

Investigating Jesus

JOHN DICKSON

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An Historian's Quest



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Introduction: *Jesus on the Fringe*

Recently, I was involved behind the scenes in a public debate on the value of religion in society. I found myself at dinner afterwards sitting opposite one of the key speakers. He had just argued (and won) the motion: ‘We would be better off without religion.’ So, perhaps inevitably, our conversation soon turned to things religious. ‘Scholars agree we know almost nothing about Jesus,’ said this professor of physics and author of a recent atheist book. ‘That is, if he existed at all,’ he added. I asked him if he knew any particular scholars who had argued this. He did. ‘Professor Wells of London,’ was his reply.

The name Wells is well known to those interested in New Testament history as that of the scholar who thirty years ago published his doubts about Jesus’ existence.¹ His most recent claim to fame, however, comes from being cited by Richard Dawkins in his immensely popular book *The God Delusion*. Dawkins presents Wells as an expert who has made a ‘serious’ historical case that Jesus never lived.² What is not mentioned is that George Wells is London University’s Professor of German – not history or biblical studies. The fact that Dawkins and my physicist friend both depend on a language professor for information about a figure from first-century Palestine says something about the gap between popular perceptions of Jesus and the views of experts (in the relevant field).

So far as I know, no professional historian – that is, no scholar teaching, researching and publishing in an ancient history department or biblical studies department of a reputable university – thinks that Jesus’ existence is still in doubt. Fearing that my own bias might be clouding my judgment, I recently asked three ancient historians, all full professors in Australian universities, if they knew of any professional ancient historian or biblical historian in any university in the world who argues that Jesus never lived. All three drew a blank. One of them was Professor Graeme Clarke,

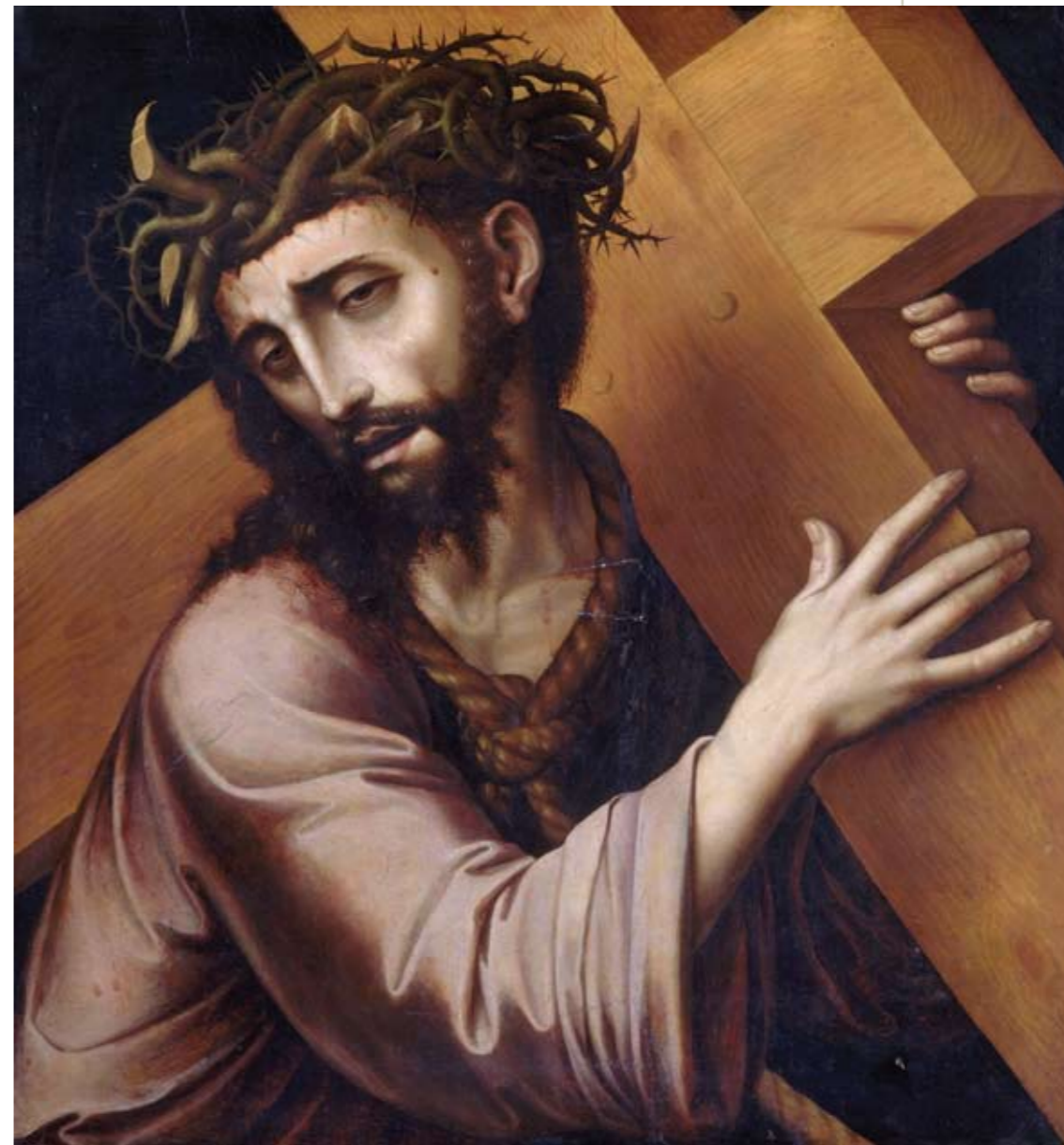
a renowned classicist from the Australian National University and author of the chapter on Christianity in a volume of *The Cambridge Ancient History*³ (a standard academic reference). He is not a religious man. He replied very forthrightly: ‘Frankly, I know of no ancient historian or biblical historian who would have a twinge of doubt about the existence of a Jesus Christ – the documentary evidence is simply overwhelming.’⁴ He added, ‘You can quote me’ – which I have dutifully done.

This book tries to bridge the gap between popular perception and scholarly judgment about the figure of Jesus. In particular, it tries to unpack *how* scholars in the discipline reach their judgments. But, first, I should clarify which ‘discipline’ I am talking about. This is not a book about theology, the study of God (which Dawkins considers a non-discipline).⁵ It is entirely about history and, in particular, New Testament history. It will perhaps surprise readers to learn that this field is populated by literally thousands of academics working in history departments and biblical studies departments in universities throughout the world. Some of these scholars do have some kind of Christian faith, but plenty of others have no faith. Still others are professing Jews, who are experts on Jesus because of their knowledge of first-century Palestine. The important thing to note, though, is that all of them know not to employ faith arguments in their work. The Christians never use the approach, ‘The Bible says it, so it must be true.’ Likewise, the atheists – and there are a few in the field – know not to resort to sceptical propaganda. From top to bottom this is a *secular* enterprise. It is an attempt to understand the man Jesus using only the tools of historical criticism.

Key here is the protocol known as ‘peer review’. To become part of the expert conversation, scholars publish their research in a reputable academic journal or book series (of which there are well over a hundred in this field). This involves submitting work to at least two academic peers, not connected with the author, who will assess whether it makes a potential contribution to the field. If it passes, it is published and discussed more widely. If not, it sits forlornly somewhere on the scholar’s hard drive (I have had both success and disappointment here). Throughout this book I will occasionally refer to ‘mainstream scholars’. By this I mean scholars who are part of this academic conversation. Some scholars (and popular writers) sit on the margins

of this conversation (such as George Wells), generally avoiding the peer-review process and publishing directly to the unsuspecting public. Often what they say is exciting, ranging from ‘Jesus never lived’ to ‘He had a wife and three children’. But such views are not taken seriously by mainstream scholars. It is partly because of the sensationalist

Christ Bearing the Cross, c. 1550–1560
by Luis de Morales.



nature of these ‘marginal’ books and DVDs that there is so much confusion in the general public about the Jesus of history.

The gap between popular writing on Jesus and the opinion of the experts finds a partial analogy in the climate-change debate. Over the last twenty years an overwhelming body of data has convinced most scientists that global warming is a serious problem and is, in part, the result of human industrial activity. Points of dispute remain, but there is a clear mainstream consensus that the issue is significant enough to warrant wide-ranging efforts to redress the situation. In the last few years the general public has caught up with this scholarly consensus. Most people, whether expert or lay, now accept that climate change is a potentially hazardous reality.

You will, however, still find the occasional scientist who challenges these mainstream conclusions. Coincidentally, as I was writing this, Australia’s national broadcaster, the ABC, aired the ‘controversial’ British documentary *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, which challenges the scientific consensus, insisting that the ‘warming’ we observe is a natural phenomenon, not the result of our carbon emissions. Imagine for a moment if this sceptical message were the only one we heard over the next ten years or so. I suspect our perception of what scientists thought about global warming would slowly become skewed by those voices from the fringes of science. Only those of us game enough to read *Nature* or the *Journal of Ecology* would realize how marginal these voices really were.

Fortunately, this is never going to happen with an issue like climate change. The scientific data are too compelling and the stakes too high. The consequences of ignoring the evidence are so great that government bodies and educational institutions will now never allow the ‘global warming sceptics’ to have the last word. Mainstream science is thus guaranteed its rightful voice. Interestingly, straight after the airing of *The Great Global Warming Swindle* the ABC thought it wise to host a live panel discussion of expert scientists. Those interested enough to listen to the discussion, which was considerably less gripping than what preceded it, were left in no doubt as to the fringe nature of the documentary’s arguments.

In historical Jesus studies, as with environmental science, there is a large mainstream consensus. Over the last thirty years historical scholars have inched towards something resembling a consensus

about the man from Nazareth, certainly concerning the major details of his life. One of the leading scholars of the last couple of decades is Professor Ed Sanders of Duke University. He is no friend of Christian apologetics and thinks nothing of dismissing parts of the biblical narrative if they do not fit with his historical analysis. Yet even he can summarize the scholarly situation in words that may surprise some readers: ‘There are no substantial doubts about the general course of Jesus’ life: when and where he lived, approximately when and where he died, and the sort of thing that he did during his public activity.’⁶ This statement would be accepted by all leading Jesus scholars working in the field today.

Despite this broad consensus, popular controversialists continue to talk as if everything were up for grabs. For example, Christopher Hitchens, the noted journalist and author of the provocative *God is Not Great*, can speak of ‘the highly questionable existence of Jesus’.⁷ French atheist Michel Onfray goes further: ‘Jesus’s existence has not been historically established. No contemporary documentation of the event, no archaeological proof, nothing certain exists today... We must leave it to lovers of impossible debates to decide on the question of Jesus’s existence.’⁸ The result of all this is a skewing of the public’s perception of what mainstream experts think.

This is where my analogy with the global warming issue breaks down. In the historical Jesus debate it is the *fringe*, not the mainstream, that gets most of the airtime. The national broadcasters of the world are unlikely to follow up their controversial documentaries about Jesus with a panel discussion of leading historians. There is neither the interest nor the sense of importance; no ecosystems hang in the balance.

Christian churches, of course, feel the importance and hit back with their apologetic resources – books and DVDs attempting to answer every criticism and neutralize every whiff of scepticism. Such works are often as marginal as the nay-saying books and documentaries (though never as popular). In fact, the two are



Marble bust of Emperor Augustus, who ruled the empire c. 27 BC–AD 14. It was during his reign that Jesus was born.

often the mirror image of each other. Apologetic writers search for evidence to prove Christianity, while sceptical authors go looking for arguments to disprove it. The one side resorts to special pleading, the other to cheap spoiling. Both make for bad history, which is why neither tends to publish in the hundred or so academic journals devoted to the subject.

Mainstream scholars, on the other hand, avoid special pleading and spoiling. Their aim is neither to prove nor to disprove the Christian faith. They approach the evidence about Jesus the same way they approach the data about Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or the Emperor Nero. They do not elevate the New Testament as a sacred volume, but nor do they dismiss it as a spurious collection of myths. There is a respect towards the writings of the first Christians, but there is no reverence.

Controversial books and documentaries about Jesus make for good news stories and often become bestsellers, but they do nothing to bring clarity. We do not need more sensational works on Jesus; we need ones that deliberately try to narrow the gap – a gap recently bridged on the climate-change issue – between academic consensus and popular perception. My small contribution to that effort is to try to explain in straightforward language *how* mainstream historians arrive at their conclusions about Jesus. What sources do they use? What methods do they employ? How rigorous is the whole process?

Let me begin, though, by briefly telling the story of 2,000 years of research into the life of Jesus.

1

CHAPTER

The Quest for Jesus from Beginnings to the Enlightenment

Academic tomes on this subject – which this is not – often begin their account of the search for the historical Jesus by reaching back only as far as the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. They introduce readers to the great German scholars Hermann Reimarus and David Strauss and their attempts to apply the critical insights of the Enlightenment to the study of the central religious figure of Western history. But historical questions about Jesus were raised long before the Enlightenment; the modern era was not the first to wonder how much of the story was really true. (It is the conceit of every age to think that it has discovered the most important questions – and answers.)

The quest for the historical Jesus in fact began almost as soon as he left the scene in AD 30.

The ancient quest

Even the author of one of the four New Testament Gospels shows an interest in searching out the facts rather than mere opinions about the man from Nazareth. The Gospel of Luke opens with these telling words:



A depiction of Luke
by Simon Vouet
(1590–1649).



Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1–4

Whatever else this is, it is the statement of someone committed to weighing earlier sources, gathering (eyewitness) testimony, researching thoroughly and then providing an orderly account of the most reliable data. This sounds more like history than theology.

Professor Richard Bauckham of Scotland's famous University of St Andrew's – famous for its scholarship as well as for being Prince William's *alma mater* – has recently shown that Luke's declared interest in 'those who from the first were eyewitnesses' is strongly reminiscent of other historical writers in ancient times, including Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and the first-century Jewish writer Josephus. When I interviewed Bauckham for a recent television documentary he spoke of various 'features in the Gospels which reveal just how keen these biblical writers were to preserve trustworthy testimony about Jesus, and *eyewitness* testimony in particular'.¹ I asked him if we can take seriously Luke's claim to depend on the testimony of *autoptai*, 'eyewitnesses'. 'Yes, I think we should,' he replied, in no uncertain terms, 'because it connects very easily with the way historians in the ancient world viewed the writing

of history. They actually thought you could only really write contemporary history – history within the lifetime of people who had been involved participants in the events.' He then added this very important observation:

And it is also interesting that what Luke actually does is describe them as the eyewitnesses and 'ministers of the word', which implies that these eyewitnesses had a role in the early Christian communities. They were ministers of the word, that is, they were giving their eyewitness testimony. They were the people whom someone like Luke, but also quite ordinary Christians or Christian preachers, would look to as authoritative sources for knowing about Jesus. These people were not just people who had been eyewitnesses but then thirty years later Luke comes along and asks them; they were actually people who had been telling their testimony all the time.²

The idea that the Gospel writers were interested in 'spiritual truths' rather than historical events is as false as it is out of date.³

By the second century, the New Testament Gospels were widely read and revered by Christians all over the Roman empire and beyond. Indeed, it seems that one of the methods of *Christianizing* the world at that time was to distribute the four Gospels.⁴ Wherever there were Christians in this period there were Gospels, and wherever there were Gospels there were people becoming Christians.

The survival of biblical scholarship

It is fair to say that biblical scholarship suffered greatly between about AD 500 and 1500. Christian North Africa (where Augustine lived and worked) fell to the Vandals in the mid-fifth century. Centres of Christian learning, such as Alexandria (in Egypt), Palestine, and Asia Minor (Turkey), were lost in the seventh century with the triumph of Islam. Now biblical scholarship (of a more dogmatic kind) was kept alive in monasteries by philosophical theologians such as Peter Abelard (1079–1142), Hugh of Saint-Victor (1096–1141) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Christian monasteries were the forerunners of the modern university. It should also be noted that a rich scholarly tradition – for the Old Testament – existed among medieval Jews. The towering figure here is Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), also known as Rambam, an acronym for his full Hebrew name Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon. His expertise ranged across many disciplines, including linguistics, scriptural interpretation, archaeology, philosophy and medicine.



A 1584 engraving of the Christian scholar, Origen (AD 185–253).

However, we must not think that this reverence for the Gospels led all Christians to approach their sacred books with pre-scientific blind faith. Intellectuals like the famous Origen of Caesarea (AD 185–253) were as meticulous in analysing the Gospels as anything we observe in modern scholarship. His approach is worth detailing.⁵

Origen lived in a period of intense criticism of Christianity. While he was still a teenager, his father was martyred for the faith, an event that would have a huge impact on this brilliant young scholar. He threw himself into his studies, not only of classical subjects like Greek grammar, mathematics, rhetoric, history and philosophy, but also of Christian theology. And when he turned to the Gospels, as he did time and time again during his fifty-year academic career, he was relentless in his analysis.

Origen consulted as many manuscripts as he could find, in order to reconstruct the most accurate form of the text: today we call this ‘textual criticism’. He assessed the geography of the Gospels against his own personal knowledge of Palestine, something archaeologists are still doing. Perhaps most impressively, he carefully compared the four Gospels and honestly noted the differences between them. He did not try to harmonize the accounts into one neat version of the Jesus story, as others had done;⁶ rather, he wanted to discern each Gospel writer’s particular emphasis and editorial hand. Scholars today call this ‘redaction criticism’. Sometimes Origen made judgments about the details of the Gospels that would make conservative Christians today a little queasy. And yet he remained a firm believer to the end, absolutely committed to reading the whole Bible as the Word of God. It was precisely Origen’s faith in the God of truth that fuelled his commitment to search for the truth about Jesus.

If this were a different sort of book, we could devote many more pages to exploring the work of scholars in ancient and medieval times who applied their significant intellectual powers to a rigorous analysis of the Gospels and Jesus. Among the stars of the story would be Eusebius of Caesarea (260–339), Jerome (331–420), John Chrysostom (347–407) and Augustine (354–430); and at the dawn of the modern period, Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536) and Martin Luther (1483–1546).

Origen’s Hexapla

Perhaps Origen’s greatest contribution to early scholarship was his production of the Hexapla, a six-column version of the Old Testament. In the left-hand column was the Hebrew text used by Palestinian Jews. Next to that was a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew, indicating (for those not quite the polymath Origen was) the correct pronunciation of the Hebrew words. In the remaining columns were four well-known Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, one or two of them dating to several centuries earlier and used widely by Greek-speaking Jews. Origen’s aim in all this was to assess the most accurate version of the Old Testament as a basis for dialogue between Jews and Christians. Historians regard the Hexapla as a marvel of scholarship – by ancient or modern standards.

With due respect to the towering figures of medieval scholarship, I want to move forward to one of the most significant periods in human history – a period that would change for ever how we studied Jesus.

The First Quest: the confidence of the Enlightenment

The ‘Enlightenment’ was a European intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which emphasized the power of human reason to discover what was valuable in life. Buoyed by the significant artistic, technical and scientific successes of the recent Renaissance period (1400s–1500s), Enlightenment thinkers felt free to question everything. They would not be constrained by mere tradition, whether cultural or ecclesiastical. The consequences for biblical studies were significant.

Whereas earlier scholarship was inspired by its faith in Christian teachings, Enlightenment scholarship was guided by its confidence in human reason. In truth, neither approach lacked the application of reason, as the example of Origen amply demonstrates, and neither really lacked a faith commitment either. As contemporary philosophers remind us, the basis for all intellectual enquiry is a *trust*, faith, in one’s rational powers.⁷

Enlightenment scholarship was absolutely confident in its ability to separate fact from fiction in the Bible. It could do this



At the salon of Marie Therese Rodet Geoffrin in Hotel Rambouillet, Paris, in 1755, a group of artists and writers listen to the first reading of the play the 'Chinese Orphan' by the sceptical Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire. Painting by Anicet-Charles-Gabriel Lemonnier, c. 1874.

using linguistics, historiography, archaeology and philosophy, without recourse to the 'dogmas' of the Christian church. Many have called this movement the 'First Quest' for the historical Jesus. Some of the key figures and ideas of this quest follow.

The 'revolutionary Jesus' of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768)

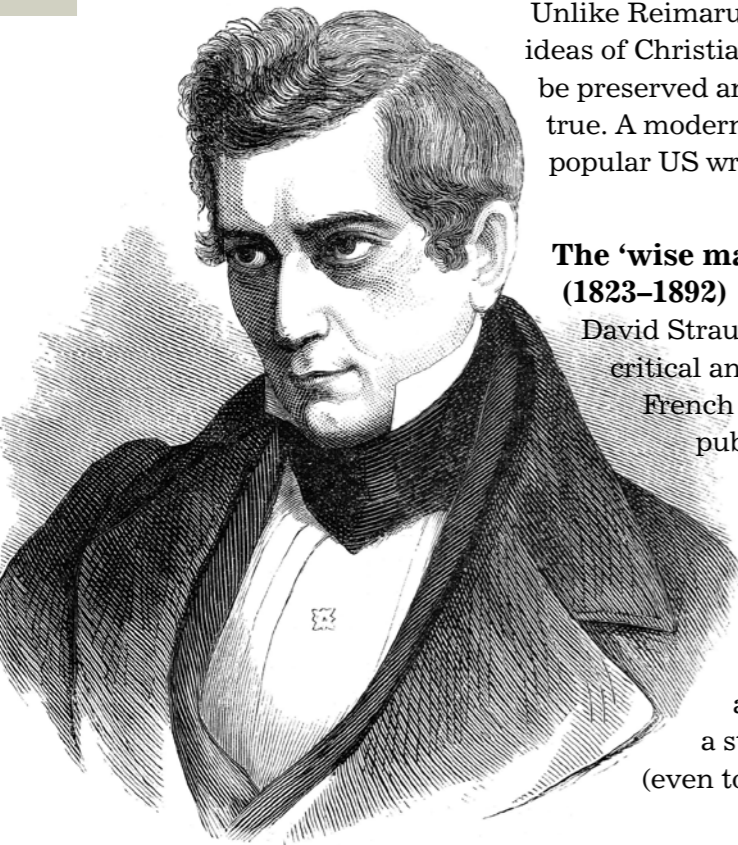
German scholar Hermann Reimarus epitomized the Enlightenment spirit and in some ways can be said to have launched the First Quest for Jesus. Reimarus was a professor of oriental languages in Hamburg and a thoroughgoing 'Deist'; he believed in some kind of Creator but rejected the idea that God had revealed himself to humanity (whether in the Bible or elsewhere).⁸ It was out of

this philosophical perspective that he wrote his stinging critique of orthodox Christianity titled 'Apologia or Defence of the Rational Worshippers of God'. He originally made it available only to a close circle of friends. However, after his death, sections of the work were published by the philosopher G. E. Lessing. These included chapters titled 'On the Resurrection Narratives' and 'On the Intentions of Jesus and His Disciples'.⁹

Reimarus insisted that we must distinguish between what Jesus actually said and did and what the apostles merely claimed he said and did. In other words, he posited a significant difference, even contradiction, between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith', which he saw as a construct of the early church. The historical Jesus was a political revolutionary, Reimarus thought, who was only transformed by later Christians into a universal saviour. Many echo this sentiment today without realizing where it comes from.

The 'mythical Jesus' of David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874)

Reimarus' extreme scepticism and anti-Christian agenda were cemented (if slightly moderated) by another German Enlightenment scholar, David Strauss. In one of the most influential books of the nineteenth century, Strauss's *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (published in 1835–36)¹⁰ argued that the Gospels needed to be understood as myth. 'Myth' here does not mean simply untrue; nor did Strauss go along with Reimarus in thinking that the apostles set out deliberately to deceive. What he meant was that wherever the Gospel writers strain our rational minds – as in the miracle stories – they are employing the religious imagination to express the inexpressible longings of the human soul. The resurrection narratives, for instance, are not lies. Nor are they history. They are rather poetical images (myths) of the divine



David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), German theologian and philosopher.

life which the early Christians longed for.

Unlike Reimarus, David Strauss believed that the core ideas of Christianity – peace and love and so on – could still be preserved and enjoyed even if the main events were not true. A modern theologian in the Straussian mode is the popular US writer Bishop John Shelby Spong.¹¹

The ‘wise man Jesus’ of Joseph Ernest Renan (1823–1892)

David Strauss launched a flurry of very confident critical analyses of the life of Jesus. In 1863 the French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan published his *Life of Jesus* in which he cast Jesus as a charming and wise Galilean preacher whose initial popularity soon waned – to the point of rejection – on account of the high demands he placed on his followers.¹² The First Quest was beginning to take a particular shape. Jesus as the simple, wise teacher would become a stock theme in many discussions about him (even today).

The ‘non-Messiah Jesus’ of William Wrede (1859–1906)

In the latter half of the nineteenth century there was still some confidence in two basic historical ‘facts’: first, that Mark’s Gospel (if none of the others) was a broadly accurate account of Jesus’ life, and secondly, that Jesus himself had claimed to be the Messiah. Both of these propositions, however, were dealt a major blow in 1901 with the publication of *The Messianic Secret* by William Wrede of the University of Breslau (Polish Wrocław).¹³

Wrede drew attention to the fact that in Mark’s Gospel Jesus occasionally asks people not to tell others that he is the Messiah. He further noted that the New Testament frequently ties Jesus’ messianic credentials *not* to his earthly ministry but to his supposed resurrection from the dead.¹⁴ From this Wrede surmised that Jesus himself never suggested he was the Messiah

(he was simply a great teacher). The messianic idea was invented by the disciples after Jesus’ death and then written back into the story *retrospectively*. Because Jesus’ contemporaries knew he never made claims to messiahship, Wrede continued, Mark had to invent a supplementary idea to explain Jesus’ apparent silence on the matter: Jesus revealed his identity only to his closest disciples, asking them to keep it a secret until after his death and resurrection. In this way, so the argument went, the early Christians turned a noble preacher into the glorious Messiah.

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) and the end of the Enlightenment quest

The strident scepticism of Enlightenment scholars from Reimarus to Wrede must have seemed unstoppable. The power of human reason seemed to have triumphed over the fancies of the Christian faith. But the confidence was ill-placed. Within a decade of William Wrede’s 1901 publication – and within two centuries of the start of the Enlightenment project – the rationalist quest for Jesus would collapse before the work of a man who, as one modern scholar puts it, ‘stands at the head of the [twentieth] century like a colossus’.¹⁵

Albert Schweitzer was a supremely gifted philosopher, historian and theologian, as well as being an accomplished musician. After publishing some of the most significant books on the New Testament ever written (and one on the music of J. S. Bach, for good measure), he left academia, completed a medical degree and devoted himself to medical missionary work in Gabon, West Africa. This ‘jungle surgeon’ won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 and, true to form, gave the prize money to a leper hospital.

In 1906 Schweitzer published *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.¹⁶ It was a stunning critique of the previous 150 years of research from Reimarus to Wrede.¹⁷ He ably demonstrated that the portraits of Jesus offered by these supposedly objective historians were basically ‘projections’ of their own ethical ideals. The characterization of Jesus as a simple, noble teacher, for instance, does not arise from the evidence, he argued, but is a construct born of the humanism of the Enlightenment. Such a Jesus is a figment of the scholarly imagination; or, as Schweitzer himself put it, ‘a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern

Dr Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), world-famous biblical scholar and physician, stands outside one of the buildings of his hospital at Lambarene in Gabon, Africa, December 1964.

theology in an historical garb'.¹⁸ (Ouch!) It was a simple observation, but, once made, it became impossible to read Reimarus, Strauss, Wrede and the others without seeing wishful thinking on every page.¹⁹

Schweitzer did not go on to provide a full-scale alternative account of Jesus. He simply offered what he called 'a sketch'. Schweitzer's Jesus was not a charming teacher of timeless wisdom; he was an 'apocalyptic Jewish prophet' (and self-proclaimed Messiah) who announced the end of the world and believed he was destined to suffer for his people to save them from the coming apocalypse.

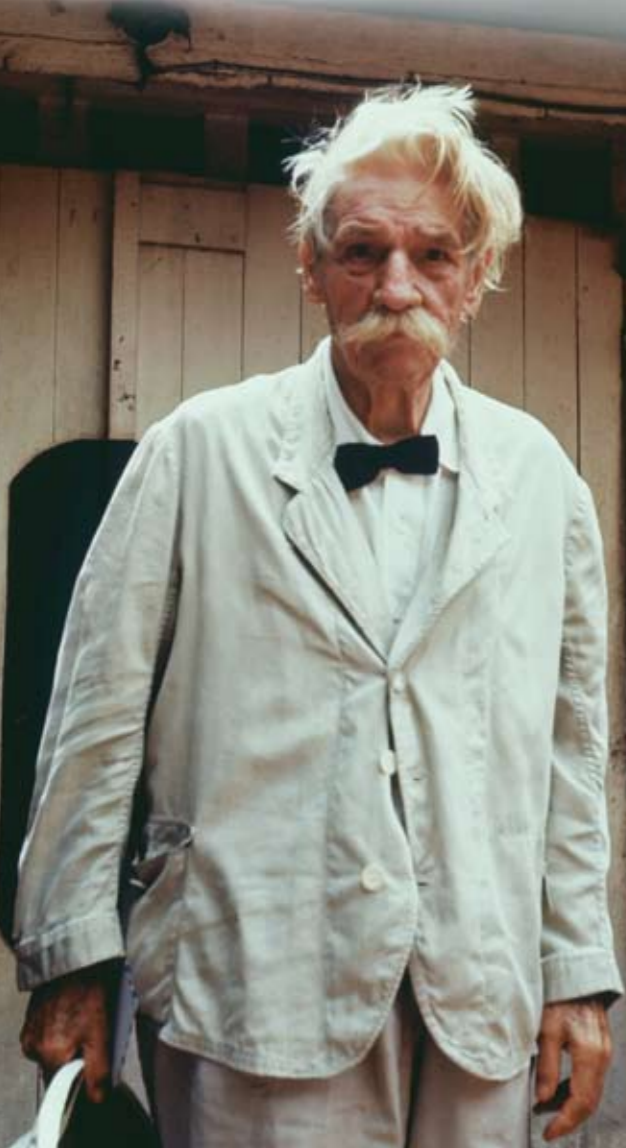
Schweitzer's analysis was historically compelling. And no one could accuse him of projecting his own ideals on to Jesus; in fact, for decades after him scholars wondered whether the

Jesus he had described had any relevance to the modern world.

As Schweitzer himself noted, he had made Jesus 'a stranger and an enigma'.²⁰

Almost single-handedly, then, Albert Schweitzer unravelled the quest for the historical Jesus. Not only had he 'erected its memorial', wrote a scholar of the next generation; he had 'delivered its funeral oration'.²¹

If Enlightenment scholarship had undermined the church's simple faith in Jesus, Schweitzer's work brought to an end the Enlightenment's pretensions to rational objectivity. It would be half a century before anyone would revive the quest for the historical Jesus, and it would take an entirely new paradigm to get it going.



2

CHAPTER

The Quest for Jesus in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Years of silence

After Albert Schweitzer there was almost half a century of conspicuous silence on the subject of the historical Jesus. Between 1906 and 1953 the topic received very little attention in academic circles. The Enlightenment confidence on the matter had been crushed, and no one quite knew what to do with Schweitzer's 'apocalyptic Jewish prophet'.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)

Theologians during this period of hiatus tended to approach the Gospels in an ahistorical way, almost as if the events of 5 BC–AD 30 were peripheral to Christian faith and life. The only solid detail was Jesus' death. No one doubted that. And for theological giants like Rudolf Bultmann the cross was just about all that mattered for theology. Jesus' birth and healings, and even his teachings, were considered inconsequential for modern faith.

