Who is Jesus? This question continues to fascinate the popular media. Last year ABC News aired “The Search for Jesus” while in 1998 PBS’s Frontline series presented “From Jesus to Christ” and in 1996 The Atlantic Monthly published Charlotte Allen’s article “The No-Frills Jesus.” The quest for the historical Jesus, though born in the Enlightenment, continues to intrigue our own age.

The readers of this journal cannot ignore this question for both pastoral and theological reasons. It presents a pastoral challenge as people come away with more questions than answers after reading these articles and watching these shows. The question is important theologically because it is the question that Jesus put to his first disciples and to each one of us: “Who do people say that I am . . . But who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:27, 29).

Critical Surveys

Scholars involved in this third quest for the historical Jesus have given a variety of answers to the question who is Jesus. For some he is a prophet in the mold of Elijah (John Meier), for others a kind of wandering Cynic philosopher (Jesus Seminar), or a magician (Morton Smith). Some scholars would see this whole quest as not only historically impossible but also theologically illegitimate (Luke Johnson).

Some critical surveys have been published recently that help to sift a way through these series of conflicting answers. The most fair and accessible survey by far is Mark Powell’s Jesus as a Figure in History (Powell, 1998). He begins by looking at possible sources and the problems these sources present to historical reconstruction. Next he examines the various criteria scholars have proposed for extracting historical information from these sources in order to authenticate the words and deeds of Jesus. Powell devotes the major part of this book to an examination of the various reconstructions of the historical Jesus beginning with the Jesus Seminar and two of its most published members, John Crossan and Marcus Borg. He also surveys the independent work of E. P. Sanders, John P. Meier, and N. T. Wright. Powell’s purpose in this book is to survey the methodology.

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Quest for the Historical Jesus

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and portraits not to provide a critical assessment.

Both Luke Timothy Johnson (Johnson, 1995, 1996) and N. Thomas Wright (Wright, 1996, 1999) provide a more critical assessment of the third quest. Johnson judges the third quest to be a misguided quest and is very critical of the work of the Jesus Seminar (Johnson, 1996). While some of his criticisms are well aimed, others seem to be petty and \textit{ad hominen} attacks.

N. T. Wright has written a less polemical but even more devastating critique of the work of the Jesus Seminar. In his chapter “Five Gospels But No Gospel: Jesus and the Seminar,” Wright finds fault with the Jesus Seminar’s use of sources and its refusal to admit its own controlling ideological bias (Wright, 1999, 83–120). In another book, \textit{Jesus and the Victory of God}, Wright gives a good overview of the various quests for the historical Jesus, the roads taken, abandoned, and taken up again (Wright, 1996, 3–124). Marcus J. Borg, a member of the Jesus Seminar, has provided a good overview of the need for the quest and a more sympathetic evaluation of the work of the Jesus Seminar (Borg, 1994). He has also published his own portrait of Jesus in his well-received book \textit{Jesus A New Vision} (Borg, 1987).

\textbf{Jesus Seminar}

The provocative and controversial work of the Jesus Seminar has now been published in two books (Funk, 1993, 1998). Individual members of the Seminar have also published their own historical reconstruction. Most important among these are the works of Crossan (1991) and Borg (1987).

The Seminar’s use of sources has generated a good deal of debate. They argue correctly that canonical texts should not be given precedence as historical sources because canonicity is a theological not an historical judgment. So their sources extend beyond the canonical Gospels to the apocryphal gospels (\textit{Thomas, Hebrews}) and even reconstructed “Gospels” (“Q Gospel,” “Cross Gospel”). Key to the Seminar’s portrait of Jesus is the importance given to the \textit{Gospel of Thomas} and a reconstructed “Q Gospel.” In these two similar “Gospels” Jesus is pictured as a wise and counter-cultural sage but not an apocalyptic preacher of the coming end-time and judgment.

John Dominic Crossan has made a methodological advance in Jesus research with his use of anthropological and cross-cultural analysis (Crossan, 1991). Crossan argues rightly that we need to use cross-cultural models to avoid cultural anachronisms in interpreting the words and deeds of Jesus. It is not enough to translate Hebrew and Greek words into English; one must understand the cultural context of these words. Jesus’ culture is one of honor and shame, hierarchical patriarchy, and purity rules. While Crossan shows vast erudition in his use of anthropological models one also suspects some sleight of hand in his eclectic use of different cross-cultural studies to construct his portrait of Jesus as a peasant Jewish Cynic.

The key and ultimately fatal problem with the portraits of both the Jesus Seminar and Crossan is that they are built upon too many hypotheses: their “Q Gospel” is reconstructed from the already hypothetical Q source. Their “Cynic Jesus” is based on a hypothetical Cynic influence in Galilee. Their dating of sources, particularly in the work of Crossan, is not only hypothetical but also idiosyncratic, not reflecting the assured results of scholarship. Hypotheses are always necessary but too many hypotheses open scholars to the perennial temptation of Jesus research, viz., to construct Jesus in one’s own image and likeness.
Marginal Jew

Other scholars have provided less provocative if ultimately more historically satisfying answers. John Meier continues to plod along with his encyclopedic study *A Marginal Jew* (1991, 1994). While his work lacks the headline grabbing allure of the Jesus Seminar it provides a thorough study of all issues and Meier allows one to travel along in his quest as he recovers and evaluates various pieces of evidence.

His first volume, subtitled *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, covers the issues of sources and methodology. He rejects the use of non-canonical Gospels, particularly the Gospel of Thomas, as historical sources. This decision is based on the historical judgment that these Gospels use the canonical Gospels as sources and so are at best secondary sources. The most important part of this first volume is a careful examination of the criteria that can be used to authenticate the words and deeds of Jesus. He gives numerous examples as he points out the strengths and limitations of the various criteria.

In his second volume, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, Meier begins to develop his portrait. Jesus began his career as a disciple of John the Baptist, his mentor. Like John, Jesus believed in the imminent in-breaking of God into history and proclaimed both a present and future Kingdom of God. Meier also suggests that, like John, Jesus continued to baptize even after he broke away from John (John 3:22, 26; 4:1).

The heart of this second volume is a detailed analysis of every miracle story in the Gospels. Meier does not argue for the authenticity of every miracle story but does argue that his contemporaries knew Jesus as a successful exorcist and healer. While his work is not yet complete one can begin to construct Meier’s portrait of Jesus. He is a “marginal Jew” or better a prophet like Elijah. Like Elijah he preaches, teaches, and heals. Like Elijah and John the Baptist Jesus looked forward to God’s imminent action in the world. One suspects that ultimately Meier’s portrait will prove to be the more historically accurate. The discussion, debate, and quest, however, are far from over.

References


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