

## To What End? The Contribution of Jesus Research to Christian Faith

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### INTRODUCTION

Jesus Research is the study of Jesus within his historical context. This historical study of Jesus is commonly referred to as the “Third Quest” for the historical Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Scholars from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Secular) are interested in studying Jesus as a first century Palestinian Jew. These Jesus scholars are convinced that Jesus is a central figure in human history and that he deserves to be understood historically. Their goal is to provide historically accurate information about Jesus by sifting through the primary sources. The study of these ancient sources, not surprisingly, has led to a greater confidence in understanding Jesus. Jesus scholar E.P. Sanders writes, “The dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that those two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism.”<sup>2</sup> During the past four decades, a plethora of books and articles have been written by Jesus scholars,<sup>3</sup> and their historical conclusions are often found in popular magazines and documentaries.<sup>4</sup> What are Christians to make of these historical conclusions? Do these conclusions have any implications for the Christian faith? To answer these questions, it will first be necessary to describe the method and limits of historical studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Current Jesus Research, which began in the mid-1960s, is called the “Third Quest” to distinguish it from the two previous quests for the historical Jesus: the Old Quest (1778-1906) and the New Quest (1953-62). Although some scholars dub the time period between these two quests as “no quest,” this is not accurate. Approximately 350 lives of Jesus were published in English during this time period. For a helpful survey of the Old and New Quests, see Charles Anderson, *Critical Quests of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), Dennis Duling, *Jesus Christ through History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1979), W. Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), and Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Thought, 1778-1860* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, G.B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: SCM, 1965), S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Scribner’s, 1967), Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Philadelphia: Press, 1973), Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity, 1984), E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994), James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> In recent years, Jesus has been on the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Life*, and even *Popular Mechanics*. Jesus has also been the object of historical documentaries: “From Jesus to Christ” (PBS, 1998), “The Unknown Jesus” (A&E, 1999), and “The Search for Jesus” (ABC, 2000). For a helpful survey of current Jesus Research, see Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure of History* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998), and Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

## METHOD OF HISTORICAL STUDIES

**Introduction.** Historical studies is a social science whose goal is to attain historical knowledge about past people and events. Using an inductive method of research, historians develop hypotheses to account for the historical evidence, namely, the remnants and records of the past. Before describing this method, it will be helpful to define what is meant by history. The term history can actually be used in two different ways. In the first way, history can refer to everything that actually happened in the past. In the second way, history can refer to what can be known or demonstrated about the past from the extant sources. There are numerous people and events in the past that are inaccessible to the historian because of the lack of source evidence. (As we will see later, some of these past people and events are also inaccessible due to the limitation of the historical method). For the purpose of this paper, history will be used in the second sense as that which the historian can demonstrate from the past. Historian Arthur Marwick states that this is the historian's role: "a historian today is someone who, essentially through analysis of sources, produces interpretations of the past, which are contributions to the accumulating body of knowledge about the past."<sup>5</sup> The historian's task, then, is to explain the extant evidence in order to contribute to historical knowledge about the past.

Unfortunately, Jesus Research is not unified in its methodology. Jesus scholars use a variety of critical methods, e.g., source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and social-scientific criticism. Most scholars of current Jesus Research are trained in New Testament Studies. In their historical study of Jesus, these scholars often attempt to reconstruct Jesus from a handful of isolated sayings that they have determined to be authentic.<sup>6</sup> Not only is this a minimalist approach, but the selectivity of these scholars often reveals more about their theological bias than about Jesus.<sup>7</sup> This makes for poor historiography. For the purpose of this paper, the threefold

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, Inc., 1989), 6.

<sup>6</sup> To determine authenticity, Jesus scholars use a variety of criteria, such as, multiple attestation, Aramaisms, embarrassment, coherence, and dissimilarity. Although the first four criteria have some value, the criterion of dissimilarity is problematic for historical studies. According to this criterion, a saying attributed to Jesus is authentic if it is dissimilar to first century Judaism and the first century church. A better historical criterion is Klausner's Test which identifies as plausible any portrait of Jesus that places him believably within first century Judaism and explains the emergence of the church. For a description and evaluation of these criteria, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 167-195.

<sup>7</sup> The tendency of Jesus scholars to create Jesus after their own image was first observed in the Old Quest. Albert Schweitzer stated that the historical Jesus of the Old Quest "is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb," in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 398. George Tyrrell likewise observed, "The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well," in *Christianity at the Cross-roads* (London: Longmans, Owen, & Co., 1910), 44. It was these comments about theological bias that brought the Old Quest to an end. Regarding the historical Jesus of the Third Quest, Helmut Koester warns, "We are again on the way toward a human Jesus who is just like one of us, one who holds values that are very close to our ideological commitments, a Jesus who is a social reformer and who attacks patriarchal orders, a Jesus, who as a real human person, can stand as an example and inspiration for worthy causes," in "Jesus the Victim," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992), 7.

inductive method of modern historical studies will be applied to Jesus Research. The three steps are identification, research, and explanation.<sup>8</sup>

**First Step: Identification.** The first step of historical studies is identification, where the historian identifies and delimits the object of study. Every field has its proper object of study. For historical studies, the proper object of study is people and events in time and space. Using historical methods, historians can properly study these temporal and material realities from the past, and speculate about material causation.

For Jesus Research, the object of study is Jesus. Unfortunately, there is much confusion about what scholars mean by “Jesus.” The following terms should help to clarify the discussion. The earthly Jesus is the flesh and blood Jewish man who lived in first century Palestine. If we had a time machine, we could go back and meet this Jesus in all his physical and psychological complexity. The earthly Jesus can be further divided into the empirical Jesus and the transcendent Jesus.<sup>9</sup> The empirical Jesus is the Jesus that is confined to time and space. This is the Jesus that can be described empirically, e.g., height, weight, hair and eye color. This empirical description includes authentic actions and sayings found in extant sources. In contrast, the transcendent Jesus is that divine aspect of Jesus. Christians have historically believed that Jesus was God incarnate and that his miracles were the result of divine causation.<sup>10</sup> These divine aspects, however, are not measurable with empirical tools. Unless someone invents a deity meter, it will be impossible to measure divine presence or divine causation. This is not a limitation on the divine but on the tools of empiricism. These tools are simply inappropriate for a study of the divine. Ronald Wells states it boldly: “We historians study humans, not God. Historians with research degrees agree on this. I know of no working historian whose subject is God in history.”<sup>11</sup> The proper object of study for Jesus Research, then, is the empirical Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to this threefold method, see Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (Chicago: Lyceum, 1989), C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (New York: Routledge, 1998), William Storey, *Writing History* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), Martha Howell & Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (London: Cornell University, 2001), Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2002), Richard Marius & Melvin Page, *A Short Guide to Writing about History* (New York: Longman, 2002), Robert Williams, *The Historian's Toolbox* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> For the distinction between the empirical Jesus and the transcendent Jesus, see M. Eugene Boring, “The ‘Third Quest’ and the Apostolic Faith,” *Interpretation* 50.4 (1996), 341-354.

<sup>10</sup> History cannot be used as a tool to either prove or disprove the central tenets of the Christian faith, e.g., the deity of Christ, the sufficiency of his atonement, the necessity of a personal decision of faith.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Wells, *History through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> The existence of the empirical Jesus is rarely disputed these days. For example, the British skeptic George Wells previously argued that Jesus did not exist. See his *Did Jesus Exist?* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1987). In his more recent book, *The Jesus Myth* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1998), Wells acknowledged the existence of Jesus but denied that he is accurately portrayed in the canonical gospels. Only a couple skeptics continue to deny the existence of Jesus. For example, see Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle* (Ottawa, Canada: Age of Reason Publications, 1999) and Robert Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000). For a response to these skeptics, see Greg Boyd and Paul Eddy, *The Jesus Legend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

But, since the bodily remains of Jesus are no longer accessible, the empirical Jesus can only be known through extant sources.

Does Jesus Research, and even historical studies as a whole, require the working assumption of naturalism?<sup>13</sup> This has been the approach of some Jesus scholars. E.P. Sanders, for example, believes that miracle reports are necessarily false; they can be explained as wishful thinking, exaggeration, the conscious wish to deceive (not applicable to Jesus), and psychosomatic healing. Regarding miracle reports that defy these naturalistic explanations, Sanders suggests that perhaps we are simply ignorant of the range of natural causes.<sup>14</sup> Other Jesus scholars, such as Ben Meyer and Graham Twelftree, argue that historians cannot simply assume naturalism and *ipso facto* dismiss miracle reports.<sup>15</sup> Instead, historians should weigh the evidence on a case-by-case basis before rendering a historical judgment. Like Meyer and Twelftree, John Meier assumes supernaturalism. But unlike these two other Jesus scholars, Meier is reluctant to render historical judgments on the supernatural. Just as historians should not render historical judgments on the divine presence in history, Meier believes that they should not render historical judgments on divine causation. For Meier, these types of judgments are more appropriate for the fields of philosophy and theology. So how should Jesus scholars handle the miracle reports about Jesus, according to Meier? Since these reports are beyond the purview of historical studies, Meier thinks that the historian should abstain from rendering historical judgments, whether for or against divine causation. Does Meier then completely ignore the numerous miracle reports in the gospels?<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly, Meier devotes over 300 pages of the second volume of his historical Jesus book to describe Jesus' healings, exorcisms, and nature miracles.<sup>17</sup> But how is this possible? Meier simply describes the miracle reports from the perspective of Jesus and his contemporaries without rendering judgments about their historicity. Interestingly, even though Sanders begins with the assumption of naturalism, he likewise takes this phenomenological approach.<sup>18</sup>

**Second Step: Research.** The second step of historical studies is research. In this step, historians gather, evaluate, and interpret the primary sources for the person or event that they are

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<sup>13</sup> Naturalism is the belief that the universe is a closed system of material causation. This has been a common working assumption in scientific and historical studies since the time of David Hume (1711-76).

<sup>14</sup> E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 143.

<sup>15</sup> See Ben Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), and Graham Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> David Aune has identified within the canonical gospels: 17 healings, 6 exorcisms, and 8 so-called nature miracles. He also observed that these miracle reports occur in every layer of the gospel tradition (i.e., Mark, Q, M, L, and John). See Aune's article, "Magic in Early Christianity" *ANRW* II/23.2, 105-157.

<sup>17</sup> John Meier, *Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracle* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 646-970.

<sup>18</sup> The phrase is "phenomenological approach" is not used by either Meier or Sanders. But it nonetheless is descriptive of their common approach to miracle reports. For Sanders' discussion of Jesus' miracles, see *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 132-143.

studying. These sources are the remnants and records of the past. Primary sources can be further divided into foreground sources and background sources. While foreground sources refer specifically to the event or person being studied, background sources refer to the socio-historical world that provides the proper context for understanding the foreground sources.

The proper context for studying Jesus is Second Temple Judaism, 515 B.C. to A.D. 135.<sup>19</sup> From this time period, Jesus scholars consider the foreground sources as well as the background sources in their attempt to understand Jesus.<sup>20</sup> To be included among foreground sources are: NT epistles, canonical gospels, Josephus, Roman writings, rabbinic literature, church fathers, and NT apocrypha. Background sources include: archaeological discoveries, Old Testament (OT), OT Apocrypha, OT Pseudepigrapha, Septuagint, Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, Josephus, Roman writings, and Rabbinic literature.

After gathering the relevant sources, the historian must interpret and evaluate these primary sources. Even though historical sources may be historically inaccurate, Marwick recommends that the historian should “always be skeptical but never cynical.”<sup>21</sup> As in a court of law, sources should be treated as innocent until proven guilty. Regarding the canonical gospels, it appears that Jesus scholars are less skeptical than previous generation of critical scholars. Craig Evans, for example, writes: “[T]he New Testament Gospels are now viewed as useful, if not essentially reliable, historical sources. Gone is the extreme skepticism that for many years dominated gospel research.”<sup>22</sup>

**Third Step: Explanation.** The third and final step of the historical method is explanation. In this step, the historian attempts to assemble isolated historical facts into a coherent hypothesis that adequately explains the evidence. Historians acknowledge that their hypothesis is simply

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony Harvey has convincingly argued that people submit to the constraints of their time period, if they hope to be understood by their contemporaries. See his book, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> For a helpful survey of the literature of Second Temple Judaism, see Michael Stone, ed., *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), Larry Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2002), and Craig Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 225.

<sup>22</sup> Craig Evans, “Life-of-Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), 14. Evans’ statement is true for the majority of Jesus scholars today. For example, the Jewish scholar, Shalom Ben-Chorin writes, “[T]he modern Jewish image of Jesus is far more positive than the medieval image. Not only is the historicity of Jesus rarely denied, but much of the gospel material (particularly the synoptics) is readily accepted. Jesus’ preaching and parables and prayers, his nationalism, and his life and death are seen to be comprehensible only in a Jewish context, in “The Images of Jesus in Modern Judaism,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11 (1974), 401. Roman Catholic scholar, Raymond Brown, writes, “Most scholars today are less agnostic than Bultmann about the historical Jesus and admit a continuity between the evaluation of Jesus during his ministry and the evaluation of him in the NT, in “Who Do Me Say That I Am? Modern Scholarship on Gospel Christology,” *Horizons* 1 (1974), 38. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. For example, the Jesus Seminar dismisses eight-two percent of the gospel sayings as ecclesiastical fabrications and embellishments. See their book, *The Five Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

one interpretation of the evidence and that their historical conclusions thus have only probability. Historian C. Beham McCullagh writes, “It is quite appropriate to call these summary general descriptions ‘interpretations’ of the subject, meaning they are one of several equally justified accounts of the subject which could be given, which provide the reader with at least one historian’s opinion of the meaning of what happened.”<sup>23</sup> Even though the hypothesis is the historian’s opinion, it is valid if it is true and fair.<sup>24</sup> True means that the hypothesis has plausibility (i.e., explanatory adequacy), while fair means that it is neither misleading nor unbalanced. A valid hypothesis contributes to historical knowledge. McCullagh states that “although historical conclusions are always fallible, when they are well supported by the evidence they deserve to be believed very probably true, that is, as telling us something about the world.”<sup>25</sup> I. Howard Marshall rightly concludes, “while the historian must often deal with probabilities, this does not mean that historical knowledge is impossible.”<sup>26</sup>

In Jesus Research, scholars attempt to develop a coherent and plausible portrait of Jesus based upon historical facts. Writing in 1954, New Testament scholar Ernst Kasemann stated, “there are still pieces in the synoptic tradition which the historian has to acknowledge as authentic if he wishes to remain a historian at all.”<sup>27</sup> E.P. Sanders refers to this authentic material in the gospels as “indisputable facts.”<sup>28</sup> Regarding the development of a hypothesis, Sanders writes, “In the first place, a good hypothesis with regard to Jesus’ intention and his relationship with Judaism should meet Klausner’s test: it should situate Jesus believably in Judaism and yet explain why the movement initiated by him eventually broke with Judaism.”<sup>29</sup> A valid hypothesis in Jesus Research, then, provides historical knowledge about the earthly (empirical) Jesus.

## LIMITATIONS OF HISTORICAL STUDIES

**Introduction.** Historical studies has three steps, with the final step leading to historical knowledge about past people and events. For Jesus Research, this knowledge comes in the form of facts about Jesus as well as a composite portrait known as the historical Jesus. Before considering the implications of these historical conclusions, it will be helpful to describe the limitations of the historical method.

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<sup>23</sup> C. Beham McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 57-59.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 50.

<sup>27</sup> Ernst Kasemann, “*Das Problem des historischen Jesus*,” *ZTK* 51 (1954); ET: “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964), 46.

<sup>28</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 18. For Klausner’s test, see Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Macmillan, 1925).

**Limitation of Sources.** In historical studies, sources are often limited, both in subject matter and perspective. Marwick comments, “[T]he sources historians use are often imperfect, fragmentary, and intractable. They were, as we have seen, created for purposes utterly different from those of the historian. Often sources have been destroyed in the course of time.”<sup>30</sup> This limitation of sources, of course, grows greater with the antiquity of the object studied. Nonetheless, historians must make the best of these limited sources, recognizing that their conclusions will only provide a glimpse of past people and events.

This limitation of sources is equally true in Jesus Research. Regarding this limitation, Luke Timothy Johnson has observed, “[History] seeks to take the often sparse and accidental evidence of past human events and connect them in some meaningful pattern.”<sup>31</sup> The fragmentary sources that survive the ravages of time provide Jesus scholars with only a glimpse of Jesus and the world of first century Palestine. There are definitely gaps in our knowledge of this time period. Fortunately, new sources are uncovered through ongoing archaeology in Palestine. Nonetheless, we will never have exhaustive knowledge of Jesus and the world in which he lived. Thus, historical conclusions will only approximate the earthly (empirical) Jesus.

**Limitation of Historian.** Following the Enlightenment, modern historical studies went through a period of naive optimism. Historical Positivism, for example, believed that historians were completely objective and that their conclusions had absolute certainty. In the early 20th century, historians began to challenge these Enlightenment beliefs. Marwick observes, “Today all historians would accept that they are in some sense prisoners of the age and society in which they live. But, to repeat, this very self-awareness is the saving grace of the historians of our time...Historians who are aware of the limitations imposed upon them by their stance in space and time can strive more successfully to counteract distortions caused by these limitations.”<sup>32</sup> Subjectivity, in fact, plays a role throughout the process of historical studies. For example, the historian must select a topic, frame questions, develop categories, evaluate and interpret sources, explain causation, draw inferences, fill historical gaps with conjecture and speculation, and develop a plausible explanation that accounts for the primary sources. Add to this the historian's personal presuppositions and cultural perspective, and it becomes clear that historical study is not completely objective.<sup>33</sup> Ronald Wells points out “that history is not merely a matter of getting the facts right. Always it is a matter of interpreting the facts in the face of the data available. Not surprisingly, competent scholars frequently differ in their interpretations.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 228.

<sup>31</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 83.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> This type of subjectivity occurs not only in the social sciences but in the physical sciences as well. See, for example, Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962).

<sup>34</sup> Wells, vii.

In spite of the claims of postmodern historiography, however, historical studies should not be reduced to complete subjectivity.<sup>35</sup> Most historians today attempt to practice "sufficient detachment," so that their conclusions have credibility. McCullagh writes, "...people cannot achieve a state of utter neutrality, committed to no values or principles, without projects or interests...Thomas L. Haskell has written a persuasive essay defending the possibility of sufficient detachment among historians to make accurate judgments...I am not claiming that historians are always detached, only that they are often capable of being so, and of making rational judgments about the truth, fairness and worth of their interpretations."<sup>36</sup> Historians attempt, to the best of their ability, to bracket their presuppositions so that their conclusions are not tainted by prejudice. The goal is to describe the past in a way that is fair and true, thus attaining a level of objectivity. After interacting with the postmodern critique, Shirley Mullen observes, "historians have every reason to continue their enterprise of critical scholarship—of seeking truth about the past and striving for objectivity."<sup>37</sup>

Current Jesus scholars appear to be divided in their acknowledgement of subjectivity. Most Jesus scholars take a modified modernist approach in which they acknowledge limited subjectivity.<sup>38</sup> Like the historians mentioned above, these Jesus scholars try to avoid the naïve optimism of historical positivism but still attempt to practice sufficient detachment. Most of these Jesus scholars reveal their theological commitments and then allow the reader to determine whether or not these commitments have biased their conclusions. It is rare, but some Jesus scholars take a postmodernist approach in which historical studies is reduced to subjectivity.<sup>39</sup> Since objectivity is an illusion for these scholars, all that remains is personal perspective.

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<sup>35</sup> For examples of postmodern approaches to historical studies, see Edward Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), Hayden White, *Metahistory* (London: John Hopkins University, 1973), and Keith Jenkins, *On What is History?* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> C. Benham McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 131. In agreement with McCullagh, Ronald Wells comments, "On the one hand we do history from a perspective, and the adequacy of a historical interpretation must take into account the historian who is in dialogue with the past. Nevertheless, all reality is not mere opinion and private experience," in *History through the Eyes of Faith*, 10-11.

<sup>37</sup> Shirley Mullen, "Between 'Romance' and 'True History': Historical Narratives and Truth Telling in a Postmodern Age," in *History and the Christian Historian*, ed. Ronald Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 31.

<sup>38</sup> Examples of Jesus scholars who take a modified modernist approach to historical studies include Marcus Borg, E.P. Sanders, John P. Meier, and N.T. Wright. Their method is often described as critical realism, an epistemology developed by Bernard Lonergan. See his books: *The Subject* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1968), *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), and *Philosophy of God and Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974). Lonergan's critical realism was first introduced into Jesus Research by Ben Meyer. See Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1989), and *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1994). The use of critical realism in Jesus Research has been more recently advocated by N.T. Wright. See his book, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> An example of a Jesus scholar who takes a postmodernist approach to historical studies is Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza. See her book, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Another example of those who take this approach is the Jesus Seminar. In spite of their rhetoric of historical positivism (i.e., complete objectivity and absolute certainty), they have clearly adopted the method of historical revisionism.

**Limitation of Conclusions.** In the third step of the historical method, historians describe the past in the form of a hypothesis, i.e., an explanation that best accounts for the historical evidence. This hypothesis, however, is based upon the limitations of the sources and the historian. I. Howard Marshall offers this insight: “The evidence will often be incomplete and it may allow several interpretations. Consequently the historian’s picture of what happened—the historical facts—will not always be a completely reliable picture of the past events...we could say that the historian constructs a ‘model’ of some past events. A model resembles the real thing, but it is not identical with it.”<sup>40</sup> So then, even though the historian begins with isolated facts, these facts are assembled into a coherent model whose goal it is to explain the past. It is important to acknowledge, however, that these models only approximate the past because they involve interpretation and speculation.

This, of course, means that historical conclusions do not have absolute certainty. McCullagh correctly observes, “The conclusion which historians generally adopt is that if an historical statement is well supported by abundant evidence, and much better supported than any alternative account, then the statement can be rationally accepted as very probably true...even when it is entirely rational to believe an historical description is very probably true, historians must admit that it could possibly be false. Historical knowledge, like all our knowledge of the world, is fallible.”<sup>41</sup> Historical conclusions must remain tentative, open to new discoveries or better hypotheses. Although historical knowledge is possible, conclusions are based upon probability. A helpful analogy here is a civil court where judgments are based upon the preponderance of the evidence but always open to the court of appeals.

Jesus scholars often distinguish their portrait of Jesus from that of the church. The former is called the historical Jesus while the latter is called the Christ of faith. The Christ of faith is the early church's interpretation of the earthly Jesus as found in canon (e.g., the four gospels) and creed (e.g., Nicene, Chalcedon). This interpretation, of course, does not exhaust who Jesus was. In the Gospel of John, the author acknowledges, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (Jn. 21:25). The Christ of faith, then, is an abstraction, a characterization built on selected and organized pieces of evidence. In contrast, the historical Jesus is the historian's interpretation of the earthly (empirical) Jesus. It is a theoretical reconstruction that attempts to account for the admissible evidence. For Jesus scholar John Meier, “the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus, but only a fragmentary hypothetical reconstruction of him by modern means of research.”<sup>42</sup> Like the Christ of faith, the historical Jesus is only an abstraction; it is not the real Jesus.

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<sup>40</sup> Marshall, 29-30.

<sup>41</sup> McCullagh, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 58. This narrow definition of the historical Jesus was used in the Old Quest by Martin Kahler. See his 1898 book, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (trans. Carl Braaten. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 103. In the New Quest, this narrow definition was used by James Robinson. See his *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 26.

The historical Jesus says nothing about the earthly (transcendent) Jesus, nor can it; historical studies are the wrong tool for the job. About this transcendent dimension of Jesus, I. Howard Marshall comments, “He is ‘beyond history’ in the same way as God is ‘beyond history.’ This figure in whom Christians believe can be termed the ‘Christ of faith.’ It is clear that he is known not by means of historical study but by some other means, such as spiritual revelation.”<sup>43</sup> The historical Jesus, then, should not to be equated with the earthly Jesus. Since historical studies can never explain a person or event in all its complexity, Jesus Research provides only a glimpse of the earthly (empirical) Jesus. This means that the historical Jesus should not even be equated with the earthly (empirical) Jesus. After all, no single portrait (i.e., scholarly reconstruction) can exhaust who the earthly (empirical) Jesus was. Having said this, scholars have offered a variety of portraits, such as political revolutionary, religious reformer, social prophet, wandering charismatic (miracle-worker), sage (wisdom teacher), apocalyptic prophet, and cynic philosophers. These portraits have various degrees of historical plausibility.

In Jesus Research, some scholars are troubled by the plurality of portraits of Jesus that have emerged. In response to this plurality of portraits, it can be observed that not all of these portraits are valid. Most scholars today are skeptical about the portraits of Jesus as a political revolutionary and cynic philosopher. These portraits lack validity because they cannot adequately explain the evidence. In contrast, the other portraits have various degrees of plausibility. Perhaps each portrait provides a glimpse of the earthly (empirical) Jesus. After all, no single portrait can exhaustively describe any person in all his/her physical and psychological complexity. Given the even greater complexity of Jesus, a plurality of portraits should be expected.<sup>44</sup> As long as these portraits compliment rather than contradict each other, Jesus scholars should avoid reductionism. In historical studies, McCullagh observes, “Different descriptions of the same thing cannot all be true if they are inconsistent, but otherwise they can all be true.”<sup>45</sup> This observation applies equally to the plurality of portraits in Jesus Research.

**Conclusion about Historical Studies.** Historical studies is a social science whose goal is to attain historical knowledge about past people and events. Using an inductive method of research, historians develop hypotheses to account for the historical evidence. As we have seen, historical studies provides knowledge about the past, albeit tentative and probabilistic knowledge. With limited sources and the subjectivity of the historian, we should expect no more. When historians have completed the three steps of the historical method (i.e., identification, research, and explanation), their work is done. The historical explanations which they develop provide important historical knowledge about the past, whether people or events.

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<sup>43</sup> Marshall, 61.

<sup>44</sup> A plurality of portraits can be seen even in the four canonical gospels. Matthew portrays Jesus as the promised kingly messiah, Mark as the suffering servant of God, Luke as the perfect man, and John as the incarnate Son of God. Rather than contradict each other, these four portraits compliment each other providing us with a fuller understanding of Jesus. For a helpful discussion of these different gospel portraits, see Richard Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) and Mark Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> McCullagh, 69.

History, after all, is a descriptive task. Ronald Nash calls this scientific history: "Scientific history seeks knowledge for its own sake, without attention to the practical value of the subject or lessons we might learn from the past or help it might provide with regard to the future."<sup>46</sup> Scientific history, then, is the study of history for history's sake; the goal of history studies, then, is to provide an accurate record about past people and events.

In Jesus Research, there are indeed those Jesus scholars who practice scientific history. They do not appear to be interested in drawing implications from their historical Jesus. They appear content to end their work with a historical explanation of Jesus. Some scholars have observed that current Jesus Research is different from the two previous quests in this regard.<sup>47</sup> Craig Evans, for examples, states: "There have appeared, however, several studies in the seventies and eighties which do not always espouse a particular theology nor are committed to finding an historical Jesus that is necessarily relevant to faith."<sup>48</sup> As examples of scholars who evince no apparent theological agenda in Jesus Research, Evans points to C. H. Dodd, Joachim Jeremias, Geza Vermes, John Bowker, Bruce Chilton, Ben Meyer, Anthony Harvey, Gerald Sloyan, Harvey Falk, and E. P. Sanders. In his book, *Jesus and Judaism*, E.P. Sanders is well aware that some readers want him to draw theological implications from his historical conclusions. Nonetheless, he concludes with these words, "The relationships between history and theology are very complex, and I shall make no poor effort to delve into a vast and difficult subject here. I have been engaged for some years in the effort to free history and exegesis from the control of theology; that is, from being obligated to come to certain conclusions which are pre-determined by theological commitment, and one sees this effort being continued here."<sup>49</sup> For Sanders and other scientific historians, the attainment of historical knowledge about Jesus is the end of their work. The descriptive task for these historians is done and they desire to don no other hats.

## CONTRIBUTION OF JESUS RESEARCH TO CHRISTIAN FAITH

**Implications of Historical Studies.** Other historians believe that their historical conclusions have modern-day implications. That is, people today can learn lessons from the past. George Santayana correctly observed, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>50</sup> In fact, many historians choose their object of study based upon their belief in the contemporary relevance of their topic. For example, historians may study the economic system of ancient Rome because they believe that American capitalism can be improved with this

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<sup>46</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Meaning of History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 5.

<sup>47</sup> The theological motivation for these two quests was certainly different. While the Old Quest attempted to use the historical Jesus to overthrow the Christ of faith, the New Quest attempted to find continuity between the two.

<sup>48</sup> Craig Evans, "Jesus of Nazareth," 15-19. This also appears to be the view of N.T. Wright: "The methods [of current Jesus Research] owe less to theological *a priori*s and more to the normal canons of historiography: hypothesis and verification, and testing of sources as part of that process," in Wright, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus," 800.

<sup>49</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 333-334.

<sup>50</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Volume 1, 1905.

knowledge of the past. It is necessary to keep in mind, however, that the historian is no longer functioning as an historian but as an economist when they prescribe their historical conclusions for modern economics. In other words, the historian is no longer practicing the descriptive task of historical explanation; they have moved beyond the legitimate realm of historical studies to some other field of study. They have switched hats. This is not necessarily wrong, unless, of course, the historian claims that their prescriptions are required by their historical conclusions. This is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. Anthony Flew defines the naturalistic fallacy as, “The mistake...of deducing conclusions about what ought to be from premises that state only what is the case.”<sup>51</sup> Historical conclusions, in other words, are descriptive rather than prescriptive. Attempts to prescribe historical conclusions, as a historian, confuses the descriptive (“is”) with the prescriptive (“ought”).

**Implications of Jesus Research.** Implications, then, are not historical judgments. This is an important point because some Jesus scholars pontificate their historical Jesus as though he were the proper object of Christian faith. Yet, their historical conclusion, i.e., the historical Jesus, is nothing more than a hypothetical reconstruction. If Jesus scholars desire to prescribe their historical Jesus, they are free to do so. But honesty dictates that they acknowledge that they are no longer functioning as a historian but as a theologian or minister. M. Eugene Boring rightly warns against those who “call for faith in their reconstruction and theological interpretation of the real Jesus. Whoever makes decisions on these matters is no longer functioning as historian.”<sup>52</sup> The goal of these efforts has been to undermine traditional Christianity by replacing the Christ of Faith with the Historical Jesus. This can be seen in the “lives of Jesus” in the Old Quest as well as the recent work of the Jesus Seminar. For these Jesus scholars, there is a strong dichotomy between these two figures.

While other scholars agree that a dichotomy exists, they reject the historical Jesus in favor of the Christ of faith. In the Old Quest, Martin Kahler was especially troubled by Jesus scholars who attempted to replace the Christ of faith with their historical Jesus. Kahler asked, “How can this figure of Jesus—this tentative residue remaining after the work of critical subtraction—which must now, for the first time, be ingeniously evoked from the mist of the past, be the object of faith for all Christians?”<sup>53</sup> Kahler made it clear that he viewed the quest for the historical Jesus as a “blind alley,” which is historically impossible and theologically unnecessary. The quest was historically impossible, according to Kahler, because the sources (i.e., the gospels) were fragmentary and biased. He believed that the quest was theologically unnecessary because the historical Jesus is a subjective and tentative reconstruction; thus, it can never be the basis of Christian faith. For Kahler, the real Jesus is the Christ of faith: “The real Christ, that is, the

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<sup>51</sup> Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), 240.

<sup>52</sup> Boring, “The ‘Third Quest’ and the Apostolic Faith,” 350. Among those who make such grandiose claims, Boring lists Burton Mack, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Elizabeth Schussler Firoenze. Surely the Jesus Seminar could be added to this list.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Ed. And trans. Carl Braaten. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 103. In this same book, Kahler states, “the historical Jesus of modern authors conceals us from the living Christ” (43), and “I reject the entire Life-of-Jesus movement as a blind alley (46).

Christ who has exercised an influence in history, with whom millions have communed in childlike faith, and with whom the great witnesses of faith have been in communion—while striving, apprehending, triumphing, and proclaiming—this real Christ is the Christ who is preached. The Christ who is preached, however, is precisely the Christ of faith.”<sup>54</sup>

Just as Kahler was critical of the Old Quest, Luke Timothy Johnson has been critical of current Jesus Research. He rejects the possibility of drawing theological implications from the historical study of Jesus. Johnson writes, “The most destructive effect of the Jesus Seminar and recent historical Jesus books has been the perpetuation of the notion that history somehow determines faith, and that for faith to be correct, the historical accounts that gave rise to it have to be verifiable.”<sup>55</sup> Johnson agrees with Kahler that historical conclusions are tentative and cannot sustain the commitment of faith. He also raises an additional question: what historical Jesus? Given the pluralities of historical reconstructions of Jesus, which one is to be believed? Both Kahler and Johnson appear to follow in the intellectual tradition of Tertullian (ca. A.D. 155-222): *credo quia absurdum est* (“I believe because it is absurd”).

Other scholars see the benefit of drawing implications from the historical study of Jesus. They believe that the historical Jesus has tremendous relevance for Christian theology and faith. John Meier is one such example: “Yet I maintain that the quest for the historical Jesus can be very useful if one is asking about faith seeking understanding, i.e., theology, in a contemporary context.”<sup>56</sup> For Meier and others, historical conclusions about Jesus have legitimate implications for Christian theology and faith. In spite of this affirmation, Meier makes it clear that the historical Jesus is not a replacement for the Christ of faith: “the proper object of Christian faith is not and cannot be an idea or scholarly reconstruction, however reliable. The object of Christian faith is a living person, Jesus Christ, who fully entered into a true human existence on earth in the first century A.D., but now lives risen and glorified, forever in the Father’s presence.”<sup>57</sup>

So, how can Jesus Research contribute to Christian theology and faith? Let’s consider its contribution specifically to Evangelical Christianity. First and foremost, historical conclusions about Jesus can serve as a necessary corrective to Evangelical Christology which often stresses the deity of Christ to the neglect of his humanity. I. Howard Marshall’s 1977 observation still rings true for Evangelicals today: “The Evangelical wing of Christianity has a strong temptation

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>55</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 141.

<sup>56</sup> John P. Meier, *Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 198. This also appears to be the view of James Charlesworth: “From the very beginnings of Christian faith the reality of history is paramount to the kerygma. Jesus’ earliest followers never falsified history...It is theologically legitimate to seek historical understanding. Faith cannot be equivocal; it always elicits questions. It is always yearning to understand as couched in the well known phrase *fides quaerens intellectum*,” in Charlesworth, “Jesus Research: A Paradigm Shift for New Testament Scholars,” 19. Both Meier and Charlesworth, of course, are indebted to Augustine (ca. A.D. 354-430) and Anselm (1033-1109).

<sup>57</sup> John P. Meier, “The Historical Jesus: Rethinking Some Concepts,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), 22.

to concentrate its attention on the crucified and risen Lord and to ignore his earthly life.”<sup>58</sup> To be sure, Jesus is the risen Lord who is worthy of our adoration and prayers. But, this risen Lord is the same Jesus who walked this earth in human form and fully experienced the human condition. There is indeed continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. That Evangelicals overemphasize the deity of Christ can be seen in their doctrinal statements. For example, the statement of the Evangelical Free Church reads, “That Jesus Christ is true God and true man, having been conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He died on the cross, a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. Further, He arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven, where, at the right hand of the Majesty on High, He is now our High Priest and Advocate.” While acknowledging that Jesus was “true man,” this statement affirms only the birth and death of the earthly Jesus. Regarding the deity of Christ, the statement affirms his divine conception, his sacrificial death, his bodily resurrection, his ascension into heaven, and his advocacy for the church. Other Evangelical doctrinal statements have the same emphasis on Christ’s deity. In Evangelical churches, it is the risen Christ who is preached and praised. Little is said about the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, a first century itinerant preacher who walked the dusty roads of Galilee in the first century A.D.

To the extent that Evangelicals neglect the full humanity of Jesus, they are guilty of Docetism, a first century Christian heresy.<sup>59</sup> Docetism is the “View that Christ’s humanity was only an appearance (from Greek *dokesis*) or disguise worn by the heavenly Redeemer.”<sup>60</sup> In the New Testament, there appears to be evidence that the early church combated the heresy of Docetism. For example, John’s Gospel not only exalts the pre-existent Word (*logos*), but it makes clear, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). The Johannine epistles likewise emphasize the physical body of Jesus. Consider the introduction to I John and its use of sensing verbs: “That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen* with our eyes, which we have *looked at* and our hands have *touched*—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” (I John 1:1, italics mine). So important was the physical body of Jesus to the early church, that those who denied it were excluded from fellowship. “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world” (I John 4:2-3). It should be clear from these references that Docetism was rejected by orthodox Christianity. But, the question remains, why was the physical body of Jesus so important to the early church?

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<sup>58</sup> Marshall, 75.

<sup>59</sup> The charge of Docetism by Ernst Kasemann served as the impetus for the New Quest. In a 1953 address to fellow Bultmannians, Kasemann said, “The immediate answer to this question is that we also cannot do away with the identity between the exalted and the earthly Lord without falling into docetism and depriving ourselves of the possibility of drawing a line between the Easter faith of the community and myth,” “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in Ernst Kasemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 34.

<sup>60</sup> Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. New York: Garland, 1990), 272.

There are at least three reasons that the early church emphasized the physical body of Jesus: incarnation, atonement, and resurrection. One, according to the Evangelical doctrine of the incarnation, the Word (second person of the trinity) embodied himself in Jesus of Nazareth. Through the virgin birth, the Word took on a human body. But without a body, there is no incarnation as we are reminded in John 1:14. Two, the early church believed in substitutionary atonement, in which the shed blood of Christ pays the penalty for human sin. Peter captures well this belief: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (I Pt. 1:18-19). Blood atonement, of course, requires a physical body. Three, for the early church, the death of Jesus was not the end of the story. In the proclamation in Acts, the apostles emphasized the bodily resurrection of Jesus. This can be seen in Paul's letters as well. For example, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hoped in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (I Cor. 15:17-19). Unlike docetic Christianity, the early church emphasized the full humanity of Jesus. They took great care to place Jesus within space and time. For the early church, a human Jesus was necessary for the central beliefs of incarnation, atonement, and resurrection. This should be no less true for Evangelical churches.

The second way that Jesus Research can contribute to Evangelical Christology is by allowing historical conclusions to challenge cultural preconceptions. We need to be reminded that our Savior visited this planet in the person of Jesus, a first century Palestinian Jew. If anything, the study of primary sources by Jesus scholars has led to a greater appreciation of this fact. Even though Jesus was like one of us, this does not mean that he was a blonde haired, blue eyed, white male, weighing around 150 lbs with a height of five feet, eight inches. Forensic scientists have used historical records to reconstruct the skeletal remains of a first century Palestinian Jew.<sup>61</sup> The reconstructed skull has a round face with olive-colored skin, curly brown hair and beard, and brown eyes. "From an analysis of skeletal remains, archaeologists had firmly established that the average build of a Semite male at the time of Jesus was 5 ft. 1 in., with an average weight of about 110 pounds."<sup>62</sup> With its attempt to understand Jesus within his historical context, Jesus scholars have rediscovered a Jewish Jesus.

The historical conclusions of Jesus Research can contribute to Evangelical Christology by challenging our docetic tendency and our cultural preconceptions. But, do these historical conclusions about Jesus contribute anything to Christian faith? After all, Christian faith is more than intellectual assent to theological propositions. Christian faith includes not only theological conviction but a personal relationship with Jesus. This relationship is built on trust in and commitment to our risen Lord. But, this risen Lord is none other than the earthly Jesus of whom we get a glimpse in Jesus Research. Some Christians, however, are threatened by the historical study of Jesus. I. Howard Marshall offers some reassurance: "The real threat to faith would be if it could be proved historically that Jesus had never died, and that he could not have been the

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<sup>61</sup> Mike Fillon, "The Real Face of Jesus," *Popular Mechanics* (December 2002), 68-71.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

Son of God; but the former of these points lies beyond all reasonable historical doubt, and the latter is beyond the reach of historical disproof.”<sup>63</sup>

Much of the discussion thus far has been abstract and impersonal. Let me make it personal. Jesus Research has impacted my personal faith in two ways. First, my study of historical conclusions about Jesus has made Jesus more real and accessible. Jesus truly lived in time and space, fully experiencing the human condition. Because of this, I can be assured that I will find a high priest who can empathetically intercede for me before my heavenly Father. Just as important, I find in Jesus Research a Jesus who lived a human life that was pleasing to God. Several years ago, the acronym WWJD (“What would Jesus do?”) became popular. You could find it on jewelry, refrigerator magnets, and book markers. To be honest, I did not find WWJD to be particularly helpful in my day-to-day life. After all, Jesus would miraculously multiply food to feed the hungry, he would still the storm by the power of his word, and he would heal all kinds of illness with the touch of his hand. As an Evangelical with a high Christology, I found little value in WWJD. Because Jesus was God incarnate, I simply could not do what Jesus did. My historical study of Jesus, however, has helped me to appreciate Jesus’ full humanity. As a human, Jesus showed compassion by extending forgiveness and ministering to human needs. As a human, Jesus became tired and hungry as he strove to fulfill God’s call on his life. As a human, Jesus would retreat to be by himself so that he could restore his emotional and spiritual strength. And as a human, Jesus was able, in spite of deep emotional turmoil, to submit to his destiny: “not my will but your will be done.” Since Jesus is fully God, he is worthy of my worship. Since Jesus is also fully human, he is an important role model.

The second way that Jesus Research has impacted my faith is through the various portraits proposed by Jesus scholars. Thinking about Jesus as a Jewish miracle-worker or apocalyptic prophet changes the way I read the gospels. It makes me more sensitive to the socio-historical context of first century Palestine so that I am less likely to read into the text my personal and cultural biases. A portrait that has been especially challenging to me is the one proposed by Richard Horsley, namely, Jesus as a social prophet. Horsley is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. His two most important writings in this regard are: *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs* (1985), and *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (1987). Horsley approaches the study of Jesus both historically and sociologically. He believes that the proper context for studying Jesus is the Jewish resistance to Roman occupation. Since Palestine was a colony of Rome, the Jews were a subject people. Since Palestine was largely an agrarian society, the vast majority of the population consisted of peasants. These Jewish peasants tended to be nationalistic. The accommodation of the Jewish aristocracy to Roman rule became a source of tension for them. Oppressive Roman taxation of village peasants added to this social tension. To better understand the social world of Jesus’ day, Horsley applies a model from sociology. This particular model attempts to explain class struggle caused by the structural injustice in a colonial setting. In this type of setting, according to the model, class struggle typically goes through four stages: oppression in the form of institutionalized injustice, non-violent resistance by peasants, repression by those in power, and finally political revolt. Horsley believes that Jesus came on the scene in Palestine during the second stage of non-violent resistance. For

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<sup>63</sup> Marshall, 106.

Horsley, Jesus was not a political revolutionary who attempted to change society from the top-down. Jesus, in fact, did not promote violence but neither was he a pacifist. Jesus directed his message and ministry to the poor and marginalized in the small towns and villages of Galilee. Jesus founded a grass-roots movement whose goal was to change society from the ground-up. This approach to social change, according to Horsley, makes Jesus a social prophet (i.e., revolutionary, reformer).<sup>64</sup>

The portrait of Jesus as a social prophet can surely be seen in Luke's gospel. In numerous episodes that are unique to Luke, Jesus is portrayed as reaching out to those who have been marginalized by Jewish society. In all four gospels, Jesus is portrayed as caring about the poor. But in Luke, this concern is emphasized. Luke alone records Mary's Magnificat in which she says, "He [God] has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Lk. 2:53). Luke is also the only gospel that records Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 61:1, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." The poor in Luke seem to enjoy a reversal of fortune in the next life as illustrated by Luke's unique parable, the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31). In Luke's gospel, it is not only the poor who are the object of Jesus' concern but Samaritans. While most first century Jews despised Samaritans (cf. Jn. 4:9), Jesus reached out to them (Lk. 9:51-56; 17:11-16) and even made a Samaritan the protagonist of his parable, the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37). In all four gospels, Jesus reaches out to tax-collectors (cf. Lk. 5:27-32; 7:33-35; 15:1; and parallels) but in a story unique to Luke Jesus ministers to a tax-collector named Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10). It is also only in Luke that Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14) where the tax-collector is the protagonist. Other passages unique to Luke emphasize Jesus' concern for women (Lk. 7:11-17; 10:38-42; 13:10-13). From these verses, it should be clear that Luke emphasized Jesus' ministry to those who had been marginalized by Jewish society. This emphasis was there long before I read Horsley's book, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*. Nonetheless, my personal and cultural blinders hindered me from seeing it, at least with any kind of clarity.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus Research is the historical study of Jesus within his historical context. Using historical methods, scholars study and evaluate the sources in order to identify historical facts about the earthy (empirical) Jesus. These facts are then assembled into a coherent and plausible portrait of Jesus. In spite of the limitations of sources, historians, and conclusions, Jesus Research attains historical knowledge about Jesus. This knowledge can be beneficial to Evangelicals by contributing to their Christology and even to their personal faith in the risen Christ.

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<sup>64</sup> Horsley, of course, develops further his portrait of Jesus. For him, Jesus condemned patriarchal families (male headship), the ruling class (governments and wealthy aristocracy), institutionalized exploitation, and structural injustice. Jesus' goal, according to Horsley, was to establish an egalitarian social kingdom on earth. It is also true that Horsley is sympathetic with liberation theology, but none of this should completely diminish his other historical conclusions.