

A Theological Significance of the Quest for the Historical Jesus

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The quest for the historical Jesus is a major academic enterprise frequently engaging the attention of many Canadians. To some, it is welcome for the way it seems to undermine traditional understandings of Jesus and offer alternatives. Others regard it with suspicion and hostility for the same reasons. A third position sees the quest in a different way; not as foundational to Christian faith, but as functioning to inform it, and thus as having a real yet only relative theological importance.¹ Versions of the first two positions have been around for over a hundred years. The third is slightly more recent, dating back the 1940s.² All three have been argued, critiqued and restated, as the quest for the historical Jesus has become an on-going feature of western intellectual life. What follows, will examine why the quest has become such a fixture. It will also argue for the third position. The quest for the historical Jesus cannot determine whether or not Jesus is the Christ. Yet, it has a real theological significance. While, not everyone needs to engage in it, at present the church as a whole has a stake in pursuing it.

What has given rise to the quest for the historical Jesus?

In his history of the development of modern thought, Hans Blumenberg argues that there is no one set of perennial questions that people repeatedly tackle.³ Instead, these may alter partly because of changes in the circumstances in which people live. As Blumenberg shows, the spread of Christianity throughout the ancient western world had an impact of this kind. It presented new concerns and questions that western thought subsequently had to deal with for centuries afterwards.

The Enlightenment in the 1700s, had a similar effect on the Western Christian theology. In giving rise to modern historical inquiry, it produced questions and concerns that Western Christianity has had to take up because of the nature of the Christian message. The gospels make historical claims about Jesus: that he lived in Galilee, carried out a public ministry and died upon a Roman cross. Divergences

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between the gospels in their presentations of Jesus and other aspects of their accounts indicate that they are theological interpretations of the history they proclaim. Modern historical inquiry inevitably asks what can be known about the history that lies behind their proclamation. So the quest for the historical Jesus arose.⁴ It will likely continue, as long as Christianity has a public presence in western society and as long as interested Christians have the means to pursue it.

One could argue that there is a fateful side to this, in that the quest for the historical Jesus can undermine or help create barriers to Christian faith. The quest is part of the on-going explosion of knowledge characteristic of modern western societies. Academics in various fields have long noted that this explosion has made it impossible for any individual to keep up on all the scholarly research going on, even in one discipline like New Testament studies.⁵ As a result the increase in the total amount of knowledge available also creates an increase in relative ignorance. At present, societies as a whole have more knowledge about many aspects of the world than societies of the past. But, because no individual can keep up on the continual increase of knowledge in all areas, it also causes an increase of every individual's relative ignorance.⁶ Different people are ignorant of different things, but all are ignorant of some important areas of knowledge. There is simply more that can be known, than any one person has time to learn.

The quest for the historical Jesus is part of this increase in knowledge, and the dynamic noted above means that it can cause problems for Christian faith. As the quest continues to be pursued, it has broadened to include a quest for the historical Galilee and for the historical Judaism(s) of Jesus' time. A statement about Jesus, today is always open to challenge on the grounds that it is based on an erroneous understanding of movements within Judaism in Jesus' time, or of the social realities of Palestine of his day, according to the latest article or book on this that has just rolled off the press. In addition to broadening in this way, the quest has produced various images of the historical Jesus, and has been criticized in terms of whose interests it serves and what it is really about.⁷ This proliferation of images of Jesus, produced by the quest can lead some to declare that little can be known about the historical Jesus with any certainty. Few have the time and ability to sift through and judge the validity of all the positions and counter-positions put forth in these debates. This means, that many Christians today, find themselves having to live their faith in the face of a field of inquiry that remains beyond their expertise and that touches rather directly upon what they believe.

But, to simply see the quest in negative terms would be to overlook the gains in knowledge about Jesus and his day that it and associated endeavours have produced. That Christian faith today must be lived in the face of the debate, diverse findings, and contrary claims typical of a field of research, even if it does touch directly upon the object of Christian faith, is not really a new problem. The number of images of Jesus produced by the quest is also no reason to disparage it in principle. Most fields of inquiry tend to produce opposing viewpoints. Debate, diverse points of view and

contrary claims have been typical of the Christian faith since its inception. No one should demand that the quest produce a uniformity of opinion or certainty of results that goes beyond what is expected of any other research-discipline. If there were no debate occurring within the quest, we would not have any new historical knowledge about Jesus. Moreover, one source of the diverse images of Jesus produced by the quest may lie in "the life of the historical Jesus itself,"⁸ which may have made varying impressions on different social groups, thus giving rise to diverse impressions and images of Jesus.⁹ The basis of faith cannot be insulated from other forms of knowledge, the debates going on within them and the new findings they produce. So the theological question remains; how should the results of this kind of inquiry be related to Christian faith?

The relative importance of the quest for the historical Jesus

Over a century ago, Martin Kahler argued that it was wrong to make the quest for the historical Jesus foundational for Christian faith, as this would lead to the authority of "the alleged results" of an empirical science replacing that of the Bible as Scripture.¹⁰ Part of Kahler's argument was his conviction that faith in Jesus Christ is never based solely on an external authority, be it that of the Bible or historical research, but more centrally on the response that the New Testament's message about Jesus evokes within us.¹¹ In arguing, that making faith dependent upon the results of historical inquiry would destroy the possibility of having assurance of salvation, Kahler was reiterating a theme of Luther's, that knowledge of God depends ultimately on God's grace, not human activity or authority.¹² Kahler's position was taken up by Paul Tillich,¹³ who managed to write one of the more important theologies of the twentieth century without much attention to the quest.

As Kahler, Tillich, and others have pointed out, the quest cannot provide a foundation for Christian faith by proving that Jesus is the Christ. Belief in Jesus Christ is always a judgement of faith, which takes up the data that historical study provides, but goes beyond it.¹⁴ Coming at this from another angle, Rowan Williams notes that "the embodiment of divine sonship is not a feature of the life of Jesus among others, an additional piece of straightforwardly verifiable fact about this human being's human life," and that "the confession of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God does not of itself specify any particular biographical facts."¹⁵ For instance, even if one could prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus performed the miracles recorded in the gospels, this would not demonstrate conclusively that he was the Christ. These could be taken simply as striking examples of the paranormal. The miracles Jesus performed is witness to his being the Christ, but cannot prove it, because faith in Jesus Christ lies on a different plane of understanding. The understanding of Jesus' miracles in the gospel of John, which are presented there as "signs," suggests the same. While these "signs" point to Jesus being the Christ, true faith is not based on them and cannot be directly produced by them, because this comes as a gift from God.¹⁶ This difference between what is knowable through empirical inquiry and what is perceived through faith means that the quest can inform

Christian faith, but it cannot provide a basis for it. For this reason, it can only have a relative importance for Christian faith.

Unfortunately, affirming this can tempt people to dispense with the quest and ignore its findings. But the church as a whole cannot simply dismiss these and still claim to bear witness to the truth that embraces all things. The contextual nature of Christian thought requires that it take up questions posed by the cultures in which it is done.

*"Theology is a cultural artifact; therefore, once a culture becomes permeated with a historical-critical approach, as has western culture from the Enlightenment onwards, theology can operate in and speak to that culture with credibility only if it absorbs a historical approach into its methodology."*¹⁷

While, the quest can be exploited in various ways and its findings are always ideologically influenced, this does not mean it should be ignored, or that its results are always pre-determined by the outlook of those engaged in it.¹⁸ The quest for the historical Jesus needs to be critically evaluated in terms of whose interests it serves, but it should not be abandoned,¹⁹ for reasons internal to Christian faith. The gospels proclaim the crucified and risen Christ, not the historical Jesus. Nonetheless, they and churches that accept them as authoritative have an interest in historical knowledge about Jesus.

A theological significance of the quest for the historical Jesus

The gospels were written to inform faith as well as to proclaim Jesus Christ. Then, as now, the risen Christ easily becomes an abstraction on which people are tempted to project their narrow self-interests. As Calvin noted, human minds, including those of people in the church, have a tendency to produce idols.²⁰ In order to help prevent this, the gospel writers reached back to remembrances of Jesus' sayings and actions in the belief that as the risen Christ is continuous with Jesus who was crucified, these remembrances could provide concrete criteria for discerning the Spirit in the present.²¹ They did this, so that the risen Christ would not become an empty abstraction that could be filled with idolatrous content. The risen Christ becomes concrete through remembering the ministry of Jesus, how he came forward amidst the conflicts of his day in the name of God, and how this led to his death on a Roman cross. The way in which the gospels relate the proclamation of the risen Christ to Jesus who was crucified demonstrates that the "function of recalling the historical Jesus is thus, within the framework of the Gospel, a permanent necessity."²² In order, for the church to determine the legitimacy of the place it occupies within the conflicts of the present in terms of its faith in Jesus Christ, it must continually reach back to these memories of Jesus' ministry and reflect upon them. As Jesus has become a "highly ambivalent cultural icon,"²³ the cultural memories of churches and societies need to be continually tested by historical inquiry as part of determining the legitimacy of the way Jesus is remembered therein. In doing this, the quest serves the church in two ways:

First, it is only as the salvation that Jesus brings is concretely revealed in his ministry, death and resurrection that his being the Christ becomes meaningful in relation to the particularities of people's lives. People live in societies divided and conflicted along lines such as race, class, gender, or cultural heritage. These lines of division may shift and give rise to new ones.²⁴ The concreteness of Jesus' public ministry, which the gospels narrate and the quest studies, is needed to give content to Jesus as the Christ in relation to these conflicts. It was in part failure to attend to this concreteness that enabled slaveholding Christians to overlook the contradiction between the brutality of their slaveholding and the claims of the gospel.²⁵ Similarly, failure to attend to the presence of women in the movement around Jesus²⁶ enabled later teaching to relegate them to a subordinate place in the church, in contradiction to what can be discerned historically about Jesus' own practice.²⁷ The concrete aspects of Jesus' life must be remembered and related to the alienations and conflicts of the present if he is to bring healing and hope into them.²⁸ The quest for the historical Jesus seeks to uncover these. This is one reason why the church has an interest in it. As Eberhard Juengel argues,

"If God has made this human being – and not just any human being – to be the Christ, as faith confesses, then faith must be interested to know what can be known about this person: but not in order to ground faith in Jesus Christ historically, but rather to guard it from a docetic self-misunderstanding."²⁹

Second, people never perceive the truth absolutely, in a way that puts what they believe beyond question or need of critique. Rather, even in the case of religious truth, we always live with relative insights that are continually in need of revision and on-going testing.³⁰ The concrete aspects of Jesus' life and work can never be determined, once and for all. Christians must repeatedly ask themselves, how well have we understood Jesus? Whose interests do our images of Jesus serve? What exclusionist tendencies may they harbour? Within the Reformed theological tradition's understanding of the church as reformed and always in need of reform, the quest can help in the church's on-going task of continually rethinking its understanding of the Christian faith in light of the witness of Scripture and the witness of the Spirit in the present. By gathering historical knowledge of Jesus, it helps the church in its constant task of testing the continuity of its witness with the person and work of Jesus Christ.³¹ As the quest for the historical Jesus serves these two purposes, it has a genuine theological significance.

A few insights from the quest over the past twenty years

What has been determined through the quest over the past twenty years? Here, only a few insights can be mentioned and one has to enter into ongoing debates. A major divide exists at present, between those who see Jesus as an eschatological prophet within Judaism acting in the expectation of a dramatic new action on God's part,³² and others who interpret eschatology differently and see the apocalyptic elements in the gospels as later additions to the traditions that grew up about Jesus after his death.³³ The debate is partly about the diversity within Judaism in Jesus' time and

his location within this. Both sides have emphasized Jesus' Jewishness and helped produce better understandings of Judaism in his day, so that deprecating the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders mentioned in the gospels as legalistic or superficial in their religious beliefs is no longer credible. Some have argued that understandings of Jesus as an eschatological prophet are determined by religiously conservative ideologies attempting to resist the current effects of globalization and postmodernism on religious traditions.³⁴ But, regardless of how one evaluates these contemporary realities, "the wholesale elimination of future eschatology from Jesus' message flies in the face of its widespread attestation in many different gospel sources and literary forms."³⁵ Acknowledging this, inclines one to see Jesus as an eschatological prophet within Judaism.

While, Jesus can only be understood as a figure within the Judaism of his day, still he was distinctive within this, as was John the Baptist. Both were creatively interpreting Jewish traditions, and in doing so were radically critical of other Jewish religious movements and institutions. Yet, Jesus was also in dialogue with other Jewish religious leaders. He learned Jewish scriptures and traditions from others, but he presented himself as giving the correct interpretation of these. He was one in a series of Jewish messianic figures, who attracted followings mostly from the peasant population and who died violently as Roman authorities attempted to crush them.³⁶ Only the movements around Jesus and John appear to have survived their leader's death.

Recent work has also shown how the community gathered around Jesus, comprised of various kinds of followers,³⁷ was crucial to his ministry. This resonates with several recent Christologies, which have emphasized the importance of the people gathered around Jesus to his being the Christ, seeing Jesus as a catalytic agent in a movement, like leaven in rising dough.³⁸ Jesus' ability to function in this way by "creating identity badges, embryonic structures, and support systems for his movement within 1st century Judaism,"³⁹ probably helped this movement to survive his death and his memory to continue to enliven it afterwards.

The quest has also demonstrated that Jesus' ministry was frequently directed to the marginalized and destitute,⁴⁰ indicating that he exercised a preferential option for the poor. Recent studies have pursued this further by unearthing political dimensions of Jesus' public ministry. As there were political aspects to Jesus' baptism by John and Jesus' own death, the two events that stand at the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry, it follows that there was a political dimension to his ministry which came in-between.⁴¹

Even Jesus' exorcisms are now understood to have seemed "threatening to the governing elite and their retainers"⁴² in his time.

But as Jesus is understood as an eschatological prophet within Judaism, he cannot be reduced to a political reformer or cultural critic. While the political dimensions of his person and ministry cannot be slighted, as these led to his death, the reign of God that he proclaimed reached beyond what is achievable in politics. His message entailed a kind of universalism, extending even to those judged as wicked, without discounting their sin or the misery it caused.⁴³ There was a transmoral dimension to Jesus' ministry,

based on his belief that God's care extends to all God's creation.⁴⁴ This was partly what made him scandalous. Jesus, a source of hope for the marginalized and oppressed, also brings hope for their oppressors.

The quest continues

One of the church's perennial tasks, as it seeks to be responsible in its witness, is to ask about its own identity and calling in the time and place where it finds itself.⁴⁵ In order to do this, the church must frequently ask the same or similar questions over and over again in each new age. The quest for the historical Jesus is a part of this. It continues because the church continues, and always needs to seek clarity about the person of Jesus who it claims to follow, in order to have clarity about its own positions in the conflicts of its day, recognizing the differences between this and Jesus' time. The quest for the historical Jesus is just one part of this. But it is a real part of it, and some in the church must take it up.

NOTES

1. For sketches of each of these positions, see Elizabeth Johnson, "The Word Was Made Flesh and Dwelt Among Us: Jesus Research and Christian Faith," in *Jesus: A Colloquium in the Holy Land* edited by Doris Donnelly (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp.148-149. This third position is not necessarily the same as the 'third quest' for the historical Jesus.
2. D.M. Baillie, *God Was In Christ* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1948), pp.28, 52.
3. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), pp.65-66.
4. For a brief history of the quest that unfortunately leaves out the Jesus Seminar, see James Keating, "Epistemology and the Theological Application of Jesus Research," in *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice* edited by Anne Clifford and Anthony Godzieba (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), pp.19-21.
5. Ernst Kasemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1969), p.2.
6. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Volume XVI* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p.7.
7. William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus* (Oakville, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2005).
8. Michael Welker, "Who is Jesus Christ For Us Today?" *Harvard Theological Review* 95:2 (2002), p.140.
9. As Welker notes, "we must consider the likelihood that Jesus had a different impact on the rural population of Galilee than he did on the urban population of Jerusalem ... that those who wished to hold high the Mosaic law or the Temple cult in the face of the Roman occupation perceived Jesus differently than did those who wanted to embrace Roman culture ... that the testimony of those whom Jesus met with healing and acceptance must differ from the testimony of those whose main impression of Jesus was drawn from his conflicts with Rome and Jerusalem." *Ibid.*
10. Martin Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*. Translated, edited, and with an Introduction by Carl Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), pp. 61-62.
11. *Ibid.*, p.87.
12. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 26-30: Luther's Works Volume 5* edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), pp.43-44.
13. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp.101-107.
14. *Ibid.*, p.117.
15. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2000), pp.25-26.
16. John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah*, 2nd edition (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1993), pp.411-416.

17. John Meier, "The Historical Jesus: Rethinking Some Concepts," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), p.22.
18. Stephen Westerholm, "The Christ of Faith: Context," in *Whose Historical Jesus?* edited by William Arnal and Michel Desjardins (Waterloo, ON: Canadian Corporation for the Study of Religion/Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), pp.238-239.
19. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Jesus of Nazareth in Historical Research," in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning* edited by Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003), p.41. See also Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp.21-25.
20. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 1, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.), p.65.
21. Kasemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, p.63.
22. *Ibid.*, p.64.
23. Welker, "Who is Jesus Christ For Us Today?" p.136.
24. Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.31.
25. Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), pp.18-19.
26. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 93.
27. I owe this insight to a student, Julie Bergen. For an extended study of this, see Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).
28. Tillich acknowledged that without "the concreteness of the New Being, its newness would be empty," Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume II*, p.114. He was criticized for not taking up the results of the quest for the historical Jesus to help determine this concreteness.
29. Eberhard Juengel, *Theological Essays Volume II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.87. See also Keating. "Epistemology and the Theological Application of Jesus Research," p.22.
30. Ingolf Dalferth, *Die Wirklichkeit des Moeglichen* (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 2003), p.430.
31. Ernst Kasemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964), p.46.
32. E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p.319. This understanding is typical of scholars participating in what is frequently called the 'third quest' for the historical Jesus.
33. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (New York, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), pp.238, 243-260.
34. Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus*, pp.41-72.
35. John Meier, "The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80:4 (1999), p.460.
36. Martin Jaffee, *Early Judaism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), p.114.
37. John Meier, *A Marginal Jew Volume III: Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp.626-632.
38. Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), p.172.
39. Meier, *A Marginal Jew Volume III*, p.632.
40. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp.266-276; John Meier, *A Marginal Jew Volume II: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p.161.
41. Gerd Theissen, "The Political Dimension of Jesus' Activities," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce Malina and Gerd Theissen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p.230.
42. Santiago Gujarrro, "The Politics of Exorcism," in Stegemann, *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, p.172.
43. Sean Freyne, *Jesus: A Jewish Galilean* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), p.88.
44. *Ibid.*, p.169.
45. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), pp. 235-238.