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## The Historical Jesus

We began in the previous chapter with the task of recovering a chronology of the life of Jesus with its challenges of minimal external points of reference, multiple calendrical systems within which to insert data, multicultural varieties of fixing days or holy days or years within an annual calendar, and the like. Knowing as much as possible about Jesus and his world certainly makes the venture worthwhile, but the writers of the early “biographies” of Jesus seemed little concerned about certain time issues and quite unsuspecting of the obsessions that we as their eighteenth-through twenty-first-century readers would entertain.

Furthermore, known details of Jesus’s life are both blessing and bane. His preserved sayings are of necessity *fragmentary*<sup>1</sup> rather than exhaustive; and

1. As we mentioned earlier, the words attributed to Jesus in Mark total just over 5,000; in Matthew almost 14,000; in Luke almost 13,000; and in John almost 9,000. (The count was done in an English version: the NASB.) This count is itself an interesting diversity, considering that Mark talks often about Jesus’s being a teacher. Even Matthew’s

*vintage*—even *representative*<sup>2</sup>—rather

comparatively large collection of Jesus’s words can be read in the time (one and a half hours) devoted to many university lectures on any given day.

For us a useful range of representative teaching styles recur. The Synoptics contain forms of teaching typical of a Jewish sage: aphorisms, proverbs, parables, and riddles. All these forms of speech fall within the range of the *mashal*, a word for the typical teaching form of wise men in ancient Israel, and also a word translated in LXX by many different Greek words (*parabolē*, *logos*, *paroimia*, and *ainigma* are four that occur in just the first six verses of Proverbs [titled *mishlê*; but also *problēma*, *mythos* and *diēgēsis*). In the Gospels, the Greek words that communicate this meaning are very restricted (*parabolē* mostly, but also possibly *logos* [Mark 4:14] in the Synoptics and *paroimia* in John [10:6; 16:25, 29]). It wouldn’t take long in early Christianity for Jesus himself to become the parable, enigma, and problem (*parabolē*, *ainigma*, *problēma*). See also Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 1–60, 567–77.

2. In chapter 9, we noted that the sermons and discourses are placed strategically. For instance, the Sermon on the Plain in Luke (6:20–49) is found at the end of a long narrative section (4:14–6:19) that tells of Jesus as an amazingly influential (and inflammatory) teacher, but that lacks any sampling of what he really teaches! By the time the reader gets to the sermon, a significant anticipation has

than random. The focus of the records left is topical and typical with an emphasis hard to miss on the hero's death. But indeed some basic chronological work can be done *prima facie*. For example, it is certain that before Jesus died, he was born; that before he worked with John, he was baptized by him; that before he was known as a worker of miracles, he was known as an ordinary worker; that before he was arrested and tried, he was in some way incendiary; that before he was betrayed, he had merited loyal friendship and even messianic hope; that before he was scourged and crucified, he had earned enemies (both political and religious); and finally, if we may, that after he was entombed (bringing an end to some hopeful scenarios), he was resurrected—giving birth to others. Debate over whether to include an account of the *risen* Jesus in discussion of the *historical* Jesus continues with energy.<sup>3</sup> It is an important dis-

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been generated by the hoarding of the masses and the silence of the sage, and now one is quite ready to hear what this man is teaching! This artful work of the Gospel writers can (and should) be viewed positively, but frequently it is not since it reveals an authorial agenda to which the reader (and Jesus) is subject.

3. Sanders, *The Historical Figure*, discusses the resurrection as an epilogue (276–81), though he also has a chapter (10) on miracles; Stein, *Jesus the Messiah*, makes it the final chapter of his book roughly of equal length with all the others; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, devote a chapter to it titling it, however, “The Risen Jesus: Easter and Its Interpretations” (474–511), making it a bridge to the final chapter on the beginnings of Christology in the early church; Chilton and Evans, *Authenticating the Activities*, have contributions by scholars on the arrest, the foot washing, and the burial but none on the resurrection (see, however, the contribution by Bruce Malina on miracles in general, specifically on the walking upon water [351–71]; and the opening essay by Evans with the same title as the book [3–29, esp.

cussion, because without the risen Jesus, would we really have the Gospels to argue about, and would we have early Christianity or the Epistles as well as any other NT and early Christian literature?

With such examples before us of our own focus and interest (with many of our questions) differing from theirs, and with our picture of Jesus determined by the portrait left by the Gospels, it should make our caution and humility both easier and more urgent. At some point ahead any student of the Gospels will have to address the question of an *author's* interests, the quest for which may be more successful as well as more meaningful, in surprising ways.

## THE CULTURAL PROBLEM

What was Jesus of Nazareth really like, especially in his views and teaching? Was he a sentimental teacher of love? A pacifist contemplative? An activist provocateur? A plotting and scheming political messiah? A para-Zealot revolutionary? An

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12–15]; Wright, *The Resurrection*, is a massive discussion; and Keener, *Historical Jesus*, makes “The Resurrection” (330–48) his final chapter, with also a separate appendix (“What Really Happened at the Tomb?” [379–88]). There are also numerous popularly written books on Jesus such as, by Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Yancey discusses the resurrection in the eleventh of fourteen chapters. (The last three chapters are instructive for both Jesus scholars and lay Christians.) Both L. T. Johnson, *Will the Real Jesus*, 133–40; and Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 330–48, discuss the debate and defend different perspectives. For a critical discussion of skeptical modern historiography, see “Miracles and Method,” 39–90 in Eddy and Boyd, *Jesus Legend*; for a plea to better understand the dilemma, see Allison, “Miracles Here, There, and Everywhere,” in Allison, *Historical Christ*, 66–78; and Chilton and Evans, *Authenticating the Activities*, 11–16.

existentialist rabbi? A cynic-like philosopher-sage? A Gnostic heavenly revealer? A mix of “all or some of the above”?<sup>4</sup> Can we know what he was like? If yes, then how? and what sort of limits would there be to our knowledge? If no, then why not?

The quest for the historical Jesus is not an easy one, because every person has his or her own conception of Jesus based on a particular cultural and religious context. The history of religious art, for example, provides many different faces of Jesus: a beardless Roman shepherd, a Cynic Greek philosopher, a Byzantine divinity, a grueling and tortured human of medieval Germany, Rembrandt’s Renaissance-Man, a pious and sentimental-looking white Anglo-Saxon, and an angry black man from an American ghetto. In nineteenth-century Western theology, Jesus was described as a liberal teacher of brotherly love, before Albert Schweitzer argued impressively that he was an urgent preacher of apocalyptic doom.<sup>5</sup> Schweitzer’s study

effectively ended the vigorous and prolific nineteenth-century quest with a fair amount of historical skepticism, for he showed that the historical-critical specialists, who had valiantly liberated themselves from the controlling strictures of dogmatic theology, ended up deviously controlled by something else: their own purview.

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see Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*; Jeremias, *Problem of the Historical Jesus*; J. M. Robinson, *New Quest of the Historical Jesus*; Flusser, *Jesus*; Flusser and Notley, *Sage from Galilee*; Conzelmann, *Jesus*; Aulen, *Jesus*; Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1–26; Bowman, *Which Jesus?*; Braun, *Jesus of Nazareth*; Käsemann, “‘Jesus of History’ Controversy,” in Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, 23–65; Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus*; McArthur, *In Search of the Historical Jesus*; Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 15–53; Reumann, *Jesus*; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*; Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*; Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*; Crossan, *Historical Jesus*; Meier, *Roots of the Problem*; Meier, *Mentor*; Meier, *Companions*; Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; Wright, *The Resurrection*; Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*; Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*; Witherington, *Jesus Quest*; Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*; Keener, *Historical Jesus*; Levine et al., *Historical Jesus in Context*; Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*; Evans, *Life of Jesus Research*; Hengel, *Four Gospels*; Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*; Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*; Crossan and Reed, *Archaeology*; Borg, *New Vision*; Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus*; Twelftree, *Miracle Worker*; L. T. Johnson, *Real Jesus*; Mack, *Myth*; Mack, *Lost Gospel*; Rousseau and Arav, *Jesus’ World*; W. Craig, “Tomb”; W. Craig, “Historicity”; W. Craig, *Assessing*; Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*; Evans, *Life of Jesus Research*; Evans, “Non-Christian Sources”; Bockmeuhl, *This Jesus*; Porter, *Criteria*; Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*. The study of the historical Jesus has as a discipline generated an entire subgenre of historical-critical-apologetic literature. As a consequence, sometimes those authors who produce technical, exegetical, and theological commentaries are sometimes neglected. It was for this very reason that Keener decided to write *Historical Jesus of the Gospels* so that his outsider and (hopefully) broader approach would be read by those who have become students of the subgenre just mentioned.

4. To begin with such a familiar list of extreme possibilities seems so clichéd. But scholars (still) do such things in their sleep. The layperson does them also, but usually with much less panache, and the resulting Jesus thumbnail usually looks like someone (e.g., the Good Shepherd) with whom they are comfortable (just as certain scholars are content with a “radical Jesus” that they have created). The point is made in the diversity. The intended pause is created by the possibility of it. See a discussion titled “Disparate Views about Jesus” in Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 1–69.

5. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. In 2000, SCM Press (and in 2001, Fortress Press) published the complete English edition based on the 1913 edition. Although W. Montgomery translated the earlier edition, a new translation was provided by Susan Cupitt and John Bowden (editor), with an appreciation of Schweitzer written by Marcus Borg. See also recent assessment by Porter in Charlesworth and Pokorný, *Jesus Research*, 16–35. After Schweitzer, further quests for the historical Jesus have ascended and descended. For example,

But not even the New Testament Gospels are immune from conceptualizing Jesus from a certain perspective. Indeed, they are even bold in their own interpretation of history.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the Gospel writers were quite good at embellishing historical data and “creating symbolic narratives.”<sup>7</sup> John explicitly, but the others no less so, writes about Jesus from the vantage point of Easter. In John’s Gospel it is an explicit motif, beginning in 2:17, 22; and continuing in 12:16 and 14:26 the disciples “remember” the events and words of Jesus with much more cognition (and courage) from the other side of the empty tomb. One must say then that a resurrection hermeneutic informs the writing of these texts, making them both confessions of faith and prompters of it.

So then, we do not have in them anything like pure historical recitation. Rather, the Gospel writers are more like tellers of history in the service of Christology,<sup>8</sup> and while the Christology at times is

6. See Eddy and Boyd, *Jesus Legend*, for a recent, sophisticated discussion and defense of the (nevertheless) historical reliability of the synoptic tradition, as well as Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, for an original and insightful defense of the Gospels as eyewitness testimony. Another stimulating recent work, informed by wide learning, on Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet is Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*. See also our chart “Development of the Gospels” in ch. 5, above.

7. Nolland, *Matthew*, 13.

8. Some of the most suggestive and productive Jesus scholarship on the person of Jesus and the early Jesus movement has then come from the solid, provocative perspective of this starting point, especially in coordination with the fast growing scholarship on first-century Judaism and the Greco-Roman world in which both religions grew and changed. For a sampling of such work, see Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*; Riley, *One Jesus*; Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*; Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*; Charlesworth, *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

embedded in such things as titles, at other times it is embedded in theological reflection on the Jewish Scriptures, sacred tradition, and even interpreted events. This manner of communication can be quite subtle and itself culturally conditioned. Such things require the twenty-first-century reader to be cautious, alert, and informed.

## THE SOURCE PROBLEM

Another challenge in our quest pertains to the nature of our sources: reliable data outside the NT are scarce. The NT sources are permeated by the literary techniques and theological perspectives of the authors.

### Sources outside the NT

The sources outside the New Testament provide only bits of information about Jesus.<sup>9</sup> We will first look at Jewish and Roman and then Christian (including Nag Hammadi).

### Jewish and Roman Sources

Only briefly is Jesus alluded to by Jewish and Roman writers. And while early Christian writers refer to Jesus and his teaching more frequently, few of them are independent of NT influence (attesting to some sort of canonical priority<sup>10</sup>). The

9. For further information, see Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins*; Crossan, *Sayings Parallels*; Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*; Schneemelcher, *NTA*, 1:77–133; Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources”; Van Voorst, *Jesus outside the New Testament*.

10. For example, two early birth or youth

Babylonian Talmud (AD 500) contains an early tradition about “Yeshu of Nazareth,” who “practiced sorcery,” “led Israel astray,” and “was hanged” [crucified?] as a false teacher “on the eve of the Passover” (*Sanh.* 43a). Even though the tradition seems unreliable in other details, it corresponds with John’s account of Jesus’s execution before the Passover, and the derogatory description of Jesus’s activities might reflect his great reputation as a miracle worker and teacher among the Jews. In a passage attributed to the Jewish historian Josephus (AD 94), the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus are reported (*Ant.* 18.63–64), but the report is probably a later Christian interpolation, because it reads like a creedal statement.<sup>11</sup>

The Roman historian Tacitus (AD 112–113) mentions that in the reign of \_\_\_\_\_ narratives about Jesus and the holy family, *Protoevangelium of James* and *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (Schneemelcher, *NTA*, 1:421–39, 439–51), both show dependence upon the canonical Gospels. The former for curiously supplying information absent from the tradition, such as how John the Baptist survived Herod’s slaughter of the innocents, and how Jesus came to have siblings. By filling in (very creatively) some hypothetical events from the boy Jesus’s youth between the ages of five and twelve, these narratives fill the gap of silence left by Matthew on the one hand (after Jesus’s returning from Egypt at around five years of age) and Luke on the other (the temple incident when Jesus is about twelve). Such creative insertions can be enlarged to such an extent that these texts can be effectively read intertextually.

11. Quite often such interpolations can be found in essentially non-Christian texts, especially in the collection of Pseudepigrapha. Early Christians were often quite transparent in their christological intrusions. Worth mention but not worth taking seriously is the sort of eccentric theory put forward by Thiering (*Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*). She proposes that early Christian history is embedded in the Scrolls so that John the Baptist is the Teacher of Righteousness, and Jesus is the Wicked Priest! No more space than that will be given here.

Tiberius Caesar “Chrestus” was given the death penalty by Pontius Pilate, and that the prefect momentarily suppressed the Chrestus sect until it broke out again in Judea and Rome (*Ann.* 15.44). This information, however, may have been derived ultimately from Christian tradition since Tacitus probably based his account on police interrogations of Christians.

### Christian Sources

In Christian sources other than the NT, we have a number of isolated sayings of Jesus, or *agrapha*. As examples, we will look at some sayings in Codex Beza, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Apocryphon of James*, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.<sup>12</sup> In the Codex Beza (D), a sixth-century NT manuscript, an independent Jesus saying occurs after Luke 6:4, stating, “When on the same day he saw a man doing work on the Sabbath, he said to him: Man! if you know what you are doing then you are blessed. But if you do not know what you are doing then you are cursed and a transgressor of the law.”

This saying, as will be shown, coheres well with what many scholars believe to be an authentic feature of Jesus’s teaching: the challenge to make one’s own decisions. The apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* (AD 200), discovered along with other Gnostic writings at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, contains some isolated sayings that could have originated with Jesus. Translations of these sayings are from the Nag Hammadi Library in English.<sup>13</sup>

12. Schneemelcher, *NTA*, 1:91.

13. Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*.

Jesus said: “He who is near me is near the fire, and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom” (82; Origen).

Jesus said: “The kingdom of the Father is like a man who wishes to kill a powerful man. He drew the sword in his house, he stuck it into the wall in order to know whether his hand could carry through. Then he slew the powerful man” (98; cf. Luke 14:28–32).

The *Apocryphon of James* (AD 200?) is another Gnostic writing discovered at Nag Hammadi. The translations of these sayings are derived from an article by a Nag Hammadi scholar.<sup>14</sup>

“Do not cause the kingdom of heaven to become desolate by you (or among you)” (13.17–19).

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a spike of wheat, that sprouted in a field. And after it ripened, he (the farmer) sowed its fruit and again filled the field with wheat for another year” (12.24–26).

In the writings of the third-century catholic Christians Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian of Carthage we find the following independent Jesus sayings:

“No one can attain the kingdom of heaven who has not gone through temptation” (Tertullian, *On Baptism* 20.2 [Ernest Evans, ed.], translated by Charles Puskas). “Ask for great things, and God will add to you what is small” (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 1.24.158).<sup>15</sup>

The above examples are considered isolated Jesus sayings because they show no clear dependency on the NT Gospels, yet their contents cohere substantially with the teaching of the historical Jesus as most scholars understand it.

14. Hedrick, “Kingdom Sayings and Parables.”

15. *ANF*, 2:336.

## New Testament Sources

The earliest literary witnesses to the historical Jesus are Paul’s epistles. But his information is brief and, as letters are, circumstantial. From him we have cursory allusions to Jesus’s ancestry, family, ministry, disciples, betrayal, death, and resurrection; many are found in kerygmatic and confessional traditions.<sup>16</sup>

Paul’s letters contain some sayings attributed to Jesus, like those in 1 Thess 4:15; 1 Cor 7:10–11; 11:23, 25, but only the first two appear to be independent of the synoptic tradition.<sup>17</sup> The most authentic agraphon is found, not in Paul’s letters but in Acts of the Apostles: “it is necessary to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he said, ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’” (20:35).

Even though the four Gospels provide the most information about Jesus, problems arise when (1) the Synoptic Gospels are compared with John and (2) the pervasive religious and literary features are detected in all four.

16. The Pauline traditions about Jesus’s betrayal, death, and resurrection will be consulted in our discussion of these topics in a later chapter. For a more-extensive treatment of the Pauline traditions about Jesus, see Goguel, *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity*, 1:105–26; Dunn, “Jesus Tradition and Paul,” in *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 151–78; Allison, “Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels.”

17. See Patterson, “Paul and the Jesus Tradition,” for an interesting discussion of the possibility of connections between Paul and communities that preserved the sayings traditions. One point suggested by Patterson is that there is an almost-playful familiarity with the Sayings Tradition evident in 1 Corinthians, suggesting both more awareness on Paul’s part and also a little of what he might have done with the time “in Arabia” during his early years as a follower of Jesus.

*The Gospel of John*

The differences (which are more substantial than the similarities) between John and the Synoptic Gospels raise some difficulties for any harmonization, as well as historical reconstruction.<sup>18</sup> In John we do not find concise synoptic sayings or parables but long discourses in the form of dramatic monologues or dialogues.<sup>19</sup> The length of Jesus's ministry in John is three or four years, whereas in the synoptic tradition it is one or two. The Synoptic Gospels regard Galilee as the main area of ministry, whereas in John it is Judea. John has Jesus make (at least) three visits to Jerusalem during his ministry, whereas the synoptic tradition mentions only one. The Synoptic Gospels have Jesus crucified on the Passover, but John has the crucifixion before the Passover (cf. *b. Sanh.* 43a). Finally, John includes many unusual stories, themes, and symbols not found in the other Gospels. These sharp differences make attempts at harmonization a futile enterprise.

18. See Goguel, *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity*, 150–57; Brown, *John*, 1:xi–li; Keener, *John* 1:40–47; Smith, *John among the Gospels*.

19. The longest sayings groups in Matthew are The Sermon on the Mount (ca. 2435 words [NRSV the source of all the following stats]) and the sayings group of 23:1–25:46 (ca. 2900). The collected sayings groups of Matthew look quite different from the long discourses in John (most with minor interruptions, structural markers, etc.): 5:19–47 (ca. 641 words); 6:32–70 (ca. 597 words); 8:34–58 (ca. 648 words); 10:7–38 (ca. 611 words); 14:1–31 (ca. 711 words); 15:1–27 (ca. 615 words); 16:1–33 (ca. 704 words); 17:1–26 (ca. 656 words). The last four discourses in John are somewhat continuous, making them almost 2700 words, or comparable to the collections in Matthew. It is the way that the complexes are used that creates the significant difference (see Keener, *John*, 1:68–80).

The similarities between John and the Synoptic Gospels concern some general agreements in sequence and a few close parallels. For example, John and Mark follow a similar sequence at certain points: the work of the Baptist, Jesus's departure into Galilee, Jesus's feeding a multitude, Jesus's walking on water, Peter's confession, Jesus's departure to Jerusalem, Jesus's Jerusalem entry and anointing (rearranged in John), the supper with predictions of betrayal, the arrest and the passion. Some close parallels include the account of Jesus's anointing (John 12:3–8; Luke 7:36–50); the cycle of feeding, lake crossing, and dialogue (John 6:1–51; Mark 6:34–8:21); and the trial scene enveloped by the story of Peter's denial (John 18:15–27; Mark 14:53–72). These parallels contribute something to source-critical discussions, but historical-Jesus research isn't much advanced beyond the circumstance of parallel traditions. If we weight the synoptic tradition historically, then we find here in John some episodes that have (thereby) imputed to them a historical credibility.

Some contributions that John's gospel might provide for our historical quest are: (1) additional information about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist, (2) the plausibility that Jesus's ministry lasted longer than one year and involved more than one trip to Jerusalem, (3) the focus on the alleged political crimes of Jesus as the main grounds for his execution (19:12,15); (4) his death on the eve of the Passover; (5) an assortment of Jesus's sayings that have some stamp of authenticity (e.g., John 3:3, 5; 4:32–38, 48; 12:24–26; 13:16); (6) accurate information in chapter 4 about the Samaritans, their theology and worship on Gerazim,

and the seemingly correct location of Jacob's well; (7) precise information in chapter 5 on the pool of Bethesda, accurate as to the name, location, and construction; (8) theological themes brought up in relation to Passover and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) reflect some accurate knowledge of festal ceremonies and the synagogue readings associated with the feasts; (9) some remarkable details about the city of Jerusalem (destroyed in AD 70) with respect to: the pool of Siloam (9:7), Solomon's portico as a winter shelter (10:22–23), and stone pavement to Pilate's Praetorium.<sup>20</sup> The above data, however, are difficult to distinguish from the pervasive literary and symbolic concerns in the Fourth Gospel. The statement of the author's purpose in writing John also has relevance for our discussion of the literary-religious character of the Synoptic Gospels:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

Selective use of data, especially to proclaim and magnify Jesus the Messiah, appears to be an overriding emphasis of

20. Since the end of the nineteenth century, points 6 through 9 above have represented historical particulars providing some vindication for the Gospel of John as historically competent with regard to Palestine, especially pre-70 Jerusalem. For further examples of specific points of historical skepticism about the Gospels as sources along with counterpoints to each, see Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 90–121. See our bibliography (commentaries section) for information on the commentaries on John by Barrett, Brown, Carson, Keener, and Moloney.

John. We will find that this point is also true of the Synoptics, though the difference may be one of focus, spiritual insight, and literary style. Clement of Alexandria called John the spiritual gospel, while the Synoptics recounted the "bodily facts."

### *The Synoptic Gospels*

Leaving John for the Synoptics is less like going from nonhistory to history than like simply to gazing at a different kind of art. In many ways, pure history still seems a good distance away in the Synoptics; interpreted history unfolds right before our eyes.

What we know with fair certainty about these texts may be usefully summarized here. First, they are narrative constructs skillfully and selectively composed by people of faith wanting to produce faith. They use material that has been fondly preserved by eyewitnesses, oral proclamation, written sources, and keepers of tradition most probably from a variety of geographical locations. The actual live history of the events of Jesus's life has been considerably collapsed so that any chronology is tentative and hard to determine.<sup>21</sup> The date of composition of these texts in the first century is almost impossible to determine,<sup>22</sup> but it is reasonable to

21. Sanders (*Historical Figure of Jesus*, 69) has even reasonably proposed that "perhaps none of the authors knew what took place when . . . or perhaps they did not care about chronological sequence and arranged the material according to some other plan. This would have resulted in chronological clues being scattered at random, and we could not draw good inference from them."

22. There is a fair consensus that Mark preceded Matthew and Luke, and that John is from the late first century, possibly during the reign of Domitian. Whether one or any or all of the Synoptics are from before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 is debated. John Nolland in writing about

assume that all the texts had a historical context involving life experiences of communities that would help to explain some of their features. They are also all attempts to preserve the works and words of Jesus in a way that would be relevant to the communities' life of faith.

The presence of eyewitnesses, multiple testimonies, Aramaic substrata, and geographical familiarities add weight, but not certainty, to the historical credibility of the traditions. In fact, *certainty* in the study of ancient history, even of sacred history or tradition, is not something that can be achieved. To say this does not make one a skeptic. There are many degrees of historic possibility and probability. Some scholars of the Gospels are relentless in their application of tests to the Jesus traditions, believing that analysis, critical reading, and patient inquiry will always produce learning and an increase in knowledge. They are usually correct. Those scholars who undertake this investigative mission with malice or even with dishonest intent do not usually survive the encounter and the test of time with intellect intact. To satisfy the questioning mind, in the history of this study numerous tests have been proposed, used, wrongly trusted, imperfectly applied, and eventually discarded. But it seems that something useful is always learned even in the presence of abuse. This sequence in fact is a part of the story of New Testament scholarship. And it is the reason why the history of scholarship should be studied and understood.<sup>23</sup>

Matthew feels there is nothing in Matthew that requires a post-70 date, and so he dates it (along with Mark) before the war. Luke, however, he dates after the war for reasons delicately deduced from the text. All reasons must be delicately deduced.

23. See, for example, the classic histories of

Next we will survey some of the criteria used to separate the more probable from the less probable elements of the Jesus tradition. Some of these elements have been events or acts of Jesus; some have been words of Jesus. Similar criteria are used in the analysis of historical events recorded in the texts. But since the goal of this chapter is simply the historical Jesus, our coverage will be limited to him. The discussion of these criteria as a heuristic method lends itself to criticism and debate, and we welcome this, will even feel compelled to encourage it. The next chapter is on the *message* of Jesus.

#### THE CRITERIA OF AUTHENTICITY<sup>24</sup>

While the “criteria of authenticity” have been used by form critics of the Gospels throughout the twentieth century (but mostly in the last half of it), the discussion of them has never been static. In the last forty years, the numbers of criteria have both risen and fallen; the opinion regarding their cogency has both waxed and waned; and the conviction regarding their relevance has both ebbed and flowed. This may seem paradoxical, given the logical nature of their conception

interpretation by Kümmel, *New Testament*; Neill and Wright, *Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*; Schweitzer *Quest*; Bruce, “The History of New Testament Study,” in Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation*, 21–59.

24. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 90–124; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:167–95; Stein, *Gospels and Tradition*, 153–87; Allison, *Historical Christ*; Allison, “Historian’s Jesus,” in Gaventa and Hays, eds., *Seeking the Identity of Jesus*, 79–95 (for a frontal assault on the criteria as a whole); Allison, *Historical Christ*, chs. 1–3 (also a critique of the criteria); Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 155–61; Porter, *Criteria* (2000).

and application, but if one remembers that they are criteria used to assess and evaluate data about the historical Jesus and theological Christ, then some of the mystery disappears. Everything about Jesus is potentially controversial.<sup>25</sup> The goal here then is to give both a primary and a secondary list of the criteria, briefly discussing the former. The primary list represents the criteria that many consider to be the most important, and includes more discussion. The secondary list is provided to illustrate the development of the discussion.

### Primary Criteria

(1) **Embarrassment.** This criterion determines material—either actions or sayings—that would have been an

25. The most (in)famous example of controversial use of the criteria in recent years is by a group of scholars named by their organizer Robert Funk the Jesus Seminar. These scholars, largely from North America, met biennially from 1985 through 1991 to discuss, assess, and vote on the authenticity or inauthenticity of Jesus's sayings. They published their results in 1993 in a text titled *The Five Gospels* (the fifth being the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* found among the Nag Hammadi Codices). They concluded that 82 percent of the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels are inauthentic, and also that 84 percent of his deeds (Funk, et al., *Five Gospels* 5; Funk, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus*, 1). For a description of their methods and results see Funk, et al., *Five Gospels*, and Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *Acts of Jesus*. For responses to the Jesus Seminar, see Birger Pearson, "The Gospel according to the Jesus Seminar"; and Pearson, "Exposé of the Jesus Seminar"; Witherington, *Jesus Quest*; Hays, "Corrected Jesus"; Johnson, *Real Jesus*. Responses to the Seminar critics are Robinson, "The Real Jesus of the Sayings Gospel Q"; Miller, *Jesus Seminar*. Crossan's bestselling *Historical Jesus*, and Borg's popular *Meeting Jesus Again* are two titles that agree with many conclusions of the Jesus Seminar.

embarrassment to the early church.<sup>26</sup> Such material can hardly be considered as a creation of the church for its proclamation, because it may have caused theological or moral difficulty for them. Examples are the baptism of Jesus by John (Matt 3:13ff.), the rumors that Jesus was a "glutton and a drunkard" (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34) and had "gone out of his mind" (Mark 3:21), his crucifixion (Mark 15:25; cf. Deut 21:23), and finally the cry of desperation from the cross (Mark 15:34).

(2) **Dissimilarity or Discontinuity.** This criterion assumes that authentic Jesus material can be gleaned from what is dissimilar to or discontinuous with (perceived) post-70 theological tendencies and community-development issues reflected in the four Gospels. For example, Jesus's announcement of the coming reign of God (Mark 1:15), his radical ethics (Luke 14:26), apocalyptic teaching (Mark 13), and simplicity in prayer (Luke 11:2–4) appear dissimilar to what is perceived in the four Gospels as a later time of community development (Matt 16:18; 18:17), creedal formulation (Matt 28:19), separation from the synagogue (John 9:22; 16:2), and adaptation to life in the Roman Empire (ca. AD 65–90). In its quest for distinctiveness, this criterion is related to number 1, but it can also be too speculative and subjective for the following reasons. First, granting a historical distance from the time of Jesus to the time of the Gospels' composition, the distinctions between "early tradition" and "later redaction" cannot be easily discerned (contra, e.g., Fuller or Perrin). Second,

26. A criterion (from Greek *kritēs*) is a standard, rule, or test by which a judgment can be formed.

how much of the Gospels is really tendential and apologetic? Is the presentation of “Jesus the teacher of Israel” (Luke 4:15; 21:37–38) merely a creative response to Jewish accusations about “the founder” of the early church? Why would the historical Jesus not be one of the best representatives of his contemporary Jewish culture? Third, how defensible is it to conclude that most of the high estimations of Jesus (say as messianic prophet and the Wisdom of God) or that most of his prophetic criticisms of the temple (e.g., Mark 11:15ff.) merely reflect the creative responses of the early church to its own authority and self-identity problems but have little or no connection to the remembered past of his earliest followers? (On this question, see also footnote 8 above.) Finally, our information and understanding of first-century Palestine have developed significantly in the last 150 years, but especially in the last fifty (e.g., with the discovery of Qumran, prophetic messianism, Hellenistic Judaism, divine-wisdom theology, and the importance of memory and tradition). As a result of these findings, making clear distinctions between, e.g., Judaism and Hellenism, early and later Christologies, pre-70 and post-70 theology or praxis<sup>27</sup> are difficult to establish with any degree of credibility.

**(3) Multiple Attestation.** This criterion is a cross-sectional test used with the

27. For example, Martyn, *History and Theology*, has argued for a post-70 separation of synagogue and church (John 9), appealing to the *birkat ha-minin* (the twelfth of eighteen *Amidah*) used in the late first-century synagogues, but Schiffman, “At the Crossroads,” 115–56; and Kimelman, “*Birkat-Ha-Minin* and the Lack,” have argued against such formal separation this early. See also in support, Katz, “Issues in the Separation of Judaism and Christianity.”

others, and it focuses on themes or concerns behind a particular saying or parable. If a concern or practice ascribed to Jesus can be traced to several independent sources (to Mark, Q, M, L, or John) and different literary forms (parable, wisdom saying, controversy story), it probably is an early Jesus tradition. Thus, Jesus’s fellowship with tax collectors and outcasts, which has been established as authentic by the criterion of dissimilarity (both the Jews of Jesus’s day [*m. Tehar* 7:6] and the early church [Matt 18:17] scorned them), is also verified by the criterion of multiple attestation. His association with tax collectors and sinners occurs in prophetic (Matt 11:19/Luke 7:34) and wisdom (Matt 5:46/Luke 6:33) sayings of Q, and in pronouncement (Mark 2:14) and controversy (2:15–16) stories of Mark. The authenticity of this practice of Jesus is attested in two independent sources (Q and Mark) and in four different literary forms.

**(4) Coherence or Consistency.** The criterion of coherence functions as a positive test that builds upon the other criteria. Early material can be accepted as authentic if it coheres or is consistent with material already established as authentic by the other criteria. For example, once the distinctive message of Jesus has been established by the other criteria, Jesus traditions consistent with this message can be regarded as authentic.

**(5) Rejection and Execution.** This criterion is different in nature but fundamental to the understanding of Jesus’s life. It is not necessarily specific to sayings or events but rather is based upon the fact that Jesus’s life was on a trajectory toward violent death at the hands of the Jewish

leaders and Roman officials. Therefore, it seeks this large and primary context to be fulfilled in our understanding of the course of his life. This is why we said at the beginning of this chapter, “before he was arrested and tried, he was in some way incendiary.” The claim of this criterion to authenticity is also related to criterion number 1: why would the church include this controversial material (e.g., Acts 5:30; Gal 3:13) in its teaching and preaching unless it was inseparable from the life and ministry of Jesus?

### Secondary Criteria<sup>28</sup>

**(6) Traces of Aramaic.** Despite the prevalence of Hellenistic Greek, a Palestinian dialect of Aramaic was the household speech of Jesus’s compatriots preserved in Greek transcription, especially Mark 5:41; 7:34; 15:34 (cf., Matt 27:46) but also Rom 8:15; 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 4:6. Even a Galilean Aramaic was recognized (Matt 26:73).

28. Items 6–11 are considered secondary. Further discussion of these criteria can be found in note 24 of this chapter. See also point 6, “Traces of Aramaic”; and Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:178ff.; Stein, *Gospels and Tradition*, 163–64; Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 158–59; for point 7, see Meier, *Marginal Jew* 1:180; Stein, *Gospels and Tradition*, 166–67; Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 157–58; for point 8, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:180–81; Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 159–60; for point 9, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:182; Stein, *Gospels and Tradition*, 168; for point 10, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:183; Stein, *Gospels and Tradition*, 154–55, 186–87; for point 11, see Stein, *Gospels and Tradition*, 162; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:174–75.

The Son of Man title appears to make better sense in Aramaic (*bar ’enasha*) or Hebrew (e.g., Mark 2:28; 8:38; 9:9, 31) than in Greek or Latin (*Filius hominis*).

**(7) Palestinian Environment.** See below.

**(8) Vividness of Narrative.**

**(9) Tendencies of Synoptic Tradition.**

**(10) Historical Presumption.**

**(11) Multiple Forms.**

Because Jesus was a great person of history (not excluding his other attributes); and because the Gospels are literary, historical, and theological; and because the historical data about Jesus are limited, distant from its subject, and separated from us culturally, ideologically, and chronologically, some criteria of discernment are necessary. Because the NT writings are primarily rhetorical and theological, and because all of us who interpret them do so from certain perspectives and orientations, our findings and conclusions must remain tentative. Although our methodologies are continually subject to revision and (hopefully) improvement, perhaps the historical presentation of Jesus that is the *most* socio-rhetorically informed, the *most* culturally conversant with the remembered stories, and the *most* attentive to the theological and christological message of the Gospels probably can make the *best* claim for some historical credibility in our postmodern era.