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THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF JESUS

Canonical insights from outside
the Gospels

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
ASNU	Acta seminarii neotestamentici upsaliensis
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
Cor.	Corinthians
Dan.	Daniel
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Eph.	Ephesians
Exod.	Exodus
FF	Foundations and Facets
Gal.	Galatians
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
Heb.	Hebrews
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Isa.	Isaiah
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
Lev.	Leviticus
Matt.	Matthew
NABPR	National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion

Abbreviations

NIB	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> , ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002)
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NT	New Testament
NTG	New Testament Guides
NTL	New Testament Library
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
par., pars	parallel(s)
Pet.	Peter
Phil.	Philippians
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
Ps.	Psalms
Rom.	Romans
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra pagina
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>T. Naph.</i>	<i>Testament of Naphtali</i>
Thess.	Thessalonians
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

1

Introduction: locating Jesus outside the Gospels

It does not take much exposure to Gospels studies, or to biblical scholarship more generally, before one encounters the term ‘historical Jesus’. The expression itself is unattested within the biblical record, but is instead a scholarly phrase or construction, a term devised within the discipline to describe the Jesus of history, the Jesus ‘who really was’. For a number of centuries now, scholars have sought to get to this ‘true’ Jesus, the Jesus behind the theological and doctrinal superstructure overlaid by the Gospel writers and the early Church, and thereby construct an objective ‘life of Jesus’ free of theological or ecclesial influence. The means by which this ‘real’ Jesus has been determined vary greatly from scholar to scholar, and the various criteria used to distinguish what ultimately goes back to Jesus are contested, manifold and diverse. The degree of suspicion with which the canonical material is viewed likewise varies, and a veritable industry of divergent methodological approaches has materialized, each reckoning to present the supposed ‘real’ Jesus.¹

As such, the historical Jesus is the Jesus created by historians, a figure that is simultaneously delineated from the so-called ‘Christ of faith’ and focused solely around the supposed person of Jesus of Nazareth. It may be that other terms are more suitable – the ‘historical figure’ of Jesus,² the ‘historic Jesus’ or the ‘earthly Jesus’

¹ For a helpful review of the historical Jesus project and its major protagonists, see James K. Beilby, Paul R. Eddy, Robert M. Price, John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, James D. G. Dunn and Darrell L. Bock, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009) 9–54.

² Cf. D. Moody Smith, ‘The Historical Figure of Jesus in 1 John’, in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, ed. J. Ross Wagner, Christopher Kavin Rowe and A. Katherine Grieb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2008) 310–24.

perhaps – but the underlying principle remains the attempt to free Jesus from dogmatic overlay and present instead a life of Jesus that is historically rigorous and persuasive. Scot McKnight, albeit in an essay proclaiming the end of the historical Jesus project, construes its depiction in particularly dualistic terms as the ‘Jesus whom scholars have reconstructed on the basis of historical methods over against the canonical portraits of Jesus in the Gospels of our New Testament, and over against the orthodox Jesus of the church.’³

In recent years, though, scholars have challenged some of the key premises of the historical Jesus project. Some have ventured that the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is a false dichotomy (and one not made by the biblical authors).⁴ Some have challenged the very heart of an enterprise that seeks (subjectively) to distinguish the kernel of genuine, historical tradition.⁵ Some have questioned the very purpose of the historical reconstruction, venturing that the only Jesus who matters is the living Jesus encountered and present today.⁶ But even those who are sceptical about the aspirations of the historical Jesus project would still consider that Jesus of Nazareth is a figure of some interest; likewise, while historical Jesus is a contested term, with its depictions of Jesus essentially constructions, there remains the common focus that it is the earthly Jesus on whom attention is rightly focused.⁷

The key point for our purposes, however, is that by their very nature, historical Jesus studies inevitably focus on the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, canonical and non-canonical alike. The scholarly

³ <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/april/15.22.html>>.

⁴ Paul Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, After Jesus 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) vii–ix, 176.

⁵ Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (London: SPCK, 2010) 459–60.

⁶ See, for example, Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999) 3–22.

⁷ For our purposes, we will continue to use the term, recognizing that its referent is the earthly Jesus, and using the two phrases interchangeably. This is not to separate the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith – as we will see, the NT evidence seems to place them in continuity – but is merely to keep the scope of our exercise manageable.

portrayals so generated along the way certainly vary, sometimes in remarkably divergent fashion, as do the methodologies and techniques so deployed. The Markan Jesus, for example, differs significantly from the Jesus presented in the Johannine Gospel, often in quite radical terms. Likewise, the Jesus of N. T. Wright diverges from that espoused by Marcus Borg or Dominic Crossan⁸ in ways that cause one to speculate as to how such divergent conclusions can be arrived at from what is effectively the same source material. However, laying such differences aside for the moment, the ‘source material’ used in Jesus studies tends to be restricted to Gospel texts, normally the canonical four, but with the occasional inclusion of other non-canonical, evangelical material (notably the *Gospel of Thomas*) as and when deemed appropriate.⁹ The other New Testament testimony is commonly rendered secondary as a result, its ‘value’ supposedly limited by either genre, late dating or merely disavowal; these texts are deemed to be more interested in the Christ of faith than in any remembrance of the Jesus of history. There is something of a parallel here, perhaps, even with Gospel studies and historical Jesus discussions, with the Gospel of John commonly sidelined in such historical questions, as it too is invariably seen as more interested in the (theological) Christ of faith.¹⁰

This book seeks to address such neglect, by focusing specifically on the non-Gospel material in an attempt to discern how these other texts of the NT contribute to framing the picture and identity of the earthly Jesus. It will have constituent chapters on Jesus in the respective later NT texts, along with a concluding chapter that seeks to tease out any overarching themes or findings

⁸ See the debates, for example, in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (London: SPCK, 1999), or Robert B. Stewart (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

⁹ The Jesus Seminar, for example, advocates a fivefold Gospel comparison – see Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

¹⁰ See, for example, the discussion in Marianne Meye Thompson, ‘Jesus and the Victory of God Meets the Gospel of John’, in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (London: SPCK, 2011) 21–40.

from the analysis. It will consider the implications of these non-Gospel texts for our understanding of Jesus and the emergence of traditions about him, while offering a bridge between the canonical Gospel portrayals of Jesus and the later apocryphal pictures that subsequently emerge. It is not a complete book-by-book analysis, and there is some element of generalization within our discussion. We will not, for example, be able to focus specifically on Jesus according to Romans; there are related books available that do embark on this book-by-book approach,¹¹ but for our purposes and strategy, space precludes that level of analysis. Instead, we will group together the respective letters of the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline corpuses, if only as a convenient way of marshalling the relevant data in a hopefully helpful fashion. But that should not limit our capacity for exploration; bearing in mind the diversity within the canonical testimony, there remains plenty of scope to explore the full contours of the canonical Jesus.

Sources for the study of Jesus

At the outset of our discussion, though, it is probably worth establishing the purpose or value of an exercise such as this. After all, books on Jesus abound, not perhaps to the scale alluded to in John 21.25, but to a significant extent nonetheless. This rather begs the question as to why another volume should be added to their number.¹² One might also venture that the Gospel genre, as a biography of Jesus, would seem appropriately fit for purpose, and more than capable of presenting Jesus as the one remembered by those who followed after him. This would be even more the case were the Gospels, as some have recently suggested, the product of eyewitness testimony to Jesus' ministry.¹³ By comparison,

¹¹ For example, Keith Warrington, *Discovering Jesus in the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009).

¹² See Beverly, Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 1–3, for a similar (and persuasive) self-justification for adding to the plethora of Jesus-related tomes.

¹³ Richard J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

any recourse to the non-Gospel material would be only secondary, and of incidental value compared to these putative 'life of Jesus' accounts. Furthermore, and more significantly perhaps, scholars tend to view the non-evangelical accounts as uninterested in the earthly Jesus, and more concerned with the proclamation and worship of the exalted Lord. Beyond the Gospels, only Acts and Paul avowedly cite any dominical sayings – and, even then, only rarely so – and any appeal to Jesus' parables or mighty deeds is minimal in, or even absent from, the non-Gospel texts. Edgar McKnight's muted summation therefore articulates the challenge faced: 'the nongospel material in the New Testament, like non-canonical references to Jesus, adds little to the overall picture of Jesus, but it does confirm the historicity of Jesus and some of the events recorded in the Synoptic Gospels.'¹⁴

Viewed in such terms, investigation of the non-Gospel testimony might seem to have little purpose or add minimal value. The function of historical corroboration could just as well be attested by non-Christian sources such as Josephus, and to view the non-Gospel texts as merely endorsing Synoptic material effectively consigns them to a secondary status when compared with their Gospel counterparts. Even someone as reticent about the historical Jesus project as Carl Braaten ends up sidelining the non-Gospel material (inadvertently perhaps), opining that: 'My view is that the only Jesus is the One presented in the canonical Gospels *and that any other Jesus is irrelevant to Christian faith*.'¹⁵ To be fair to Braaten, he does subsequently offer some reflection on the NT epistolary corpus's witness to Jesus, and ventures that the 'access we have to the real Jesus of history is solely through the picture of faith left behind by the apostles'.¹⁶ By this, one suspects, he includes Paul, John, Peter and others. But the point still remains, that engagement with Jesus tradition – be that in historical terms or otherwise – tends to be focused primarily,

¹⁴ Edgar V. McKnight, *Jesus Christ in History and Scripture: A Poetic and Sectarian Perspective* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999) 39.

¹⁵ Carl E. Braaten, *Who Is Jesus? Disputed Questions and Answers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 3, my emphasis.

¹⁶ Braaten, *Who Is Jesus?* 46.

sometimes exclusively, on the *Gospel* accounts of his life. There is the common tendency to remove the rest of the New Testament from the equation in terms of framing Jesus tradition, preferring (once the canonical four Gospels are taken as read) to look to other (non-canonical) sources for reference, be they the so-called apocryphal gospels or other *agrapha* found in Early Christian writings.¹⁷ This may reflect the expectation or prejudice that such texts have little to contribute to Jesus studies – notably those focusing on historical matters – but any such assessment remains surely that: a prejudice.

Now of course, some caution in handling the non-Gospel texts is certainly appropriate, and one must concede that the respective genres of the NT material necessarily impact upon how one goes about the study of the earthly Jesus. The Gospels are ‘about Jesus’ in a way that the non-Gospel texts are simply not. Both in terms of genre and content, the canonical Gospels encapsulate the life of Jesus, whereas the NT epistles testify to the communal life of congregations gathered in his name. The letters of Paul or Peter are situational in nature, addressing particular concerns and contexts, and one commonly has to read between the lines as to the situation or issue that they address. The nature of the documents should also caution us from *over*-expectations as to the role

¹⁷ This seems implicit in Robert L. Webb’s otherwise excellent review of historical method in historical Jesus studies (Robert L. Webb, ‘The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research’, in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 9–93). He carefully addresses the appropriateness and relevance of various sources, but omits to consider what value the rest of the NT might have for this exercise. Likewise, in his review of potential historical Jesus sources, Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), covers a number of salient texts, including Talmud and midrashim, but does not include the NT. Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012) 105–17, is therefore quite unusual for giving attention (albeit relatively briefly) to the way in which the non-Gospel material (and particularly the non-Pauline texts) attests to the existence of Jesus. Michael Labahn, ‘The Non-Synoptic Jesus: An Introduction to John, Paul, Thomas, and Other Outsiders of the Jesus Quest’, in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 1933–96, also includes some discussion of how certain non-Gospel texts impact upon historical Jesus concerns. His titular designation of these texts as ‘outsiders of the Jesus Quest’ sums up our point well.

occupied by the earthly Jesus in the particular texts, and one cannot ignore the important datum that the non-Gospel texts do not yield substantial information in this regard. Indeed, the relative silence of the rest of the NT on Jesus' life and teaching is something of a given, even in relatively conservative scholarship, and we shall explore the important implications of that fact for Jesus studies particularly in the final chapter. However, rather than viewing the (relative) silence on Jesus in the NT texts as a matter of embarrassment that has to be assuaged, we will consider what such silence means for the remembrance of Jesus within the life of the early Church.

Moreover, the genre difference between the Gospels and the non-Gospel material does not preclude the latter having something significant to contribute to constructing a portrait(s) of Jesus. One might, for example, distinguish between the Gospels as *biographies* of Jesus, interested in recalling the events of his life, and the non-Gospel material as sources for, or windows onto, the *identity* of Jesus – a different lens, perhaps, but one that seeks to spread the vision wider than just 'historical' or biographical questions. To use James Dunn's titular phrase,¹⁸ the non-Gospel material contributes to the portrayal of 'Jesus Remembered' in a different way or function from the Gospel presentation, but it contributes nonetheless.¹⁹ The NT epistles possess (potentially genuine) testimony to Jesus tradition, and reflect it as such, offering different ways in which such tradition is utilized; they yield other ways by which Jesus is remembered – be that in liturgy, in proclamation, in teaching or in paraenesis. References to Jesus' life need not be limited solely to the biographies/lives of Jesus, and the celebration, worship and preservation of Jesus memory in the life and practice of those who followed after him is both a window onto the identity of Jesus and also something fundamentally rooted in the discussion of who he is. To put the matter another way, if the Gospels are still valid sources for recollecting Jesus' significance,

¹⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making 1 (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁹ This distinction is made in Gaventa and Hays, *Seeking*, and in Hays's chapter within the volume ('The Story of God's Son: The Identity of Jesus in the Letters of Paul' 180–99). Note, though, the criticism leveled at it from N. T. Wright concerning the book's lack of attention to historical questions, and the critique of Richard J. Bauckham, 'Seeking the Identity of Jesus', *JSNT* 32 (2010): 337–46, that eyewitness memory is similarly undervalued.

and if the dichotomy between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history is a false one, as many now conclude, it would seem warranted to ensure that the non-Gospel texts (those that still appeal to Jesus as central to their self-understanding) are allowed a voice in the shaping of the identity of Jesus. It may, of course, be that the exercise proves to be a fruitless one; it may be that they have little to say, or contribute, to the question. But equally it may prove a rich and fruitful enterprise, and suggest that the canonical Jesus is more than just the evangelical Jesus.

One might add some further reasons to suggest that the non-Gospel material has something to contribute to Jesus studies. First, *to restrict the non-Gospel materials' contribution merely to echoing or confirming Jesus' historicity is simply to place false restrictions on them.* The non-Gospel material certainly has something to say about Jesus, about how he was remembered, how he was proclaimed and celebrated; such testimony is not lacking in historical value, quite the reverse. Indeed, it is hard to think otherwise from this – one would surely expect to encounter at least *some* reference to, or *some* invocation of, Jesus' life and ministry within the non-Gospel material. The testimony of the Pauline literature, for example, is that Jesus tradition formed part of Paul's preaching when founding churches; he can speak of publicly proclaiming Jesus' death before the Galatians (Gal. 3.1) or of passing on Jesus traditions to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15.3), both, it seems, as part of his missionary preaching.²⁰ Likewise, Hebrews can speak of Jesus' salvific message being proclaimed by him and passed on to the Hebrews by his first followers (Heb. 2.2). As such, 'it remains very unlikely that there ever were Christian communities who lived only with the tradition about Jesus, or only with the confession of his death and resurrection without knowledge of his earthly activity.'²¹ One would therefore expect such tradition to feature

²⁰ Cf. Martin Hengel, 'Eye-Witness Memory and the Writing of the Gospels', in *The Written Gospel*, ed. Markus N. A. Bockmuehl and Donald Alfred Hagner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 70–96: 'The message they proclaimed was too uncommon, even offensive, for them not to have to report something definite about Jesus' (75).

²¹ Eduard Schweizer, 'The Testimony to Jesus in the Early Christian Community', *HBT* 7 (1985) 77–98 (96).

in, or be alluded to, within the epistolary discourse, however incidentally. To push the matter further, there also seems to be little direct evidence of *Gospels* functioning as texts used in very early Christian worship.²² By contrast, we have clear evidence of letters and epistles being read (cf. 2 Pet. 3.16), such that when it comes to remembering the story within a liturgical framework, or encouraging each other through written discourse, it is evident that the epistles bear that mantle more than the Gospels. Thus, even if the volume of data on Jesus is not huge, it is still historical data per se, and contributes in some fashion to the overall 'biblical' picture of Jesus, and to both the recognition of the diversity of the canonical witness and the multivalent portrayals of Jesus therein.

Second, *the person of Jesus and the Jesus movement that followed after him are surely intertwined* – a rigorous historical method seeks to account for why/how people became committed to his cause, particularly after his death. That which people followed has to make sense of what has come before, and it 'is not at all easy to detach Jesus from his followers'.²³ First-century historian Paula Fredriksen, for example, takes this approach, beginning with the movement that followed after Jesus and then working *backwards* to the Gospels in order to try and explain the historical data from that point.²⁴ In this sense, then, the NT material is historically valuable, both for (perhaps) reflecting on the life of Jesus and also for bringing out how Jesus was understood by those who followed after him. Furthermore, recent developments in historical Jesus studies make the inclusion of non-Gospel material all the more valid, especially in the appeal to *memory* as the way in which Jesus tradition is preserved. There are different takes on how memory may be seen to operate,²⁵ but core to all of them is the language

²² So W. A. Strange, 'The Jesus-Tradition in Acts', *NTS* 46 (2000) 59–74 (73).

²³ Francis Watson, 'Veritas Christi: How to Get from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith without Losing One's Way', in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 96–114 (114).

²⁴ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Knopf, 1999) 74–8.

²⁵ See inter alia Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*; Allison, *Constructing*; Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009).

