

## Book Review

*The Historical Jesus: Five Views*

**James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds.**

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In the mid-eighteenth century, Hermann Samuel Reimarus challenged orthodox Christianity by proposing that the real Jesus of history was a wanna-be messiah intent on a military campaign and an ensuing earthly kingdom. According to Reimarus, the untimely arrest and crucifixion of Jesus meant only short-term failure; Jesus' disciples stole the body, fabricated a resurrection story, and created a salvific doctrine based upon Jesus as suffering savior of all humanity. Reimarus produced one of the earliest minimalist approaches to the reliability of the Gospels.

In concert with the adage, "there's nothing new under the sun," contemporary scholars continue to seek the evasive historical Jesus in both academic and ecclesial contexts. The collection of authors featured in the volume serve as various proponents in what is now deemed as the "third quest," the most recent attempt to discern what can be known of Jesus' life and message.

James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy set up the discussion with a stellar introductory essay on the history of the Jesus quest. They begin with the first, now "old" quest (1776-1906), generated between the work of Reimarus and the landmark survey of Albert Schweitzer, who surmises that Jesus was ultimately a failed apocalyptic prophet. Beilby and Eddy include synopses of this

period produced by H. E. G. Paulus, D. F. Strauss, Ernest Renan, and William Wrede.

The second or "new" quest (1953-1970) includes the efforts of Ernst Käsemann, C. H. Dodd, Ernst Fuchs, Ferdinand Hahn, Norman Perrin, Edward Schillebeeckx, and James Robinson. During this period, historical critics found source and form criticism wanting and moved toward redaction criticism. Redaction critics turned authors of the Gospels into redactors, editors with specific literary and theological agendas. As a result, scholars envisioned a potentially new level of editorial fabrication, whereby the literary creativity of the Gospel writers trumps interest in a mere historical Jesus.

Finally, the third quest (1980s – present), coined by N. T. Wright, comprises the efforts of a broad range of influential scholars such as E. P. Sanders, Ben Meyer, Geza Vermes, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, James Dunn, Ben Witherington III, and John Meier. Funk's formation of the controversial *Jesus Seminar* became the primary battleground between liberal and conservative questers. This period is marked by great diversity; scholars depict Jesus as an eschatological prophet, a Galilean holy man, an occultic magician, rabbi, trance-inducing psychotherapist, a Jewish sage, an Essene conniver, a traveling exorcist, a peasant artisan, a Cynic-like

philosopher, and more! With this vast interpretative background before the reader, Beilby and Eddy bring together five representative scholars of the third quest. Chosen for their scholarly breadth and diverse positions, each quester works through a specific methodological lens and arrives at a specific reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Each quester receives a response from the other four contributors. I turn to them in order of their appearance.

- 1) Robert M. Price of Johnnie College Theological Seminary (Miami Gardens, FL) and author of *Deconstructing Jesus* (1999) and *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man* (2004) surmises that the historical Jesus is essentially non-existent, an oxymoron. Price employs the principle of analogy; if stories of Hermes, Pythagoras, or the Buddha walking on water function as legends, why should Jesus' story be deemed historical? If mythic stories of dying and rising gods, whether Middle-Eastern, Greek, or Roman, provide symbolic meaning for their respective religious groups, so also early Christians produce parallels through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For Price, where biblical exegesis comes up short on historical content, scholars scour the world of ancient literature and find in Jesus the archetype of a mythic hero.
- 2) The prolific John Dominic Crossan, professor emeritus at DePaul University, penned highly influential works including the watershed *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991) where he locates early Christianity as the cross-section of a "Brokered Empire" (Rome), "Embattled Brokerage" (Judaism), and a "Brokerless Kingdom" (Jesus). Jesus emerges as a Galilean Jew within

Judaism in the tumultuous territory of Herod Antipas of the Roman Empire. According to Crossan, Jesus expected a collaborative eschatology, a soon-to-be consummated kingdom; "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) became an anti-imperial call for early followers to forego the injustice of violence and embrace the justice of nonviolence.

- 3) Luke Timothy Johnson, prolific New Testament scholar at Emory University, addresses questers via *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (1996) and *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (1999). Johnson laments the limits of historical quests, whereby scholars settle for what happened in the past. Instead, Johnson argues that Christianity thrives not primarily because of the historical Jesus, but rather as a result of focused attention on the living Jesus, who continues to create deep devotion, demand radical allegiance from individuals, and, in turn, transform communities.
- 4) James D. G. Dunn of Durham University, widely published on Jesus, Paul, and early Christianity, protests against arguments that the Christ of faith is a perversion of the historical Jesus. He decries dismissal of the Gospels as legitimate sources for the oral history of the Jesus tradition. Instead, Dunn judges that the Gospels go back to Jesus because of the impression Jesus had upon those who followed him.
- 5) Finally, Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary is author of the recent *Jesus According to the Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (2007) and an earlier survey entitled *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide*

*to Sources and Methods* (2002). Like Dunn, Bock defends dependence on the Gospels; these sources do not mean lost access to Jesus, but rather a multiperspectival impression no less historical than autobiography.

This volume serves as an invaluable history of interpretation. Since students and pastors regularly pick up resource material on the life of Jesus, Beilby and Eddy tender valuable insight into the hermeneutics, presuppositions, and worldviews of the most influential scholars on the quest for Jesus. Of the five conversation partners, informed students definitely need to be familiar with the scholarship of Crossan, Johnson, Dunn, and Bock (though Price is hardly a

household name). Readers need go no further for a good secondary analysis of the debate. At the same time, I find the larger debate rather tedious; the whole process produces in me a “been there, done that” syndrome. Undoubtedly, fourth and fifth quests will follow, but be assured there will be no final quest, and since the questions remain essentially the same, I, like Johnson, would rather look forward and engage with people on a quest for what Jesus is saying to the Church in the twenty-first century.