

*Jesus  
Our  
Salvation*

An Introduction to Christology

CHRISTOPHER MCMAHON

Saint Mary's Press®

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## A Note to Instructors

Allow me to begin by thanking you for choosing *Jesus Our Salvation* for your course. On behalf of the Saint Mary's Press college publishing division, it is my hope that you find the text to be an engaging and helpful resource for your class, one that is both approachable and challenging. I have tried my best to provide students with a serviceable account of the contours and challenges the history of Christology poses for the contemporary discipline. Although the presentation is centered in the Roman Catholic tradition, such centering also acknowledges that this tradition has become increasingly open to and conversant with Protestant theologies and the religious outlooks of other traditions. The merits of this cross-fertilization of contemporary Christology will be evident to all readers.

### Organization

The text unfolds in three parts: the quest for the historical Jesus, the emergence of the christological tradition, and contemporary christological issues. Part one charts a well-traveled path through historical Jesus research and privileges the work of John Meier and N. T. Wright. Meier and Wright, for better or for worse (I think for better), have provided accounts of the historical Jesus and of historical Jesus research that are most in keeping with the christological tradition, though William Loewe's assessment of the limits of historical Jesus research sounds an appropriate caution about the relevance of such research for contemporary Christian thought.

Part two begins by walking a tightrope in the discussion of the Resurrection of Jesus, and the position taken in the text is open to the scrutiny of readers, teachers, and students (whether they are readers or not). I have regularly found the chapter on the Resurrection to be some of the most difficult and troubling material for students to engage, and it is my hope that the presentation here will open up a rich and fruitful classroom conversation. From there the Christology of the early church is traced out using a Lonerganian approach, which recognizes innovation as the hallmark of orthodoxy as well as the importance of various realms of meaning in doctrinal formulation. This approach, I believe, will be of some benefit to students who may otherwise have difficulty finding their bearings in such



a discussion. Additionally, a Lonerganian approach provides a general account of the immense value of doctrines as well as their limitations. The chapter on the soteriological tradition offers a balanced presentation of biblical, patristic, medieval, and Reformation approaches.

The final part of the book is devoted to issues in contemporary Christology—an area so expansive that a survey such as this cannot hope to provide anything more than a snapshot. Such a snapshot inevitably is limited by the narrow focus of the camera’s lens, and so it is with the third and final section of the text. Building on the previous chapter on the soteriological tradition, part three begins by mapping a new approach to soteriology articulated in the work of William Loewe—it is a soteriology that emphasizes the concrete difference Christian faith makes in a world marred by violence and evil. Such an approach draws attention to the theologies of J. Moltmann and E. Johnson as well as the emergence of postcolonial theology in Asia, and provides a segue into perhaps the most important christological question of the twenty-first century: the relationship between Christian convictions about Jesus and the prevalence of other traditions that do not accept or recognize those convictions. Within this context, at the end of the paradigm shift to a low-ascending Christology, the text moves to a presentation on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who questioned the import or appropriateness of such a shift, leaving us with a renewal of the high-descending approach.

## **Text Features**

I have tried to include enough quotations and enough references to make the book a helpful starting point for some basic undergraduate research, but no attempt has been made to be exhaustive. Additionally, I have included a number of charts and peripheral discussions of important topics and personalities throughout the text. These features are meant to engage students in interesting (even if occasionally digressive) conversations and provide background knowledge on material presented in the chapter.

Each chapter concludes with a series of questions. The “Questions for Understanding” ask students to recall basic facts from the chapter; they can be used to hold students accountable for reading a significant

part of each chapter. The “Questions for Reflection” ask students to go beyond recalling information presented in each chapter to deal with the implications of that information. Instructors may find it useful to assign “Questions for Understanding” for students to complete individually and use the “Questions for Reflection” for small-group discussion or as a springboard for additional research.

## **Instructional Design and Latitude**

The book certainly is not *the definitive guide* to contemporary Christology, yet it is my sincere hope that what this work lacks in comprehensiveness, it makes up for as a learning guide that will help students connect with the tradition so that they may evaluate and participate in christological debates.

I have made an effort to include a variety of voices within the tradition in such a way that instructors with various perspectives may find the text engaging, but some teachers will be concerned that important contemporary voices such as those of eco-feminist, womanist, or *mujerista* theologians, among others, are not featured here. While I accept that critique, I urge instructors to use the text to set up supplemental presentations of alternative Christologies. Additionally, teachers of more advanced students may find the text helpful as a springboard from which to approach and engage primary sources in the history of Christology.

As a guide for beginning undergraduates, *Jesus Our Salvation* provides students with an integration of a relatively detailed presentation of the christological tradition and a survey of contemporary approaches to Christology. This integration always acknowledges the presence of the tradition—an historic, not just a contemporary, community of thinkers and believers.

# Introduction

## An Invitation and Some “Ground Clearing”

Imagine that tomorrow morning, just as the sun peaks over the horizon, your alarm clock goes off as usual and you make three or four sleepy half-blind swipes at the “snooze” button. Halfway through your morning coffee, you find yourself reasonably awake and in pretty good spirits. But as you begin to move around your room, the crucifix on your wall catches your eye—the one you received as a confirmation gift from your godparents—and you realize at that moment that your faith in Jesus Christ is gone.

Generally people do not actually “lose” their faith overnight—coming to faith and abandoning it are both complex experiences—but imagine that it did happen as instantaneously as described. From this point forward, how would your day be any different than any other day? How would your life change?

For a non-Christian the hypothetical scenario has no point—of course one’s life would not change. But for many Christians in the early twenty-first century, a meaningful answer to this question is often elusive. Some might say, after pondering the question for a moment, that they would stop praying, quit going to church, or that they would no longer believe that there is a God. Others might say that they would no longer feel obligated to treat their neighbors with love and respect. Of course, not believing in Jesus Christ is different from not believing in God; after all, billions of people believe in God but do not believe in Jesus. These same people also treat their neighbors with care and concern. And if your response to the question revolves around what prayers you might say or what church you might attend, many people feel so connected to the people in their communities of worship that despite losing faith in Jesus Christ, they might just keep on going to their church and maintain their involvement in a variety of activities.

The hesitancy and uncertainty that many Christians experience when wrestling with the practical implications of their faith in Jesus may help function as a barometer for measuring two realities. First, such hesitancy may reflect the relative strength of our beliefs about Jesus. Do we have

real convictions about Jesus and the God he reveals to us, or are these so-called convictions merely a set of general assumptions Christians share but don't take too seriously? Is Jesus simply an empty concept into which we may pour our own agendas, or project our hopes and fears? What is the relationship between the act of faith or trust in God, and our beliefs, the content of that faith? Second, the hesitancy of our response may be a barometer for assessing how our convictions or beliefs about Jesus do or do not structure a distinctive way of living.

Increasingly, Christians find themselves in a **post-Christian** culture, struggling to integrate their faith life with daily economic and political concerns. Christians' strongest convictions about the world are all too often determined by the values of the dominant culture, so that one cannot easily distinguish between the values one holds as a follower of Christ and the values one holds as a twenty-first-century consumer. As we stand twenty centuries removed from the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the relevance of his life and the relevance of doctrinal statements about him often escape us, even if today we find comfort and fellowship in church communities formed in his name. In these churches we often avoid wrestling with Jesus—he is too historically specific, too particular, and church doctrines about him are too elusive. Instead, we prefer to concentrate on our own lives—we interpret our lives in an attempt to find religious meaning, while the stories of Jesus supply the superstructure, the set of images, that provide us with a point of reference for this reflection. Or we bring Jesus to life as our invisible friend, walking beside us or "carrying us" through the tough times as in the famous devotional work "Footprints." Such activity is understandable and has its place in the faith life of Christians, but our devotional life, our liturgical life, and our life as Christians in a world threatened by sin and violence need to reflect the deep and rich mystery of our faith in Jesus.

The history of theology is in some ways a history of forgetting. This is especially true of the discipline known as Christology, critical reflection on the religious significance of Jesus. The christological tradition is regarded by many Christians as largely irrelevant for contemporary faith, and many choose to ignore it or just forget about it. Such sentiment has been expressed widely, even among those theologians who, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, attempted to drive out what

they regarded as the demons of medieval and ancient Christology and its creeds.

Dissatisfaction with what might be called creedal Christianity has driven many contemporary Christians to emphasize the Bible in the hope that an unambiguous affirmation of a collection of texts might provide simple assurance and affirmation of basic Christian faith. Yet even the biblical accounts of Jesus have suffered attack. Increasingly, skeptics have tried to get behind the Gospels to find the Jesus whom they claim has been hidden and distorted by the early Christian church. Such sentiment was behind the widely popular book and film *The DaVinci Code* as well as the spate of popular books on the so-called historical Jesus in the 1980s and 1990s.

Given the apparent demise of christological doctrines within modern culture and the pathological suspicion of Scripture that culture engenders, it is understandable that individualism has come to reign within the devotional lives of so many Christians. Insulation can be comforting. As long as one remains within the devotional life of the individual or small group, the personal relationship with Jesus can remain largely unassailable. I certainly do not wish to assail a personal relationship with Jesus—the language of a personal relationship has long served to designate the powerful transformative presence of Christ in those who have come to believe, not merely participate in religious observances. Nevertheless, one must recognize that confession of faith in Jesus is always mediated, made available, through a believing community. Those who self-identify as Christians do so because the faith has been witnessed to them, and the resources supplied by the tradition (the Bible, worship, prayer) have summoned them to deeper faith. There is a famous saying from the early church: “One Christian is no Christian.” This book invites those tempted to marginalize the religious significance of Jesus, either through a rampant skepticism or through a retreat into personal piety, to discover or, rather, to remember the joy and the beauty of the tradition, the questions it poses, and the resources it offers for renewing an understanding of the religious meaning of Jesus, our salvation.

## Shifting Terrain

For a time Christology was a rather straightforward discipline. In Roman Catholic circles, a course on Christology had a mathematical precision to it. One simply investigated how God became human in Christ, what powers Christ had, and how the death and resurrection of Christ saved us. As you have probably guessed, the account of Christology offered in these pages will not progress in such a straightforward manner. Times and people have changed. It is now expected that an introductory Christology text should begin by discussing how modern times have shifted the terrain of all theology, Christology included.

There has been a paradigm shift in the way Christology is done and taught. Karl Rahner, one of the giants of twentieth-century theology, was perhaps the greatest and most vocal advocate for this shift. Rahner was critical of the christological mentality that prevailed within the church in the middle of the last century.<sup>1</sup> He was particularly concerned with how the modern church had all but forgotten its own christological teaching regarding the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus. This doctrine had been established at the Council of **Chalcedon** in 451, but in the common language and practice of the church, this teaching was only verbally acknowledged, while in the practice of theology and in the lives of the laity it was nonoperative—that is, it was irrelevant to how people believed and lived. Rahner believed that the teaching of Chalcedon, and indeed all church teaching on Christ, represented both an obstacle and an opportunity for the renewal of Christology.

Chalcedon enshrined what many have called a **high-descending** approach to Christology. The prologue to John's Gospel is the best example of a high-descending approach to Christ. In that text the Word of God descends from heaven and becomes flesh, is glorified in death, and returns to the Father in heaven. In Christian art we often see images of the Annunciation represented with a tiny person (often carrying a cross, as in Robert Campin's *Annunciation Triptych*) who flies down from heaven and occupies the womb of the Blessed Mother. Such an approach to Christology makes perfect sense in the worldview of ancient peoples, but, as Rahner argued, it has become perilously out of date and theologically dangerous within our present context.

A high-descending approach has burdened many Christians with a warped and unorthodox Christology that Rahner termed *crypto-monophysitism*. This phrase—a real mouthful—is comprised of both Latin and Greek terms: Greek *crypto* (“hidden”), Latin *mono* (“one”), and Greek, *physis* (“nature”). Rahner’s point is that modern Christians, while verbally affirming the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, actually have an unacknowledged tendency to ignore the human nature of Christ and emphasize only his divine nature. The neglect of Jesus’ humanity is entirely understandable given the high-descending approach that dominated christological discourse and popular piety for centuries. But this approach has also produced a mythical understanding of Jesus that disconnects him from our experience as human beings and disconnects him from history. This disconnect represents an attack on the authentic teaching of the church, for Chalcedon affirmed the full and complete humanity of Jesus along with his divinity.

Rahner argued for a shift in christological thinking away from the high-descending approach to an emphasis on the humanity of Christ as the appropriate path to a recovery of the church’s teaching. Such a shift, he argued, would act as a counterbalance to the longstanding crypto-monophysitism that dominated the church. Some theologians, however, objected to this move, arguing that a low-ascending approach would diminish the divinity of Christ. But Rahner rightly anticipated such concerns when he wrote, “Anyone who takes seriously the historicity of human truth (in which God’s truth too has become incarnate in Revelation) must see that neither the abandonment of a [theological] formula nor its preservation in a petrified form does justice to human understanding.”<sup>2</sup> Just because you say it does not mean that you really believe it, for you might not act in accordance with it. For example, if I say, “I love you,” but I regularly act impatiently, react with anger, and am constantly preoccupied with myself, have I really understood and affirmed the truth of my statement? Similarly, the mere repetition of christological doctrines and formulas does not mean that they have been properly understood or adequately appropriated. When talking about God, something more is always possible. Therefore, the shift to a low-ascending Christology is not really a challenge to traditional Christology; rather, it is the means by which contemporary Christians do homage to the tradition and renew it.

As such, this book will follow a low-ascending approach, though with the recognition that such an approach will inevitably raise issues that can also prove both helpful and problematic for articulating a contemporary Christology that is faithful to the tradition.

## A Road Map for What Follows

There is always something more to say about a given subject—especially when that subject is Jesus. This book represents one attempt to frame contemporary debates on the religious meaning of Jesus. Although many issues and personalities have been omitted in this text, the material included here reflects a twofold concern: to provide students who have little or no background in theology with a reasonably complete and accessible overview of important developments in the history of Christology, and to introduce students to the major questions that constitute the contemporary conversation in Christology. Because the contemporary conversation includes an assessment and appropriation of the history of Christology and its language, one cannot easily separate these concerns.

The threefold division of the text follows the logic of a low-ascending approach to Christology mentioned above. That approach begins with the human being Jesus and proceeds to ask, “What was it about this human being from the distant past that claimed the attention and devotion of so many people—both those who knew him and those who did not?” The first two chapters address the question of the human being Jesus from the perspective of history. Chapter 1 surveys the debate concerning the relevance, possibilities, and limitations of historical Jesus research. The chapter concludes with a warning that historical Jesus research cannot be the sole norm for theological reflection on Jesus. Chapter 2 outlines what one might call the middle ground in historical Jesus research. Using the work of John Meier and N. T. Wright, the chapter establishes the religious character of Jesus’ life and ministry, and raises questions about how Jesus understood himself, his ministry, and his death. As one wrestles with the historical portrait of Jesus, one begins to recognize the difficulties and ambiguities inherent in the older forms of Christology. In the end, one has to deal with the human reality of Jesus of Nazareth and not simply retreat into the doctrinal claims of traditional Christology.



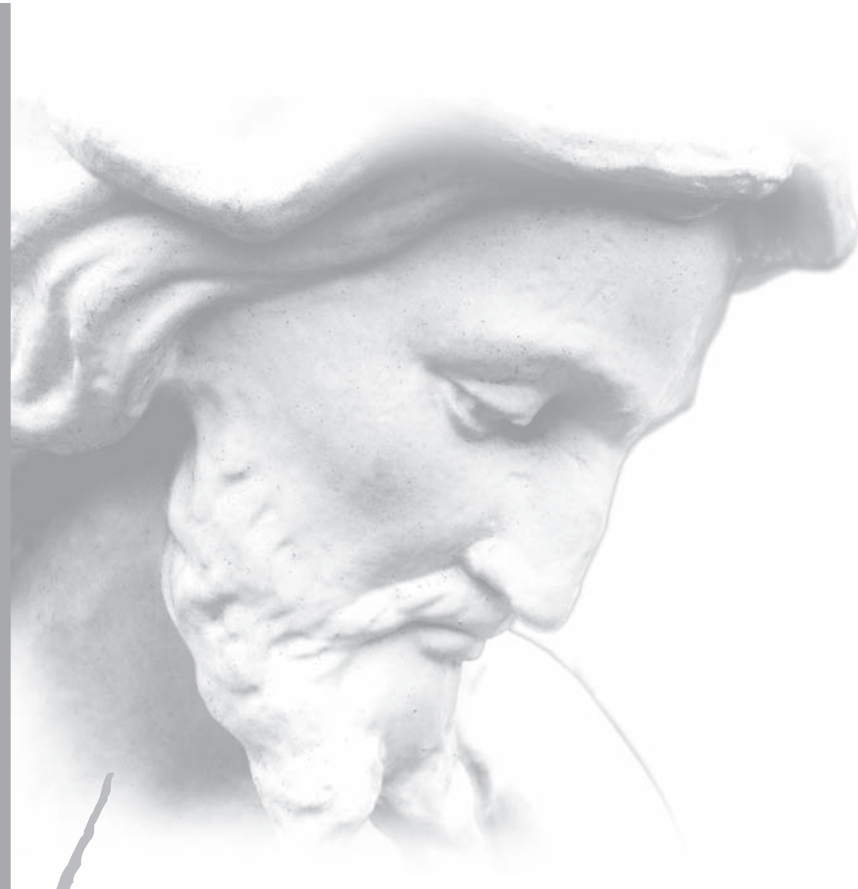
Part two steers the reader through the complex history and developments of christological doctrine. The resurrection of Christ stands at the origins of the Christian tradition, and for all the diversity of early Christianity, N. T. Wright correctly insists that there was no form of Christianity that did not proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. Chapter 3 addresses the experience of Jesus' resurrection as the catalyst for the earliest christological affirmations. Chapter 4 addresses the complex question of how the resurrection of Jesus, as well as the context of his life and ministry, created a new situation for the early followers of Jesus. Within the context of Jewish belief in one God, early believers affirmed that God was present in Jesus bringing about a dramatic fulfillment to the story of Israel, and hope amid the world's despair. The New Testament affirmations, however, were manifold; they did not provide a single encompassing vision of Christ and his relationship to God. In chapter 5 the long road to doctrinal orthodoxy (correct belief or teaching) passes through the first five centuries of the Christian era and beyond. The tension between fidelity to the biblical narratives and the need to articulate the Christian experience of salvation in Christ echoes the need for theological innovation already evident in the pages of the New Testament. In the creation of a new language about God, christological orthodoxy begins to emerge, though not without the tragedy and scandal of imperial politics and divisions within the church. Part Two concludes with the exploration of Christ's saving work, or soteriology, in chapter 6. Biblical, patristic, and medieval doctrines create a rich theological tapestry, though at the expense of doctrinal clarity. The Western tradition is left with a maze of approaches, but seems to place violent imagery at the center of Christ's saving work.

Part three begins with an acknowledgement of a crisis regarding the credibility of Christian faith in the contemporary world. As traditional doctrines are increasingly subject to the scrutiny of a contemporary world defined by science and the norms of reason and secular values, the theological response to the contemporary situation shifts to a concern for the social effectiveness of Christian convictions, asking the question, "What difference does Christian faith make?" Chapter 7 begins with William Loewe's recasting of the soteriological question in terms of conversion and offers an account of how Christ saves us by making human transformation possible through the reversal of sin. The chapter then moves on

to treat the revolutionary Christologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Elizabeth Johnson. Both Moltmann and Johnson suggest that modern Christology must undergo a revolution to become a catalyst for people oppressed by violence and dominated by suffering, and both also challenge the traditional boundaries or limits of christological reflection. The chapter concludes with reflections on the suffering caused by colonialism and the way theologians, especially in Asia, have come to articulate their own experience of suffering by formulating distinctly Asian postcolonial Christologies. Chapter 8 brings the discussion of contemporary Christology to a close by asking, “How can Christians affirm their faith in Christ while living in a world of non-Christians?” The approaches of numerous theologians are addressed, with particular emphasis on the ideas of Roger Haight and Jacques Dupuis. The chapter concludes with a brief presentation of the great Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar and his aesthetic and dramatic Christology. Though it may seem odd to include his theology within a chapter dedicated to religious pluralism, some theologians regard his approach to Christology (and to theology as a whole) as a way to move forward from the critical Christologies that seem to threaten the integrity of the tradition, especially the centrality of Christ. While von Balthasar’s Christology represents a return to the high-descending approach, his theology avoids the mythological worldview of older Christologies and offers a thoroughly post-modern engagement with the tradition.

## Endnotes

- 1 Karl Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” in *Theological Investigations* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 1:149–200.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 150.



## The Story of the Quest(s)

The shift to a low-ascending approach to Christology mentioned in the introduction (i.e., the approach that begins by looking at the first-century human being Jesus) has been responsible, in part, for the wave of books, films, and documentaries on Jesus we have seen over the past two decades. These media have often presented pictures of Jesus that many Christians have found disconcerting: Jesus as a violent revolutionary, a confused and naïve religious reformer, a magician, and a philosopher. The diverse depictions of Jesus have one important feature in common: they all purport to offer a view of the person behind the Gospels, the historical human being rather than the religious figure proclaimed by the Christian church. Scholars generally designate any sketch of this

historical human being “the historical Jesus.” In the face of all these images of Christ, one might fairly ask questions like, why not stick with what the Bible says—isn’t the Bible enough? or, how do we know who this Jesus behind the Gospels was? These are excellent questions, and perhaps the best way to begin addressing them is to explain how and why this quest for the Jesus “behind the Gospels” developed. The brief account offered here will address the important insights as well as the problems inherent in any talk about the historical Jesus in contemporary Christology.

## The Old Quest: The Challenge of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment provides the basic backdrop against which the so-called old or original quest for the historical Jesus is best understood. The historical parameters for the Enlightenment are often disputed and, as with all large movements, the identification of a specific inaugurating event proves elusive. One development, however, may help us understand both its historical context and its general philosophical and political concerns, namely the “wars of religion” sparked by the **Reformation** and the **Counter-Reformation** and extending to the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Europe witnessed decades of wars between allegedly Christian (Catholic and Protestant) rulers who, with perverse irony, were busy killing one another in the name of Jesus. These wars helped to discredit religious authority in Europe: if Christian authorities on either side of the conflicts could cite divine sanction for their violent crusades, logically their respective accounts of that authority must be highly selective and self-serving, to say the least.

The discrediting of religious authority prompted many thinkers to look outside religion for answers to questions of reason, truth, and morality. As one of its main principles, the Enlightenment cultivated a pervasive suspicion of religious authority—those people, documents, and institutions that appealed to God for their exercise of power were not to be trusted. Instead, the Enlightenment celebrated the work of the individual mind that was free from authoritarian constraints, including religious authority. In part, the Enlightenment set the stage for the **old quest** for the historical

## Important Movements and Eras

All movements and eras, all periods in history, are constructed. That is, they are devices used by scholars to understand how history has unfolded and to differentiate one set of developments from another. Below is a chart representing some of the movements or eras discussed in chapter 1.

Reformation	Enlightenment	Romanticism	Modernism and Post-Modernism
<p>The Reformation established the primacy of the literal sense of Scripture (as opposed to allegory) and the autonomy of the individual believer in the interpretation of Scripture. The Reformation was a political and social movement as well as a religious one. It was inaugurated by Martin Luther in 1517, though there were many less successful reformers before him.</p>	<p>The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation spawned considerable violence in Europe: the “wars of religion.” As this violence came to an end in the 1600s, European thinkers began to look to human reason rather than religious authority as their guiding principle. At this time the natural sciences began to emerge as true sciences, whereas religious assertions were increasingly viewed with suspicion. The political repercussions of the Enlightenment include the French and American revolutions, which replaced the authority of kings with “government by the people.” In France this resulted in the tyranny of Robespierre and Napoleon, while in the U.S. it resulted in the Constitution and the founding of the Republic.</p>	<p>Romanticism was concerned less with science than with humanity, art, and a sense of transcendence. The Romantic movement was a reaction to the excesses of the Enlightenment. As a movement, the Enlightenment and its effects were still felt throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but Romanticism tempered that influence in the nineteenth century through its appeal to narrative, image, the past, and the individual.</p>	<p>Modernism, or “modernity,” emerged in the nineteenth century as a response to traditional forms of philosophy, art, and politics. Modernity sought to overcome every aspect of tradition that held back “progress.”</p> <p>Post-modernism was a reaction against the emphasis on progress. In the middle and later part of the twentieth century, notions of progress and disdain for tradition came under scrutiny. Many claims of progress and objective science were unmasked as destructive ideologies.</p>
1500	1600    1700	1800	1900

*Wars of Religion (1618–1648)*

*American Revolution (1776–1781)*

*French Revolution (1789)*

*WWI (1914–1919)*

*WWII (1939–1945)*

Jesus that emerged in the nineteenth century by discrediting traditional Christianity and its source of authority: Scripture.

But the Enlightenment's hostility to organized religion provides only one piece of the background necessary for understanding the old quest. The other piece involves the Enlightenment's successor, Romanticism. Whereas the Enlightenment had emphasized the cool logic of scientific reason as the sole criterion of truth and value, Romanticism emphasized the emotional, mystical, and more natural aspects of human existence. Like the Enlightenment, Romanticism prized individual experience and remained suspicious of organized religion and religious authority. However, Romanticism was much more comfortable creatively engaging traditional Christianity than was the Enlightenment, albeit in a subversive way. Together Romanticism and the Enlightenment, to varying degrees, fueled the major efforts of the old quest.

## **The Old Quest: Looking for Jesus amid Social and Cultural Revolution**

The French Revolution (1789) was a watershed event in the political, social, and religious life of Europe. The insights and challenges posed by Enlightenment thinkers came to fruition in what amounted to a wholesale rejection of the old order of Europe in which the Christian church had held a position of considerable cultural and political influence. At this time the father of historical Jesus research, Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), inaugurated what has come to be known as the old quest for the historical Jesus. The general indictment of the church that accompanied the French Revolution seems to have played a role in his description of the origins of Christianity and the place of Jesus therein. Reimarus suggested that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God stood in contrast to the disciples' emphasis on Jesus and the church. Jesus' ministry was primarily a nationalist religious and political reform movement (much like the French Revolution), while Jesus' disciples, through their preaching and writing, misrepresented the message of Jesus for their own purposes. Reimarus concluded that traditional Christianity was, simply stated, a fraud, a deception that an investigation into the life of Jesus behind the Gospels helps to unmask. Such an account of Jesus and the

origins of the church further eroded the power of the church while giving solace to those who sought political and social reform.

The attack on the Christian church as a fraud certainly resonated within many quarters in nineteenth-century Europe, but the profound religious and philosophical sensibilities of the culture also admitted a more nuanced revision of the origins of Christianity, such as that offered by David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874). His major work, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1836), went through several editions during Strauss's own lifetime. An admirer of the German philosopher G. F. Hegel, Strauss argued that the Gospels were **myth** and attempted to communicate a reality that Hegel designated the ideal of "God-manhood." This ideal is somewhat complicated, but in broad terms it describes human life lived

## Person of Interest

### Bruno Bauer

Bruno Bauer (1809–1882) was a philosopher, historian, and theologian. Bauer was a student of the great German philosopher G. F. Hegel and the teacher of Karl Marx. Bauer's thought stressed rational autonomy of the human person as well as the notion of historical progress. His research on the origins of Christianity may be the best-known aspect of his work. He contextualized its origins in the experience of alienation and disaffection with terrestrial existence. Such alienation spurred the human mind to project the notion of irrational transcendent powers—i.e., "God"—over the individual. This projection sanctioned the specific interests, both material and ideological, of the Christian sect. Furthermore, Bauer located the origins of Christianity in the second century CE rather than the first century and argued that the Gospels were written much later than people had supposed. In reconstructing the genealogy of basic Christian beliefs, Bauer argued that Christianity had only a vague connection with Judaism; rather, its most distinctive beliefs were derived from Greek thought and religion. But Bauer also believed that Christianity emerged as a revolutionary force in the Roman Empire—it promoted liberation for the economically and politically marginalized. As such, Christianity stood as an important moment of progress in Roman history. Bauer's account of the historical origins of Christianity were positive from a social point of view (though heretical from a Christian point of view), but his account of nineteenth-century Christianity was far less optimistic. Bauer saw the growing emphasis on religious feeling rather than reason as a sign of Christianity's impending demise.

toward the goal of actualizing the great spiritual orientation of our existence: a union with God. Jesus therefore is not the incarnation of God, but a sign, or example, of what human beings might become if they are awakened to the spiritual foundations of their existence. Strauss's understanding of myth has proven influential over the years.

For Strauss, the disciples' desire to communicate the dynamics of a personal encounter with Jesus could only be effective if that communication were evocative—it had to invite people to respond or react in a certain way, rather than merely describe or report the events of Jesus' life. Myth was the means by which the literary and religious conventions of the first century were unconsciously used by early Christian writers to bring the encounter with Jesus alive and thus make the realization of God-manhood possible in a way that mere description could not. For Strauss, Christianity was not a fraud but a mistake or a misunderstanding of this basic dynamic, a mistake that could be corrected. This correction, however, necessitated the demise of traditional Christianity, but at the same time would create a new, more authentic, and non-dogmatic religion.

Around the time of Strauss, a movement emerged within theological circles that sought to find middle ground between the principles of the Enlightenment and traditional Christianity. This position came to be known as **liberal theology**, and one of its most popular exponents at the turn of the twentieth century was the great historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Liberal theology, evolving from the work of a group of theologians known as rationalists in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sought to accommodate the principles of the Enlightenment and Christianity—usually by adopting a thoroughly modern outlook, retaining aspects of traditional Christianity that fit, and abandoning elements that did not. For example, the **miracle** stories were given naturalistic and moral interpretations. Jesus' healings had natural explanations, and so-called nature miracles like the feeding of the multitude had moral significance (when we share, we find that there is more than enough to go around). In his famous book *What Is Christianity?* (1900), Harnack depicted Jesus as an eminently reasonable human being and did away with any hint of the supernatural. The resultant portrait of Jesus and his mission revolved around three central ideas: (1) the kingdom of God as a present interior reality, (2) the infinite value of the human soul, and (3) the



law of love as the supreme religious and moral value. For Harnack, Jesus did not point to himself; rather, he directed all people to God as a loving Father. Harnack, like Strauss, rejected the doctrines of traditional Christianity, but he did so not because they are a misunderstanding of Jesus. Rather, Christian doctrines, even those in Scripture, are historically and culturally determined—the product of Greek and other influences—and only of passing value.

Harnack was an important and serious church historian, and he was closely connected to many of the Romantic and “liberal” approaches to the historical Jesus that emerged in the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century. These approaches imaginatively narrated the life and ministry of Jesus so that the worldview of Jesus was made to fit with that of modern European intellectuals. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, many began to wonder whether the quest for the historical Jesus was sufficiently self-critical.

## **The End of the Old Quest: The Limitations of Historical Investigations**

The old quest was brought to a close through important developments in two areas of New Testament study: the development of a better understanding of the formation and purpose of the Gospels, and a better (though still imperfect) understanding of first-century Palestinian Judaism and its theology. First, it had been argued for the better part of Christian history that the Gospels represented eyewitness accounts of the life and death of Jesus (particularly the Gospel of Matthew, the “first Gospel”). The Markan hypothesis challenged this assumption and thereby revolutionized how most scholars read the canonical Gospels. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, Mark came to be regarded as the first Gospel, a kind of bare-bones account of Jesus’ life and ministry with few theological accretions. In some circles Mark was confidently regarded as a basic historically reliable account of Jesus’ life, whereas the other Gospels were thought to have comparatively little historical value.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the historicity of Mark came under fire in the work of William Wrede (1859–1906), who suggested that even Mark’s Gospel was suffused with the theology of the early church.

He claimed that one example of this was the so-called **messianic secret** material in Mark. The messianic secret refers to passages in Mark where those who have witnessed Jesus' divine power (e.g., in a healing or exorcism) are instructed not to tell others of Jesus' identity as the divine agent, but to be silent about what they have seen (Mark 1:40–45; 5:21–24, 35–43; 7:31–37; 8:22–26). Wrede saw this feature of Mark as an apologetic tool—a means to defend the truthfulness of Christian faith—and attributed it to the *Sitz im Leben* (life-setting) of Mark's audience rather than to Jesus' own ministry. In other words, Wrede claimed that primitive Christians had understood that Jesus became the Messiah after his death (we will discuss the development of New Testament Christology in a later chapter). As Christology developed, Jesus' identity as Messiah was read back into the stories about his ministry, but this created a tension—was Jesus the Messiah before or only after his death? Wrede believed that Mark's community resolved this tension by creating the messianic secret: Jesus was the Messiah during his life, but he hid his identity and revealed it only after his Resurrection.

This feature of Mark's Gospel was but one example of how later concerns and developments within early Christianity came to dominate the proclamation of the gospel. For Wrede, the Gospels were excellent sources for the study of earliest Christianity but poor, or even inadequate, sources for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

The critical account of the historicity of the Gospels was also fueled by the emergence of a more complex account of first-century Judaism and its theology. Johannes Weiss (1863–1914) put another nail in the coffin of the uncritical assumptions of the old quest with his book *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (1892). Weiss argued that one may indeed gain some knowledge of the historical Jesus by reading the Gospels, but the picture that emerges makes Jesus irrelevant to modern human beings because his message and his actions all revolve around an ancient understanding of the world and God.

Weiss claimed that Jesus' preaching and ministry was informed by first-century Jewish apocalypticism, or more precisely, **apocalyptic eschatology**. The expression comes from two Greek words: *apocalypsis*, "revelation," and *eschatos*, "last" or "end." We will discuss apocalyptic eschatology in more detail in another chapter, but some initial background

may be helpful at this point. Apocalyptic eschatology is a term developed by scholars to get a handle on the unique features of a particularly Jewish and Christian perspective that flourished from the second century BCE to the second century CE. The term refers to a theological genre of literature as well as a theological movement that prevailed in many sectors of Palestinian Jewish society in the years before and after the time of Jesus. This eschatology was blended with ideas from Persia and Greece and began to focus on the idea that God would shortly intervene in history, raise the dead, give both the wicked and righteous their just rewards, and reestablish Israel as an independent kingdom ruled by God. Apocalyptic eschatology usually involved the communication of this message or revelation of hope to a persecuted community through the work of an intermediary—sometimes an angel, other times a famous figure from the history of Israel. Needless to say, if Weiss was correct about the basic content and meaning of Jesus' ministry and self-understanding, then the entire project of liberal theology would be undercut. In fact, the entire historical Jesus quest would be vain because it could not supply a picture of Jesus that would be useful for modern people.

Albert Schweitzer, notable composer, physician, medical doctor, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and theologian, brought the old quest for the historical Jesus to a halt in 1906 with the publication of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. In this book Schweitzer traced the progress and aberrations of the various attempts to discover the historical Jesus in the nineteenth century. Schweitzer made use of George Tyrell's famous image of historical Jesus research at the time: such research is like looking down a dark well—what one sees is simply one's own reflection. In other words, the political philosopher and revolutionary see Jesus as a revolutionary, the Hegelian philosopher sees Jesus as a Hegelian philosopher, and the humanist sees Jesus as a humanist. Schweitzer's own position was similar to that of Johannes Weiss and his thoroughgoing eschatology. Schweitzer contended that the Jesus of history was so thoroughly immersed in the situation of first-century Palestine and its concern with eschatology that any attempt to bring him into the modern period does so only through violence and distortion. The historical Jesus is alien to modern ways of thinking.

## Person of Interest

### Albert Schweitzer

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) was one of the most important figures within twentieth-century Western culture. His family was deeply religious as well as musically and academically inclined, and this helped to chart Albert's future. His greatness first manifested itself in Albert's musical abilities: he was nine when he first performed at his father's church in Strasbourg. Schweitzer's musical interest continued unabated to the end of his life—he was internationally renowned. His performances and musical publications earned him substantial financial resources with which to continue many endeavors over the years, but as a young man, he used these resources to further his education. Initially Schweitzer entered into theological studies at the University of Strasbourg, where he completed his doctorate in philosophy (1899). He also received a licentiate in theology a year later. Afterward he took up posts as a pastor and professor over the next decade, during which he wrote several important books, including his celebrated account of the old quest for the historical Jesus (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906). Around the same time, Schweitzer decided to go to Africa as a medical missionary and proceeded to earn a medical degree in 1913. He founded a hospital at Lambaréné in French Equatorial Africa, which he operated until his death in 1965. The hospital could serve as many as five hundred patients at its height, and Schweitzer had multiple roles there: physician, surgeon, pastor, administrator, and janitor. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

In his account of the progress of the old quest for the historical Jesus, William Loewe identified four major positions at the end of the nineteenth century:<sup>1</sup> (1) the historical Jesus is the Jesus of the Gospels (the position of fundamentalists or reactionaries), (2) the historical Jesus is the Jesus of philosophers and humanists (liberal theologians), (3) the historical Jesus cannot be reconstructed from the Gospels (Wrede), and (4) the historical Jesus is freakish and irrelevant to our time (Weiss and Schweitzer). Within academic circles in Europe, positions three and four carry the day, but positions one and two enjoy significant popularity. The result of this division between academics and the broader culture was the general acceptance of the position outlined in Martin Kähler's book *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (actually pub-

lished before Schweitzer's book). For Kähler, the "historical" (*geschichtlich* in German) Jesus cannot be identified as the object of faith; rather, it is the Christ proclaimed at Easter that is the object of proclamation and belief, and it is this "historic" (*historisch* in German) Jesus that makes a difference in history. Kähler's distinction between the historical person and the Christ of the faith community would be influential over the next several decades.

## Beyond the Question of the Historical Jesus

Few figures have dominated theological debates as did Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Bultmann, a Lutheran, helped to move theology away from the seemingly intractable

### The Historical Jesus at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

At the close of the nineteenth century, the quest for the historical Jesus had all but come to an end in one of four major positions.

**The historical Jesus is the Jesus of the Gospels.** For many Christians the rise of biblical criticism in the wake of the Enlightenment seemed obviously contrary to the spirit of Christianity; they responded by rejecting any separation between Jesus in the Gospels and accounts of the historical Jesus. Many Christians today continue to find such distinctions troubling since they seem to cast doubt on the truthfulness of the Gospels.

**The historical Jesus is the Jesus of philosophers and humanists.** Not all Christians viewed the contributions of the Enlightenment, and the modern world in general, as destructive. Liberal theology was a widely popular movement that saw the Enlightenment as an opportunity to formulate a new understanding of Christianity. Liberal theology worked tirelessly to construct a positive account of Jesus as the ultimate humanist and philosopher. Such

an account was to replace traditional dogmas that identify Jesus as the incarnate **Son of God**.

**The historical Jesus cannot be reconstructed from the Gospels.** William Wrede determined that Christian confidence in the Gospels as a source for uncovering the life and ministry of Jesus was misplaced. Wrede saw the Gospels as good resources for understanding the early church, which created the Gospels to help them deal with their own particular situation. Christians, therefore, are left without any sure historical resource for their faith.

**The historical Jesus is freakish and irrelevant.** Weiss and Schweitzer both attacked the supposition of liberal theology that Jesus could best be understood through an appeal to modern ideas. Rather, they insisted, Jesus was a unique individual who was a product of a first-century Jewish worldview: he thought that the world was coming to an end in the fiery and dramatic advent of God. His Crucifixion was, therefore, a failure, a last desperate attempt to force God to act.

situation created by the demise of liberal theology and the old quest to locate an authentic religious expression of Christianity within a modern context. The movement became known as dialectical theology. Dialectical theology did not share with liberal theology its optimism regarding human history and progress; rather, God was understood as entirely “other”—apart from the world—and such a position carries some important implications for the study of the historical Jesus.

Bultmann denied the theological significance of the historical Jesus beyond the mere fact of his existence. The fact of Jesus’ existence (*das Dass*) was simply the precondition for the proclamation of the early church. Bultmann was concerned instead with historical issues surrounding the formation of the Gospels within the early church. He and other form critics (especially Martin Debelius) sought to deconstruct the Gospels into individual units to determine the original life setting of the early church that gave rise to these units. By doing this Bultmann hoped to gain an understanding of the manner in which the early church came to understand and communicate its faith in Christ. Armed with this knowledge, the contingencies that formed much of the New Testament could be relativized or dismissed in a project of **demythologizing**. For Bultmann, as for Kähler, the proclamation, or **kērygma** of the risen Jesus has import for believers, not a historically reconstructed figure of the past. The main features of Bultmann’s theology and his approach to historical Jesus research are outlined in his famous essay on demythologizing the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

For Bultmann, the New Testament presents a mythical worldview and a corresponding mythical view of salvation. The world of the New Testament is a three-story structure (heaven is “up there,” earth is “here,” and hell is “down there”); the course of human history is governed by spiritual powers; salvation occurs as a result of the God-man’s atoning sacrifice and the victory this gives him over the powers of evil; anyone who belongs to the Christian community is guaranteed resurrection. For Bultmann, one cannot recover this worldview—one cannot go back to olden times and adopt a “flat-earth worldview”; rather, the worldview of the New Testament must be deconstructed. The mythical worldview of the New Testament has its roots in the mythology of either first-century Judaism or that of the Greco-Roman world. Christians cannot accept

## The Reformation and Contemporary Christianity

Although the history of Christianity from earliest times bears witness to its great diversity, both practical and theological (note the churches of Greece, Russia, Egypt, Armenia, and Lebanon), the Reformation gave rise to numerous expressions of Christianity in the West and dramatically changed the landscape of the faith. The sixteenth-century reformers and the movements they founded all took exception to the Church of Rome (the Roman Catholic Church) to which virtually all people living in Western Europe belonged until that time (note that *catholic* means “universal”). Two important theological principles unite virtually all Reformation or Protestant Churches: (1) Scripture is the sole authority for governing Christian thought and practice, and (2) justification (“being made right with God”) is given to human beings by God as a gift (i.e., grace) through faith and not through any good works on our part. In the chart below, the four major trajectories of the Reformation are presented along with the general aspects of the tradition, the contemporary churches in those traditions, and the characteristic elements within these traditions. The chart paints Protestant Christianity with a broad brush, and is meant to give readers a reference point and not a full-scale account of any denomination or the history of the Reformation. Many important Protestant churches are not represented here because they emerged more recently (e.g., pentecostal churches).

	Lutheran Churches (R. Bultmann)	Reformed / Presbyterian Churches (K. Barth)	Anabaptist and Baptist Churches	Anglican / Episcopal and Methodist Churches
<b>Leaders</b>	Martin Luther (1483–1546) Philip Melancthon (1497–1560)	John Calvin (1509–1564) John Knox (1505–1572)	Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) Menno Simons (1496–1561)	Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) Menno Simons (1496–1561)
<b>General Tradition</b>	Lutheran churches are the direct descendants of Luther’s movement. Lutheran churches generally emphasize the importance of Scripture, of preaching, and of salvation by grace through faith, but also celebrate Communion on a regular basis and maintain a hierarchy (i.e., bishops).	The Reformed movement was distinct from that of Luther in emphasizing the irresistibility of grace (i.e., God gives grace to human beings and they cannot reject or lose that grace), and predestination (God chose those human beings who would be given God’s grace before they were created). Administrative authority rests in a body of elders (or “presbyters”) in each congregation.	This “radical” branch of the Reformation has less coherence than other branches. While Zwingli opposed the ideas of the Anabaptists like Menno Simons, they both agreed on the importance of congregational authority rather than on bishops or elders (hence the term <i>free churches</i> ). Of the Protestant churches, these tend to be the most conservative in their handling of the Bible, but the most	The Church of England became a separate entity not on theological grounds but jurisdictional: it rejected the authority of the Pope. The Anglican tradition does not usually consider itself “Protestant,” for while it (cautiously) adopted many of the practices and much of the theology of the Reformers, it also retained much of the catholic heritage, such as the authority of bishops. <i>Episcopal</i> comes from

## The Reformation and Contemporary Christianity *(continued)*

	Lutheran Churches (R. Bultmann)	Reformed / Presbyterian Churches (K. Barth)	Anabaptist and Baptist Churches	Anglican / Episcopalian and Methodist Churches
<b>General Tradition</b>			critical of church tradition, including traditional doctrines and the creeds.	<i>episcopos</i> , “bishop”). Wesley, an Anglican priest, began a revival movement that grew into a denomination (the Methodists) in its own right. Today, Episcopal and Methodist churches are among the most theologically progressive communities.
<b>Some Contemporary Denominations</b>	ELCA, Missouri and Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Churches (LCMS and LCWS), The Worldwide Lutheran Federation (to which ELCA belongs)	Reformed Churches (Dutch, Swiss, etc.), Presbyterian Churches (PCUSA, PCA, etc.)	Anabaptists (Mennonites, Amish). Modern Baptists are related to this movement but stand between the Reformed, Anabaptist, and even Anglican/Episcopalian traditions. Most non-denominational Evangelical churches stand in this tradition as well.	The Church of England and its sister churches forming the worldwide Anglican communion (Episcopal Church in America, Church of Canada, Australia, etc.). United Methodist and other Wesleyan Churches sprang from this tradition.
<b>Some Distinguishing Characteristics</b>	Luther’s reverence for the celebration of the Eucharist (Communion) and emphasis on the proclamation of Scripture in the assembly make Lutheran worship similar to contemporary Roman Catholic (i.e., post-Vatican II) worship and general practice.	In this tradition the holiness and sovereignty of God are emphasized, especially in the doctrine of predestination and the denial of free will, though these last two are still debated among many Reformed Christians, with many churches taking a less Calvinist position.	These churches reject infant baptism in favor of believer’s (adult) baptism. They emphasize the relationship between God and the individual, and tend to be suspicious of the state.	Episcopal churches grew out of the Church of England and are therefore “national churches.” They stand between the Reformed and Catholic traditions in many ways. Methodist churches emphasize the spiritual and emotional experience of God’s love.



## The Reformation and Contemporary Christianity *(continued)*

Many Christians today belong to non-denominational churches, which often purport to be free from denominational concerns. Although these churches provide new and exciting visions of doing church, they also emphasize a basic form of Evangelical Christianity that is more often than not rooted in some form of traditional Protestant Christianity (usually Baptist). For example, Saddleback Church, from which comes the *Purpose-Driven Life* series of books, was affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The Willow Creek Churches (WCA), though non-denominational, nonetheless espouse an Evangelical faith that finds strong support from Baptist churches. This is not a bad thing, but Christians must be conscious of their theological roots and wary of evacuating the Christian tradition of its history. Christians believe that God is made known through history—that is a complex, beautiful, frustrating, and redemptive reality!

this worldview because (1) there is nothing specifically Christian about this worldview, and (2) no one can appropriate this worldview today in light of modern culture. The revision of the New Testament worldview springs forth most obviously from the natural sciences. Geology, biology, astronomy, and the other scientific disciplines help us to construct a scientifically responsible worldview. More important for Bultmann, however, is the way our self-understanding as modern people helps to shape our worldview, and this has great implications for our understanding of salvation.

Demythologizing does not imply a cafeteria approach to Christianity—taking what fits with our modern worldview and leaving behind ideas or doctrines that do not conform to our modern sensibilities. Rather, Bultmann insists, “We can only accept the mythical world picture or completely reject it.”<sup>3</sup> He contends that the mythic picture of the New Testament will be done away with as we uncover the real intention of the New Testament and its use of myth. For Bultmann, myth is to be understood not in cosmological terms but in anthropological terms. It gives expression to the “beyond” or the limit of human existence that lies beyond the familiar disposable world that we take for granted. In other words, myth must be understood as disclosing the mystery of human existence (what it means to be human).

This is not an altogether novel approach to the gospel; rather, Bultmann insists that the task of demythologizing is already undertaken in the New Testament itself. Earlier attempts at demythologizing the New

Testament were offered in the nineteenth century, most notably by Strauss and by some within liberal theology. These attempts, however, failed to understand the kērygma (the faith proclamation of the church). An existential interpretation of the New Testament myths is needed, an interpretation that will speak to the difficulties of human existence in the modern world.

The understanding of “being” that underlies the Christian kērygma contrasts existence (or “human being”) with faith and without. The human being outside faith—one who lives “according to the flesh”—is subject to the impermanence and decay associated with the world. However, in faith, human beings live “according to the Spirit” because their lives are based on what cannot be seen and what is not disposable. For Bultmann, the eschatology usually associated with Jewish apocalypticism is now to be read as the new life of the believer, a new creation, free from the trouble of this transitory and disposable world.

Bultmann contends that this discovery is dependent on the New Testament. The revelation that takes place in Christ is the revelation of the love of God. This love frees us from ourselves and opens us up to the freedom and future possibility. Christian faith recognizes the act of God in Christ as the condition for the possibility of our love and our authenticity. That is why, for Bultmann, the significance of the Christ occurrence rests not in historical questions but in discerning what God wants to say to us in the proclamation of Christ. The cross of Christ is to be understood not as an occurrence outside of ourselves and our world; rather, the meaning of the cross is found in the lives of believers who commit to the suffering that authentic freedom demands.

The project of demythologizing the New Testament preserves the paradox (apparent contradiction) of the Christian faith because the transcendent God—the God that is totally beyond us—becomes present in the concrete history and lives of people. Bultmann’s project, though criticized during his lifetime, was eminently pastoral (rather than simply academic) since it tried to outline how Christians are to believe within the modern world. Bultmann’s project began to be dismantled in the latter part of the twentieth century at the hands of some of his own students.

## Christianity and Existentialism

Existentialism, a philosophical movement that flourished in the middle of the twentieth century, rejected classical philosophy and its insistence on abstractions like “essence.” The famous existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre defined existentialism in the maxim “existence precedes essence.” In other words, human beings are thrown out into the world—“thrown toward death,” to use Martin Heidegger’s expression—without any definition or foundation to guide them. According to existentialism, one is forced to wrestle with one’s own existence and, through the exercise of will, responsibly create one’s own essence. Such a project no doubt explains why human beings are so anxious, consumed by the desire to possess and control, under the illusion that the one who controls or owns the most “wins.”

While some of the most famous existentialists were atheists (Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus), the movement had its roots in the work of the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (†1855). Kierkegaard, deeply dissatisfied with the modern emphasis on science and a correspond-

ing concern with universals in accounts of human existence, emphasized the problems of individual existence. Gabriel Marcel, a twentieth-century existentialist philosopher, frames the issue simply: the primary task of human life is not to have or control but to be or become. Such an outlook transcends the scientific emphasis of the modern world without rejecting its advances. Thus the modern world is neither vilified nor glorified.

Both of the founders of dialectical theology (Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann) appealed to the thought of Kierkegaard, though Bultmann was well acquainted with the thought of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger as well. For dialectical theology, existentialism helped to move Christianity away from liberal theology’s problematic embrace of modernity and the dangerous idea of “progress.” Existentialism helped to emphasize the precarious position of the human person and the need to abandon oneself to God in an outrageous leap of faith. As such, existentialism helped to reinforce the Reformation’s emphasis on salvation as a gift that cannot be earned.

## The New Quest

The dismissal of the historical Jesus from the scope of theology was a difficult position for many to accept, even among those who closely supported Bultmann’s overall project. Ernst Käsemann (1906–1998), one of Bultmann’s former students, launched the **new quest** for the historical Jesus when he took exception to Bultmann’s position on the historical Jesus. In a paper delivered at a meeting of Bultmann’s former students on October 20, 1953, Käsemann asserted (1) there was a danger of heresy in Bultmann’s dehistoricizing the kerygma, (2) the Gospels were composed because the early church was in fact concerned with the earthly Jesus,

and (3) the Gospels identify the risen Christ of the *kērygma* with the earthly Jesus. These points combine to argue that the quest for the historical Jesus, contrary to Bultmann's assertion, was not only possible but also theologically necessary.

Käsemann positively regarded the basic theological insights of Bultmann, and was sympathetic to Bultmann's dissatisfaction with liberal theology and the old quest. Though Bultmann's concern to present a thoroughly modern yet Lutheran approach to the gospel is successful in many ways, Bultmann's denial of the theological significance of historical Jesus research comes dangerously close to embracing the early heresy known as Docetism. Docetism (from the Greek verb *dokeō*, meaning "to think" or "to seem") was the heresy that denied the reality of the Incarnation, saying instead that Jesus only "seemed" or appeared to be human, but since he was divine, he could never be a real (material) human being. Käsemann argued that the denial of the theological significance of historical Jesus research in favor of the *kērygma* was almost the same as denying the Incarnation.

The second and third points on which Käsemann criticized Bultmann are directly related to one another. First, Bultmann fails to deal with the fact that the *kērygma* of the early church developed into the narratives of Jesus' life and ministry that we call the Gospels. This happened, Käsemann argued (his third point), because the earliest Christians wanted to make the explicit connection between the faith to which the *kērygma* calls us and the life of the human being that was the basis for the *kērygma*.

Among Bultmann's students, few full-length works on the life and ministry of Jesus emerged, with the notable exception of Gunther Bornkam's *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was widely read and influential for almost two decades. Among Roman Catholics, however, historical Jesus research quickly became a focal point of christological reflection. One of the most prominent and influential books released was by the Dutch Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–). Schillebeeckx's major work appeared in two volumes: *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*. Schillebeeckx, while not sharing the same history or commitments as Bultmann's students, nonetheless offers a work that in some ways was characteristic of the new quest. Schillebeeckx offers readers an outline of what historians can reasonably assert, a critically assured

minimum of information about Jesus. This initial sketch focuses on the words of Jesus and his association with the marginalized and suffering. From this point Schillebeeckx reflects on the development of Christology in the New Testament. It is the “experience” (an important concept in Schillebeeckx’s theology) of the early disciples that provides the basis for their subsequent proclamations about Jesus’ identity as Messiah. Because of this, Schillebeeckx has been accused of blending his historical reconstruction of Jesus with his own theology, the theology of experience. This is a common accusation raised against the entire new quest: it aims to uncover the unique personality of Jesus and thereby gain an understanding of how Christian faith emerged from the personal encounter with Jesus. In other words, there seems to be a theological agenda that controls the historical reconstruction of Jesus.

The new quest rescued historical Jesus research as an integral part of contemporary Christian faith. But the precise place of historical Jesus research within contemporary Christology is still a matter of considerable debate, a debate that has animated the so-called **third quest**.

## The Third Quest: Some Distinguishing Features

The British scholar (and bishop in the Church of England) N.T. Wright coined the expression “third quest” to describe the wave of Jesus research that took place from the mid-1980s to today. Generally, this wave of Jesus research has several features that distinguish it from the earlier quests, but in any given author one can also trace some or many of their concerns to a previous generation of scholarship. For example, the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars and other interested individuals, have produced a series of works that seem, in many ways, to continue the old quest objective of using historical Jesus research to attack traditional forms of Christianity. John P. Meier, however, argues that the third quest for the historical Jesus represents a significant departure from previous quests. He identifies seven notable gains that define the third quest:<sup>4</sup>

1. The third quest has an ecumenical and international character (whereas earlier quests were almost exclusively male, German, and Protestant).

2. It clarifies the question of reliable sources (the New Testament is viewed as the primary source for research, and other texts and artifacts like the apocryphal gospels or the Dead Sea Scrolls are only secondary sources).
3. It presents a more accurate picture of first-century Judaism (as opposed to the tendency in previous quests simply to contrast Jesus and first-century Judaism).
4. It employs new insights from archaeology, philology, and sociology.
5. It clarifies the application of criteria of historicity (i.e., unlike previous quests it consistently and carefully applies certain criteria for sifting the New Testament and other sources for historically reliable material).
6. It gives proper attention to the miracle tradition (as opposed to the previous quests, which relegated the miracle tradition to the status of legend or myth).
7. It takes the Jewishness of Jesus with utter seriousness (Jesus is to be portrayed as a first-century Jew).

Perhaps the two most important of these unique features of the third quest—the Jewish background of Jesus (items 3 and 7) and the use of criteria (5)—deserve further comment.

Since the end of the Second World War and coming to terms with the Holocaust, Christian churches, and Catholics in particular, have gradually acknowledged that their understanding of Judaism, especially the Judaism of the first century, has been slanted and incomplete. For example, in both the old and new quests as well as in Bultmann's theology, Judaism acted as a foil for the presentation of Jesus. First-century Judaism was petty, materialistic, and oriented toward earning salvation from God through good works. This is a caricature, a false exaggeration, of Judaism rather than a historically and theologically responsible portrait. Rooted in the work of G. F. Moore in the 1920s, the writings of E. P. Sanders in the 1970s revolutionized Christian scholarly descriptions of first-century Judaism, which subsequently became much more complex and sympathetic. Additionally, the discovery of Jewish sectarian texts (writings that are special or holy for a small group) in the wilderness of Qumran near the Dead Sea (the Dead Sea Scrolls) help make the picture of first-century Judaism more diverse and, therefore,

less authoritarian and uniform. These factors help to situate Jesus within Judaism as a faithful or perhaps prophetic critic, someone on the margins but nonetheless recognizable as a first-century Palestinian Jew.

## Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1947, a young shepherd was wandering in the wilderness near the shores of the Dead Sea in Palestine at a place called Qumran. As he threw stones into some caves located above him, he heard a sound of breaking pottery, and so signaled one of the most sensational archeological discoveries of the twentieth century. The caves contained dozens of clay jars filled with ancient manuscripts of both biblical and non-biblical books that had remained untouched for almost two thousand years. These manuscripts were deposited in the caves at Qumran by a group or sect within early Judaism known as the **Essenes**. They copied and preserved both biblical manuscripts as well as many sectarian documents (documents that reflected the group's distinctive theology). When their monastic community came under threat from the advancing Roman legions near the end of the first century BCE, they hid their sacred texts in caves. After their community was destroyed, the documents remained hidden and undisturbed for almost two thousand years.

For Christians, the scrolls are important for at least two reasons. First, the scrolls give us some of the oldest biblical manuscripts we have. Prior to the discovery of the caves, the oldest complete text of any portion of the Old Testament in our possession was from the early Middle Ages. The commentaries, translations, and expansions of biblical books are also helpful for exegesis (biblical interpretation) and textual criticism (determining what the original manuscripts of the Bible actually said). Second, and perhaps most important, the scrolls bear witness to the theological diversity of Palestinian Judaism around the time of Jesus, particularly as it pertains to

eschatology, or discourse about the culmination of human history. Before the discovery of the scrolls at Qumran, many scholars thought that certain beliefs about eschatology held by early Christians were borrowed from the Greek world and were alien to Judaism. However, with the discovery of the scrolls it was apparent that Christian eschatology—apocalyptic eschatology—had its roots in Judaism. The sectarian documents found at Qumran envisioned a community of purified believers who awaited a final cosmic battle to bring about the defeat of their enemy and the victory of God. Central in this battle are the role of an enigmatic figure called “the Teacher of Righteousness” and the segregation of the world into two camps: “the Sons of Light” and “the Sons of Darkness.” Before that battle, the Essenes were called upon to live as a holy people, set apart from the rest of the world. This separation was certainly geographical at Qumran—they were far outside Jerusalem in a desert—but it was also spiritual and ideological. Those who were to become members of the community dedicated themselves through rituals of water immersion (baptism) and communal eating that set them apart from the rest of the world.

Among the most noteworthy of the biblical texts found at Qumran are the complete leather scroll of Isaiah, parts of the book of Ezekiel, and copies of the Psalms. In addition there are important translations of books (*targummim*) in Aramaic—few people read Hebrew in first-century Palestine—as well as commentaries (*persharim*) and other creative expansions of biblical books. Among the sectarian documents at Qumran, four texts are particularly important: the

## Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls *(continued)*

Community Rule, also called the Manual of Discipline (1QS); the Hymn of Thanksgiving (1QH); the War Scroll (1QM); and the Temple Scroll (11QTemple). Additionally, fragments were found of a strange work called the Damascus Document or Damascus Covenant (DC), already known from a medieval copy discovered in 1896 in a Cairo geniza (a repository for sacred texts no longer in use—reverence for the sacred word prohibits “throwing out” sacred books). It was published in 1910 without any sense of its importance. The discovery of fragments at Qumran confirmed that DC was indeed a Qumran document, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls found some distance from the Dead Sea!

Scholars cite the Dead Sea Scrolls following a complex system, first referencing the cave in which the document was found. For example, if a document was found in cave 1 of Qumran the citation would begin 1Q. The next part of the citation varies considerably. If it is a copy of a biblical book, the abbreviation for that book comes next. For example, the beautiful leather scroll of Isaiah from the second century BCE was found in cave 1. The citation for that document is 1QIsa. Additionally, there are copies of commentaries, translations, and expansions of biblical books. An Aramaic translation of Job, called a *targum*, was found in cave 11. That citation

is 11QtgJob (the “tg” signifying *targum*). The commentary, or *peshet*, on the prophet Habakkuk from cave 1 is cited 1QpHab. The sectarian documents, like the War Scroll found in cave 1, follow a similar pattern. It is abbreviated 1QM. The “M” stands for *milhama* (“war”).

The sectarian documents in particular have caused a stir ever since their discovery. Wild speculation about their contents and their significance in relation to the New Testament has often been overstated. One urban legend holds that the Vatican has been orchestrating a cover-up and preventing the publication of many manuscripts. Such speculation sells newspapers but has little connection to the reality behind the complex process of deciphering and translating the documents. In fact, many of the scrolls were made available almost immediately: 1QIsa and 1QpHab were published in 1950 and 1QS in 1951. Many other fragments were published in a series known as *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* (published between 1955 and 1982) and then in a single volume (*The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, ed. G. Vermes, rev. ed. [New York: Penguin, 2004]). The political situation in Palestine/Israel as well as the deliberate (i.e., slow) pace of some scholars working on the project delayed the process of publication, but no conspiracy existed, let alone one led by the Vatican!

Meier also zealously defends the use of criteria in historical Jesus research. In his voluminous treatment of the historical Jesus, *A Marginal Jew*, Meier often insists that whether we affirm or deny the historicity of a particular story from the New Testament, we must know why we do so, why we make the particular judgment. In fact, one could argue that of greatest importance for Meier is the historical autonomy of the third quest: history guides the quest, not theology. The following quote from Meier is characteristic of his concern:



It is only in the light of this rigorous application of historical standards that one comes to see what was wrong with so much of the first and second quests. All too often, the first and second quests were theological projects masquerading as historical projects. Now, there is nothing wrong with a historically informed theology or christology; indeed, they are to be welcomed and fostered. But a christology that seeks to profit from historical research into Jesus is not the same thing and must be carefully distinguished from a purely empirical, historical quest for Jesus that prescind from or brackets what is known by faith. This is not to betray faith. . . . Let the *historical* Jesus be a truly and solely *historical* reconstruction, with all the lacunae and truncations of the total reality that a purely historical inquiry into a marginal figure of ancient history will inevitably involve. After the purely historical project is finished, there will be more than enough time to ask about correlations with Christian faith and academic Christology. ("The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80 [1999]: 459–87, 463)

In short, Meier's concern is to defend the idea, rooted in the goals of the new quest, that historical Jesus research is primarily an academic project that can defend the reasonableness of Christian faith. Yet Meier's concerns about the historical integrity of Jesus research emanates from his frustration with the way liberation theologians (including both Latin American and feminist theologians) have understood the nature of historical inquiry and the use of historical Jesus research.

## The Problem of History: Understanding the Limits and Value of History

In the mid-1980's, Elizabeth Johnson, in a debate with David Tracy, offered a good example of the liberationist position on historical Jesus research.<sup>5</sup> For Johnson, a critically assured minimum of knowledge about the historical Jesus can be obtained through historical research. This basic set of data can then be cast into a particular interpretive mold or framework, and can yield multiple Christologies given the particular sets of concerns or locations of the theologian. But Johnson went beyond that position by

emphasizing the theological necessity of the historical Jesus as “the memory image” by which the church and the tradition have always referred to a reality that existed before the church. As such, even though the historical Jesus is the product of modern historical research (in the Middle Ages no one was asking questions about the historical Jesus), it still functions as the symbol that mediates the reality of God’s saving activity. In this way, Johnson contended, a sketch of the historical Jesus can provide necessary content for Christian faith and can also be used to test competing representations of Jesus and judge which representations are valid. For example, if our historical sketch of Jesus conclusively proved that Jesus prohibited violence, then images of Christ, or Christologies, that portray Christ as a warrior could be rightly criticized on the basis that such Christologies contradict the basic data on the historical Jesus. While this use of historical Jesus research might seem completely reasonable, Johnson claimed that historical Jesus research functions as a norm or foundation for Christology. This last point has proven contentious among theologians.

In 2000 William Loewe updated the parameters of the debate concerning the theological relevance of historical Jesus research and challenged those who would argue for the **normative** value of historical research.<sup>6</sup> He concluded that while there has been a shift to historical Jesus studies in contemporary Christology, this shift has significant limits. Perhaps the most obvious limitation to the theological significance of historical Jesus research is its provisional character—such research is always open to revision. What historians and biblical scholars affirm about Jesus in one decade may have to be revised significantly in the next decade in light of a new archaeological find, a previously neglected piece of data, or a more precise and encompassing theory. Additionally, there seems to be less and less consensus concerning what one can affirm of the historical Jesus. For instance, while John Meier concludes that “the Twelve” (the twelve disciples) was a feature of Jesus’ own ministry, John Dominic Crossan contends that it is a creation of the early church and runs counter to Jesus’ practice of inclusive discipleship—Jesus treated everyone as equals and would not have privileged one group over others. This lack of consensus among scholars, therefore, challenges the naïve assumption that there is one established account of *the* historical Jesus and compromises any talk of historical Jesus research as normative.

Loewe therefore concludes that the historical Jesus cannot be the ground of either Christian faith or Christology. Rather, historical Jesus research helps Christology to move away from an ahistorical, metaphysical approach, characteristic of those who would simply leave Christology with the reading of Scripture or repeat the formulas of church councils and old catechisms. Instead, historical Jesus research enables us, in part, to focus on a historical and genetic account of the christological tradition. By enabling us to get a sense of Jesus as an historical figure, how he interacted with the world of the first century and came to challenge it, we can more fully appreciate the dynamics of his ministry. In turn, a historical sketch of Jesus' ministry may help us to understand why and how the earliest Christians came to believe that this human being, Jesus, was God's own self-expression to the world, God's agent for conquering sin and evil. In this way, historical Jesus research helps us to offer constructive statements on Christology and its contemporary significance. But this importance must not be overestimated, for historical Jesus research is not the foundation or norm of Christian faith.

The third quest has opened up the possibility for more fruitful historical research through its attentiveness to more precise criteria, its concern for the Jewish background of Jesus, and its ecumenical or interdenominational character (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and non-religious scholars working together). Yet these improvements in methodology and in the diversity of scholars engaged in the field have not yielded more stable results. In fact, the results of historical Jesus research are arguably more confused than ever. Perhaps the third quest's lasting contribution to historical Jesus research is a sense of humility concerning the results of this research as well as humility concerning its theological significance.

## Conclusion

The quest for the historical Jesus has consumed vast amounts of ink, paper, and bytes over the last two centuries. Those who want to attack traditional forms of Christianity have appealed to the historical Jesus for vindication, while defenders of the faith have also appealed to these historical reconstructions to support their cause. It would appear, however, that both sides in the debate are asking too much of historical Jesus research.

Bultmann was indeed correct when he expressed fear about those who pursue historical Jesus research in order to prove Christian faith, but his abandonment of the quest was problematic for the Christian understanding of the Incarnation—“the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). William Loewe, with much of the theological community, concludes that historical Jesus research has value in that it provides us with important insights and moves us away from mythological understandings of the New Testament, but it is limited in that Christian faith does not rest on an historical reconstruction. Christians do not put their faith in a critical sketch offered by historians; rather, Christian faith rests on the witness of the apostles and the ministry of the church in word and sacrament. Historical research on Jesus is legitimate and constructive, but its results are not normative.

## Questions for Understanding

1. What were the defining concerns of the old quest?
2. Why did the old quest come to an end?
3. What was the major contribution of Albert Schweitzer to the quest for the historical Jesus?
4. Why did Bultmann reject the quest for the historical Jesus? What place does his project of demythologizing have in his theology?
5. On what grounds did Käsemann challenge Bultmann on the historical Jesus?
6. Describe three defining characteristics of the third quest.
7. Contrast the positions of Elizabeth Johnson and William Loewe on the theological significance of historical Jesus research.

## Questions for Reflection

1. Can we overcome George Tyrell’s parable about historical Jesus research? If so, how?
2. What do you think about the notion of myth used in this chapter? Given that Strauss used myth positively and Bultmann, negatively, what is the place of the concept in the study of the New Testament?

3. Is historical Jesus research foundational for Christian faith? If scholars could determine that Jesus offered a definitive teaching, would this teaching be binding for the church? Why or why not?

## Endnotes

- 1 William P. Loewe, *The College Student's Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996), 31–32.
- 2 Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings," ed. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; German original published in 1941).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 4 John P. Meier, "The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80 (1999): 459–87.
- 5 Elizabeth Johnson, "The Theological Relevance of the Historical Jesus: A Debate and a Thesis," *Thomist* 48 (1984): 1–43. Johnson's position has developed considerably in the past twenty years.
- 6 William P. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Historical Jesus," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 314–31.