

# “The Historical Jesus”

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*Sermon for Jesus College Oxford 2011-01-30*

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In turning my mind to this evening’s assignment, I found myself developing an unexpected degree of empathy for the predicament faced by the proverbial Anglican bishop asked to preach a sermon on a doctrine he or she does not believe in. Now before you begin to shift uncomfortably in your choir stall, I hasten to add that I have no intention to adopt the old 20<sup>th</sup>-century episcopal euphemism and speak of “God, as it were”. Nor do I think that the Christian Easter faith means Jesus was resurrected in the faith of the disciples, just as winter frosts may give way to the daffodils of spring.

But here I am not concerned with the sort of doctrine that makes certain bishops squirm and twiddle their episcopal rings. Instead, my assignment is to speak about an article of faith to which most New Testament scholars have for two centuries subscribed unreservedly, and which has in recent decades furnished some of the more enterprising among them with comfortable royalty cheques and natty little sports cars. I am of course referring to the scholarly doctrine that goes by the name of “The Historical Jesus”. And I am content to acknowledge my doubts about its usefulness for either history or Christian faith, both of which I passionately care about.

To uninitiated outsiders, who include millions of readers of these best-selling authors, it may often seem as if what is on offer here is the elusive prize of historical proof, or at least of fact rather than myth, about Jesus of Nazareth. Some readers may hope for facts to prop up what they already believe and vaguely hope to be true, while others look for facts that will help to relieve any lingering doubts about their own belief that Christian faith and all its works is a load of baloney.

But proof of that sort in fact has never been the promise of historical Jesus research. It is true that in its origins the quest for a figure called “the historical Jesus” was conceived in protest and reaction against Christian doctrine. More particularly, against the clouding of historical questions by obscurantist churchmen content to let dogmatic theology adjudicate our understanding of the Christian past.

Famous critics of the 18th and 19th centuries committed themselves to hacking away at the church's dogma-encrusted account of Christian origins until the pure voice of critical reason could uncover the unadulterated truth about Jesus of Nazareth and the beginnings of Christianity. These men and their 20th-century successors believed that the quest for the historical Jesus required one to burrow beneath and behind the gospel texts until one uncovered the objective identity of the man himself – the first century charismatic healer or visionary prophet or egalitarian pacifist or political revolutionary rather than the object of Christian devotion. In other words: the so-called “Historical Jesus”.

Recent years have witnessed a growing number of more constructive accounts. Nevertheless, to both devout and sceptical readers it must inevitably come as a disappointment to find that these quests for the Historical Jesus turn out to offer so little proof either to faith or to unbelief. Aside from the occasional raspy polemicist, no serious scholar now questions that Jesus ever lived, a topic that for a while generated a pitch of excitement and filled European debating halls in the first decade of the last century. Most would agree that we do know rather more than that now – or at least we agree that we *think* we know more. In particular, there is today remarkably widespread agreement that Jesus of Nazareth can only be appropriately understood in his Jewish context.

Spectacular new discoveries of manuscripts and archaeological remains from ancient Judaism and early Christianity have come to light over the past century, but none have been contemporary sources making direct reference to Jesus of Nazareth. We know much more about first century Judaism than perhaps any generation since

the first century, but this provides context rather than text for the study of Jesus. The Even skeptics would concede that the bones of Jesus have not been discovered, there is no trace of his illegitimate children with Mary Magdalene, nor is there evidence of his tomb in Kashmir.

We have more contexts, but no more texts – although it is true that the contexts do in many cases ensure a historically richer understanding of the texts. Facts and proof remain elusive, whether you want to establish historically that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God or that he was a deceiver who led his people astray (as the Talmud has it).

So where does all this leave us? What can we really know about Jesus? One possible conclusion would be to bid farewell to the entire exercise of seeking to understand Jesus historically. It seems in one sense perfectly reasonable to conclude that history can neither establish nor disprove what faith affirms about Jesus; and certainly that is true about a good deal that is in the Christian creed: “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father”, and so forth.

Not that the Creed is irrelevant to this quest: Jesus' existence as a man, his crucifixion and burial at the behest of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, do in fact tie him inextricably to the course of our human historical existence, to the chain of events in which we ourselves participate. And these are things about which history speaks clearly.

Nowadays many historical scholars would say more than that, including that he was known as a teacher and worker of miracles. But his status as son of God, his birth by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary “for our salvation”, his resurrection according to Scriptures and ascension to the right hand of God the Father, let alone his future kingdom – Historical Jesus research can neither add nor take away from these convictions. And yet what it does establish is that these things are first asserted of Jesus not in creeds concocted by fourth-century clerics,

but in the very earliest Christian sources at our disposal, including traditions firmly datable to the first half of the first century. They are at the very heart of the memories and convictions about Jesus held by those who first knew him.

Recent scholarship may have been unable to prove or disprove what Christians believe about the Jesus of history. But what it *has* established is that we cannot think of Jesus as an ordinary Jewish carpenter whom Paul and Hellenistic Christians turned into a god – as has so often been claimed by sceptics from 19<sup>th</sup> century German theology all the way to contemporaries like Philip Pullman or Christopher Hitchens. The fact is that no matter how far you dig down behind or below the gospels, you always find a Jesus who is already remembered as the object of someone's faith or unbelief – whether an inconsequential Galilean charismatic crushed by the might of Rome and its collaborators, or else the captivating revelation of God's love who was affirmed as Lord and Messiah by virtue of his resurrection from the dead. Interestingly, the sources that grant our clearest access to him – the gospels – affirm both those affirmations to be true about Jesus: crucified under Pontius Pilate, and resurrected on the third day according to the Scriptures. What this means is that, as some contemporary scholars have begun to put it, the fullest critical and historic access to Jesus of Nazareth may in the end be found not in quests *behind* the testimony of the gospel texts but *in front of them*, in the encounter with the historical footprint he has left behind. We do well to remember that we only have the gospels in the first place for this reason: unlike Virgil or Plato or other great ancient literature, these documents only survive at all because of their continuous life in communities of faith that were profoundly shaped by the impact Jesus had made upon them.

It is this awareness that already surfaces in our reading from Acts 10 this evening, an account that in terms of its chronological placement represents perhaps the earliest outline narrative of Jesus. There, Simon Peter confirms the Christian

conviction that the same earthly Jesus who was anointed by God and “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed”, the same Jesus who was put to death by crucifixion was the one whom God raised on the third day and who ate and drank with his disciples instructing them to bear witness to the world.

So there is no such thing as the Historical Jesus, if by that we mean a reconstruction of a person and identity that is somehow made ‘objective’ and ‘credible’ by reading against the grain of those earliest witnesses. There is of course Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Jew about whose setting we can today know more than our parents and grandparents ever thought possible. And there are good and legitimate critical queries to be asked about the gospel texts that purport to tell us his story. But in the end the identity of Jesus of Nazareth is most fully apprehended not in any of a hundred different scholarly reconstructions of what is called the Historical Jesus, but in the living footprint of his memory and impact on those who knew him and who took his message to the world – those who believed and prayed in a way that came to be affirmed in the creed. That is the real Jesus of History, who invites you and me to the adventure of faith.