

Quests of the Historical Jesus

NT Survey/Introduction
Rev Dr Lim Kar Yong

Quests of Historical Jesus

- Situation before the Enlightenment
 - No questions raised on the miracles narratives and the HISTORICITY of the narratives
- Enlightenment
 - Historical-critical method
 - Application of the historical-critical method to the study of the historical Jesus

Quests of the Historical Jesus

- The original quest (1778-1906)
- Demise of the Original Quest (1906-1953)
- The New Quest (1954 – present)
- The Third Quest (1965 – present)

The Original Quest

- Reason is the rule
- Historical Jesus vs Dogmatic Jesus
- H. S. Reimarus – his works published after his death
 - the gospel proclaimed by the early church was a historical fabrication perpetrated by the disciples, especially the notion of a suffering redeemer
 - Reimarus’ Jesus – political Messiah called to bring liberation and renewal to Israel that ended in his death.

The Original Quest

- David F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, in 1835
 - Controversial book that cost Strauss his job at Tübingen
 - “myth” permeated the gospels until no part could be accepted as historically trustworthy
 - Mythological ideas subsequently narrated in the gospel accounts, especially in John’s gospel – God became man – cf Greek mythology
 - Value of Jesus is not in the history of the Gospel accounts but in the value the church attributed to him

The Original Quest

- William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, 1901
 - Mark imposed the “secret” as a device to camouflage the fact that Jesus’ ministry was not messianic, even though the church preached him as such.
 - The “secret” was a theological construction of the evangelist.
 - If Mark could not help us find Jesus → then the historical figure of Jesus is lost in the theological overlay of the Gospels

The Original Quest

- 2 Characteristics:
 - Distinction between natural religion (based on reasoning) and positive religions (that has a founder)
 - Anti-supernaturalism

The Demise (1906-1953)

- Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?*
- Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 1906
 - Argued that the original quest is a failure, and those authors in the Quest attempted to construct a Jesus in an image favourable to them. These authors failed to take into account Jesus' Jewishness and Jewish context seriously enough

The Demise (1906-1953)

- Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, 1892
 - the preached Christ and the historical Jesus were so intertwined in the Gospel materials that no method could separate the strands.
- Johannes Weiss, *The Preaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God*, 1892
 - Defended the gospel by considering the Jewish backdrop to the message of Jesus → Jesus did preach the coming of the Kingdom

The Demise (1906-1953)

- The original quest – not looking for the historical Jesus, but for a Jesus with whom they could be comfortable
- Result: a supra-historical Jesus, and NOT a historical Jesus
- Nothing of the historical Jesus could be known

The Demise (1906-1953)

- Rise of Form Criticism – marks the demise of the original quest
- Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition; In the Formation of the Gospel Tradition*
- Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*
- Vincent Taylor – form criticism in the gospels

The Demise (1906-1953)

- Gospel of Mark as earliest gospel – hence historical kernel of historically reliable information about historical Jesus
- “Sitz im leben” of each tradition
- Historical reference transformed in the process of transmission

The New Quest (1954 – present)

- Far less radical
- The continuation of Bultmann’s students
- Ernst Käsemann, in his essay “The Problem of the Historical Jesus”
 - pleaded for a more fruitful quest.
- Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1960
 - Still rejected the idea of Jesus as Messiah, but accepted Jesus’ teaching (especially ethical teachings) as authentic

The New Quest (1954 – present)

- James Robinson – another proponent
- Joachim Jeremias – focussing on the Aramaic background of Jesus’ teachings
- T. W. Manson and C. H. Dodd – realised eschatology
- Focus on kerygmatic tradition/theology; ethica teachings of Jesus
- Use of both canonical and noncanonical texts, especially the *Gospel of Thomas*, as in the Jesus Seminar movement

The Third Quest (1965 – present)

- Quest to place Jesus in the context of 1st century, Second Temple Judaism – discovering Jesus in his cultural context
- Jesus Seminar by Robert Funk
- B. Mack, *A Myth Innocence*
- John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*
- Methodology of the Jesus Seminar – reliant on the *Gospel of Thomas*

The Third Quest (1965 – present)

- George B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation*, 1965
 - Emphasis on Jesus’ Jewish roots

The Third Quest (1965 – present)

- E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 1985 –
 - Jesus as a reformer of Judaism who offended the leadership by his associations and religious practices. Doubtful Jesus saw himself as Messiah
- B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*

The Third Quest (1965 – present)

- N. T. Wright – *New Testament and the People of God; Jesus and the Victory of God; The Resurrection of the Son of God.*
 - How does Jesus fit into Judaism?
 - What were Jesus’ aims?
 - Why did Jesus die?
 - How and why did the early church begin?
 - What are the Gospels what they are?

The Third Quest (1965 – present)

- James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 3d ed, 2006; *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making, Vol 1; 2003.
- Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, 2003.
- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2006.

The Third Quest (1965 – present)

- Ben Witherington
- Craig Blomberg
- Craig Keener
- Scot McKnight

Summary of the Quests of Historical Jesus

	Tools	Views of Jesus	Philosophical Assumptions
Pre-Quest (prior to 1778)	Exegesis	Jesus of history = Jesus of faith	No problems and no quest
First Quest (1778-1906)	Source criticism	Difference between Jesus of history and Christ of faith, with emphasis on Jesus of history	Methodologically possible and theologically necessary
Abandoned quest (1906-1953)	Form criticism	Difference between Jesus of history and Christ of faith, with emphasis on Christ of faith	Methodologically impossible and theologically unnecessary
2 nd quest (1953 – present)	Redaction and tradition criticism	Jesus of history less important than Christ of faith	Methodologically possible and theologically necessary
3 rd quest (1965-present)	Social-scientific and a retooled tradition criticism	Jesus of history, not Christ of faith, is subject of investigation	Methodologically possible and theologically neutral

Divergent Views of Jesus		
View of Jesus	Proponents	Description
Travelling Cynic philosopher	John D. Crossan F. G. Downing	Jesus preached and practiced a radical egalitarianism that abolished social hierarchies and distinctions
Charismatic faith healer	Markus Borg G. Vermes	Jesus as charismatic figure with visionary, mystical experiences of God who functioned as channel of God's power to others
Apocalyptic prophet	E. P. Sanders Maurice Casey	Jesus as prophet who expected the climax of human history in his lifetime or shortly after his death
Social reformer	Gerd Theissen Richard Horsley	Jesus as itinerant preacher who renounced possessions, family ties, and violent revolts, calling for return to egalitarianism and renouncing social class system
Feminist Jesus	Elizabeth Fiorenza	Jesus as liberator of women and the marginalised from male-dominated Roman social structures
Sage	Ben Witherington III	Teacher of wisdom who saw himself as the embodied Wisdom of God
Marginal Jew	J. P. Meier	Jesus renounced livelihood as carpenter and did not live by the rules of the Judaism of his day
Risen Messiah	N. T Wright	Jesus as risen Messiah who delivers Israel from exile

Pop Quiz

- In your opinion, what significant impact do the quests of the historical Jesus make in the church today, if any?
