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Evangelicals and The Jesus Quest: Some Problems of Historical and Theological Method¹

Frank Thielman

Every year, at Eastertide and Christmas, as regularly as the Easter bunny and Santa Claus, the Jesus Seminar makes its appearance. Most of us are familiar with the routine. Newspapers, news magazines, and television networks feature interviews with serious looking professors of religion – often authors of the latest Jesus biography – who claim to speak for the scholarly world and tell us that Jesus was neither born of a virgin nor resurrected from the dead. The popular hype is matched by a profusion of scholarly tomes about Jesus, each arguing that he was shockingly untraditional. Jesus becomes an itinerant Cynic philosopher, a magician, a spiritual savant, a Jewish sign-prophet, or the agent of the divine Sophia.

Those of us who teach or study in seminaries and theological colleges usually know something about the history of all this. The quest for the historical Jesus is now commonly divided into three phases, the first of which began in 1778 with the posthumous publication of Hermann Samuel Reimarus' work, *On the Intention of Jesus and His Disciples*.² Reimarus believed that Jesus had been a religious reformer who became convinced that he could release the Jews from Roman captivity and set up a 'secular kingdom'. He succeeded only in angering the authorities, however, who captured, tried, and crucified him, putting his political goals to a disillusioning end. After his death, his disciples reconstructed him as a spiritual figure who died for human sin, was resurrected, and would return. The gospels were the deposit of this reconstruction. Reimarus, in other words, believed the gospels to be

1 Presented as a public lecture at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, October 5, 2000. I am grateful to the Seminary faculty for inviting me to give the lecture and for the helpful interaction of students and faculty on the lecture's topic.

2 Translated into English by George Wesley Buchanan under the title, *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970). Reimarus' essay was part of a much larger work, *Apologie, oder, Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, to which G.E. Lessing gained access. Lessing published 'fragments' of the larger work in seven installments between 1774 and 1778. *On the Intention of Jesus and His Disciples* was the seventh of these. Reimarus' complete manuscript remained unpublished until 1972.

tendentious documents that could supply useful historical information but only after taking account of their own deceptive intentions.

In the nineteenth century a large army of Jesus questers, now equipped with the documentary hypothesis of the gospel's composition and convinced of Mark's priority, approached the gospels in the same way. They assumed that, at least from a historical perspective, the gospels got it wrong – they were hagiographies that hid the real Jesus underneath a thick layer of ecclesiastical piety. Once these layers were peeled back, the historical Jesus was free to walk out of the pages of the nineteenth century lives and into the modern era. The trouble, as both Martin Kähler and Albert Schweitzer pointed out, was that the Jesuses who walked out of the pages of these books looked very unlike each other.³ Their most common trait was the nineteenth century ideological clothing in which Jesus was almost always dressed.⁴ On the heels of Schweitzer's critique of the nineteenth century quest, Rudolf Bultmann argued that a rigorous application of the historical-critical method to the gospels revealed almost nothing of the historical Jesus, and the quest for the historical Jesus ground to a crawl.⁵

The so-called 'new quest' emerged from the work of Bultmann's students Ernst

3 Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964; orig. ed. 1896), p. 57: '...Jesus is being refracted through the spirit of these gentlemen themselves.'

4 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. F.C. Burkitt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968; orig. ed. 1906), p. 312: The rationalistic theology of the 19th century German lives of Jesus 'creates the historical Jesus in its own image, so that it is not the modern spirit influenced by the Spirit of Jesus, but the Jesus of Nazareth constructed by modern historical theology, that is set to work upon our race'. Cf. Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus" in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), pp. 15-47, here at p. 19: 'Did not the Jesus of the Gospels become, under the hand of the Rationalists, a figure just like ourselves, thus showing how the wealth of portraits of Jesus assembled by A. Schweitzer corresponds to the multitude of possible viewpoints and beholders?'

5 Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963; orig. ed. 1921); *idem, Jesus and the Word* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934; orig. ed. 1926), p. 8: '...I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist. Except for the purely critical research, what has been written in the last hundred and fifty years on the life of Jesus, his personality and the development of his inner life, is fantastic and romantic.'

Käsemann and Günther Bornkamm who believed that their teacher had been too skeptical. In an influential lecture Käsemann argued that the early church, by composing narratives set in Jesus' earthly life, had forged a strong link between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Although very little of the historical Jesus survived the early church's desire to make him relevant to their present concerns, enough remained to allow us to say with certainty that Jesus preached with authority and shattered Jewish tradition in his preaching.⁶

Bornkamm constructed a slightly more robust account of Jesus than either Bultmann or Käsemann ever produced.⁷ Bornkamm's Jesus was baptized by John, proclaimed both the presence and the future coming of God's kingdom, called people to eschatological decision, and urged them to fulfil God's will. Jesus tried to deliver this message in Jerusalem but the cleansing of the temple angered the authorities and Jesus was arrested after celebrating a last meal with his disciples. At this meal he interpreted his impending death in eschatological terms. The scene in Gethsemane, his arrest, and crucifixion ensued. After his death he was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.⁸ The fullness of Bornkamm's account is only remarkable when compared to the meagre results of his teacher. He is still aware at every turn of the supposedly legendary nature of much that the gospels say about Jesus.

The term 'Third Quest' is now used to account for the explosion of Jesus studies in the 1980's and 1990's.⁹ The Third Quest has arguably emerged from the great cultural shift that has taken place in the Western world after World War II. The voices of the marginalized and oppressed began to be

6 "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," originally given as a lecture on October 20, 1953 and subsequently published in the "Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 51," (1954), pp. 125-53.

7 Käsemann says that his lecture is only a 'superficial outline' and implies that it could be filled in more fully. Perhaps if he had done so, his account of Jesus would have been as substantial as Bornkamm's.

8 *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960; orig. ed. 1956).

9 The term 'Third Quest' has been used in a variety of ways. B. Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995) uses the term broadly to refer to the renewed interest in the historical Jesus since the 1980s and following the demise of the approach of Bultmann and his students. He includes in the Third Quest the Jesus Seminar and portraits of Jesus that stress the importance of understanding him against a Greco-Roman philosophical background. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*

heard more clearly in the second half of the twentieth century, and so a series of Jesus portraits has emerged in which Jesus is not what established authorities want him to be. Just as the documentary hypothesis provided evidence for the nineteenth century quest, and form and redaction criticism for the 'new quest', so the 'Third Quest' has been fuelled by the Gnostic documents against which the Great Church conspired, by renewed consideration of Jesus' Jewishness, and by reconstructions of the social life of Galilean peasantry.

What unites all three 'quests' and makes their separation from each other somewhat superficial is the consistent application from Reimarus to the present of a hermeneutics of suspicion to the canonical gospels. The various Jesus books from the late eighteenth century forward are virtually unanimous in their presupposition that the four gospels do not describe the real Jesus. The gospels are at worst deceptive attempts to use the authority of Jesus to oppress the poor and disenfranchised. At best, their portraits of Jesus are incomplete and need the fuller detail supplied by the historian if they are to be used to reveal the Jesus who really lived.

For Jesus questers in all ages the biases of the gospels must be taken into account, the chronological framework that they supply the story of Jesus disregarded, and their information about Jesus supplemented with non-canonical sources in order to reconstruct the real Jesus. In a sense, then, the three quests can be viewed as one quest to reconstruct a Jesus different from the Jesus of the gospels.

(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), p. 34, 81, n. 2, and 83-124 excludes the Jesus Seminar from the Third Quest and limits it to those studies which, following Albert Schweitzer, seek to understand Jesus against the religious, social, and political background of first century Palestinian Judaism. Cf. Stephen Neill and N.T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 379-403. Bruce D. Chilton, "Assessing Progress in the Third Quest," in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*, NTTs (Leiden; Brill, 1999), p. 18 believes that the 'Third Quest' can be distinguished from its predecessors by its 'understanding that Jesus is an inference of literary history'. Here I am using the term 'Third Quest' in Witherington's broader sense.

If this account of the quest for a non-canonical Jesus is roughly correct, then the response of evangelical biblical scholars to it, especially in recent years, is puzzling. They have not often criticized the fundamental historical method of the questers or pondered the theological advisability of engaging in the quest. Sometimes, they have simply joined the quest themselves and written their own books about Jesus, albeit books of a more pious bent. This willingness to join the quest has its roots in a classic and laudable evangelical instinct that Christian faith is joined indissolubly to historical reality. The instinct is laudable because it is profoundly biblical. Luke 1:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-17 are only the most explicit biblical claims that the Christian faith stands or falls with the historicity of its fundamental claims about Jesus. As Graham Stanton has said and Craig Blomberg affirmed, 'The gospel is concerned with history: not in that it stands if its claims could be verified by the historian, but in that it falls if the main lines of the early church's portrait of Jesus of Nazareth were to be falsified by historical research'.¹⁰ The discovery in the Jerusalem area of a sarcophagus of a crucified man datable to A.D. 33 with the inscription 'Jesus bar Joseph' ought to make Christians nervous.

Perhaps this is why evangelical scholars are sometimes willing to suspend their theological commitments to the four stories of Jesus in the gospels and write their own accounts of the historical Jesus. Not engaging the quest on its own turf seems like conceding the game to the sceptics. It seems like a tacit admission that although classical Christianity makes historical claims, it is not capable of defending them. To use N.T. Wright's witty paraphrase of Festus, 'Christianity appeals to history; to history it must go.'¹¹

Evangelicals should raise their sights, however, from the details of the various questers' accounts of Jesus to the methodological world that encompasses the quest itself. Large problems immediately come into view. Martin Kähler pointed out over a century ago the most fundamental of these problems: the gospels simply do not provide us with enough of the kind of evidence that the historical

10 Graham Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 189, as quoted in Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1997), p. 187, n. 28.

11 *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), p. 11.

critical method is capable of using to construct a historically plausible biography of Jesus.¹² In all three quests, this has meant that a universally recognized historical method has been replaced with implausibly hypothetical reconstructions. The notion that Mark came first and that Matthew and Luke both independently used the hypothetical source Q is used to say that Mark and Q preserve the earliest witness to the real Jesus. Mark's theological bias is discerned and then subtracted from his gospel to produce a scattering of historically probable sayings and deeds. Q is used to construct a picture of the community that produced it. Late sources such as the gospels of Thomas and Peter, whose voices must have been suppressed because they recorded dangerous truths about Jesus' openness to unorthodox notions, are then brought in to complete the picture. It is no mystery why the Jesus books that make up the current surfeit differ as wildly from one another in their portraits of Jesus as the nineteenth century lives against which Albert Schweitzer complained so bitterly.

The problem is a lack of historical control. The historian's task is to describe what is probable not what is possible, but when hypothesis is stacked upon hypothesis in this way, probability changes rapidly into the spinning of tales. The historian can legitimately say that Matthew and Luke probably used Mark. The historian can also say that Matthew and Luke, independently of each other, probably used another source no longer in existence. But to move from these two probabilities to the claim that the Markan Jesus is closer to the authentic Jesus than the Jesus of Matthew and Luke or to a reconstruction of theology of the Q community is to move in the direction of fiction. A controlled historical method simply has to stop at the first set of probabilities without going further unless it is clearly stated that the result is only what Jesus' life and teaching might have looked like, not what they most probably looked like.

Once the narrative framework of the gospels, particularly of Mark's gospel, is abandoned, it is not a legitimate procedure to supply a new framework for the isolated accounts of Jesus' teaching and deeds that are left over.¹³ After

¹²So-called *Historical Jesus*, pp. 54-5.

¹³Schweitzer, *Quest*, p. 336 and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: the Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 125-7.

the ship of Mark's narrative framework has sunk, the flotsam and jetsam that remain cannot be reassembled in any way that will pass the tests of a consistently applied historical critical method. Those who attempt the feat anyway regularly produce portraits of Jesus that are worth about as much historically as William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* or Robert Graves' *I Claudius*.¹⁴ These works are wonderful entertainment because they engage the reader's historical faculties and literary imagination at the same time, but no one goes to them to learn who the emperors Julius Caesar or Tiberius Claudius really were. For that we need the writings of Caesar himself, Cicero, Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, and a virtual library of directly relevant inscriptions and papyri.¹⁵ We also need historical studies of these figures, based on this large body of historical evidence, to help us put it all together.¹⁶

By way of contrast, those who write biographies of Jesus must use a meagre body of directly relevant evidence (the four gospels) that focuses on only a small period of Jesus' life (about three years) and seldom speaks of the aims behind his actions. Jesus books regularly attempt to fill these gaps with implausible attempts to introduce as evidence later documents such as the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas, or purely hypothetical documents such as 'Q' or a 'Cross Gospel'. In combination with this, or as an alternative to it, they offer conjectures about the intentions behind Jesus' actions such as the cleansing of the Temple. They then regularly fail to admit that the result of their method is closer to fiction than to historiography.

Precisely for this reason, the most useful of the recent deluge of Jesus books may be Gerd Theissen's *In the Shadow of the Galilean*.¹⁷ Theissen's book openly embraces the vehicle of fictional narrative to communicate its vision of

14 Cf. Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus*, p. 57: 'How many authors of the "Lives" blithely compose epics and dramas without being aware that this is what they are doing! And because this is done in prose, perhaps even from the pulpit, people think that this is merely a presentation of the historic, biblical picture of Christ.'

15 Cf. Johnson, *Real Jesus*, pp. 105-111.

16 Such as Christian Meier, *Caesar*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Basic Books, 1982) and Barbara Levick, *Claudius* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

17 Subtitled, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

who Jesus was. In a methodological reflection on what he is doing in the book, Theissen says this:

All history is experienced and shaped by human beings from a limited perspective. To put it another way. There is no such thing as history *per se*; only history perceived from a perspective.¹⁸ If this is true, then it is no wonder that when historians strip the narrative structure away from the gospels they can only reassemble what remains in widely divergent ways.

Curiously, the most eloquent cry that the emperor of the quest has no clothes comes not from an evangelical but from a Roman Catholic biblical scholar – Luke Timothy Johnson – who raises many of the objections to the most recent products of the quest that Martin Kähler and Albert Schweitzer raised a century ago.¹⁹ Leading evangelical biblical scholars, however, have not given his book a warm reception. Although they admit that Johnson has successfully pointed out some sloppy scholarship within the Jesus seminar, they have not been enthusiastic about the substance of his critique.²⁰ The problem seems to be that Johnson confirms their worst fears about what not participating in the quest can lead to – the fideistic claim that the real Jesus is the living Jesus whom Christians have experienced since the first Easter, not the historical Jesus about whom there is precious little historical evidence. Johnson puts it this way:

...Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past but by the reality of Christ's power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living

18 *Ibid.*, 27. Cf. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, pp. 3-15; Käsemann, "Problem," pp. 18-21; and the sophisticated discussion of this issue in N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), pp. 81-120.

19 *Real Jesus* (see note 11 above).

20 See, for example, the reviews of B. Witherington, *CSR* 27 (1997), 149-50 and Scot McKnight, *CBQ* 59 (1997), 159-61.

God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus.²¹

This sounds uncannily like the opening pages of Rudolf Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*,²² and is open to the same objection: it fails to honour the emphasis that the Bible itself places on the link between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Scot McKnight responds to Johnson this way:

...Are the essential facts about Jesus that form the foundation for [his religious] meaningfulness rooted in things that actually happened in space and time, or are they facts rooted only in a constructed universe? Is the meaning one attributed by later believers to events that did not happen? Some people want to know; I am one of them.²³

Evangelical biblical scholars have followed Johnson's critique of the historical method employed by the Jesus quest but then have refused to travel the path to which Johnson has directed them. Repelled by Johnson's neo-orthodox unwillingness to link history with faith, they have preferred to retrace their steps back to the Jesus quest.

It is at this impasse, however, that an evangelical philosopher, C. Stephen Evans, offers some helpful guidance. In his book *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, Evans articulates a sophisticated and plausible case that we are intellectually justified in claiming to know something is true even without being able to offer in support of our claim a series of arguments based on the classic historical critical method.²⁴ Arguments drawn from historical evidence can be helpful in apologetics, and can be used by the Holy Spirit to assure us

21 *Real Jesus*, pp. 142-3. See also Johnson's "Response to Criticism of *The Real Jesus*," *BBR* 7 (1997), 250-4, here at 250.

22 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951-55), 1:3, 33; *idem*, *Jesus and the Word*, pp. 3-5. See also Käsemann, "Problem," 18-24.

23 Review of Johnson, *Real Jesus*, p. 161.

24 Subtitled, *The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

that our beliefs are true, but if our faith also consists of a healthy dose of beliefs that are ultimately unprovable by means of the historical critical method, this does not imply that our faith is intellectually unjustified. Along with a number of other philosophers, Evans argues that all knowing involves assent to basic sources of knowledge whose reliability cannot be investigated.²⁵ As Evans puts it:

...No one else has succeeded in putting aside all convictions and assumptions in looking at the historical records, least of all biblical scholars committed to Troeltsch-like historical methods. So the believer should not be intimidated into giving up faith's insights for the mirage of an 'objective, impartial view.'²⁶

If Evans is right, then evangelical biblical scholars do not need to choose between a panicky evidentialist perspective on the one hand that believes the Christian faith falls to the ground unless Christians can use the historical-critical method to make it plausible and a complacent fideism on the other hand that maintains a robust faith even if the pale Galilean now moulders in the tomb. If historical study can produce the body of Jesus, we are in trouble, but if it can only say that the gospels' claims about Jesus are false because the historical-critical method cannot prove them, then we can respond with intellectual integrity that we know the gospels are true because their claims cohere with our other basic sources of knowledge.²⁷ It has taken a Roman Catholic biblical scholar and an evangelical philosopher, therefore, to reveal something that evangelical biblical scholars ought to understand – that the present quest for the historical Jesus is a methodologically dubious enterprise and is theologically unnecessary.

The quest may not be merely theologically unnecessary, however; it may also

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 292. Cf. Theissen, *Shadow*, p. 19.

²⁷ Cf. Johnson, "Response," 250, 251-2 and Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: the Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), pp. 25-35.

be theologically ill-advised. From at least the mid-second century most of the church has embraced the four gospels as the definitive accounts of who Jesus was and is, and most of the church has resisted attempts either to reduce their pluriform nature or to add to their number. Sticking with these four witnesses has traditionally had three advantages.

First, it shows that the experience of the historical Jesus was richer than any single perspective can adequately express.²⁸ Neither Matthew's understanding of Jesus as the teacher who is greater than Moses, nor Mark's claim that Jesus is the suffering Son of God, nor Luke's belief that he is the last and greatest of the prophets, nor John's concept of Jesus as the Son who reveals his Father fully accounts for Jesus on its own. All four gospels, with their varied interests, are necessary to see this, but when scholars produce a single mega-narrative, even if it is woven solely out of the four gospels, the indecipherable richness of the historical Jesus is flattened into a single, manageable story.

Second, since the pluriform nature of the gospels inevitably poses puzzling historical problems, it directs the reader's gaze beyond the historical biography of Jesus to its spiritual significance.²⁹ John meant something like this when he concluded his gospel with the statement that 'there are many other things that Jesus did, but if they were written down one by one, I do not suppose the world would have the space for the books that would be written' (21:25). John is not simply saying that Jesus did so much that no one could possibly write it all down, but that the world, with its secular approach to Jesus, cannot comprehend his story.

Third, the pluriform nature of the gospels helps to protect the church from theological error. In a famous passage, Irenaeus defended the limitation of the gospels to the four that the church recognized with the argument that the world has four zones and four principal winds and so the worldwide church ought to have four gospels. This is silly, as critics have often pointed out. But

28 Johnson, *Real Jesus*, p. 149. See also *his Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999) and the similar perspective of Martin Hengel *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 1-15, especially his comments on p. 106.

29 Cf. Johnson, *Real Jesus*, p. 149.

Irenaeus says something else in the same passage that merits hearing:

...They are foolish and uninstructed, even audacious, who destroy the pattern of the gospel, and present either more or less than four forms of the gospel – the former, because they claim to have found more than the truth, the latter because they annul the dispensations of God. (*AH* 3.11.9)³⁰

Irenaeus then describes Marcion's rejection of all but a truncated form of Luke's gospel, the Montanists rejection of John's Gospel, and Valentinus' claim that 'The Gospel of Truth' reveals who Jesus really is. Irenaeus therefore links the attempt to get at Jesus through some means other than the fourfold gospel with theological error. These four gospels, each with its own distinctive angle on Jesus' identity and teaching, define the truth about Jesus, and, for Irenaeus, one of the fundamental problems with the various heretical movements was their unwillingness to acknowledge the gospels as the deposit of theological truth. The more bizarre accounts of Jesus that have appeared as part of the Third Quest give eloquent testimony to the legitimacy of Irenaeus' concern.

Even the Jesus books produced by evangelicals give reason for pause. Evangelical Jesus questers, for example, face a dilemma when they come to John's gospel. Many non-evangelical questers believe John to be a less reliable historical source than the synoptics. What could be more historically implausible, they seem to reason, than that Jesus would claim to be one with God, equal to God, and even pre-existent (5:18; 8:59; 10:32)? Yet if we accept John's testimony about Jesus to be true, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that this is exactly what Jesus did. John presents these claims not as later theological reflection on more veiled references to divinity during Jesus' lifetime but as claims so obvious and so outrageous to Jesus' own hearers that they picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy (5:18; 8:59; 10:32). Faced with the problem of including John's claims in their portraits of

³⁰The translation belongs to Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, LCC 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), p. 383.

Jesus or losing their place at the discussion table, some evangelical questers choose to marginalize John. It is worth asking, however, whether Jesus books written by evangelicals can possibly offer the 'real Jesus' to Christians if they do not take account of John's claims.

It is important to emphasize that all manner of Jesus books, both evangelical and otherwise, can help their readers appreciate the cultural world in which the Jesus of the gospels lived and taught. They can be read with enormous profit as studies which shed cultural and historical light on the gospels and so prevent Christians from understanding the Jesus of the gospels anachronistically. To the extent that Jesus books can help Christians avoid reading their own pre-suppositions into the gospels and in this way help them to stand more fully under the authority of the Jesus of the gospels, such books are valuable.³¹

At the same time Jesus books ought not to be read as 'fifth' gospels whose portraits of Jesus supplement or supplant the fourfold gospel of the Christian scriptures. C. Stephen Evans is right when he says that it is difficult to see how Jesus could be religiously significant if his true identity were only now being revealed.³² Would God bury the truth about Jesus so deeply that only a scholar of the Third Quest could discover it? If all historiography involves interpretation, and if 'mere history' is an illusion, then, for the believer, the gospels provide the authoritative interpretation of the historical Jesus. The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are one person, and the four gospels reveal who he really was.

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31 From the perspective of method, B. Witherington's argument that Matthew and John incorporated the historical Jesus' understanding of himself as Wisdom into their gospels provides a helpful precedent. See *Jesus the Sage: the Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994).

32 "Methodological Naturalism in Historical Biblical Scholarship" in Carey C. Newman, ed., *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), p. 202.