Guest Editor's Foreword

Why devote a whole edition of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* to Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, a book that has received little attention in most standard textbooks on the historical Jesus? The best way to answer such a question is by means of a brief personal biography outlining my first encounter with historical Jesus studies.

When I was in seminary in the early 2000s, I took a class on the historical Jesus. The central text was N.T. Wright's influential *Jesus and the Victory of God*. As a beginning seminarian unaccustomed to the academic study of Jesus, Wright oriented me to a heretofore unheard-of world of Jesus scholarship. I was introduced to Germans, Frenchmen (only men; those were the times), Brits, and North Americans who had carried on a conversation about Jesus among themselves for the better part of two centuries.

In this conversation criteria were created and critiqued, consensus lost and found, quests began and ended and many trees felled as the tomes on Jesus increased in length. This entire area of research excited me, and at one point I thought that I too might one day write an excessively long book about the historical Jesus. I soon discovered, however, that judging by the authors mentioned in the history of research in standard works on the historical Jesus, many scholars believed that people of African descent (those in North America and beyond) have had little of import to say about the historical Jesus. Apparently, while Europe and North America were going in a first, second, and New Quest for the historical Jesus African Americans busied themselves with other matters.

One possible reason for a lack of interest in early African American reflection on Jesus is that while academic study of Jesus in the West has gone on for centuries, African Americans have rarely had luxury of producing Jesus scholarship for the academy. My forebears could not pretend that their interest in such matters was purely an intellectual interest. Much African American reflection on Jesus ranging from beginning of the first quest in the 18th century to the present has either been decidedly ecclesial (rooted in the Black church) or public in the sense of oriented to advocating for expanded freedoms for the

disinherited. This is not because African Americans lacked the ability. Law and custom, simply put, did not allow much access to the academy.¹

If academic scholarship must be disinterested and much African American reflection is decidedly *interested*, then the rules of Jesus scholarship mean that Black reflection on Jesus is ruled out a priori. Wimbush says,

All too often the response of those trained at the highest academic (doctoral) level in the field of biblical studies is to cultivate essentially a mode of silence. This silence is a sign of the most important lesson that biblical studies teaches and cultivates in many seminary and religious studies curricula—a respect for the mystifications of biblical scholarship to the point that little is said about the Bible in contemporary society and culture.²

Since much African American theological reflection has refused to adopt the posture of silence, as it relates to contemporary issues, our reflections on the historical Jesus have been underappreciated.

Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, then, which has been influential within African American academic and ecclesial communities since its publication in 1949 is a victim of the academic culture briefly depicted above.³

We cannot undo the past, but we do not have to be bound by it. Therefore, the editors of *JSHJ* decided to dedicate an issue to Thurman's classic on the 70-year anniversary of its publication and asked if I would be willing to serve as guest editor. I agreed because I believe that if study of the historical Jesus is to be the work of a wider community of scholars, we must create space for a diverse group of academics to pursue their interest in dialogue with one another. This edition does just that.

Jemar Tisby puts Thurman's work in historical context so that we are aware of the world into which *Jesus and the Disinherited* was born.⁴ Abraham Smith rightly argues that Thurman was aware of, but not overly impressed with the

1 With the growth of African American and womanist theology in the last 30–50 years, there has been a welcome increase of Black presence in the academy. However, according to the most recent data, African Americans make up about 4% of the faculty members in the Society of Biblical Literature. See <https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2019.pdf>.

2 Vincent L. Wimbush, "Introduction: Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures," in *African Americans and The Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*. ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Continuum: New York, 2001), 1–48.

3 See Jemar Tisby's introduction in this volume.

4 See also the early portion of Abraham Smith's essay.

various quests for the historical Jesus. Rather than being a work that fits within those paradigms, Thurman's work is message of hope based upon his reconstruction of the religion of Jesus, a religion well acquainted with the realities of "oppression, colonization, violence, and exploitation." In my contribution, I try to bring Thurman into conversation with two Jesus scholars, Jens Schröter and Dale Allison, whose work on social history, provides points of contact with Thurman's own concern for the social realities of the Second Temple period. Richard Horsley's essay on Thurman also recognizes the importance of Thurman's emphasis on the historical and social realities that shaped Jesus message. He demonstrates the ways in which Thurman anticipates more recent developments in historical Jesus research and suggests ways that we can build upon his message. Emerson Powery's essay highlights the interpretive method bequeathed to Thurman by his grandmother. Thurman's intentional centering of the Black experience had a major influence on African American methods of biblical interpretation. Dennis Edwards brings the general epistles by comparing the Jesus reconstructed in Thurman's work with 1 Peter's use of the Jesus tradition. Finally, like others in this volume, Mitzi Smith notices that Thurman focuses on the African American experience and class in his analysis of Jesus' religion. While this is welcome Smith notes his neglect of the intersection of race, gender, and class. She rectifies this lack by bringing Thurman into conversation with womanist scholarship of Audre Lorde and Delores Williams.

Together these diverse voices, written from a variety of perspectives, testify to the power of *Jesus and the Disinherited* to inspire fresh reflection on the historical Jesus with an eye toward how such reflections impinge upon the lived experiences of those with their backs against the wall. Our hope is that this is the beginning not the end of the recovery of Thurman and a host of other authors whose works on Jesus warrant a wider audience.

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