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Editorial

The Next Quest for the Historical Jesus

What follows is not a *JSHJ* editorial line—you may rest assured that the submission process remains as it was—but my own reflections following a question recently posed and discussed informally among disgruntled colleagues in the field: what would the Quest for the Historical Jesus would look like if it could be rebuilt it as a field of study within the humanities?

It is a timely question too. The late twentieth-century Quest for the Historical Jesus has stagnated, even if its influence continues to dominate. Innovative approaches, perhaps those less directly marketable to the mainstream, have been largely overlooked by a not insignificant power base of scholarship (backed by sometimes very large popular audiences) still obsessed with establishing “facts” about a specific individual. The Next Quest for the historical Jesus, a turn of phrase I owe to my colleague Chris Keith, is long overdue and it should not be about adding another potential source, repetitive promotion of the outdated criteria of authenticity, the continual deferral to the same scholarly authorities of yesteryear, or even the same themed chapters in historical Jesus books. Some of these issues remain important; establishing the earliest ideas associated with the historical Jesus, for instance, will obviously be a necessary part of what comes next. But the old certainties are gone. In terms of the “historicity” of a given saying or deed attributed to Jesus, there is little we can establish one way or another with any confidence. The criteria of authenticity have all but been demolished, the implicit anti-Judaism of much of the so-called “Jewishness of Jesus” debate exposed, and the faux “subversiveness” of unsubversive scholarly reconstructions shown to be duplicitous.

This is why now is the time to reconstruct and reinvigorate the Quest for the Historical Jesus by bringing it in line with what has been happening in the humanities—indeed, in line with Christian origins scholarship more

generally—and building on the more overlooked historical Jesus scholarship of this century. To do this, the primary concerns of the Next Quest must involve:

- 1 *Social History of Scholarship.* One of the significant twenty-first century developments in historical Jesus studies closing in on the mainstream is examining scholarship in light of historical and cultural issues of its time. The Next Quest will build on histories of scholarship contextualised in, for instance, the development of the nation state, European colonialism, fascism, capitalism in its various guises (Fordist, neoliberal, etc.), and American culture wars. There is much work to be done, from the lives of individual academics through a more nuanced understandings of specific cultural contexts to a major social history of the field.
- 2 *Study of (Human) Religion.* Next Quest historical Jesus studies should take seriously (and not just pay lip service to) the ideas associated with Jesus as *human* phenomena. Rather than continue the stress on Jesus as a Great Man who almost single-handedly changed human history and acted with supreme agency, the Next Quest will understand Jesus as part of a movement and wider network of human relations and as a product of the material interests of agrarian Galileans. This also means that any claims to religious authority must be treated as academics would treat any other claims in any other historical, religious, or cultural context.
- 3 *Historical Method.* The emphasis in understanding history in the Next Quest must shift towards explanation. It should engage with arguments that have been taking place about the varied social factors that explain how the Jesus movement emerged when and where it did and how it survived and spread. Implying that the movement did so because it was better is not good enough. The Next Quest will look beyond the speculative establishing of “facts” about Jesus to how ideas would have been understood in Galilee and Judea at the time of Jesus. More work is needed on imagining how the words and deeds attributed to Jesus ended up in the Gospels. This is not simply a repackaging of the old form critical arguments. The recent trend in memory studies has now shown that we need a more expansive understanding of this process that is not simply about handing down “tradition.” The discussion of scribalism in relation to (il)literacy and survival of the Jesus movement needs more analysis.
- 4 *Jewishness.* Rather than tagging “very Jewish” onto reconstructions as a loaded rhetorical flourish or accusing more philosophical Jesuses as being “not very Jewish,” the Next Quest will simply assume Jesus was Jewish. The Next Quest will analyse and contextualise ancient claims and perceptions of what it meant to be Jewish (or, if you prefer, “Judean,” “Galilean,” etc.) without imposing scholarly judgment on who was and

was not a proper Jew or which elements of Judaism were supposedly in need of reform.

- 5 *Comparison.* Where possible, the Jesus movement should be seen as a cross-cultural or comparative phenomenon. This approach will take difference seriously without making claims about Jesus' "uniqueness" as if any other figure or movement were not also "unique." An obvious example will be to build on the cross-cultural phenomenon of millenarianism (remarkably, one of the lesser discussed aspects of eschatology in the Gospels) and think about how millenarianism emerged and modified in pre-modern agrarian societies. And there are plenty more comparative issues, such as...
- 6 *Class.* Despite the Gospels being full of claims about rich and poor, and despite some notable exceptions, the study of class has not been a major feature of scholarly lives of Jesus. While ideas about "status" are gaining traction in the study of Christian origins, the field still needs to address seriously the function of class as a driver of historical change. The Next Quest will not romanticise class conflict but will take seriously the influence of both elite and non-elite ideologies and will contextualise these issues in comparison with pre-modern agrarian societies.
- 7 *Slavery.* Despite the centrality of slavery in the ancient world, it has somehow not been prominent in historical Jesus studies beyond romantic comments about Jesus. The Next Quest will utilise the innovations in the study of slavery among Christian origins scholars and understand more about its different forms in the Empire and the Levant, and how local Galilean and Judean audiences would have understood such references. Indeed, it is possible that slaves were actively involved in the transmission of material about Jesus.
- 8 *Race and Ethnicity.* Race and ethnicity have hardly been absent in historical Jesus studies, but the Next Quest will develop work in Gospel studies about the use of ancient slurs and how Rome categorised different peoples in the Empire, including when they executed and humiliated them. It will look at how the Jesus movement constructed their ethnicity to the outside world without shying away from discussing the inevitable ethnocentrism in the sources. And we should not forget that these early constructions of race and ethnicity have a significant place in the long, disturbing history of ethnic and racial ideologies.
- 9 *Gender and Sexuality.* The Next Quest will move beyond claims about whether Jesus was nicer to women than other Jews and beyond chapters or sections on "Jesus and women." Instead, the Next Quest will build on the extensive scholarship on ancient constructions of gender and

sexuality and how such ideas were used by and to describe the Jesus movement. It will look at stereotypical expectations concerning roles within households and wider Galilean society to understand the Jesus movement.

- 10 *Reception History*. The Quest for the Historical Jesus has had a long history beyond scholarship or that which is now classified as legitimate scholarship. The Next Quest will trace more of this history across different historical and social contexts (including popular culture) and see the place of scholarship as part of this history, whether in difference or similarity. This list is obviously the beginning, and much more could be added in what will be a more expansive and open Quest than what we are used to. Currently, historical Jesus studies is far behind developments in the humanities. Now is the time for the mainstream to test, and test thoroughly, some new ideas.

James Crossley

St Mary's University, Twickenham, London, UK; the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements (CenSAMM), Bedford, UK
james.crossley@stmarys.ac.uk