THE SEARCH FOR JESUS’ SPECIAL PROFILE

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1. The Problem

In a strictly private and anonymous manner, on the basis of rationalistic theology, a professor in Hamburg began to share the first Leben Jesu with a limited circle of readers. After the author’s death, G. E. Lessing published his posthumous papers, without however revealing his name; a century passed before D. F. Strauß identified the unknown scholar as H. S. Reimarus. Reimarus could have no idea of the impact his observations Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger (“On the goal of Jesus and of his disciples”) would make. From this modest rivulet, a mighty stream has grown by stages, becoming ever more diversified, especially in the last generation, so that today there is no continent, (almost) no religion, no Christian denomination or confession, no important cultural or societal trend, and no professional group producing academic literature, poetry, music, or films, which is not involved in this undertaking. It is impossible for one single person to have an overview of this staggering plurality.

Many presentations of Jesus discuss the methodological path that their authors have taken, and this essay will focus exclusively on this aspect. When we look for innovative statements in the contemporary scene, it is natural to turn to the authors who belong to the so-called “Third Quest.” The dynamism in this most recent trend in the historical investigation of the life of Jesus has given a new impetus to pluralism, but it has also taken over a number of epicenters of discussion, including the following:

First, the study of new sources and the extension of the field of research, e.g. by taking into account the agrapha and those gospels which have become apocryphal, the texts found at Qumran and Nag Hammadi, the archaeological discoveries in the Mediterranean area (including epigraphical texts), and the history of the territory of Galilee and Judea.

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Secondly, new methodological approaches, e.g. the discussion of the gospels from the viewpoint of literary history, which studies the stages of development in various directions; investigations of the structure of ancient societies from the perspective of social and cultural history, including cultural anthropology and similar specific fields; and a discussion of the criteria to be applied in the search for the oldest material about Jesus and in making differentiations within this material.

Thirdly, the new evaluation of traditional problems, e.g. the relationship between written texts and orality; the investigation of Q; the option in favor of a Jewish understanding of Jesus; and the (frequent) detachment of research into Jesus from the history of Christianity.

Fourthly, a perspective on Jesus suggested by contemporary questions, e.g. feminism, gender research, and the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

This overview indicates where the methodological focal points lie. We shall now look at the most important of these.

2. The Sources

Like the Baptist and other early Jewish prophets, Jesus and his circle of disciples worked in a non-literary context, and this is why we have no written testimony from Jesus or his circle comparable to that which we possess for Josephus or Philo, the Teacher of Righteousness, or Bar Kochba. According to Luke 4:16–30, Jesus could read; but this probably reproduces Luke's own view, since it is he who elaborates Mark 6:1–6 here and introduces this motif. Luke relates that Jesus was handed a scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue. At any rate, the way in which early Judaism treated the Hebrew Bible excludes the possibility that Jesus and his circle had parts of the Bible in their private possession and carried these texts around with them. This means that Jesus' knowledge of the Bible is the work of his memory; it does not involve literary quotation. Nor did the disciples of Jesus express themselves in literature (cf. Acts 4:13). Attempts to claim them as authors must be judged unsuccessful: when the headings of early Christian literature present names from the group of Twelve, these attributions are intended to guarantee the authority of the works in question. They tell us nothing about the authorship. In other words, Jesus lived with his disciples in an oral culture.

This accords with the observation that the narrative sections in the gospel literature do not have the style of first-person or eyewitness accounts, but are expressed in the way that those who are not themselves