“The historical and substantive presupposition for modern research into the life of Jesus is emancipation from traditional Christological dogma on the basis of the principle of reason.”¹ So began Hans Conzelmann’s classic entry in the third edition of Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (1959), which offered a brief portrait of the historical Jesus based on the results of the post-Bultmannian ‘New Quest of the historical Jesus.’ In a few pages Conzelmann chronicled the progress of the quest from D. F. Strauss’s overthrow of dogmatically-based pictures of Jesus, through the late nineteenth-century liberal search to discover the “personality” of Jesus as a religious genius, to his own day when the tools of redaction criticism joined with source and form criticism to permit a more responsible investigation of the Jesus of history.

The collapse of dogmatically-grounded portraits of Jesus had in fact begun at least a half a century before Strauss’s Das Leben Jesu: Kritisch bearbeitet² with the Fragmente of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), whose skeptical method combined synoptic comparison of the four gospels with a concerted effort to locate Jesus within the world of Second Temple Judaism as it was then known.³ Reimarus’s results are well known: the evangelists had fabricated fantastic and contradiction-riddled accounts of their hero, a rather unexceptional apocalyptic prophet and preacher of repentance, whose body the disciples had stolen and invented the tale of his resurrection and the prediction of an imminent glorious

return. Although most of the details of Reimarus’s thesis were quickly repudiated, he had succeeded in two important respects. The contradictions to which he so forcefully drew attention made it clear that even if it was not a matter of outright deception, the gospel accounts could no longer be harmonized into a coherent picture and used naively as the basis for later Christian dogma—since credible Christian beliefs could hardly be founded on deceptions or vagaries. And the dissonance between the gospels’ accounts of Jesus and contemporary Jewish beliefs raised the possibility that a significant gap existed between the historical Jesus and the gospels’ representations. Thus Reimarus had driven two wedges, one between the gospels and Christian dogma and another between the historical Jesus and his first biographers.

Reimarus’s essays were not only bold but timely. Lessing, who published the seventh of the “anonymous Wolfenbütteler’s” Fragmente (“Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger”) ten years after Reimarus’s death, accompanied the essay with a rejoinder where he advanced his own theory of gospel composition, which took into account the internal disagreements that Reimarus had interpreted as signs of falsification and which presented the evangelists as essentially reliable narrators. Lessing in effect used Reimarus’s devastating attack on the foundations of Christian dogma and the credibility of the gospel accounts to allow him the space to advance his own views, which showed significant sympathies with Reimarus’s criticism of naive use of the gospels by dogmatic theology and which acknowledged the critical problem of divergence in the gospel tradition without resorting to Reimarus’s drastic solution.

The struggle to disentangle historical scholarship on the gospels from ecclesiastical and dogmatic agendas and the endeavour to produce a historically defensible portrait of Jesus continued throughout the nineteenth century, so that by the publication of Schweitzer’s Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung (1906) most of the key (German) contributors to the Quest claimed that at the levels of presupposition and method, the Quest observed a strict separation between historiographic goals and theological interests in Jesus. Of course it is often doubted that this separation was as strictly observed as advertised. But the wedges that Reimarus had driven between dogma and the gospels and between the gospels and Jesus remained and

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