When Justin of Rome speaks of “our Jesus,”¹ he shows that the crucified Lord fully belongs to history (Dial. 46.1); but he perceives him from one particular perspective (“our Jesus”) which cannot be detached from the faith which recognizes in him “the Christ” (116.1), “the Son of God” (116.2), “our savior Jesus Christ” (1 Apol. 33.5) according to the teaching imparted by those who have cultivated the remembrance of Jesus (1 Apol. 33.5). The same is true of Origen in his refutation of Celsus.²

The historian who studies Jesus of Nazareth inevitably encounters this perspective inspired by faith, but he will not allow himself to be inspired by it when he attempts to specify as an historian who this man was, what he did, and what he said. He is aware that “the hypothesis of an action of providence eludes science,”³ and he will keep to those instruments which the customary praxis of history offers him. If necessary, he will make it clear that the Jesus of history is in fact only the Jesus reconstructed by the academic discipline known as history—not what we might call the “real” Jesus. And this means that despite the reservations which one sees on this point among theologians (including some exegetes),⁴ a secular approach, i.e. one carried out in a purely historical perspective, seems to me legitimate and possible.

1. An Undertaking which Is Both Legitimate and Possible

According to E. M. Laperrousaz, “There was a time, not so very long ago, when it was the done thing—for the sake of prudence—to cast

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¹ Dial. 33.1; 116.1. Cf. also “our Christ,” 111.2 and 113.1.
² Cf. Contra Celsum 1.25, 29, etc.
⁴ Cf., e.g., Pierre Grelot, Jésus de Nazareth, Christ et Seigneur 1, LD 167 (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 12–13.
doubt on the real existence of the founders of religious and other movements in classical antiquity. Today, with the development, the deeper knowledge, and the greater sophistication of our knowledge of the ancient history of the eastern Mediterranean Basin, who would dare to call into question the real existence of persons such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Jesus, and… the Teacher of Righteousness who founded the Essene community of Qumran…?”\(^5\) If Jesus is an undisputed historical personage, it seems normal that one should study him in a rational manner which has recourse exclusively to the methods and approaches which are employed in the customary praxis of history. In this case, we are moving above all in the realm of ancient history, where we have a variety of sources on which to draw: historical, literary, or epigraphic texts, archaeological discoveries such as figurative artistic objects, and the contribution made by numismatics (to mention only a few of the available resources).\(^6\) Sometimes, the researcher who studies Jesus as an historian is also a believer, but this situation is not without its parallels: other historians too have an existential relationship to the object of their researches. Just as some of his colleagues must take care to keep their political or ideological commitment in check, so too the Christian historian will endeavor to prescind from his personal faith and to concentrate on those things which can be observed and verified and thus form the object of a common undertaking which is independent of the personal convictions of the individual scholar. In addition to intellectual honesty, respect for methodology constitutes a useful and indeed indispensable safeguard here. For no matter what differences may exist among the various schools of historians, they all have the critical method in common, and the historical enterprise implies that all who are involved in this rational procedure “take care to verify facts, cultivate precision, and seek complete information,” without forgetting the fundamental ingredients, viz. the criticism of one’s sources and the establishing of the facts.\(^7\) When the academic study of the Bible concentrates on the historical aspect, it must be conducted according to the same rules. This means that “it is not obvious why faith should be


\(^7\) Antoine Prost, Douze leçons sur l’histoire (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 285, 287; cf. also 290–293.