The historical Jesus research as a global cultural phenomenon did not begin in modern times. It started right from the New Testament era itself. By historical Jesus is meant the question whether Jesus of Nazareth (ca. 4 BCE/6 CE–33 CE) really existed, whether he personally said, taught and did all the things attributed to him; and whether from the extant “historical” records we today can gain a glimpse of his historical person “as he really was.” Global research could mean attempts to discover what the different nations and scholars worldwide are saying or have said in their different cultural contexts about the historical Jesus as here outlined. This study, however, focuses on how each epoch and culture, starting from the New Testament era, understands and appropriates the global Jesus whose global cultural nature is given by God, in virtue of his being God’s universal Messiah, not a human construct. It acknowledges that the main resources in any discussion of the historical Jesus are the canonical gospels, though recently the “historical” value of the apocryphal gospels is being emphasized.¹ As Dei Verbum rightly observes, “even among the New Testament, the Gospels have a special place, and rightly so, because they are our primary source for the life and the teaching of the Incarnate Word, Our Savior.”² The debate on the historical nature or otherwise of these documents cannot invalidate their irreplaceability as our unique primary

¹ See, for instance, Christopher Tuckett, “Sources and Methods” in Cambridge Companion to Jesus, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 121–137, esp. 128–130; J. D. Crossan, Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), and the rich bibliography cited in these works.

sources for meeting the Jesus of history, or their value in themselves as historical documents.\(^3\)

Secondly, these historical documents on the historical Jesus, we recall, were not written for Christians of the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. It is even doubtful that New Testament authors ever thought the world would last this long, given their expressed belief in the Lord’s promise to return soon or that the generation then alive would not pass away until all his words and promises had been fulfilled, notwithstanding the Lukan parables warning against expectation of immediate return (Luke 19:11–27) of the master going on a long journey (cf. Luke 20:9–19).\(^4\) Any discourse on the historical Jesus, therefore, needs to bear in mind the short term, contextualized, localized, even personalized, community-based and faith-motivated nature of these documents and, above all, their interpretative nature.\(^5\) Reception, digestion/assimilation and transmission are integral aspects of the New Testament writings, especially the gospels (cf. Luke 1:1–4; John 20:30–31). This applies also to what they record about the historical Jesus. All history, not only the “history” of the historical Jesus, is interpretation, as is all human endeavor, since to be human is to be a hermeneut, an interpreter, one who is able to read, understand and respond to the signs

\(^3\) We may situate this issue in the context of other historical persons, ancient and modern. How, for instance, do we know that a Plato, an Aristotle, a Socrates, a Hammurabi, or a Pharaoh really lived and did the things attributed to them? How and what do we know about the historical Moses, by all indications founder of the Israelite nation and religion? The answers to these questions may vary, yet one thing is certain, that to gain even a glimmer of truth about these historical persons, we depend, at least as a starting point, even if only in faith, on the records about them transmitted down the centuries by those who knew them or claimed and thought they knew them. The New Testament records cannot be an exception to the rule, especially since they date much closer to the events they narrate than those other ancient documents.

\(^4\) Scholars have unfairly accused Luke of converting the Parousia into an indefinite period of history. For Albert Schweitzer (The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Raimarus to Wrede, ed. J. M. Robinson, trans. W. B. D. Montgomery, reprint 1968 [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998], 4), Jesus was the first to be disappointed in his expectation of the immediate return of the Son of Man, a figure Schweizer distinguishes from Jesus himself.

\(^5\) “Personalized” in the sense that the gospels were primarily concerned with the immediate persons and communities to whom they addressed their work in order to elicit from them a life-giving faith in the historical Jesus; “community-based,” because the authors did not write independently of the community of faith from which they received and to which they directed their writings.