Implicit christology represents diverse attempts to find christological motifs embedded in the words, deeds, and person of the historical Jesus. This quest originates as a response to the scholarly excision of all christological dogma from the historical Jesus.

1. Faith and History

The demarcation between history and dogma was inherent in the basic tenets of the Enlightenment and in the modernity to which it gave birth. In particular, the insistence upon scientific analysis of all historical events in order to separate myth, dogma, and ideology from historical reality presumed a critical analysis of the New Testament images of Jesus.

By the late seventeenth century scientific criticism had already turned to the texts of the New Testament and to their portraits of Jesus. Spinoza (1632–77) questioned the miracle stories, and English Deists challenged traditional views of Jesus.1 A more significant challenge came from Hermann Reimarus (1694–1768), who saw a conflict between Jesus’ own intentions and the fraudulent conspiracy by Jesus’ disciples in the days following his death. Reimarus’s Jesus was distinct from the Christ described in the gospels:

The former was a Jewish revolutionary who attempted unsuccessfully to establish a messianic kingdom on earth, while the latter was the fictional projection of those who stole his body and pretended he had risen from the dead.2

By 1836 D. F. Strauss saw the miraculous accounts of the New Testament as myths created in the faith response to Jesus. Strauss believed

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this generative process made it almost impossible to illuminate the historical life which lay behind these ideas and myths.3

The decisive blow came in the opening years of the twentieth century, and it was delivered along three fronts. At the turn of the century Adolf Harnack argued that the true image of Jesus must be distilled from the Christ of dogma—from the metaphysical overlay of Greek philosophy.4 While Harnack framed a theological distinction, a second front rooted the demarcation in the gospels themselves. The lives of Jesus written in the nineteenth century abandoned the Gospel of John as theological mythmaking. For a time the Gospel of Mark was granted priority, both chronologically and theologically: the earliest of the gospels was assumed to be a rather straightforward account of Jesus’ messianic mission. The third front came with Wrede and Schweitzer, who took the division into the heart of the Gospel of Mark. William Wrede argued that the Gospel of Mark, with its motif of a secret messiahship, is a theological construction and not a direct historical account of Jesus’ ministry.5 In the same year Albert Schweitzer severed the link between the Markan portrait so favored by the liberal quest and the realities of the historical Jesus.6 Schweitzer argued that the liberal portrait of Jesus, based on the Gospel of Mark, had fallen before a double blow—the thoroughgoing scepticism of Wrede and the thoroughgoing eschatology of Schweitzer:

Thoroughgoing scepticism and thoroughgoing eschatology, between them, are compelling theology to read the Marcan text again with simplicity of mind…The material with which it has hitherto been usual to solder the sections together into a life of Jesus will not stand the temperature test. Exposed to the cold air of critical scepticism it cracks; when the furnace of eschatology is heated to a certain point the solderings melt. In both cases the sections fall apart.7

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3 See Brown, Introduction, 818; Dunn, Jesus Remembered, 29–34.