To write the life of Jesus has become a great challenge. For centuries, people were content with the confusion between history and sacred history: the life of Jesus was what the gospels said, with a few borrowings from the apocryphal literature to fill in the gaps of what they did not say. But from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, scholars became interested in the contents of the life of Jesus, in order to ascertain more precisely the nature of the link between his ministry and the birth of Christianity.¹

It is indeed true that the story of Jesus can be located in time by the presence of at least three personages of Roman history: (1) Jesus is born at the end of the reign of King Herod (40–4 BCE); (2) he receives baptism in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE); (3) he is judged and condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, who was prefect of Judea from 26 to 36. In other words, he was born shortly before 4 BCE, received baptism in 28 CE, and died before 36, probably in the year 30.² This means that Jesus’ life lasts roughly for thirty-five years and mostly covers the first three decades of the Common Era. But apart from these points of reference, how are we to read this history? What is the origin of this Jesus who disturbs the games of the mighty? What was at stake in his trial? If Jesus’ ministry ends with his death, what does his resurrection mean?

The year 2000 came and passed away without resolving the enigma of the life of Jesus.³ It seems at first sight as though the critical reading of the four gospels would leave no place for history: the first

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¹ This essay first appeared in French: “Trois questions sur la vie de Jésus,” *Foi et Vie: Revue de Culture protestante* 2 (2006): 7–47.—The first critical study of Jesus, by H. S. Reimarus, was published by G. E. Lessing in 1774. Lessing himself was the author of the first critical examination of the genesis of the gospels, which was published posthumously in 1778.


conclusion drawn by the historians was to deny the existence of Jesus. Nevertheless, Christianity was born of an indisputably historical event, and the existence of Jesus gradually won acceptance, despite all the difficulties. Under these circumstances, the second conclusion was drawn by German theologians at the beginning of the twentieth century, viz. that Jesus spoke and that his words are the only traces we have of his historical existence. However, the analysis of the logia shows that most of them are “post-Easter”: i.e., they were formulated by the disciples and placed by them on the lips of their master. The next step is to argue that Christianity is based less on the words of Jesus than on christology: if the words were in fact the only historical trace left by Jesus, how are we to explain the fact that Christianity has moved so far from these words?

It was the study of the manuscripts of the gospels that led me to the question of the historical Jesus. In this essay, I should like to look at the following three points. I wish to examine the social origins of Jesus; to restore the continuity which exists between the project to which his ministry was devoted and earlier Judaism (although traditionally, scholars have emphasized those elements that constitute his originality); and to show that the ministry does not cease with Jesus’ death, but continues with a Jesus who now belongs to the heavenly realm. The four gospels, which form a homogeneous basis, are the primary foundation of my examination. Where necessary, I shall attach most weight to the oldest form of their text, which is usually attested

4 The nineteenth century had a poor opinion of Jewish literature: civilization was viewed from the perspective of the Greco-Roman world, and everything else was seen as the domains of barbarism. This opinion, which went hand in hand with the colonial spirit, has the corollary that Christianity is detached from Judaism at the very outset, in order that it may enter the Greco-Roman world; and the nineteenth century is marked by the search for everything that can link the New Testament writings to the Greco-Roman world. The researches by R. Bultmann on rhetoric and G. Theissen on sociology are exemplary in this field; and the profound impact made by the writings of these scholars is very well known.

5 The dominant scholarly presupposition is that the canonical gospels are four books composed separately, then united by means of a selection which eliminated other gospels. However, the manuscript tradition leads me to different conclusions: the primary fact—more important than the fact that they are separate books—is that they form a tetrad of gospels, i.e. four pieces of one single instruction. This is the reason for their coherence and complementarity. We can go so far as to define precisely the circumstances in which this tetrad was drawn up: the project features (in the second sense of this word) in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, and it was his successor, Polycarp of Smyrna, who realized it, doubtless ca. 120.