WHICH JESUS IS THE REAL JESUS?

Michael Wolter

I.

1. What is the similarity between Jesus of Nazareth and—let's say—Alexander the Great, Martin Luther, or Winston Churchill? All were great people. Biographies and historical books have been written about all of them.

The problem is, however, that Jesus of Nazareth was, on the one hand, a historical figure, but on the other hand, we know that for Christians he was and is more than just a historical figure like Alexander the Great, or Martin Luther, or Winston Churchill. We would certainly not claim that any of these aforementioned men was God's son, that they rose from the dead and that God's salvation is available through one of them.

At the same time, however, we also know that not everyone believes these things about Jesus. Here we face an intriguing question: anyone can write a book about the teaching and actions and fate of Jesus of Nazareth. To do this, one does not have to believe that Jesus was God's Son, that he is risen from the dead or that God's salvation is made available through him. One does not even have to believe in God. To write a good book about Jesus, one must merely be able to apply historical methods critically and honestly. One can surely write about Jesus in the same manner that one would write about Alexander or Luther or Churchill.

The question is whether this is the Jesus in whom Christians believe? Do we believe in that Jesus who is reconstructed for us by historians? Of course, nobody does. To mention God in relation to this Jesus is entirely optional since this particular Jesus can be reconstructed in an entirely secular form.

Moreover there are theologians who write such books about Jesus. They reconstruct a fully historical Jesus, they put him into his cultural environment, depicting a person who is no different from any other person in history. Therefore the theological impact of their results is
equivalent to—in the words of Dale Allison—“a list of the U.S. Presidents and their dates”.¹

However since they are theologians this enterprise leads to two interesting questions:

– Is there a difference between a book about Jesus that has been written by a historian who is not a theologian and a book about Jesus written by a theologian who does serious historical work?
– How important is this Jesus, reconstructed by means of historical analysis, for Christian faith?

2. In light of this tension the theological significance of the inquiry into the historical Jesus has existed since the publication of Martin Kähler’s lecture The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ in 1892.² Kähler addresses the so-called “life of Jesus research”, which is commonly cited as beginning in the eighteenth century with Hermann Samuel Reimarus.³ And although Reimarus had already made a similar distinction to that later made by Kähler,⁴ it led him to quite different conclusions. Reimarus presented Jesus essentially as an ethical teacher who belonged entirely to Judaism, and who, with his teaching, wanted “to improve men in their inner disposition and all their heart”.⁵ In contrast, Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation, his messianic status and his being the Son of God were the apostles’ inventions after Jesus’ death, as were the idea of the salvific significance of his death, the expectation of his return, and much more.

² M. Kähler, The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ (German ed. 1892, 2nd ed. 1896), trans., ed. and with an introduction by C.E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988; all quotations are taken from this edition).
³ Cf. in that sense the subtitle in Albert Schweitzer’s The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910). This subtitle is omitted from Schweitzer’s expanded second edition (1913) with its new title, and therefore absent from John Bowden’s translation (London: SCM, 2000), even though Bowden retains the 1910 English title.
⁴ In his essay “On the Intention of Jesus and his Disciples” which was originally published by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in connection with the subtitle “Another Fragment of the Woffenbüttel Unknown” in 1784 Reimarus demanded “to separate completely what the apostles say in their own writings from that which Jesus himself actually said and taught” (Reimarus: Fragments, ed. C.H. Talbert, trans. R.S. Fraser [London: SMC, 1971], 64).
⁵ Ibid., 69–70.