The invitation to contribute an essay to this volume has called me out. After years of fascination with the Gospels and rare forays into Jesus’ sayings, this is the first essay I have written on the historical Jesus. Interpretations of the historical Jesus are invariably subjective; they represent the era in which they are written and the particular values and biases of the interpreter, so what follows is inescapably a personal construction. Nevertheless, even granting the limitations of our evidence and the gyrations of historical Jesus research, I believe we can say some things about Jesus with a degree of confidence. If what is offered here is not entirely original, it is because others have done far more work on the historical Jesus than I have. Areas of consensus are beginning to emerge, and these may serve as our most secure foundation for further thought about Jesus. “Contours” suggests an outline, shape, or sketch. Its use in the title of this essay also acknowledges a healthy dose of historical humility—a contour is not a portrait.

As an initial response to Michael Wolter’s helpful review of the ways New Testament scholars have handled the relationship between the historical Jesus, the Jesus reconstructed by historians, and the Jesus of the Christian kerygma—three conceptual entities—I should indicate at the outset that I find great value in the “path” of Reimarus and the “Third Quest.” This “path” complements and adds a historical dimension that is missing in the church’s creeds and confessions that emphasize Jesus’ birth and his death and resurrection but say little or nothing about his life and ministry, his teachings, or the nature of the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed. Moreover, the life of Jesus is also theologically important. Would it not make a difference to the claim that Jesus was the agent of the Kingdom of God and that God raised him from the dead, if the historical evidence showed that Jesus was a violent revolutionary, or one who taught hatred? Or to put the question another way, how would Christianity be different if it derived from another historical figure of the time (Judas Maccabaeus, Caiaphas, Hillel, or the Teacher of Righteousness)? Without the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry, the claim of his resurrection and Lordship would be empty and essentially meaningless.
In the brief scope of this essay I propose to approach the historical Jesus from three angles of vision: the context of Jesus’ life in Galilee early in the first century, the activities that characterized his ministry, and the teachings that give us a glimpse into his self-understanding. Where these three converge—that is the significance of Jesus’ activities in his social, political, and religious context, and the relationship between his activities and his teachings—they shed light on the “contours” of his life.

1. First-Century Galilee: The Context of Jesus’ Life

The context of Jesus’ life has become a significant factor in the study of the historical Jesus. Whereas the “New Quest” started with the sayings and parables and employed “the criterion of dissimilarity,” namely that what is most dissimilar from Judaism and early Christianity is most securely attributed to Jesus, starting with what we know of first-century Galilee invokes what we may call “the criterion of contextual affinity,” namely that Jesus’ activities and teachings must be understood in his social, economic, religious, and political context. This context gives us clues to influences on his life and ways his activities would have been understood. Of course, Jesus stood out dramatically in this context. Otherwise he would not have been remembered—and would not have been crucified. Still, this distinctiveness can be understood, and has meaning, only within the context and setting of his life.

As a focal text for the setting of Jesus’ ministry we may take Matt 4:23–25. This passage is obviously Matthean and redactional. The argument, therefore, is not that this summary statement comes from an early source but that the Gospel tradition itself preserves, indeed is based on, this general understanding of Jesus’ ministry.

23 And he went throughout all Galilee teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. 24 And the report about him went out into all Syria, and they brought to him all who had various diseases: those tormented by pain, the demon possessed, epileptics, and the paralyzed, and Jesus cured them. 25 And great crowds followed him, from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and across the Jordan. (Author’s translation)