HISTORICAL JESUS RESEARCH AS NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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The typical academic qualification, “If I have understood him correctly” must preface my response to Michael Wolter’s far-reaching contribution, “Which Jesus is the Real Jesus?”. It is possible that philosophical and theological differences, or different views of the relationship between these two disciplines, have led me to misunderstand some details where I thought (and still think) we are in general agreement. The subject is many-sided, and complicated by 250 years of fractious debate and drawing on 2,000 years of relevant religious experience. It is to Dr. Wolter’s credit that he simplifies matters less than most. Any lecture-length contribution to so complex a subject is likely to contain simplification, but Wolter avoids over-simplifications as he draws attention to several aspects of the problem that are often overlooked and reaches conclusions which could challenge those who share his commitment to both critical historical scholarship and theological reflection to reconsider the way they study and teach the Gospels. The importance and complexity of the topic and the fertility of Wolter’s essay are the only excuses I can offer for the length of this response.

Even stating the problem is a problem; there are clusters of problems, some of them lurking in the vocabulary used to define and address them, others in the different standpoints occupied by participants in the debate. History, theology, religion, and faith are ambiguous, contested, and multi-layered concepts, and differing standpoints prioritize different issues. In asking about the real Jesus we may wonder which question is the real question. It is possible to talk at cross-purposes by addressing rather different questions as well as by addressing them in different ways. After 250 years of debate Reimarus and his English precursors, Strauss in his opposition to Schleiermacher, and Kähler and those who invoke him in the name of a rather different kerygmatic theology remain conversation partners.

Wolter’s title, and the analyses and arguments which follow, recall two conflicting ideas about “the real Jesus”, both of them spurious. Its conventional meaning is synonymous with “the historical Jesus”, underlining the polemical opposition of both phrases to traditional Christianity or “the
dogmatic Christ", or more generally “the Christ of faith”. That reflects the perception that historical criticism has undermined traditional religious belief. Modern historical methods do not speak of God. Whether or not that implies a naturalistic world-view, the claims of historical reason seem ‘harder’ than those of faith. Wolter rightly dismisses the equation of “the real Jesus” with “the historical Jesus”, but the misunderstanding persists, together with its polemical antithesis to “the Christ of faith” first made current by D.F. Strauss in the title of his 1865 tract *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*. Wolter’s argument will be reinforced in what follows by some criticism of the phrase “historical Jesus”.

But the phrase “real Jesus” also evokes for theologians Martin Kähler’s 1892 pamphlet *The so-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*. This title echoes Strauss’ polemical contrast, but Kähler reversed Strauss’ preference for the historical Jesus and insisted that the Jesus Christians follow is their Christian Jesus, the Christ of faith, the man from Nazareth portrayed in the canonical Gospels, the Christ of the whole Bible, the Redeemer. The question is who is right about Jesus, and while Kähler is glad to see historical criticism demolish the brittle pictures of Byzantine dogma he is not willing to surrender his pietist biblical faith in Jesus to the likes of Renan and Strauss. Their so-called historical Jesuses are more fiction than science. If Christians are right (as Kähler assumed they are) then theirs is the real Jesus: “the real Christ is the preached Christ”, the “historic, biblical Christ” (a phrase in need of some elucidation), not the “historical Jesus”.

Wolter sees that “the real Jesus” can no more be identified with Kähler’s “biblical Christ” or believer’s faith-images than with the historian’s constructions. The real Jesus is an “ontic reality” behind or beyond all images. This ontological difference between “the real Jesus” and all our images and historical or religious descriptions entails (for him) that the real Jesus is unknowable and inexpressible for humans—be they theologians or historians. I agree on the main point but am doubtful about the apophatic

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