Editorial

The Third Quest in Retrospect

What was the Third Quest? In retrospect it was a historiographical construct demarcating a period of Jesus research characterized by (1) the question of Jesus’ Jewishness and subsequently his eschatology, (2) a preoccupation with criteria for authentication, and (3) the tendency to chart the intellectual history in terms of quests. In this short space I will reflect on the key trends in Jesus research from the 1970s to early 2000s and critique a few common categories employed. I will then briefly introduce a few trends that move beyond the so-called “Third Quest.”

From the 1970s to early 2000s Jesus’ Jewishness was reconsidered, foregrounded, marginalized, and accepted as consensus.1 Factors contributing to this line of questioning included (a) an effort to rethink New Testament studies in light of the catastrophic consequences of Christian anti-Semitism, (b) the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and (c) a reaction to the rigid distinction between Second Temple Judaism and Hellenism of previous generations. Jewish voices like David Flusser, Geza Vermes, and Amy-Jill Levine were finally normalized within a field dominated by Christian and post-Christian scholarship. Other mainstream voices like Dale C. Allison Jr., John P. Meier, E. P. Sanders, and N. Thomas Wright accepted Jesus’ Jewishness as a primary starting point for the study of his life. Moreover, this generation reached a consensus that Jesus’ Jewishness was central to his identity, aims, and impact (specifically,

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1 I do not include the “Jesus Seminar” of the 1980s and 1990s under the (already dubious) label of “Third Quest” as it is clear that Bob Funk refused to allow his brainchild to be associated with it. See Robert W. Funk, “Milestones in the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” The Fourth R 14–4 (2001); https://www.westarinstitute.org/resources/the-fourth-r/milestones-in-the-quest-for-the-historical-jesus/; accessed: May 9, 2016. It should be said, however, that although Funk explicitly aligned his brainchild with previous generations of scholarship, the Jesus Seminar served as the foil (and catalyst) for several contributors to the so-called Third Quest.
Jesus’ eschatology was reexamined in light of other texts of Second Temple Judaism). These developments—the consensus and significance of the starting point—were relatively new to the field. Whereas previous generations failed to normalize the views of e.g. Jacob Emden (1697–1776), Abraham Geiger (1810–74) and Joseph Klausner (1874–1958) the “question” of Jesus’ Jewishness was finally a matter of nuance and focus rather than a disputed starting point. Importantly, it rightly became the central focus of Jesus research rather than simply the starting point. The so-called Third Quest, therefore, did not rediscover Jesus the Jew. Rather, this period marginalized a European thread of research that promoted an Aryan or even Christian Jesus. Today Jesus’ Jewishness is no longer presented as a “question” in need of an answer; it is the premise and guiding focus of the Jesus historian.

A byproduct of the emphasis on Jesus’ Jewishness was the influx of maximalist readings of the Jesus tradition by scholars who defended the New Testament as largely historically accurate. Whereas previous generations mined the gospels for the kernels of Jesus’ originality (elements that set Jesus against his Jewish “background”), many Christian scholars embraced the affinities between Jesus and Judaism. This allowed them to look for and find a Jewish historical Jesus within a largely Jewish New Testament. In service to this goal, many of these scholars employed field-specific literary tools. This brings us to the second key characteristic of that generation.

From the 1970s to early 2000s a handful of field-specific criteria were regularly employed in Jesus research. Some scholars identified dozens of criteria, some avoided their use entirely. Even so, the criteria of dissimilarity, coherence, Semitic influence, embarrassment, multiple attestation, and multiple forms were staples of the period. These formalized criteria represented the logic of previous generations but took on concretized and popularized form. While many of the adherents of these criteria (myself included) voiced dissatisfaction with a number of these criteria and/or their application, the search for a scientific method often settled for a checklist of criteria. In their most optimal application, the criteria were used to fortify more sophisticated methodologies. This is no longer the case. Whereas the so-called Third Quest generally accepted the use of criteria for authenticating pericopae in isolation, Jesus historians now must defend the use of these criteria. But judging from the last decade of articles and monographs, most historians—John P. Meier being a notable exception—simply avoid them.

From the 1970s to early 2000s surveys of Jesus research had standardized a “quests” paradigm in keeping with Albert Schweitzer’s nationalistic and Eurocentric myopia. This paradigm imagined that the phases of Jesus research could be divided into epochs and the genius of “great men” within these