

How do I understand the history of the quest of the historical Jesus?

I understand the history of the quest of the historical Jesus as having two main phases, divided by, above all, the pivotal work of Rudolf Bultmann, who gave negative answers to both of the questions that proponents of the quest had theretofore answered positively, viz., whether the quest of the historical Jesus is *religiously or theologically necessary*; and whether it is *historically possible*. Bultmann's work is so pivotal, however, because, in insisting that the old quest had to be abandoned simply because of its historical impossibility, he at the same time opened up the possibility of a genuinely new quest by laying down the lines along which it could be pursued. In terms of Willi Marxsen's later distinction, Bultmann opened up the possibility of a historical quest of Jesus even while denying the possibility of a quest of the historical Jesus.

The so-called new quest of the historical Jesus, however, is not to be thought of as realizing this possibility, because it proceeded, at the hands of the leading new questers, along different lines from those that Bultmann had laid down. Instead of recognizing that the only possible object of a genuinely new quest is the Jesus attested by the earliest Christian witness, the new questers generally fell back into seeking once again the object of the old quest, thereby running afoul of Bultmann's sharp strictures against its historical possibility. Representative in this respect, as in others, is the confused position of James M. Robinson, whose understanding of the objective of the quest as Jesus's own "selfhood" is obviously of a piece with the old quest, and so not anything really new after all. This regressive development seemed historically possible to so many, presumably, because of the supposed development and applicability of certain so-called criteria of authenticity, which promised to enable inquiry to penetrate back behind even the earliest Christian witness to Jesus to Jesus' own authentic proclamation and teaching. But, as Marxsen, for one, clearly realized, this supposition was mistaken and the promise false. If our only sources are at best secondary, and if they are witness of faith rather than historical reportage, then no criterion can enable us to get behind these sources without begging the question.

On my understanding, then, the second main phase of the quest consists, for the most part, in so many unsuccessful attempts to evade the strict either/or that Bultmann formulated, in effect, already in 1926: either abandon the quest of the historical Jesus or radically reconceive it as a historical quest of Jesus, the final objective of which, given the nature of the available sources, can only be the Jesus attested by the earliest layer of the synoptic tradition. Because "post-Bultmannian" theology in general is simply a series of attempts to avoid this choice, it is not surprising that the different attempts tend to fall into two main types: (1) those that fail to reconceive the quest's objective, and so are open to the objections coming, above all, from form criticism; and (2) those that manage to take the objections of form criticism seriously only to have to change the objective of the quest, tacitly (and inconsistently!), along just the lines that Bultmann had laid down.

At the same time, so-called new questers, including the "renewed questers" currently pursuing the quest, have proved to be quite confused about just what kind of quest of Jesus is really necessary, religiously or theologically. Beginning with the correct theological judgment that Christian faith is obedient acceptance of the gift and demand decisively re-presented through Jesus, they commonly proceed to infer that what is religiously or theologically necessary is a quest of the historical Jesus. What is really thus necessary, however, is a historical quest of Jesus—the Jesus attested by the earliest Christian witness, if only implicitly, by its "that" as witness, to be of decisive significance for human existence.

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