Jesus and the logic of history
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Jesus and the logic of history

Paul W. Barnett
For
Bill Haffenden,
parakléos
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Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: 1. the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); 2. the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and 3. the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God’s universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the footnotes interact with the best of the scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

This volume interacts thoughtfully and tellingly with the literature of the ‘third questers’. Dr Barnett offers important contributions to the manner in which we may responsibly work as both historians and theologians to understand not only the nascent Christian church, but also the historical Jesus whom they confessed. This study yields fresh insight not only into Paul’s thought, but also into the relationship between Paul and Jesus. Dr Barnett’s work deserves wide dissemination.

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Author's preface

Christianity is a historical religion in at least two senses. It is historical in the sense that it has been continuously part of world history for a long time. Indeed, much of the world community still reckons its years from and before the birth of Christ. Christianity is also historical because Jesus was a real man who was born, lived and died at a particular time and place. This can be demonstrated for him by the same methodology – and just as easily – as for the emperor Tiberius, in whose era and empire Jesus became a public figure. Similarly, the rise and spread of earliest Christianity are demonstrably factual. The origins of Christianity are not mythical in character.

While there have been times in the past when mythical origins have been proposed, this is not the current view. Rather, at this time a significant body of scholars are redefining Jesus historically. There is a presumption that he cannot have been a supernatural figure, the God-man of the church's creeds, and that he must be capable of other explanations. It is those other explanations which have come into prominence in the final quarter of the twentieth century. In a sense the manifold reconstructions reflect the deconstructionist, individualist character of our postmodern era. There are as many Jesuses as there are people who write about him.

It is the argument of this book that the 'logic' of history demands a Jesus who is definable and about whom a practical consensus can be reached. By this 'logic' it is argued that the Christ of the early church's faith and proclamation must have borne a close relationship to Jesus the historical figure.

This book arose out of the Moore Theological College Annual Lectures (1996), which were also entitled Jesus and the Logic of History. The opportunity to reflect on this critical subject was provided by the kind invitation to the lectureship extended by the Principal of Moore College, Dr Peter Jensen. I thank the
Faculty and students for their attention and questions. I am deeply grateful to Dr Peter Head, of Oak Hill College, London, who offered many helpful suggestions and criticisms.

Paul Barnett
Abbreviations

ANRW  Ausstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
BAR  Biblical Archaeological Review
BBR  Bulletin for Biblical Research
Bib  Biblica
BJRL  Bulletin of the John Rylands Library
BR  Biblical Review
CBQ  Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CH  Church History
ExpT  Expository Times
HJ  Heythrop Journal
HTR  Harvard Theological Review
JBL  Journal of Biblical Literature
JOR  Jewish Quarterly Review
JSNT  Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSOT  Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JTS  Journal of Theological Studies
NovT  Novum Testamentum
NTS  New Testament Studies
RTR  Reformed Theological Review
SJT  Scottish Journal of Theology
SNCTS  Society for New Testament Studies
SP  Studia Patristica
TB  Tyndale Bulletin

ThT  Theology Today
TJ  Trinity Journal
USQR  Union Seminary Quarterly Review
Chapter One

Jesus and the practice of history

Introduction

Christianity is currently facing one of its most profound challenges, one that cuts to its heart. Between 1980 and 1992 there were published no fewer than 260 books, articles and reviews devoted to life-of-Jesus studies.¹ The challenge is that for the most part, this volume of literature presents a Jesus who is unrecognizable to the Christian faith as expressed in the historic creeds and confessions of the church.

For the greater part of the twentieth century, scholars have been sceptical about the recoverability of the historical Jesus. In these last decades, however, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme. In 1971 Leander Keck could comment that ‘the search for the real Jesus’ is a dead-end street’. By 1988, however, Marcus Borg could refer to a ‘renaissance’ in Jesus studies, noting that ‘we can... know as much about Jesus as... about any figure in the ancient world’.² (Such confidence stands in contrast with Bultmann’s famous remark of 1926 that ‘we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus’.) ‘Renaissance’ is no exaggeration. The body of literature includes some very substantial texts, by such authors as Vermes


(a trilogy), E. P. Sanders, Charlesworth, Crossan and Meier (a trilogy). Moreover, there have been ongoing specialist study groups such as the Society of Biblical Literature Historical Jesus Section and the widely publicized Jesus Seminar. Inevitably this flood of scholarly work has overflowed through the electronic and print media to the general public. Jesus has been the subject of cover stories in international journals, popular television programmes, and a number of best-selling pseudo-academic literary reconstructions.

What has emerged from this plethora of research? In the main, the scholars make a point of asserting Jesus' Jewishness, as reflected in such titles as *Jesus the Jew* (Vermes), *Jesus and Judaism* (Sanders), *Jesus' Jewishness* (Charlesworth) and *A Marginal Jew* (Meier), to take a few examples. A minority of the scholars, however, emphasize Jesus' Hellenistic environment above the Judaic. Here Jesus emerges as a teacher in the Cynic tradition (Downing, Mack, Crossan). These scholars tend to be quite selective in their use of sources, preferring the so-called 'Q' source and the *Gospel of Thomas* to the four canonical gospels.

What kind of Jesus is to be found in these works? If the miracle tradition in the gospels is the focus, Jesus emerges as healer and exorcist (Vermes). Where the sayings are regarded as central, Jesus is seen as teacher. Depending on whether the sayings concentrated on are aphorisms, proverbs or apocalypticisms, Jesus is a sage (Downing), a subversive sage (Borg) or an eschatological prophet (Sanders, Charlesworth). Where the Son of man sayings are viewed as primary, Jesus is seen as a social prophet (Horsley). If a particular social context for Jesus is suggested, his profile is sharpened. A group, class or activity for Jesus is sought, or perhaps even a sub-class, adding to the

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3 The issue of the Jewishness of Jesus has been addressed from both a historical and a theological perspective. D. J. Harrington, 'The Jewishness of Jesus: Facing Some Problems', *CBQ* 49 (1987), pp. 1–13, sets out some of the historical problems arising from the growing knowledge of Jesus' Jewish background. The more we know of its diversity, the more difficult it is to locate Jesus within it. B. Hebblethwaite, 'The Jewishness of Jesus from the Perspectives of Christian Doctrine', *SJT* 42 (1989), pp. 27–44, seeks to reinstate the fact of Jesus' Jewishness into the matrix of theology, the theology of the incarnation and the theology, based on fact, of the resurrection. Otherwise Jesus is not capable of sustaining Christianity. B. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1994), pp. 147–208, locates Jesus within the tradition of Jewish wisdom teachers.
plurality and complexity of the analyses. Where the Jewish rabbinic context is emphasized, Jesus emerges as a rabbi (Chilton) or, more specifically, a Pharisee (Falk). Where apocalyptic Judaism is seen as his milieu, he is, for example, a humane apocalyptist (Charlesworth) or a reasonable visionary (Sanders). The variations of definition arising from these methodologies have prompted the social commentator Paul Johnson, though not a specialist in the field, to observe shrewdly that 'using the same texts and scholarly apparatus, dozens, perhaps hundreds of different Jesuses can be constructed'.

It is an interesting coincidence that the closing decades of the nineteenth century also witnessed a spate of books on Jesus, many of them idealistic and romantic in character, reflecting the spirit of that age. The current Jesus reconstructions are also idealistic, but are shaped more by the values of late-second-millennium political correctness. The Jesus of the 'third questers', as they are called, often looks remarkably like the scholars who write about him: postmodern, ideologically reformist and eminently reasonable.

In the late nineteenth century, Martin Kähler wrote against the numerous 'lives of Jesus', making the famous distinction between the 'so-called Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith'. Kähler's book repays careful reading. The distinction he made, the issues he raised and the criticisms he offered come across with freshness and great power despite the intervening years. Kähler argued that modern scholars cannot create a 'fifth' gospel via their own biographical efforts; saving faith can arise only from the proclamation of the exalted Christ, who fulfils the prophets, and who is to be found in the whole New Testament. His sharp words for such biographers have application to those who engage in Jesus reconstructions now. 'What is usually happening', he wrote, 'is that the image of Jesus is being refracted through the spirit of these gentlemen.'

The argument of Kähler's book, which is historically rather than theologically based, none the less has profound implications for theology, and for Christology in particular. The uniqueness of Christ is challenged implicitly or explicitly by the

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great majority of recent historical works devoted to Jesus. Note
the words of E. P. Sanders: ‘I do not doubt that in some ways . . .
Jesus was unique; in some ways everybody is unique . . . In fact
we cannot say that a single one of the things known about Jesus
was unique.'6 Sanders’s remark bears on the relationship
between history and theology. The Christ of the church’s faith
and proclamation rests on the Jesus of history, Jesus as he was,
historically speaking. But if the historical Jesus is undercut and
reduced in stature and being, so too, in consequence, is the
Christ of faith. Thus the practice and method of history are not
irrelevant to the practice and method of theology. Christ’s
incarnation occurred in time and space, that is, in history. The
practice and method of history are related to the practice and
method of theology.

The practice and method of history

The work of life-of-Jesus scholars purports to arise out of
historical enquiry and so raises questions which go to the heart
of the practice and method of history.

History defined

‘History’, wrote the Tudor historian G. R. Elton, ‘deals with
events, not states; it investigates things that happen and not
things that are.’ Its concern is for ‘the transformation of things
(people, institutions, ideas and so on) from one state into
another’.7 History, therefore, may be defined as ‘those human
sayings, thoughts, deeds and sufferings which occurred in the
past and have left a present deposit; and it deals with them from
the point of view of happening, change and the particular’.8 In
short, history so defined deals with phenomena, and, where
possible, seeks to explain them.

This understanding of history appears to have informed the
thinking of C. F. D. Moule in his important work, The
Phenomenon of the New Testament.9 Moule referred to ‘the coming

7 Elton, The Practice of History, pp. 10–11. Elton’s definitions and view of
methodology are of interest, since they do not arise out of, nor are they
directed towards, biblical studies; rather, they are general in character.
8 Ibid., p. 12.
into existence of the Nazarenes’, that is, an event, which called for an explanation. His own explanation is that the phenomenon was brought about by ‘a most powerful and original mind and a tremendous confirmatory event’. According to Moule, the existence of the Nazarenes is accounted for by the ‘powerful and original mind’ of Jesus and the event of his resurrection from the dead. I find this logic compelling. The phenomenon of the coming into existence of early Christianity is well attested. Its sudden emergence is as historically secure as any event in Palestine in that century. So the historian asks: what plausible explanation or explanations can be found for this event?

The social sciences and history

Not all, however, share the view of history given by Elton and illustrated by Moule. Those who apply social science to historical studies place their emphasis on what was, on the way things were, rather than on particular events and why they occurred. It is not too much to say that in the last quarter of the twentieth century this discipline and its ancillaries have revolutionized the study of history, including the study of antiquity and of Christian origins. A discipline that was once peripheral is now central, and one that was once central is now peripheral. Notable benefits for the understanding of the historical Jesus are claimed for the approach. Social science figures prominently in current Jesus research.

Social science enquires into known groups of the time: for example, Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. An attempt is then made to understand Jesus in relation to such groups, whether belonging to the group, modifying it or opposing it. The methodology seeks to be ‘holistic’, that is, to paint a bigger canvas than the extant historical texts. Various background studies (such as Galilee studies) are also valued, even favoured, placing Jesus in a context in which to understand him. This approach asks, ‘What were Jesus’ overall aims?’ and ‘How does Jesus relate to Judaism or Galilee globally?’ But there are several problems with the method in regard to

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10 Ibid., pp. 3, 17.
historical enquiry in general and into Christian origins in particular. First, dependence on social science rather than on the historical text tends to be speculative, with few controls. How can Jesus or any other historical figure from the period (for example, Herod the tetrarch or Pontius Pilate) be known apart from the texts which refer to him? Useful as background studies are in providing a social context for the person under review, they cannot portray the historical figure in the foreground. Only the specific texts, in this case the gospels, can do that.

Secondly, the method underestimates the influence of particular individuals upon the times in which they live. Social analysis can take us only so far in explaining the rise and impact of Herod the Great, for example. Certainly the emergence and influence of a Herod depended on the existence of propitious opportunities and circumstances; and in his case these did exist in the form of the weakness of the tail-end of the Hasmonean dynasts just as the Romans were encroaching into the eastern Mediterranean region. Yet the qualities which made Herod the Idumean 'great' ultimately elude analysis. How can social analysis explain his seizure of power? Josephus's portrayal of Herod as a prodigious athlete, fighter and leader\(^\text{12}\) must be taken into account. Similar questions must be applied to Jesus. There were other prophets and rabbis in his general era. Why were they forgotten while he is remembered? The problem with the sociological approach is that it tends to limit great people to the social pool in which they are deemed to belong. It does not adequately account for the special qualities by which a very small number of people leave their imprint in history.

A third and more particular difficulty is that of data and distance. The social sciences depend on elaborate statistical data relating to such matters as income, education, peer associates, location of domicile and family history. Little information of this kind is available from the times of Jesus, and in the absence of hard evidence confident analysis is not possible.

A fourth problem relates to source material for the major factions of Jesus' time: the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament, Josephus, the Mishnah, the Talmudim and so on. Daunting obstacles face the scholar in each set of sources. For example, there is a twofold related difficulty with the use of the Jewish

\(^{12}\) *War* i.429–430.
sources, the Mishnah, Targumim and Talmudim. Not only are these texts much later than the era of Jesus, but significant changes occurred within the Judaism of the intervening years. By the time this literature was formulated the wars with Rome (AD 66–70 and 132–135) had been fought and lost. The world of the Mishnah (written c. AD 200) is very different from Jesus’ world almost two centuries earlier. When the Mishnah was written, the high priests, the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealot-type revolutionaries no longer formed part of the landscape, as they had in Jesus’ day. Moreover, gone were the various factions of the Pharisees, as they had existed up to AD 70; the movement was homogenized, and it was the era of Rabbinic Judaism. The Judaism of Herodian times, which had been inseparably Hebraic and Hellenistic, became now overwhelmingly Hebraic. To be sure, the later literature echoes the era of Jesus, with some traditions from Jesus’ day surviving into the Mishnah, but it is a distant echo heard on the farther side of a wide cultural and historical chasm created by the wars throughout the period AD 66–135.

Certainly the texts of apocalyptic Judaism, the Qumran sectaries and Josephus, which are closer to Jesus, are valuable in recovering some aspects of the religious world of the first century. But there are problems of dating the apocalyptic texts and of establishing what connection Jesus himself may have had with these literatures. For example, the concept of the ‘kingdom of God’, which appears to have been so important in Jesus’ teaching, is scarcely to be found in these terms in the texts of apocalyptic Judaism. In addition, some scholars no longer associate the Qumran texts exclusively with the Qumran community. Indeed, not all scholars agree that the buildings at Qumran were a religious settlement; some suggest that the complex had a quite different purpose. Lastly, although Josephus, the historian who wrote during the later decades of the apostolic age, is our most valuable source for the general history of the era, he portraits the Jewish religion of Palestine not in recognizably Jewish terms, but as various ‘philosophies’, a category accessible to his Graeco-Roman readership familiar

13 A. D. Crown and L. Cansdale, ‘Qumran: Was it an Essene Settlement?’ BAR 20/5 (1994), pp. 25ff. argue that the Qumran settlement was a trading-post for that region.
with Platonists, Stoics, Epicureans and Cynics. Notwithstanding these limitations, Josephus's writings do provide extensive understanding of the political, social and religious world of Jesus.

These criticisms do not amount to a rejection of the value of sociological analysis. To the degree to which it rests on appropriate sources, it assists in reconstructing Jesus' landscape, which in turn enhances our appreciation of him. But the reconstructed context in itself tells us little of particular individuals, whether Herod or Jesus. Great and significant figures leave their mark on account of their greatness and significance. And it is the marks of their greatness left in the sources which are to be the particular interest of historical enquiry.

Events and interpretation
Throughout his study *The Practice of History*, Elton interacts with and criticizes the argument of E. H. Carr that historical knowledge cannot be separated from the interests of those involved. Historians' use of sources of 'fact', and the way they process those 'facts', both depend on human perception. According to Carr, history is 'a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past'. But Elton questions this. It should not be assumed, he says, that no connection exists between the initial event and the record of it. Information about events and persons should not automatically be thought of as the artificial or arbitrary creation of those who have left the records. Rather, Elton argues, to a significant degree, people and events which impact on the course of life create their own evidence. This holds true whether we think of Herod 'the Great', Jesus of Nazareth or the outbreak of the Jewish war in AD 66. This is not to deny that the interests, competence and integrity of the authors of the sources need to be assessed. It is a fundamental part of the task of historians to identify the biases in their sources and also to be conscious of their own interests and worldviews.

The way an individual creates his or her own evidence is illustrated in the account of John the baptizer and Jesus. Why is it that Jesus, rather than John, is called 'Christ'? John's claims to the title were, it could be argued, equal to or greater than those of Jesus. While both men had disciples, John came first and it was he who did the baptizing. Josephus devotes more space to John than to Jesus; he summarizes John's teachings, but not those of Jesus. John's ministry, like that of Jesus, attracted a large following. Jesus' words that there was no-one greater than John probably reflected the popular opinion. It is no surprise to hear from Luke that 'all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ', or from John's gospel that the Jerusalem religious establishment sent to ask John if he were the Christ. John the baptizer, beheaded by an evil apostate Jew, Herod the tetrarch, was accorded the status of a martyred prophet by the Jews; whereas Jesus, being crucified for treason by the Romans, would have been regarded by Jews as accursed, being hanged upon a tree. Finally, both men left behind them communities which revered them. Yet it is a matter of history that the deaths of these two notable leaders issued in the preaching of not two messiahs, but of only one, Jesus. There is no evidence of any proclamation of John as Messiah, but there is extensive evidence of the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah. This is the more striking in that John was believed by some to have been raised from the dead.

How is this distinction in roles to be accounted for? The most plausible explanation is that both John and Jesus distinguished their roles. Whereas John anticipated a successor, Jesus did not. Both John and Jesus saw John as forerunner and Jesus as 'he who [was] to come'. In other words, the early apostles proclaimed Jesus as the Christ because that was Jesus' own view of himself. The resurrection alone cannot explain this proclamation of Jesus as Messiah since, as noted above, some also believed that John had been resurrected. While the resurrection of Jesus may have clinched the matter, it can have done so only

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19 Mk. 6:14.
20 Mt. 11:3, 10.
on the basis that Jesus himself first believed himself to have been the Messiah and that he had established his messianic identity firmly in the minds of the disciples beforehand. In short, Jesus' own view of himself in turn became the apostles' view, and it is this view which permeates the New Testament.

All sources must be surveyed

Historical enquiry – the investigation of phenomena and their explanation – is dependent upon sources of information. According to Elton, 'Ideally the student should never consider less than the total of the historical material which may conceivably be relevant.' This is difficult for the study of history for which there are masses of source materials. But this generally is not the case in the era of Jesus. All sources can be marshalled and considered, and there is no excuse for failure to do so. Elton helpfully comments that 'Historical research does not consist, as beginners in particular often suppose, in the pursuit of some particular evidence which will answer a particular question; it consists of an exhaustive, and exhausting, review of everything that may conceivably be germane to a given investigation.' Properly observed, he continues, this principle provides a safeguard against the dangers of prejudiced selection of evidence. Broad-based interpretation of all relevant information conducted in the awareness of one's own personal 'blinkers' is fundamental to historical enquiry.

This procedure, however, has not always been followed. Jesus studies have tended to limit their enquiry to the gospels set against a preferred context, but without regard to the Acts of the Apostles or the New Testament letters. Moreover, not all the gospel evidence is used. Scholars have tended to choose a class of texts relating, for example, to Jesus as miracle-worker or to Jesus as teacher, or even a subset of those texts, leaving the remainder out of reckoning. The exclusive use which has been made of the hypothetical Q source, with little reference to other gospel strands, is a further example. Based on selective

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21 Elton, The Practice of History, p. 66.  
22 Ibid., pp. 66–67.  
Q 'Q' derives from the German Quelle, 'a source', and is a term applied to a source believed to be common to Matthew and Luke and which, as reconstructed, mainly consists of sayings of Jesus. For a review of various opinions on the existence of Q and its roles, see G. N. Stanton, Gospel Truth (London: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 63–76. Stanton, who argues that the
choice of texts, a narrow role for Jesus is determined, whether 'Cynic', 'sage,' 'subversive sage', 'humane apocalyptist', or 'reasonable visionary'. A high degree of subjectivity is implied by a concentration on some texts and the relegation of others. Bultmann's dictum about the difficulty of presupposition-less exegesis remains true.

Thorough scholarship, it should be emphasized, addresses all the sources.

Incidental sources deserve careful notice

The neglect of the New Testament letters by current scholarship represents a particular failure in historical method. According to Elton, a distinction must be made between evidence produced specifically for the historian's attention, and that produced for another purpose. 34 The gospels and Acts would fit into Elton's first category, comprising, 'in the main, evidence of a literary and often secondary kind: chronicles, memoirs, notes of self-justification, letters intended for publication'. The letters of the New Testament, however, belong to the second category, 'that produced for another purpose'; these are 'the products of the ordinary events of life'. 35 Whereas the gospels and Acts are, as it were, the official records about Jesus and the history of the church, the letters are incidental documents addressing current issues in the churches, 'the ordinary events of life'. Because they are innocent of any attempt to convey new information about the historical Jesus, such information as they do contain, being incidental, is the more valuable and must be taken carefully into account.

To our loss this information is for the most part ignored by the Jesus-studies movement. The major weakness of the method is its failure to consider Jesus in terms of his immediate impact, that is, in the existence of the early church, its momentum and trajectory. This is a failure to begin at the beginning, with the study of the earliest written documentary evidence for Jesus, that is with the letters of the New Testament, especially the

existence of Q is 'a valid working hypothesis' (p. 71), though not an oral but a documentary tradition (p. 68), questions the view that there were various layers, such as Q1, Q2 and Q3. Stanton's proposal (pp. 75-76) that Q can be thought of as a written gospel is unconvincing. See also, with bibliography, E. Linnemann, 'The Lost Gospel of Q - Fact or Fantasy?' TJ 17 (1996), pp. 3-18.

34 Elton, The Practice of History, p. 77. 35 Ibid.
letters of Paul. This present work seeks to redress the imbalance, in particular by examining the letters of the New Testament.

Distant sources are problematic

Historical enquiry begins by assembling all the sources. These will be classified according to proximity to the event, type of source (for example, a gospel or a letter), original intended readership, original intended purpose, perceived interest or bias, intellectual competence, and so on. It is a basic, common-sense task which, above all, must be conducted in a right spirit in relationship to the sources. Sources which are distant from the event and which cannot be shown to rest on data closer to it are to be treated with appropriate critical caution.

In this regard, the use of the non-canonical or apocryphal gospels, in particular the Gospel of Thomas (for instance, by Koester and Crossan) is problematic. Historical method requires that all the sources be considered, with due weight given to early and underived sources. The Gospel of Thomas was written in the second century in Egypt, in a non-Palestinian religious ethos which is overtly gnostic. Whatever traces of Jesus' words and actions may be recovered in the Gospel of Thomas, this work is removed from the world of Jesus by a considerable passage of time and by the religious culture of a different country. The Muratorian Canon and the Anti-Marcionite Prologues, which belong to the second century,\(^{26}\) speak of a fourfold gospel canon, and specifically exclude other gospels from the church's canon. Tatian (c. AD 170) combined the four gospels into one corpus. Its title, Diatessaron\(^{27}\) ("through four"), significantly points to the early fixity of four gospels. The early recognition of four gospels is historically secure. Yet Koester and Crossan depend on later and rejected works like the Gospel of Thomas while making minimal use of the canonical gospels. J. P. Meier, who acknowledges the worth of having a greater pool of information about Jesus than we have in the canonical gospels, nevertheless comments that 'to call upon the Gospel of Peter or


\(^{27}\) Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica IV.29.6–7.
the Gospel of Thomas is to broaden out our pool of sources from the difficult to the incredible.  

A number of scholars make use of the Gospel of Thomas together with the hypothetical Q document as a means of attacking the traditional and orthodox view of Jesus as set out in the canonical gospels and the remainder of the New Testament. Thomas reproduces sayings of Jesus, but has little interest in his death and resurrection. Likewise Q concentrates on the sayings and lacks concern for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But both sources are problematic. As noted above, Thomas is late, remote and derived. Q is quite hypothetical, being without external reference by Paul, the early fathers, or the early manuscripts. Neither Thomas nor Q alone poses a threat to the views of the canonical gospels or to apostolic belief. Nevertheless, when placed in an alliance, as by a number of scholars, they can be marshalled to attack the presentation of Jesus as we find it in the New Testament. But two flawed hypotheses do not produce one flawless one.

Conclusion

I have offered a definition of history and accompanying canons of practice. This definition and these canons reveal significant weaknesses in the processes of historical enquiry adopted by some currently engaged in Jesus research. I have argued that the practice of history focuses on events and changes of states from one thing to another, and on what explanations there might be for these phenomena. Social analysis, the study of the things that are or were, is of qualified value in regard to the study of antiquity in general and of Jesus specifically. Frequently those engaged in such studies depend on socially related studies more than on the extant texts. Textual study, where it occurs, is often eclectic, concentrating now on Jesus as healer, now on him as

30 See e.g. S. Patterson, 'Q the Lost Gospel', BR IX/5 (October 1993), pp. 35ff.
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prophet, sage or reformer. There is a tendency to ignore some of the evidence and to place insufficient weight on evidence closest to Jesus, in particular the letters of Paul. These letters, along with others, deserve special attention since they were not written with the intention of providing historical information about Jesus, but dealt with 'the ordinary events of life'. They none the less bore incidental and implicit witness to the impact of a powerful figure in their recent past. The failure of scholars to include these epistolary data and to give due weight to them is perhaps the most signal failure of all.