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The Meaning of JESUS

TWO VISIONS

The Leading Liberal and
Conservative Jesus Scholars Present the
Heart of the Historical Jesus Debate



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Plus:
Insights,
Interviews,
and More

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OF JESUS

TWO VISIONS



HarperCollins e-books

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8 INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK HAS grown out of a friendship. We first met in 1984, after Tom Wright had read Marcus Borg's book *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*. As Tom has described elsewhere, he found this book exciting and illuminating, and he sought out Marcus to congratulate him as well as to explore some "matters arising" and to ask why the book had ended as it did rather than in certain other possible ways.

Since our friendship thus grew out of the fascinated study of Jesus within his historical context, it is appropriate that it should give birth, some fourteen years later, to a book in which we put down some markers indicating where the conversation has led. During this period, we both have published several books and articles, many of them about Jesus. It is impossible in a work of the present size to rehearse all the arguments and to set out all the documentation, which are the normal requirements of scholarship. The main lines of most of what we here summarize have been set out and argued for in these other works, though at various points we both go beyond what we have said elsewhere, not least as a result of our own continuing dialogue.

Our personal stories are both interestingly similar and interestingly different. Marcus Borg grew up in a traditional and conventional Midwest Lutheran church, Tom Wright in a traditional and conventional Anglican one in the north of England. Marcus found increasing difficulties with his tradition in his teens and twenties, though he never lost his fascination with its central figure, and through that he has come

back into a lively and active Christian faith. Tom, at the equivalent period of his life, found the tradition coming alive in fresh ways through some fairly un-Anglican styles of spirituality, though he never lost his instinctive rootings in the liturgical life of the church, and he has faced the predictable challenges that arise through the study of history and philosophy. Both of us went to Oxford University, and both, though at different times, ended up studying under the late Professor George B. Caird; our indebtedness to him has been recorded elsewhere. Marcus, however, continued to pursue the study of Jesus, whereas Tom at that stage focused almost entirely on Paul, coming to the historical study of Jesus in the late 1970s.

We are both committed to the vigorous practice of the Christian faith and the rigorous study of its historical origins and to the belief, which we find constantly reinforced, that these two activities are not, as is often supposed, ultimately hostile to each other. Rather, we find them mutually informative and supportive. To put this another way: we both acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as Lord, and we regard the no-holds-barred study of his actual history as a vital part of what we mean by that. For precisely this reason, we deliberately began the work for this specific project in shared eucharistic worship, when Marcus visited Tom in Lichfield (England) in September 1997. The plan for the book took shape within the framework of participating together in morning and evening prayer in Lichfield Cathedral during the following five days. We believe that this setting, so far from prejudicing the “objectivity” of our work, was and is the most appropriate context for it. There is, after all, no such thing as objectivity in scholarship. Anyone who supposes that by setting scholarship within a modern secular university, or some other carefully sanitized, nonreligious setting, they thereby guard such work against the influence of presuppositions that can seriously skew the results should, we suggest, think again.

This is not to say, of course, that we find ourselves in substantial agreement on the majority of issues. If that were so, there would hardly be a book to write. Indeed, within the bounds of friendship and shared Christian faith and practice, we have both frequently been puzzled, and even disturbed, by some of what the other has said. Working on this book has at least enabled us to understand each other a lot better, to explain to each other (and perhaps to our readers) things that we each

had thought were clear but that apparently weren't, and to remove impressions that had been unwittingly given. Inevitably, this has left the remaining disagreements posed more sharply. We have not flagged them all the way through the book, since to do so would become complex and tedious. The reader will quickly see where they are to be found. What results is, as it were, a single-frame photograph taken from a long sequence, freezing one moment in our conversation in the hope that others will find it interesting and helpful.

We envisage at least three categories of interested readers.

First, we hope that those who would not call themselves Christians will find the conversation interesting and refreshing. We both believe strongly that what we say about Jesus and the Christian life belongs, not in a private world, inaccessible and incomprehensible except "from faith to faith," but in the public world of historical and cross-cultural study, in the contemporary world as well as the church.

Second, we hope to shift logjammed debates into more fruitful possibilities. Much current writing about Jesus falls into rather sterile either-or distinctions (such as the classic fundamentalist versus modernist debates); we venture to suggest other ways in which the issues might be lined up. We hope thereby to advance an ecumenical dialogue that is often ignored. Liberal Lutherans, for instance (to use a broad-brush term for the moment), have more in common with liberal Anglicans or Presbyterians than with the more conservative members of their own denominations. Our dialogue might provide stimulus for such groups to begin to talk to each other afresh. While hard-line fundamentalists and radicals will both perhaps gnash their teeth, we hope that this book will serve as a bridge between many other groups of Christians.

On this point, it might appear at one level that Tom is a traditionalist in his views and Marcus a revisionist. There is a grain of truth in this, but we regard these labels, and similar ones, as quite misleading. Tom has come, through wrestling with the history and culture of first-century Judaism, to a picture of Jesus that is seriously at odds with traditional Christian views on some matters (for example, Jesus' supposed predictions of his second coming), while supporting the tradition in other matters, though from quite new angles. Marcus has come, through wrestling with cross-cultural issues of how to describe appropriately a

figure like Jesus, to a picture that is firmly supportive of the tradition on some matters (for example, Jesus' healings, his spirituality, and his founding of a movement), while questioning it on many others, though by no means always in what has become the standard, dare one say traditional, revisionist fashion. Tom feels able, as a historian, to attribute more of the gospel material to Jesus than Marcus does, though the meaning Tom suggests for the material is by no means always what the traditionalist would expect. Marcus, in suggesting that less of it goes back to Jesus himself, nevertheless insists upon its importance, its truthfulness in senses other than historical, and its validity within a contemporary Christian vocation to follow Jesus.

Third, we hope to open up more specifically the perennially important question of how different visions of Jesus relate to different visions of the Christian life. Many who are deeply concerned with issues of justice, spirituality, pastoral care, and other matters within the churches do not always relate these issues to the question of Jesus. We propose some ways in which this might be done.

Neither of us is content to let things rest with a cheap and easy suggestion that, since we are both practicing Christians, our two positions are equally valid—whatever that might mean. It might be that both our positions are equivalent and fairly adequate expressions, from different points of view, of the same underlying reality. Neither of us quite thinks that. It might be that we are both wrong, and that some quite different position is truer. Neither of us thinks that, either. It might be that one of us is closer to the truth in some areas, and the other in others; and that by our dialogue we may see more clearly things that the other has grasped more accurately. We are both prepared for that eventuality.

Where we do agree, however, is on the following point. Debate about Jesus has recently been acrimonious, with a good deal of name-calling and angry polemic in both public and private discourse. We hope in this book to demonstrate that this is not the only way of doing things. Of course, it is comparatively easy for us: our positions, though very different in many ways, are not at opposite poles in the current debate, and we share, as we have said, both friendship and overlapping personal histories. But we hope, and indeed pray, that in this book we will be able to model a way of conducting public Christian disagreement over serious and central issues that will inspire others to try the

same sort of thing. If, in the process, we help both Christians and non-Christians, and those uncertain which of these two brackets they belong in, to grapple with points of view they might otherwise have dismissed without serious thought, we shall be delighted. If, in addition, both of us grow, through this process, in our understanding of the subject matter, and enable others to do so as well, we shall have succeeded in our deepest underlying aim.

Our process, for those who may be interested, has been as follows. We had already read each other's work, as it had appeared, over many years, and had had many conversations, public and private, about broad outlines and numerous details. When we met in September 1997 we discussed some of the most central topics and managed to eliminate some initial puzzles and misunderstandings as well as to pose new questions to each other. We then agreed on the outline of the chapters for the book—the topics for each chapter and the order in which we would take turns in addressing them. We then each drafted what we wanted to say on the topic in question, without further reference to the other, though of course with many memories of the issues the other had raised. We then read each other's chapters, commented on them, and redrafted our own in dialogue. We could, of course, have doubled the size of the book by taking matters further at each point, but we have felt that the reader would not easily follow to-and-fro discussion of detailed points. Though we have not, of course, reached agreement, we are satisfied that we have eliminated misunderstandings, that is, that neither of us has misrepresented the other. We offer the result to the reader as the celebration of shared friendship, faith, and scholarship.

M. J. B.

N. T. W.

I

HOW DO WE
KNOW ABOUT
JESUS?

SEEING JESUS: SOURCES, LENSES, AND METHOD

Marcus Borg

HOW DO WE KNOW about Jesus? What are our sources, what are they like, and how do we use them?¹ For most of the Christian centuries, the answers to these questions seemed obvious. Our sources? The New Testament as a whole, and the four gospels in particular. What are they like? The gospels were seen as historical narratives, reporting what Jesus said and did, based on eyewitness testimony. How do we use them? By collecting together what they say about Jesus and combining them into a whole. Importantly, it did not require faith to see the gospels in this way; there was as yet no reason to think otherwise.

This way of seeing the gospels led to a common Christian image of who Jesus was and why he mattered. Who was he? The only Son of God, born of the virgin Mary. His purpose? To die for the sins of the world. His message? About many things, but most centrally about the importance of believing in him, for what was at stake was eternal life.

But over the last two hundred years among historical scholars, both within and outside of the church, this common image of Jesus has dissolved. Its central elements are seen no longer as going back to the historical Jesus, but as the product of the early Christian movement in the decades after his death. Jesus as a historical figure was not very much like the most common image of him.

As I write these words, I am sitting on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. I am here with a group of thirty Christians assisting my wife, Marianne, an Episcopal priest who leads educational-spiritual

pilgrimages to Israel. My role is to provide historical background and commentary. As I do so, I often feel like the designated debunker. Again and again I find myself saying about holy sites associated with Jesus, “Well, it probably didn’t happen here,” or, “Well, it probably didn’t happen at all.” Of course, I have more to say than that, but it is a frequent refrain.

For example, today as we drove past Cana, I told the group that the story of Jesus changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana is most probably not a historical report but a symbolic narrative. At the site marking the Sermon on the Mount, I said that it was unlikely that Jesus ever delivered the Sermon on the Mount as a connected whole, even though many of the individual sayings probably go back to him. In Nazareth, I said Jesus probably was born *here*, and *not* in Bethlehem.

I sometimes feel like a debunker in my writing as well. A significant portion of what I have to say is, “This story is probably not historically factual,” or, “Jesus probably didn’t say that.” And yet, for reasons I will explain later, I also find the nonhistorical material to be very important and meaningful. I am not among the relatively few scholars who think that *only* that which is historically factual matters.

THE NATURE OF THE GOSPELS

But for now I want to explain why the issue comes up so often, whether on pilgrimage to the Holy Land or in my work as a Jesus scholar. The issue arises because of the nature of the Christian gospels, our primary sources for knowing about Jesus. Two statements about the nature of the gospels are crucial for grasping the historical task: (1) They are a developing tradition. (2) They are a mixture of history remembered and history metaphorized. Both statements are foundational to the historical study of Jesus and Christian origins, and both need explaining.

The Gospels as a Developing Tradition

The four gospels of the New Testament are the product of a developing tradition. During the decades between the death of Jesus around the year 30 and the writing of the gospels in the last third of the first cen-

tury (roughly between 70 and 100), the traditions about Jesus developed. More than one factor was responsible. There was a need to adapt the traditions about Jesus to new settings and issues as early Christian communities moved through time and into the broader Mediterranean world. Moreover, the traditions about Jesus grew because the experience of the risen living Christ within the community shaped perceptions of Jesus' ultimate identity and significance.

As developing traditions, the gospels contain two kinds of material: some goes back to Jesus, and some is the product of early Christian communities. To use an archaeological analogy, the gospels contain earlier and later layers. To use a vocal analogy, the gospels contain more than one voice: the voice of Jesus, and the voices of the community. The quest for the historical Jesus involves the attempt to separate out these layers or voices.

History Remembered and History Metaphorized

The gospels combine history remembered with history metaphorized. By the former, I mean simply that some of the things reported in the gospels really happened. Jesus really did do and really did say some of the deeds and teachings reported about him.

By history metaphorized, I mean the use of metaphorical language and metaphorical narratives to express the meaning of the story of Jesus.² I define *metaphor* broadly to include both symbol and story. Thus the category includes individual metaphors, such as Jesus is the light of the world, and metaphorical narratives, where the story as a whole functions metaphorically. Metaphorical language is intrinsically nonliteral; its central meaning is "to see as"—to see something as something else. To say Jesus is the light of the world is not to say that he is literally a light, but means *to see him as* the light of the world. Thus, even though metaphorical language is not literally true, it can be powerfully true in a nonliteral sense.³

As I use the phrase, history metaphorized includes a wide variety of gospel material. Sometimes a story combines both history remembered and history metaphorized. For example, Jesus really was crucified. But the stories of his death, as I shall argue in chapter 5, are to a large extent history metaphorized: the meanings of his death are expressed in

metaphorical language and narrative. A second example of history metaphorized based on history remembered: Jesus probably did restore sight to some literally blind people. But the way the stories are told in the gospels gives them a metaphorical meaning as well.⁴

The category of history metaphorized also includes stories of events that most likely did not happen. I see the story of Jesus changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana in its entirety as history metaphorized; I do not think a historical event lies behind it. As the opening scene of the public ministry of Jesus in John's gospel, the author uses it (and perhaps created it) to invite us to see the story of Jesus as a whole as the story of a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out and at which the best is saved for last.

So also with the stories of Jesus feeding the multitude in the wilderness with a few loaves and fishes. They are, almost certainly, not historical reports but metaphorical narratives using imagery from Israel's story of the Exodus. The association invites us to see Jesus as one like unto Moses, to see what happened in him as like a new exodus, and (as the gospel of John puts it) to see Jesus himself as the bread of life, the true manna sent from God to feed us in the midst of our journey from bondage to life in the presence of God.

In short, the gospels do not simply report the history of Jesus, they metaphorize it.⁵ For me as a Christian, both matter. For me as a historian, the realization that the gospels are a developing tradition containing both history remembered and history metaphorized points to the historical task. It also leads to the distinction that has been foundational to the modern discipline of Jesus scholarship.

A CRUCIAL DISTINCTION

The name *Jesus* has two referents. On the one hand, *Jesus* refers to a human figure of the past: Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean Jew of the first century. On the other hand, in Christian theology, devotion, and worship, the name *Jesus* also refers to a divine figure of the present: the risen living Christ who is one with God.

These two referents have been variously named in the history of Jesus scholarship. The first is commonly spoken of as "Jesus of

Nazareth” or “the Jesus of history” or “the historical Jesus.” The second is “the Christ of faith” or “the biblical Christ” or “the canonical Jesus.” My own preferred terminology is “the pre-Easter Jesus” and “post-Easter Jesus.”

By the pre-Easter Jesus, I mean of course Jesus during his historical lifetime: a Galilean Jewish peasant of the first century, a flesh-and-blood figure of the past. This Jesus is dead and gone—a claim that does not deny Easter but simply recognizes that the “protoplasmic” Jesus isn’t around anymore.

By the post-Easter Jesus, I mean *what Jesus became after his death*. More fully, I mean the Jesus of Christian tradition and experience. Both nouns, *tradition* and *experience*, are equally important. The former includes the Jesus of the developing Christian tradition in its pre-canonical, canonical, and ultimately creedal stages. The latter is the Jesus whom his followers (in the first century and in the centuries since) continued to experience after his death as a living, spiritual, and ultimately divine reality. As the Jesus of Christian experience, the post-Easter Jesus is an experiential reality, not simply an article of belief.

Both the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus are the subject of this book. How they are related to each other will be treated in later chapters. For now, I want to emphasize the importance of making the distinction between the two. When we don’t, we risk losing both.

Such was my experience. I didn’t know the distinction when I was growing up in the church, and so I combined everything I heard about Jesus into a single image: stories from the gospels, texts from the rest of the New Testament, doctrinal statements from the creeds, affirmations from Christian hymns and preaching. My uncritical synthesis generated what might be called “the composite Jesus.”

I thus thought of Jesus as a figure of history as more divine than human. That’s because I took it for granted that he was all of the things that the New Testament and the creeds say about him: Son of God, Word of God, Wisdom of God, messiah; very God of very God, begotten before all worlds, of one substance with God, the second person of the Trinity. And I took it for granted that he knew all of these things about himself.

Moreover, I thought of him as having the mind and power of God. It was because he had a divine mind that he knew things and could

speak with authority. Because he had divine power, he could do spectacular deeds such as multiplying loaves and walking on water.

But note what had happened: I lost the historical Jesus as a credible human being. A person who knows himself to be the divinely begotten Son of God (and even the second person of the Trinity) and who has divine knowledge and power is not a real human being. Because he is more than human, he is not fully human. As the South African scholar Albert Nolan has remarked, we consistently underrate Jesus as a figure of history.⁶ When we emphasize his divinity at the expense of his humanity, we lose track of the utterly remarkable human being he was.

Less obvious but equally important, I also lost the living risen Christ as a figure of the present. Because I had uncritically identified the divine Jesus with the human Jesus, Jesus as a divine figure became a figure of the past. He was here for a while, but not anymore. For thirty years, more or less, Jesus a divine being walked the earth. Then, after he had been raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven, where he is now at the right hand of God. He will come again someday—but in the meantime, he is not here. Jesus had become for me a divine figure of the past, not a figure of the present.

Thus failing to distinguish between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus risks losing both. When we do make the distinction, we get both.

MY LENSES FOR SEEING JESUS

How we see Jesus is to a large extent the product of the lenses through which we see him. So I turn to describing the lenses—the intellectual factors—that most affect how I see Jesus and Christian origins. Four are most important.

The first lens is the foundational claim of the modern study of Jesus, and this has already been described. Namely, the gospels are the product of a developing tradition, and they contain both history remembered and history metaphorized.

The second lens is the study of ancient Judaism. Like most scholars, I emphasize Jesus' rootedness in his own tradition. Jesus must be understood as a Jewish figure teaching and acting within Judaism, or we will misunderstand what he was about.

The third lens is the interdisciplinary study of Jesus and Christian origins, especially the social world of Jesus. A recent development with great illuminating power, it is one of the central features of the current renaissance in Jesus research. John Dominic Crossan most fully embodies this approach, and I have learned much from him.⁷

My fourth lens is the cross-cultural study of religion. To the interdisciplinary approach of Crossan and others, I add studies of religious experience (its varieties and effects) and types of religious figures known cross-culturally. I emphasize especially ecstatic religious experience and the nonordinary states of consciousness associated with it. Indeed, to the extent that my own sketch of Jesus is distinctive within the discipline, it is because of the weight that I give to ecstatic religious experience and its effects.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORLDVIEW

One more crucial factor affects how we see Jesus: our worldview. It could be understood as a fifth lens, but is better understood as a “macro-lens” affecting all of our seeing. A worldview is one’s most basic image of “what is”—of what is real and what is possible.⁸

Individuals have worldviews. We all live our lives on the basis of what we think is real and possible. Cultures also have worldviews; indeed, one of the primary elements of a culture is its worldview.⁹ Thus there are a multitude of worldviews.

Nevertheless, and broadly speaking, worldviews fall into two main categories: religious and secular. For a secular worldview, there is only “this”—and by “this” I mean the visible world of our ordinary experience. For a religious worldview, there is “this” and “more than this.” The “more than this” has been variously named, imaged, and conceptualized; I will simply call it “the sacred.” A religious worldview sees reality as grounded in the sacred. For a secular worldview, there is no sacred ground.

Modernity is dominated by a secular worldview. This image of reality began to emerge in the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the birth of modern science. Sometimes called the Newtonian worldview or simply the modern worldview, it sees

what is real as the world of matter and energy, space and time; and it sees the universe as a closed system of cause and effect, operating in accord with natural laws. This vision of reality took the Western world by storm, to a large extent because of the impressive accomplishments of the science and technology that it generated. By this century, it had become the worldview of mass culture in the West, and most of us were socialized into it.

Like all worldviews, it functions in our minds almost unconsciously, affecting what we think possible and what we pay attention to.¹⁰ It is especially corrosive of religion. It reduces reality to the space-time world of matter and energy, thereby making the notion of God problematic and doubtful. It reduces truth to factuality, either scientifically verifiable or historically reliable facts.¹¹ It raises serious doubts about anything that cannot be accommodated within its framework, including common religious phenomena such as prayer, visions, mystical experiences, extraordinary events, and unusual healings.

This worldview has very much affected the modern study of Jesus and the Bible. Not all scholars operate within it, but it has been the majority mind-set of the modern academy. When we try to see Jesus within this framework, it radically reduces what we will take seriously. There is much that we will miss, including the centrality of God for Jesus. We focus instead on what makes sense within our way of seeing.

So it was for me. There was a prolonged period in my life when the modern worldview functioned in my mind as the final arbiter of what can be taken seriously. The process was gradual. Raised as a Christian in the middle of this century, I grew up with both a religious and a secular worldview. By early adolescence, the secular worldview had begun to cause problems for my religious worldview. By my late teens and twenties, the problems had become acute. Indeed, the modern worldview had essentially crowded out the religious worldview.

But I now see things differently. In my thirties, I became aware of how uncritically, unconsciously, and completely I had accepted the modern worldview. I saw that most cultures throughout human history have seen things differently.¹² I realized that there are well-authenticated experiences that radically transcend what the modern worldview can accommodate. I became aware that the modern worldview is itself a relative cultural construction, the product of a particular

era in human intellectual history. Though it is still dominant in Western culture, I am confident that the time is soon coming when it will seem as archaic and quaint as the Ptolemaic worldview.¹³

The change in my worldview has made it possible for me once again to take God seriously. I am convinced that the sacred is real. I see reality as far more mysterious than the modern worldview (or any worldview) affirms. I do not know the limits of what is possible with any precision. To be sure, I am reasonably confident that some things never happen, but I am convinced that the modern worldview draws those limits far too narrowly. All of this has strongly affected my work as a historian of Jesus and Christian origins. I can take much more of the tradition seriously.

METHOD: EARLY LAYERS PLUS CONTEXT

Constructing an image of Jesus—which is what the quest for the historical Jesus is about—involves two crucial steps. The first step is discerning what is likely to go back to Jesus. The second step is setting this material in the historical context of the Jewish homeland in the first century.

Step One: Discerning What Is Early

The quest involves discerning the early layers of the developing traditions about Jesus. What is early? What is later? I accept these common scholarly conclusions about our sources of material about Jesus:

- Paul is our earliest New Testament author. All of his genuine letters were written before any of the gospels; his earliest ones are from around the year 50, and they predate Mark by about twenty years. Yet Paul says relatively little about the historical Jesus, so he is not a major source.
- Q is the earliest written layer in the gospels, put into writing most likely in the fifties. A hypothetical document reconstructed by scholars from material found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, it is about two hundred verses long. An early collection of

teaching attributed to Jesus, it contains very little narrative material. It was used by both Matthew and Luke when they wrote their gospels.¹⁴

- Mark is the earliest of our existing gospels, written near 70 C.E. It provides the narrative framework for the other two synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke.
- Matthew and Luke each had a copy of Mark when they wrote their gospels later in the century. They also had a copy of Q, and they knew or created other traditions now found in them.
- John's gospel is very different from the synoptic gospels and is not a primary source for the historical Jesus. It is, however, a powerful witness to what Jesus had become in the early Christian community in which John was written, about which I will say more later in this book.
- The gospel of Thomas, discovered about fifty years ago in Egypt, is (like Q) a collection of sayings (114 in all). In present form, Thomas probably dates to the first half of the second century. I am inclined to see Thomas as independent of the synoptics and containing some early traditions not found elsewhere. But it is not a major source in my work.

Thus I see Mark and Q as the two primary documents behind the synoptic gospels. This widely accepted position is commonly known as “the two-source theory” or “the two-document hypothesis.”¹⁵

Given the above view of our sources, how does one discern what is early? First, the most objective test is multiple attestation in two or more independent sources, at least one of which is early. In practice, it most commonly means “double attestation,” for we have relatively few traditions with three or more attestations. The logic is straightforward: if a tradition appears in an early source *and* in another independent source, then not only is it early, but also it is unlikely to have been made up.

Second, when a core of material has been established through multiple attestation, texts that have only single attestation can be accepted if they are coherent with this core. Coherence might be argued on the basis of common subject matter. It might also be argued on the basis of

common form. For example, many of the parables that have only single attestation are accepted as going back to Jesus because they reflect a perception and voice already established by multiple attestation.

A third factor involves a complication. Namely, one can discern demonstrable tendencies of the developing tradition. This functions both negatively and positively. When a saying or story reflects such a tendency, one must be suspicious of it. Alternatively, one that counters a demonstrable tendency of the developing tradition may well be historical, a survivor from an earlier stage.

Step Two: Historical Context

Historical context is crucial, for words spoken and deeds done take on meaning only in context. They mean little, or remain ambiguous, apart from context. The same gesture can have very different meanings in different cultures, and the same saying can mean very different things in different contexts.

For reconstructing the meaning of things said and done by the historical Jesus, the crucial context is not the literary context of the gospels, but a cultural context, a social world. The context in which early Jesus material is to be set is the social world of the Jewish homeland in the first third of the first century.

There are several resources for knowing about the world of Jesus. Some of what we know comes from literary sources: early Christian literature, mostly canonical but also noncanonical; Jewish literature, both ancient and contemporary with Jesus; and (to a lesser extent) non-Jewish sources. Some comes from archaeological investigation. And some comes from the interdisciplinary study of his world. There are things we can know about his world that our ancient sources do not explicitly say. For example, none of our sources says that the world of Jesus was the world of a preindustrial agrarian society, yet we can be quite sure that it was. Knowing the economic and political dynamics typical of such societies can help us understand what the world of Jesus was like. Indeed, knowing those characteristics enables us to recognize data in our sources that point to such a world.

This is not the place to try to describe the world of Jesus in a comprehensive way. I content myself with noting that the Jewish social

world in the time of Jesus was undergoing significant social change and sharp tensions. The Jewish homeland fell under Roman imperial control in 63 B.C.E., about sixty years before Jesus was born. The combination of Roman rule and Hellenistic cultural influences meant that traditional ways and identities were in question. Ethnic identities were in tension with more cosmopolitan visions of human life. The commercialization of agriculture led to the dislocation of peasants from land that they had owned. It was a restive time. Jewish revolts against Rome broke out around the time of Jesus' birth. Forty years after his death, the calamitous war of Jewish rebellion climaxed in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, changing Jesus' native religious tradition forever. Jesus thus lived in a watershed century. In this setting, he did what he did. And everything we can know about his world is relevant to the study of the historical Jesus.

Because much of this chapter has focused on how to go beneath the surface level of the gospels in order to discern the historical Jesus, I want to emphasize as I conclude that both the historical Jesus and the canonical gospels matter to me as a Christian.¹⁶ The pre-Easter Jesus, as we can discern him through historical research, is a remarkable and compelling figure, and our glimpses of him can help provide content for what it means to take him seriously. The canonical Jesus discloses what Jesus had become in the experience of early Christian communities near the end of the first century. Independently of their historical factuality, the stories of the canonical Jesus can function in our lives as powerfully true metaphorical narratives, shaping Christian vision and identity. It is not an either-or choice; both the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus matter.

What we see is to a large extent the product of how we see. Thus our understanding of the sources, as well as the lenses through which we see both them and the world of Jesus, will decisively affect what we see in the figure behind the gospels. What all of this means will, I trust, become clear in the rest of this book.