

## LIFE-OF-JESUS RESEARCH AND THE ECLIPSE OF MYTHOLOGY

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**F**OR TWO CENTURIES theologians and biblical scholars have investigated and debated the various problems that attend research on the life of Jesus. Perusal of the scholarly literature that has been produced over this period of time reveals several interesting trends and, with respect to the topic of mythology, seems to suggest that we have moved in the last ten or twenty years into a new era in historical-Jesus research.<sup>1</sup> It would appear that there has been a major shift—from an agenda shaped in large measure by concerns with mythology to a new agenda that makes little or no reference to mythology.

The purpose of this article is to assess that shift, including its antecedent and subsequent developments. A clearer understanding of the path that has been trod and the new path that lies ahead should assist us in perceiving better the problems that attend research concerned with the historical Jesus. This essay is not a history of the scholarly quest, for many of its major contributors and issues will not be touched upon;<sup>2</sup> rather it is an investigation into the role that myth has played in the scholarly quest.

### FACTORS LEADING UP TO THE MYTHOLOGICAL DEBATE

With the posthumous (and anonymous) publication of several fragments of Hermann Reimarus's lengthy manuscript *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*,<sup>3</sup> the historicity of

<sup>1</sup> For bibliography, see my *Life of Jesus Research: An Annotated Bibliography*, *New Testament Tools and Studies* 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1989) 85–100.

<sup>2</sup> For recent assessments of life-of-Jesus research, see H. K. McArthur, *The Quest through the Centuries: The Search for the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966); G. Aulén, *Jesus in Contemporary Historical Research* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); D. L. Pals, *The Victorian "Lives" of Jesus*, Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion (San Antonio: Trinity Univ., 1982); and W. S. Kissinger, *The Lives of Jesus: A History and Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Several parts of this manuscript, which is essentially a defense of Deism, were published by G. E. Lessing between 1774 and 1778. Fragments 6 ("Über die Auferstehungsgeschichte") and 7 ("Vom Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger") have been traditionally cited as the work that inaugurated the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus. Fragment 7 was originally published as *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger: Noch ein Fragment des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten*, ed. G. E. Lessing (Braunschweig: [no

the gospel portrait of Jesus came to be seriously questioned. Reimarus believed that Jesus had not anticipated his death but had hoped to become Israel's earthly Messiah. This is seen in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey (a deliberate attempt to fulfill Zech 9:9), in the crowd's acclamation of Jesus as king, and in the placard placed over Jesus' cross, which read "King of the Jews" (cf. Matt 27:37). That death on the cross was neither Jesus' intention nor expectation is seen in his cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (cf. Matt 27:46). After the crucifixion and burial, the disciples stole the body of Jesus (cf. Matt 28:11–15). They then reformulated Jesus' teachings and proclaimed his resurrection and glorious return. The life of Jesus was freely retold, with the miracle stories no more than mere fictions intended to advance the apostolic proclamation.

Reimarus's skeptical stance did not represent anything new. The whole question of miracles had in recent years been subjected to critical philosophical scrutiny. Reimarus wrote his manuscript only a few years after the appearance of David Hume's treatise on epistemology, a treatise in which miracles had been subjected to trenchant criticism.<sup>4</sup> And it was only a few years after the appearance of Reimarus's fragments that Thomas Paine's well-known critical discussion of religion and miracles appeared.<sup>5</sup> Such skepticism was not confined to philosophers, for even among biblical scholars serious doubts were beginning to be expressed as to the historicity of the miracle stories of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Thus Reimarus's attitude toward the miraculous is completely in step

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publisher identified], 1778); English trans.: *Fragments from Reimarus consisting of Brief Critical Remarks on the Object of Jesus and His Disciples*, ed. C. Voysey (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879). For a recent edition, see C. H. Talbert, ed., *Reimarus: Fragments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> D. Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) esp. sect. 10, "Of Miracles." See also the 17th-century writings of B. Spinoza, e.g. *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) chap. 6, "Of Miracles"; and *Epistle 73* (to Oldenburg). Spinoza regarded miracles as the product of ignorance and superstition, arguing that God does not act contrary to the laws of nature.

<sup>5</sup> T. Paine, *Age of Reason* (Part I, 1794). It should be noted that numerous works of English Deists were translated into the German language and had profound influence upon the thinking of German theologians and philosophers; see G. V. Lechler, *Geschichte des englischen Deismus* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965 [orig. 1841]) 451; A. Tholuck, "Über Apologetik und ihre Literatur," in his *Vermischte Schriften grösstentheils apologetischen Inhalts*, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Perthes, 1859) 1.362.

<sup>6</sup> J. J. Hess, *Geschichte der drei letzten Lebensjahre Jesu*, 3 vols. (Leipzig and Zurich: Weidmann, 1768–72); J. S. Semler, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon*, Texte zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte 5 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1967 [orig. 1771]); J. G. Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1780–83).

with the *Zeitgeist* of 18th-century Europe.<sup>7</sup> The significance of Reimarus's work lies not in its skepticism, but in the fact that it was the first critical assessment of the life and teaching of Jesus which concluded that the true Jesus of history was very different from the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels, the Jesus in whom Christians have historically placed their faith. His critical assessment brought an important part of the contemporary philosophical discussion to bear directly upon gospel research. In the place of dogmatic orthodoxy (i.e. the historical Jesus = the Jesus of the Gospels, who is none other than the Christ of orthodox Christianity) there arose dogmatic skepticism (i.e. miracles cannot occur; all documents that describe miracles are therefore mythological).

After the appearance of Reimarus's work many critics assumed that the Gospels contained an admixture of the historical and the unhistorical (i.e. the miraculous).<sup>8</sup> In fact, no serious work could avoid discussing the problem. Various studies attempted to salvage the essential historicity of the Gospels by rationalizing the miraculous elements. Two early and influential works by Johann Herder argued that some of the miracles, especially those recorded in the Fourth Gospel, were symbolic only and so should not be taken literally.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Heinrich Paulus attempted to rationalize the miracle stories and to present an historical Jesus devoid of supernatural (or "mythological") elements.<sup>10</sup> He believed that the disciples were mistaken in assigning miraculous explanations to many of the events in Jesus' life and ministry. These events, when rightly understood, prove to be no more than natural events.

The works of Herder and Paulus were among many that grappled with this perceived problem of myth in the Gospels.<sup>11</sup> In the early

<sup>7</sup> For a competent assessment of the philosophical background against which Reimarus should be interpreted, see W. L. Craig, *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy*, Texts and Studies in Religion 23 (Lewiston and Queenston: Mellen, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Although sharply critical of Reimarus's position, J. S. Semler (*Beantwortung der Fragmente eines Ungenannten insbesondere vom Zweck Jesu und seiner Jünger* [Halle: Erziehungsinstitut, 1779]) viewed the gospel miracles as unhistorical.

<sup>9</sup> J. G. Herder, *Vom Erlöser der Menschen nach unsern drei ersten Evangelien* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1796); *Von Gottes Sohn, der Welt Heiland nach dem Johannes Evangelium* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1797).

<sup>10</sup> H. E. G. Paulus, *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Commentar über das neue Testament*, 3 vols. (Lübeck: Bohn, 1800–02); *Das Leben Jesu, als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums*, 2 vols. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1828).

<sup>11</sup> K. Bahrdt, *Ausführung des Plans und Zwecks Jesu*, 4 vols. (Berlin: [n. p.], 1787–93); G. L. Bauer, *Entwurf einer Hermeneutik des Alten und Neuen Testaments* (Leipzig: Weygan, 1799); *Hebräische Mythologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments, mit Parallelen*

decades of the 19th century the debate centered on the questions of how much myth was present in the Gospels and how this myth should be understood.<sup>12</sup> Many believed that the miraculous elements (e.g. Jesus' virginal conception, divine identity and attributes [such as omniscience], miracles, exorcisms, transfiguration, resurrection, and ascension) represented nothing more than mythological embellishments of certain aspects of Jesus' life and ministry. Ingenious explanations were offered to explain the gospel miracles in rational, nonsupernatural, terms.<sup>13</sup> Some even suggested chicanery.<sup>14</sup> Conservative scholars, of course, attempted to defend the historicity of much of the miraculous element. Liberal scholars were content to defend less.<sup>15</sup>

#### THE MYTHOLOGICAL DEBATE

##### *Presence and Extent of Myth in the Gospels*

The two-volume work of David Strauss gave new shape and focus to the controversy.<sup>16</sup> Strauss sided with the hermeneutical position of conservative scholars by agreeing that the main literary and theological point of the gospel accounts is the supernatural identity of Jesus. The point of the Gospels is not, as many liberals maintained, a natural Jesus around which supernatural embellishments eventually formed.

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*aus der Mythologie anderer Völker, vornehmlich der Griechen und Römer*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Weygan, 1802); K. Venturini, *Natürliche Geschichte des grossen Propheten von Nazareth*, 3 vols. (Bethlehem: [n. p.], 1800-02); J. P. Gabler, "Über den Unterschied zwischen Auslegung und Erklärung erläutert durch die verschiedene Behandlungsart der Versuchungs-geschichte Jesu," in Gabler, *Kleinere theologische Schriften*, 2 vols. (Ulm: Stettinische Buchhandlung, 1831) 1.201-7.

<sup>12</sup> A classic in this regard is F. Schleiermacher's *Das Leben Jesu*, ed. by K. A. Rüttenik (Berlin: Reimer, 1864). This edited work is based on Schleiermacher's 1832 lectures at Berlin University. For a critical response, see D. F. Strauss, *Der Christus des Glaubens und der Jesus der Geschichte* (Berlin: Duncker, 1865).

<sup>13</sup> Popular explanations typically ran along the following lines: Impressed by the generosity of the young lad the 5000 produced supplies of food that had been withheld out of selfishness; when walking on the water Jesus was actually walking across a sandbar; the "dead" that Jesus raised were only comatose; others who were sick suffered from psychosomatic conditions which were relieved when assured by Jesus that they were forgiven.

<sup>14</sup> Bahrtdt (see n. 11 above) believed that Jesus faked some of his miracles, including his (apparent) death and resurrection.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that in the early years of the quest, apostolic authorship of the Gospels of Matthew and John was assumed by liberals as well as by conservatives.

<sup>16</sup> D. F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1835-36; repr. 1984); English trans.: *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

Strauss sharply criticized the rationalizing interpretations of Herder, Paulus, and others,<sup>17</sup> arguing that the whole point of the Gospels is nothing less than the presentation of Jesus as the miracle-working Son of God. But Strauss was no conservative. He believed that, far from historical, this presentation of Jesus was thoroughly mythological.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Strauss believed that the correct approach to the Gospels was to view them as myth, not history. Or, to put it another way, the Gospels present religious, not historical, truths.

Whereas most scholars sought ways to refute Strauss's radical skepticism,<sup>19</sup> some contended for even more radical conclusions. Best known in this regard are the works of Bruno Bauer. In three massive studies Bauer attempted to show that there never was a historical Jesus,<sup>20</sup> but that Jesus of Nazareth was nothing more than a fictional character invented by the Marcan evangelist.<sup>21</sup> For two generations or so this radical view was treated seriously in most major German universities, though it never came close to being the dominant view among scholars.<sup>22</sup> Convinced, nevertheless, that Bauer's radical skepticism was destined to carry the day, Artur Drews in 1909 gave new expression to what had come to be called the "Christ myth."<sup>23</sup> He argued that the gospel story of Jesus is completely mythical, that Jesus never lived, and that Paul, the tentmaker of Tarsus, was one of the

<sup>17</sup> Strauss also criticized Reimarus's conspiracy theory; see D. F. Strauss, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus und seine Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1862). Parts of this work appear in English translation in Talbert, *Reimarus* 44–57.

<sup>18</sup> See also D. F. Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1840), where the influence of Spinoza and Hume is clearly seen.

<sup>19</sup> Strauss's provocative study touched off an academic furor that resulted in the publication of hundreds of books and articles. An early and significant reply to Strauss was offered by J. E. Kuhn, *Das Leben Jesu, wissenschaftlich bearbeitet* (Mainz: Kupferberg, 1838). An invaluable guide that supplements the older surveys of this debate (which usually restrict themselves to books) is E. G. Lawler, *David Friedrich Strauss and His Critics: The Life of Jesus Debate in Early Nineteenth-Century German Journals* (New York: Lang, 1986).

<sup>20</sup> B. Bauer, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte und der Synoptiker*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Wigand, 1841–42; 2d ed., 1846); *Kritik der Evangelien und Geschichte ihres Ursprungs*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Hempel, 1850–51).

<sup>21</sup> B. Bauer, *Christ und die Cäsaren: der Ursprung des Christentums aus dem römischen Griechentum* (Berlin: Grosse, 1877; 2d ed., 1879).

<sup>22</sup> The belief that Jesus never existed was picked up by Marx and Engels and came to be the "official" view of Marxism.

<sup>23</sup> A. Drews, *Die Christusmythe* (Jena: Diedrichs, 1909; 3d ed., 1924); English trans.: *The Christ Myth* (London: Unwin, 1910).

major developers of the myth. But Drews's work failed to convince many,<sup>24</sup> coming to be looked upon as the last gasp in a rather strange chapter in the century-long quest of the historical Jesus.

The scholarly mainstream, in contrast to Bauer and company, never doubted the existence of Jesus or his relevance for the founding of the Church. The quest for the historical Jesus therefore continued. After Heinrich Holtzmann's important and influential work,<sup>25</sup> most believed that Mark's Gospel was earliest and that it and the sayings source common to Matthew and Luke (eventually called "Q") yielded the raw materials necessary for the recovery of the Jesus of history. The widely-held belief that Mark and Q were relatively free from theological and mythological tendencies gave scholars the confidence they needed to go about their work. They were convinced that history could be isolated from myth; an historical Jesus could therefore be found.

### *The Interpretation of Myth: Demythologization*

The appearance of several books at the turn of the century did much to shake scholarly confidence both in the possibility of the recovery of the historical Jesus and in the theological relevance and value of the results themselves. First, the foundation on which 19th-century scholarship had been built was the belief that Mark's Gospel offered simple history that was relatively free from mythological and theological tendencies. William Wrede's analysis of the so-called "messianic secret," however, made it apparent that Mark could not be considered simple, nontheological history.<sup>26</sup> In his masterful analysis of life-of-Jesus re-

<sup>24</sup> Drews's position was immediately attacked by conservatives and liberals alike; see J. Weiss, *Jesus von Nazareth: Mythos oder Geschichte? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Kalthoff, Drews, Jensen* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1910); K. Dunkmann, "Die Christusmythe," *Der Geisteskampf der Gegenwart* (March 1910) 85–94; English trans.: "The Christ Myth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 68 (1911) 34–47; E. Troeltsch, *Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1911); S. J. Case, *The Historicity of Jesus: A Criticism of the Contention that Jesus Never lived* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1912; 2d ed. 1928); K. Staab, "Wege zur 'Christusmythe' von A. Drews," *Biblica* 5 (1924) 26–38; M. Goguel, *Jésus de Nazareth. Mythe ou Histoire?* (Paris: Payot, 1925); English trans.: *Jesus the Nazarene: Myth or History?* (New York: Appleton, 1926); and H. Windisch, "Das Problem der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu: die Christusmythe," *Theologische Rundschau* NS 2 (1930) 207–52.

<sup>25</sup> H. J. Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien: Ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Charakter* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1863). In a chapter entitled "Lebensbild Jesu nach der Quelle A [i.e. Mark]," Holtzmann responds to Strauss and others and offers his own sketch of the life of Jesus based on the Marcan Gospel (468–96).

<sup>26</sup> W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); Eng. trans.: *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke, 1971).

search, Albert Schweitzer challenged Wrede, arguing that his conclusion does not make good sense of history or of the theological concerns of the evangelist Mark.<sup>27</sup> Such an understanding of Mark, moreover, could take us back to the radical skepticism of Strauss.<sup>28</sup> But Schweitzer's portrait of a deluded prophet who thought that by taking upon himself Israel's eschatological sufferings he could bring on the messianic age appalled theologians and did not find a significant following.<sup>29</sup> In any case, the advent of form criticism supported Wrede's skepticism, if not always his conclusions, and had the effect of erecting a formidable barrier between the modern scholar and the object of his research, the Jesus of history. Rudolf Bultmann, one of the pioneers of form criticism, gave clear expression to the historical skepticism of this period when he concluded: "In my opinion we can sum up what can be known of the life and personality of Jesus as simply nothing."<sup>30</sup> Al-

<sup>27</sup> A. Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1906); Eng. trans.: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: Black, 1910; with Introduction by J. M. Robinson; New York: Macmillan, 1968), rev. ed.: *Die Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 1913; 6th ed., 1951; idem, *Das Messianitäts- und Leidensgeheimnis: Eine Skizze des Lebens Jesu* (Tübingen and Leipzig: Mohr [Siebeck], 1901); Eng. trans.: *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God; the Secret of Jesus' Messiahship and Passion* (London: A & C Black, 1925; New York: Macmillan, 1950). Schweitzer's was an attempt to work out more thoroughly the eschatological interpretation of Jesus offered by J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892; 2d ed., 1900; 3d ed., 1964, ed. by F. Hahn, with introduction by R. Bultmann); Eng. trans.: *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Chico: Scholars, 1985). For Schweitzer's critique of Wrede, see *Quest* 338–50. The validity of Schweitzer's interpretation depended upon the essential historicity of the gospel narrative, especially its chronology. Although Schweitzer (*Quest* 359–97) based his interpretation primarily on the Gospel of Matthew (rather than Mark), the implication of Wrede's thesis was obvious. If Mark, supposedly the least theological of the synoptics, could not be trusted, then in all probability Matthew could not be trusted either.

<sup>28</sup> Schweitzer (*Quest* 331–38) suggests that Christianity is faced with two alternatives: thoroughgoing skepticism (as in Strauss and Wrede) or thoroughgoing eschatology (as in Weiss and Schweitzer).

<sup>29</sup> In a famous passage (*Quest* 370–71) Schweitzer describes Jesus' experience as follows: "Soon after [the preaching of John the Baptist] comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign."

<sup>30</sup> R. Bultmann, *Jesus* (Berlin: Deutsche Bibliothek, 1926) 12; Eng. trans.: *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1934) 9. Elsewhere Bultmann avers: "We no longer can know the character of Jesus, his life, or his personality. . . . There is not one

though Bultmann's pessimism at that time was not widely shared, many did concur that it had begun to appear as though there was little chance of recovering the historical Jesus; the mythological component was simply too pervasive.

Second, at the same time that confidence in the possibility of the task was being shaken, doubts began to arise as to the efficacy of the results themselves. These doubts could be traced to Martin Kähler's work which had suggested that the historical Jesus the 19th-century quest had produced, although ostensibly free from myth, was also theologically irrelevant for Christian faith.<sup>31</sup> The Jesus of liberal theology, a Jesus who, it was claimed, had been chiefly concerned with social and religious reform, bore little resemblance to the Christ of the Church's historic creeds. Although Kähler's very significant contribution was passed over in Schweitzer's scholarly assessment, and consequently was ignored initially, the new theological mood that arose in Germany following the First World War began to voice similar concerns. Kähler's criticism of the 19th-century quest had now found an interested and receptive audience. Neoorthodox theology (also sometimes called neoliberalism or dialectical theology) sharply criticized the thinking that lay behind the 19th-century effort to recover the Jesus of history.

In the minds of many, the quest of the historical Jesus had thus reached a dead end, with some claiming that such a quest was historically impossible (a judgment in large measure supported by form criticism) and theologically illegitimate (as was frequently asserted by the dialectical theologians). Many scholars believed that once again they were faced with the very dilemma with which 19th-century scholarship had struggled and at one time thought it had overcome.

But Bultmann saw a way out. His solution lay in a new understanding of the gospel's relationship to history and myth. First, with regard to history, Bultmann believed that the truth of the gospel stands apart from historical confirmation or historical details. He rejected, of course, the radical skepticism of Bauer and Drews, affirming the fact (the *daß*) of Jesus' life, but denying the possibility (or necessity) of recovering its details (the *was* and the *wie*).<sup>32</sup> He did not wish to sac-

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of his words which we can regard as purely authentic" (*Die Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1925] 32-33).

<sup>31</sup> M. Kähler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1892; 2d ed., 1896); Eng. trans.: *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

<sup>32</sup> R. Bultmann, "Allgemeine Wahrheit und christliche Verkündigung," in *his Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1960) 3.176-77. See the expanded version that appeared as *Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum his-*



rifice the Christ of faith, the gospel itself, for an uncertain historical Jesus. Nor was the Christ of Christian faith to be set aside or lost in the quest for a Jesus of history.<sup>33</sup> He believed that the loss of history did not mean the loss of the gospel (as had usually been assumed). At this point Bultmann obviously differed significantly from the 19th-century scholars.

Second, Bultmann did not wish to dispense with myth; he wished to interpret it.<sup>34</sup> Herein lies the major difference between this 20th-century interpreter and the 19th-century quest. According to Bultmann, myth was the hermeneutical mode of expression by which early Christians testified to their faith in what God had done through Christ. Myth was not to be set aside in a quest for historical facts, a notion contrary to Christian faith itself (cf. 2 Cor 5:7). But myth, of course, could not be accepted in its ancient and unscientific form, for that presented modern people with a false stumbling block (to believe in miracles and angels, etc.). Myth, therefore, had to be "demythologized." That is, the mythological language of the New Testament was to be unpacked of its (existential) meaning and communicated in language that modern humanity could understand and live by.<sup>35</sup>

Bultmann's approach to myth added a whole new dimension to the mythological problem. Now, myth was not being isolated and discarded, nor was its presence viewed as threatening. Myth and the Christian gospel were apparently wrapped up together. The literature that contributed to this debate spans some three decades and is volu-

*torischen Jesus* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1960; 3d ed., 1962); Eng. trans.: "The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus," in C. E. Braaten and R. A. Harrisville, eds., *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ: Essays on the New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Abingdon, 1964) 15–42.

<sup>33</sup> One of the evident strengths of Bultmann's approach is that it provided an answer to the criticism that Kähler had raised. See the helpful assessment of N. Perrin, "The Challenge of New Testament Theology Today," *Criterion* 4 (1965) 25–34.

<sup>34</sup> For the classic statement of the problem, see R. Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie," Part II of his *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 7 (Munich: Kaiser, 1941); repr. in H.-W. Bartsch, *Kerygma und Mythos: Ein theologisches Gespräch*, Theologische Forschung 1 (Hamburg-Bergstedt; Reich und Heidrich, 1948); Eng. trans.: "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (London: SPCK, 1957) 1–44; repr. *Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 96, ed. E. Jüngel (Munich: Kaiser, 1985); see also his *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1958).

<sup>35</sup> R. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1933); Eng. trans.: *Faith and Understanding* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); *Existence and Faith* (New York: Meridian, 1960); "πίστις," *TWNT* 6:174–230; Eng. trans.: *Faith*, with A. Weiser (London: A&C Black, 1961); "The Christian Hope and the Problem of Demythologizing," *Expository Times* 65 (1953–54) 228–30, 276–78.

minous. Although many criticized Bultmann's approach,<sup>36</sup> no alternative seemed to offer itself. Even with the emergence of the post-Bultmannian movement and its "New Quest" of the historical Jesus, myth continued to occupy a prominent place on the agenda. The presence of myth was taken for granted; what to do with it was the point of debate.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Among the earliest responses are those of P. Althaus, "Neues Testament und Mythologie: Zu R. Bultmanns Versuch der Entmythologisierung des Neuen Testaments," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 67 (1942) 337–44; W. G. Kümmel, "Mythische Rede und Heilsgeschehen im Neuen Testament," in B. Reicke, ed., *Coniectanea Neotestamentica XI*, A. Fridrichsen Festschrift (Lund: Gleerup, 1947) 109–31; repr. in Kümmel, *Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte*, ed. E. Grässer et al. (Marburg: Elwert, 1965) 153–68; and J. R. Geiselman, "Der Glaube an Jesus-Christus—Mythos oder Geschichte?" *Theologische Quartalschrift* 129 (1949) 257–77, 418–39. Other significant studies include W. G. Kümmel, "Mythos im Neuen Testament," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 6 (1950) 321–37; A. N. Wilder, "Mythology and the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 69 (1950) 113–27; W. F. Arndt, "Entmythologisierung," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 22 (1951) 186–92; G. Bornkamm, "Mythos und Evangelium: Zur Diskussion des Problems der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung," in G. Bornkamm and W. Klaas, *Mythos und Evangelium: Zur Programm R. Bultmanns*, Theologische Existenz heute NS 26 (Munich: Kaiser, 1951; 3d ed., 1953); Eng. trans.: "Myth and Gospel: A Discussion of Demythologizing the New Testament Message," in C. E. Braaten and R. A. Harrisville, eds., *Kerygma and History: A Symposium on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 172–96; E. Fuchs, "Das entmythologisierte Glaubensbekenntnis," *Evangelische Theologie* 11 (1951–52) 398–415; and P. Althaus, *Das sogenannte Kerygma und der historische Jesus: Zur Kritik der heutigen Kerygma-Theologie*, Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie 48 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1958); Eng. trans.: *The So-Called Kerygma and the Historical Jesus* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959).

<sup>37</sup> To be sure, there were significant differences between Bultmann and his pupils in the understanding of myth and the Gospels. For example, G. Bornkamm avers that "the gospels are the rejection of myth" (*Jesus von Nazareth*, Urban-Bücher 19 [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1956; 3d ed., 1959]; Eng. trans.: *Jesus of Nazareth* [New York: Harper & Row, 1960] 23). For further discussion see C. K. Barrett, "Myth and the New Testament," *Expository Times* 68 (1957) 345–48, 359–62; J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Studies in Biblical Theology 25 (London: SCM, 1959; repr. Missoula: Scholars, 1979; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); German ed.: *Kerygma und historischer Jesus* (Zurich and Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1960; 2d ed., 1967). There were many, of course, who complained that the presence of myth in the New Testament was exaggerated; see G. Casalis, "Le problème du mythe," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 31 (1951) 330–42; K. Adam, "Das Problem der Entmythologisierung und die Auferstehung des Christus," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 132 (1952) 385–410; A. Nygren, "On the Question of De-Mythologizing Christianity," *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1952) 140–52; A. Barr, "Bultmann's Estimate of Jesus," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7 (1954) 337–54; O. Cullmann, "Le mythe dans les écrits du Nouveau Testament," *Numen* 1 (1954) 120–35; J. Thompson, "Demythologizing," *Bible Translator* 7 (1957) 27–35; and H. Wenz, "Mythos oder historisch zeichenhaftes Heilsgeschehen?" *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 18 (1962) 419–32.

However, while Bultmann's approach may have provided some theological relief from the problem, the negative impact that it had on the quest for a Jesus of history is obvious. In Germany the quest all but came to a halt. Although historical-Jesus research continued in some German,<sup>38</sup> French,<sup>39</sup> and British<sup>40</sup> circles, great caution (usually skepticism) was the watchword.

#### THE DEMISE OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL DEBATE

The secondary literature of the last two decades or so suggests that mythology's role in scholarship concerned with the historical Jesus has been eclipsed. Superficially this is seen in the noticeable decline in the number of books and articles that even speak of myth in relation to the question of the historical Jesus.<sup>41</sup> In the 1980s only a handful of studies appeared that were concerned with myth, and in these doubt is expressed as to the future of the demythologizing hermeneutic itself.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> E.g. P. Feine, *Jesus* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1930); M. Dibelius, *Jesus* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1939; 2d ed., 1949); Eng. trans.: *Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949; repr. 1963); W. G. Kümmel, *Verheißung und Erfüllung: Untersuchungen zur eschatologischen Verkündigung Jesu* (Basel: Majer, 1945; 2d ed., Zurich: Zwingli, 1953); Eng. trans.: *Promise and Fulfillment* (SBT 23; London: SCM, 1957).

<sup>39</sup> E.g. M. Goguel, *La Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Payot, 1925); Eng. trans.: *The Life of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); M. J. Lagrange, *L'Évangile de Jésus-Christ* (Paris: Gabalda, 1928); Eng. trans.: *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 2 vols. (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1938); F.-M. Braun, *Où en est le problème de Jésus?* (Paris: Gabalda, 1932); *Jésus: Histoire et Critique* (Tournai: Casterman, 1947); C. A. H. Guignebert, *Jésus* (Paris: Renaissance, 1933); Eng. trans.: *Jesus* (London: Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1935; New York: University Books, 1956).

<sup>40</sup> E.g. J. Mackinnon, *The Historic Jesus* (London: Longmans, 1931); T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1931; 2d ed., 1935); F. C. Burkitt, *Jesus Christ: An Historical Outline* (London and Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1932); P. Gardner-Smith, *The Christ of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1938); W. Manson, *Jesus the Messiah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946); German trans.: *Bist Du der da kommen soll?* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952).

<sup>41</sup> See Evans, *Life of Jesus Research* 99–100.

<sup>42</sup> For recent reviews, see J. Macquarrie, "A Generation of Demythologizing," in J. P. van Noppen, ed., *Theologistics* (Brussels: Vrije Universiteit, 1981) 143–58; and K. H. Schelkle, "Entmythologisierung in existentieller Interpretation," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 165 (1985) 257–66. For an essay that ponders the future of demythologization, see U. Luz, "Rückkehr des mythologischen Weltbildes: Überlegungen bei einer neuen Lektüre von Bultmanns Programm der Entmythologisierung," *Reformatio* 33 (1984) 448–53. For an essay that offers a positive assessment of demythologization, see M. J. de Nys, "Myth and Interpretation: Bultmann Revisited," *International Journal for Philos-*

What is more significant is the fact that most of the recent significant books published on the historical Jesus make little or no reference to the problem of myth or demythologization. In contrast to the systemic skepticism that characterized much of German and North American scholarship, often a concomitant of assumptions about myth in the Gospels, Jesus research in recent years has reflected a greater optimism that the Gospels can yield the data necessary for an intelligible reconstruction of the ministry of Jesus. This is seen in the fact that virtually all of these works make historically plausible suggestions as to how Jesus understood himself and his mission, things that Bultmann and others a generation ago thought beyond reach. What accounts for this change in thinking? And, more to the point of the present essay, why has mythology dropped out of the mainstream of the discussion? In my judgment there are at least five major factors involved in the demise of mythology as a relevant issue in life-of-Jesus research.

First, the New Testament Gospels are now viewed as useful, if not essentially reliable, historical sources. Gone is the extreme skepticism that for so many years dominated gospel research.<sup>43</sup> Representative of many is the position of E. P. Sanders and Marcus Borg, who have concluded that it is possible to recover a fairly reliable picture of the historical Jesus. Borg notes that more and more scholars are coming to the conclusion that "we can sketch a fairly full and historically defensible portrait of Jesus."<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Sanders comments: "The dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that those two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism."<sup>45</sup> With regard to Mark, some critical interpreters, although

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*ophy of Religion* 11 (1980) 27–41. For a negative assessment, see D. Cairns, "A Reappraisal of Bultmann's Theology," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981) 469–85.

<sup>43</sup> To be fair, one must remember that much of the skepticism in the first half of the 20th century was in reaction to the positivistic historiography of the Old Quest that sought to extract from the Gospels the mental, psychological, and spiritual development of Jesus. The "lives" generated by this thinking deserved to be regarded with skepticism.

<sup>44</sup> M. J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 15.

<sup>45</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 2. For evidence of this "dominant view" Sanders (355 n. 14) cites H. Schürmann, "Zur aktuellen Situation der Leben-Jesu-Forschung," *Geist und Leben* 46 (1973) 300–10, and G. Aulén, *Jesus in Contemporary Historical Research*, viii, 3. See also W. R. Farmer, *Jesus and the Gospel: Tradition, Scripture, and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), who says with regard to the Gospels: "We have access to a large body of first-rate historical evidence that is decisive in answering important questions about Jesus" (21).

still recognizing his theological motives and redactional activities, believe that the Marcan evangelist has treated his tradition in a conservative manner.<sup>46</sup>

Second, mainline life-of-Jesus research is no longer driven by theological-philosophical concerns, at least not overtly.<sup>47</sup> There has been a shift away from a philosophical orientation to a historical orientation. Gone is the lively and often convoluted discussion of *Geschichte* and *Historie* as meaningfully distinct categories. The matter is simply no longer debated.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the related concern to find a Jesus relevant

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Other studies that view the Gospels in a similar light include those by B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979); A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (London: Duckworth, 1982); R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.7 (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1981; 3d ed., 1988); "Der Ursprung der Jesus-Überlieferung," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 38 (1982) 493–513; A. F. Zimmermann, *Die urchristlichen Lehrer: Studien zum Tradentenkreis der διδάσκαλοι im frühen Urchristentum* (WUNT 2.12; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1984); G. N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1989) 150–64; B. Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 1–31; E. E. Ellis, "Gospels Criticism: A Perspective on the State of the Art," in P. Stuhlmacher, ed., *The Gospel and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 26–52; P. Stuhlmacher, "The Theme: The Gospel and the Gospels," *ibid.* 1–25, esp. 2–12.

<sup>46</sup> See R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 2.1–2 (Freiburg: Herder, 1976–77) 1.63–67; 2.1–25; M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 32–41; R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary 34A (Dallas: Word, 1989) xxxiii–xxxiv. By "conservative" I mean that the evangelist has *conserved* the dominical tradition, as opposed to having freely and extensively edited it or having created it altogether.

<sup>47</sup> Bultmann, e.g., considered the universe a "self-subsistent unity immune from the interference of supernatural powers" ("New Testament and Mythology" 7). For similar thinking addressed specifically to the question of miracles, see also Bultmann, "Zur Frage des Wunders," in his *Glauben und Verstehen*, 2 vols., (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1954) 1.214–28; Eng. trans.: "The Problem of Miracle," *Religion in Life* 27 (1958) 63–75; Bultmann declares: "The idea of miracle has, therefore, become untenable and it must be abandoned" (*Faith and Understanding* 249; his emphasis). For Bultmann the facticity of Jesus' miracles is irrelevant. The deistic heritage is obvious. For a philosophical analysis of miracles in the thinking of Spinoza, Reimarus, Hume, Strauss, Feuerbach, and Bultmann, see E. Keller and M.-L. Keller, *Der Streit um die Wunder* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1968); Eng. trans.: *Miracles in Dispute: A Continuing Debate* (London: SCM, 1969; repr. 1984).

<sup>48</sup> As part of their rationale for the New Quest, in which a stronger historical link between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith is established, Bultmann's pupils advocated a new understanding of history (which involved, of course, a new understanding of *Geschichte* and *Historie*) in which subjective appropriation of theological, or existential, truths was believed to be the essence of historiography, not the recording of objective facts. But this understanding has not escaped significant criticism. P. Merkle

for the Christian kerygma seems also to have receded. In responding to his pupils thirty years ago Bultmann summed up their principal disagreement: "In the time of the [Old Quest] . . . the emphasis lay upon establishing the difference between Jesus and the kerygma. Today [i.e. in the New Quest] it is the reverse: the emphasis lies on the working out of the unity of the historical Jesus and the Christ of the kerygma."<sup>49</sup> Bultmann's succinct statement of the essential point of difference between the Old and New Quests is certainly accurate and it also reveals how different the current mode of Jesus research is. The question of the role of the kerygma is hardly raised today. Life of Jesus research is characterized today more by an interest in history rather than in faith. In the case of Sanders, this is explicitly stated.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, scholars tend to talk of "life-of-Jesus research," as opposed to a "quest."<sup>51</sup> Consequently the debate over the legitimacy or illegitimacy

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has criticized leading advocates of the New Quest for misinterpreting and misappropriating the views of the late historian R. G. Collingwood, concluding that these scholars simply do not understand history and historiography ("New Quests for Old: One Historian's Observations on a Bad Bargain," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 16 [1970] 203–18). Moreover, the distinction between "authentic" and "authoritative," a distinction often made, or at least assumed, by the leading advocates of the New Quest, is also problematic; with regard to this problem see R. H. Stein, "'Authentic' for 'Authoritative'? What is the Difference?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 24 (1981) 127–30. Stein and Merkle have in mind the sort of thinking so aptly expressed by Robinson: "One may however observe that material regarded as wholly 'unauthentic' in terms of positivistic historiography may not seem nearly as 'unauthentic' in terms of modern historiography. For a saying which Jesus never spoke may well reflect accurately his historical significance, and in this sense be more 'historical' than many irrelevant things Jesus actually said" (*New Quest of the Historical Jesus* 99–100 n. 3). Clearly, what Robinson means here by "historical" is not what too many historians today (or at any time, for that matter) would recognize as the proper sense of the word. If words are allowed to have their conventional meaning, then one should realize that "authentic" ought to imply that the saying in question goes back to Jesus, while "inauthentic" ought to imply that it does not. Whether a saying (that goes back to Jesus or not) has existential relevance for a person is quite another matter. For further criticism, see J. P. Mackey, *Jesus the Man and the Myth* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 10–51; Meyer, *Aims of Jesus* 51–54; J. Gnillka, *Jesus von Nazaret: Botschaft und Geschichte*, HTKNT Suppl. 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1990) 11–34; J. P. Meier, "The Historical Jesus: Rethinking Some Concepts," *TS* 51 (1990) 3–24; *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus 1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 26–31.

<sup>49</sup> Bultmann, *Das Verhältnis* 5–6; Eng. trans. 15.

<sup>50</sup> With regard to the theological significance of Jesus, Sanders states: "The present work is written without that question in mind" (*Jesus and Judaism* 2).

<sup>51</sup> See J. H. Charlesworth, "Research on the Historical Jesus," *Proceedings of the Irish*

of research into the historical Jesus, an item to which great importance was attached throughout most of this century, has simply ceased. To raise it now would strike most as odd, even atavistic.

Before moving on to the next item, Bruce Chilton's admonition is worth quoting: "[H]istorical enquiry must . . . rest content with a reasoned, exegetical account of how what is written came to be, and how that influences our appreciation of the received form of the text. *The historical question centers fundamentally on what people perceived, and how they acted on their perception.*"<sup>52</sup> The scientific or metaphysical problem of how to define a miracle is just that—a scientific and metaphysical problem. It is not an item that should bring historical inquiry to a standstill. The historian need not know just exactly how Jesus healed someone or just exactly what happened when a person was exorcized of a "demon." What the historian needs to know is whether Jesus did those sorts of things and, if he did, what they meant to his contemporaries.<sup>53</sup>

Third, the miracles of Jesus are interpreted more carefully and more realistically in context, with the result that they are now viewed primarily as part of charismatic Judaism, either in terms of piety or in terms of restoration theology (or both).<sup>54</sup> The older notion that the

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*Biblical Association* 9 (1985) 19–37; "From Barren Mazes to Gentle Rappings: The Emergence of Jesus Research," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 7 (1986) 221–30.

<sup>52</sup> B. D. Chilton, "Exorcism and History: Mark 1:21–28," in D. Wenham and C. Blomberg, eds., *The Miracles of Jesus*, Gospel Perspectives 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1986) 253–71, at 265 (my emphasis).

<sup>53</sup> A major problem that attends any attempt to distinguish a mythological world view from a "scientific" world view is that in a certain sense all human observation and description is to some extent "mythological." Herein I believe lies a major flaw in Bultmann's "scientific" understanding of miracles and the demythologising hermeneutic that attempts to deal with them. For studies that address this problem, see I. Henderson, *Myth in the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 7 (London: SCM, 1952); "Karl Jaspers and Demythologizing," *Expository Times* 65 (1953–54) 291–93; R. F. Aldwinckle, "Myth and Symbol in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology: The Limits of Demythologizing," *Journal of Religion* 34 (1954) 267–79; A. D. Galloway, "Religious Symbols and Demythologising," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 10 (1957) 361–69.

<sup>54</sup> Years ago P. Fiebig (*Jüdische Wundergeschichten des neutestamentlichen Zeitalters* [Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1911]) gathered together the Jewish miracle stories of the New Testament period. The potential relevance of these stories has been recently and very helpfully explored by G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973) 58–82. Vermes has concluded that Jesus' miracles place him within the context of charismatic Judaism (see esp. 69, 79). Although some have criticized Vermes's inference that Jesus was essentially a Jewish hasid, or holy man, most agree that Jesus' ministry of miracles parallels more closely the lives of Jewish personalities such as Honi, Hanina ben Dosa, or Theudas, than it does the lives of

miracle tradition is relatively late and of Hellenistic origin,<sup>55</sup> perhaps the product of *theios anēr* ideas,<sup>56</sup> has been largely abandoned. Ongoing research has provided us with more precise knowledge of the historical, social, and religious context of first-century Palestine.<sup>57</sup> Stud-

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various hellenistic magicians and wonder workers who have been put forward. For his part, Sanders thinks that Theudas offers the closest parallel (*Jesus* 170–73). See also O. Betz, “Jesu Heiliger Krieg,” *Novum Testamentum* 2 [1957] 116–37; Betz discusses passages in Josephus that describe promised wonders (*J.W.* 2.13.4 §259 vs. *Ant.* 20.5.1 §97; *J.W.* 2.13.5 §262 vs. *Ant.* 20.8.7 §176) and then compares them to Jesus’ wonders. Also see B. Lindars, “Elijah, Elisha and the Gospel Miracles,” in C. F. D. Moule, ed., *Miracles: Cambridge Studies in their Philosophy and History* (London: Mowbray, 1965) 61–79; C. Brown, “Synoptic Miracle Stories: A Jewish Religious and Social Setting,” *Forum* 2/4 (1986) 55–76.

<sup>55</sup> R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931); Eng. trans.: *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968). Bultmann asserts that the “Hellenistic origin of [most of] the miracle stories is overwhelmingly the more probable” (ET 240). His assumption of the non-Palestinian origin of the miracle tradition is made clear by his statement that “in Q [which contains almost no miracle stories] the picture of Jesus is made essentially from the material of the Palestinian tradition, while in Mark and most of all in his miracle stories Hellenism has made a vital contribution” (241). A similar position is adopted by M. Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1919); Eng. trans.: *From Tradition to Gospel* (London: James Clarke, 1971). According to Dibelius, the miracle tradition is remote and unhistorical: “[The presence of miracle stories] often, but not always, means a degeneration of the tradition, removing it further from the historical reality” (ET 99). Indeed, the miracle tradition is basically non-Christian (102).

<sup>56</sup> The concept of the “Divine Man” (*theios anēr*) is a synthetic creation of the History of Religions School. Some have thought that the divine-man idea aids interpretation of the gospel miracle tradition, e.g. H. D. Betz, *Lukian von Samosata und das Neue Testament: Religionsgeschichtliche und Parännetische Parallelen* (Berlin: Akademie, 1961); P. J. Achtemeier, “Gospel Miracle Tradition and the Divine Man,” *Interpretation* 26 (1972) 174–97. Betz presupposes that a *Gesamtkonzeption* of the divine man was handed down from ancient Greek literature to the time of the early Church (100–101). Such a “complete concept,” however, does not exist. For a convenient summary of the criticisms leveled against this theory, see H. C. Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World: A Study in Sociohistorical Method* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ., 1983) 297–99. For further criticism, see M. Hengel, *Der Sohn Gottes: Die Entstehung der Christologie und die jüdisch-hellenistische Religionsgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1975); Eng. trans.: *The Son of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 31–32; B. L. Blackburn, “Miracle Working THEIOI ANDRES in Hellenism (and Hellenistic Judaism),” in Wenham and Blomberg, eds., *Miracles of Jesus* 185–218.

<sup>57</sup> S. Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian: A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (Wilmington: Glazier; Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1980); *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); R. A. Horsley and J. S. Han-



ies in the miracles themselves have taken important steps forward, resulting in more nuanced assessments of miracle, medicine, and magic.<sup>58</sup>

Fourth, the miracle stories are now treated seriously and are widely accepted by Jesus scholars as deriving from Jesus' ministry. Major studies on the historical Jesus discuss the miracles, whether in general terms or in reference to specific miracles, with little or no discussion of myth or the philosophical issues at one time thought to be necessary for any assessment of the miracle traditions in the Gospels.<sup>59</sup> Several specialized studies have appeared in recent years, which conclude that Jesus did perform miracles.<sup>60</sup> There have been also a few attempts at

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son, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985). For a survey of the relevant historical and archaeological data, see J. H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

<sup>58</sup> H. C. Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World; Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 55 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1986); E. Yamauchi, "Magic or Miracle? Disease, Demons and Exorcisms," in Wenham and Blomberg, eds., *The Miracles of Jesus* 89–183.

<sup>59</sup> Many of the most significant studies on Jesus in recent years take the miracles seriously into account, e.g. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* 58–82; M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 8–20; Meyer, *Aims of Jesus* 154–58; Harvey, *Jesus and Constraints* 105–18; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 157–73; Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* 57–75; Witherington, *Christology of Jesus* 145–77; J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 303–53.

<sup>60</sup> R. H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963); German ed., *Die Wunder Jesu in Exegese und Verkündigung* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1967). Fuller concludes that "the tradition that Jesus did perform exorcisms and healings (which may also have been exorcisms originally) is very strong" (39). Fuller's positive assessment anticipated the critical affirmations that have been heard in more recent years. G. Theissen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten: Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1974); Eng. trans.: *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983): "There is no doubt that Jesus worked miracles, healed the sick and cast out demons" (277); P. J. Achtemeier, "Miracles and the Historical Jesus: A Study of Mark 9:14–29," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (1975) 471–91; O. Betz and W. Grimm, *Wesen und Wirklichkeit der Wunder Jesu, Arbeiten zum Neuen Testament und Judentum 2* (Frankfurt am Main and Bern: Lang, 1977); Smith, *Jesus the Magician*: "In most miracle stories no explanation at all is given; Jesus simply speaks or acts and the miracle is done by his personal power. This trait probably reflects historical fact" (101); D. Zeller, "Wunder und Bekenntnis: Zum Sitz im Leben urchristlicher Wundergeschichten," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 25 (1981) 204–22; G. Maier, "Zur neutestamentlichen Wunderexegese im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," in Wenham and Blomberg, eds., *The Miracles of Jesus* 49–87: "Historische Forschung kann heute mit guten Gründen sagen, dass Jesus damals Wunder getan hat" (79); Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*: "There is agreement on the basic facts: Jesus per-

delineating criteria for ascertaining the historicity or nonhistoricity of individual miracle stories. E. Gutwenger, e.g., has argued that the miracles can be assessed against criteria similar to those used for ascertaining the authenticity of the sayings tradition.<sup>61</sup> Franz Mussner went much further in arguing that the miracles of Jesus in the Gospels portray the *ipsissima facta Jesu*.<sup>62</sup> Mussner has scored some important points, but his conclusion may go beyond the evidence. Rudolf Pesch reasons, *pace* Mussner, that if the *ipsissima verba Jesu* cannot normally be recovered, it is not likely that *ipsissima facta* can either.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Pesch too concludes that Jesus performed miracles. Alfred Suhl has reached a similar conclusion, arguing that the miracle tradition is ultimately rooted in the historical Jesus (and not the early Church, as many of the form critics had supposed).<sup>64</sup> René Latourelle has offered one of the most detailed and systematic treatments of criteria for evaluating the historicity of the miracles of Jesus.<sup>65</sup> Although his work contains many useful insights, it is flawed by a pronounced, and at times overriding, theological apologetic.<sup>66</sup> Criteria have been worked out here and there in other studies that, together with the better points argued by Mussner and Latourelle,

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formed miracles, drew crowds and promised the kingdom to sinners" (157); Witherington, *Christology*: "That Jesus performed deeds that were perceived as miracles by both him and his audience is difficult to doubt" (155).

<sup>61</sup> E. Gutwenger, "Die Machtweise Jesu in formgeschichtlicher Sicht," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 89 (1967) 176–90.

<sup>62</sup> F. Mussner, *Die Wunder Jesu: Eine Hinführung*, Schriften zur Katechetik 10 (Munich: Kösel, 1967); Engl. trans.: *The Miracles of Jesus: An Introduction* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1968).

<sup>63</sup> R. Pesch, *Jesu ureigene Taten? Ein Beitrag zur Wunderfrage*, Quaestiones Disputatae 52 (Freiburg: Herder, 1970); "Zur theologischen Bedeutung der 'Machtthaten' Jesu: Reflexionen eines Exegeten," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 152 (1972) 203–13.

<sup>64</sup> A. Suhl, *Die Wunder Jesu: Ereignis und Überlieferung* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1968). Although some still argue that the miracle tradition reflects the history of the early Church and its faith, more than it does the history of Jesus (e.g. G. Schille, *Die urchristliche Wundertradition: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem irdischen Jesus*, Arbeiten zur Theologie 29 [Stuttgart: Calwer, 1967]), this view appears to be waning.

<sup>65</sup> R. Latourelle, "Authenticité historique des miracles de Jésus: Essai de critériologie," *Gregorianum* 54 (1973) 225–62. Most of this essay has appeared in Latourelle, *Miracles de Jésus et théologie du miracle* (Paris: Cerf; Montreal: Bellarmin, 1986); Eng. trans.: *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles* (New York: Paulist, 1988) 54–69.

<sup>66</sup> The massive study by H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus*, Novum Testamentum Suppl. 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1965) suffers from the same weaknesses. Although van der Loos makes some good points in support of this miracle or that, his theological apologetic often leads him beyond what can be reasonably claimed on historical grounds. Moreover, some of his assertions (e.g. 235–36) are simply gratuitous. No rigorous criteria are developed and employed.

form the basis for a critical, historical evaluation of the miracles of Jesus. In my judgment the following seven criteria support those scholars who have argued that Jesus performed miracles.<sup>67</sup>

1. *Multiple Attestation.* Tradition that is found in two or more independent sources (such as Mark and Q) enjoys a stronger claim to authenticity than does tradition found in only one source.<sup>68</sup> Multiple attestation, of course, is no guarantee that a given story is authentic, no more than single attestation proves that a given story is inauthentic. The miracle tradition is attested in Mark, Q, and the Fourth Gospel (as well as in material found only in Luke ["L"] and, possibly, in Matthew ["M"]). The attestation of the miracle tradition in Q is significant, for the miracle tradition apparently does not have the programmatic theological and Christological function in this putative source that it does in Mark. Not only does Q narrate a miracle story (Matt 8:5–13// Luke 7:1–10; cf. John 4:46–54);<sup>69</sup> it also contains sayings, judged by many to be authentic, that presuppose Jesus' miracles (Matt 11:2–6// Luke 7:18–23; Matt 10:8// Luke 10:9; Matt 11:21–23// Luke 10:13–15; Matt 13:16–17// Luke 10:23–24; Matt 12:43–45// Luke 11:24–26). Some of these sayings appear in Mark as well (e.g. Matt 12:27// Luke 11:19; cf. Mark 3:23) and so represent true examples of tradition multiply attested. Moreover, Paul's reference to the "signs of a true apostle" (2 Cor 12:12), which he believes were wrought through him by Christ (Rom 15:19), certainly implies that an early miracle tradition, understood to be rooted in Jesus' ministry and continued in the ministries of his disciples, was known to him. Lastly, hostile interpretations of Jesus' miracles, particularly with respect to the exorcisms,

<sup>67</sup> Most studies of the criteria of authenticity are concerned with Jesus' sayings; see D. G. A. Calvert, "An Examination of the Criteria for Distinguishing the Authentic Words of Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 18 (1972) 209–19; F. Lentzen-Deis, "Kriterien für die historische Beurteilung der Jesusüberlieferung in den Evangelien," in K. Kertelge, ed., *Rückfrage nach Jesus: Zur Methodik und Bedeutung der Frage nach dem historischen Jesus*, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 63 (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 78–117 esp. 94–102; H. K. Nielsen, "Kriterien zur Bestimmung authentischer Jesusworte," *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 4 (1979) 5–26; D. Polkow, "Method and Criteria for Historical Jesus Research," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (1987) 336–56; C. A. Evans, "Authenticity Criteria in Life of Jesus Research," *Christian Scholars Review* 19 (1989) 3–31; *Life of Jesus Research* 100–12; Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 167–95. Some of these criteria can be applied to Jesus' actions.

<sup>68</sup> See Evans, "Authenticity Criteria" 8–10; Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 174–75.

<sup>69</sup> Bultmann regards Matt 8:5–13// Luke 7:1–10 as a latter Hellenistic intrusion (perhaps as a variant of Mark 7:24–31) into the earlier, Palestinian material that for the most part makes up Q (*History of the Synoptic Tradition* 64, 328). Bultmann's analysis, however, seems controlled by his questionable assumption that the miracle tradition originated in Hellenistic, non-Palestinian circles of the early Church.

both in early traditions (e.g. Matt 9:34; 12:24//Luke 11:18; Mark 3:22) and later (e.g. Celsus, in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.6, 38, 68; *b. Sanh.* 43a), offer a measure of support to the authenticity of the miracles; for the miracles are not denied, only criticized. For these reasons and for others, several scholars argue for the essential historicity of the miracle tradition.<sup>70</sup>

2. *Dissimilarity*. Tradition that cannot easily be explained as having originated in the early Church or having been taken over from Jewish traditions is said to be dissimilar (or distinctive) and therefore has a reasonable claim to authenticity.<sup>71</sup> Are the miracles of Jesus distinctive to the legends and traditions of the Mediterranean world? Despite efforts to interpret Jesus as a Jewish holy man (e.g. Vermes<sup>72</sup>), on the one hand, or as a magician or Hellenistic wonder worker (e.g. Smith and Crossan<sup>73</sup>), on the other, most scholars have recognized that the miracles of Jesus resist such simple categorization. Unlike Honi or Hanina ben Dosa, rarely does Jesus *pray* for healing or for other miracles. One thinks of Honi standing in his circle beseeching God to give his people a "rain of goodwill, blessing, and graciousness" (*m. Ta'an.* 3:8; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.2.2 §25–28) or Hanina who prayed with his head between his knees, knowing that his prayer has been heard when it comes fluently (*y. Ber.* 5:5; *b. Ber.* 34b). Jesus' style is very different. He speaks the word and the cure is effected. Moreover, he speaks and acts in his own name. He says, "I will it" (Mark 1:41; 2:11), not "God wills it."<sup>74</sup> More importantly, neither Honi nor Hanina was remembered as the leader of a renewal movement. Most scholars, therefore, hesitate to follow Geza Vermes fully.<sup>75</sup> So it is in the case of comparisons made with magic. There are superficial parallels, to be sure, but

<sup>70</sup> A. George, "Les miracles de Jésus dans les évangiles synoptiques," *Lumière et Vie* 33 (1957) 7–24; Latourelle, *Miracles of Jesus* 56–58. Because of its wide and early attestation Fuller (*Interpreting the Miracles* 24–29) finds the evidence in favor of the general tradition of exorcisms "little short of overwhelming" and the healing miracles "very strong" (*Interpreting the Miracles* 24–29). More recently G. H. Twelftree has concluded that there is "more than sufficient evidence to affirm that Jesus was an extremely successful exorcist" and that "in many ways Jesus seems to have been a man of his time in that he used readily recognizable techniques" (*Miracles of Jesus*, ed. Wenham and Blomberg, 361–400, at 393).

<sup>71</sup> See Evans, "Authenticity Criteria" 15–16; Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 171–74.

<sup>72</sup> Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* 58–82.

<sup>73</sup> Smith, *Jesus the Magician* 140–52; Crossan, *Historical Jesus* 303–53.

<sup>74</sup> Latourelle, *Miracles of Jesus* 58–60.

<sup>75</sup> For criticisms, see Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 170–72; Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic* 82; Witherington, *Christology of Jesus* 157–60.

there are so many important features missing that few have followed Morton Smith.<sup>76</sup> Scholars have accordingly concluded that Jesus' ministry of miracles was in significant ways unique.<sup>77</sup>

But the criterion of dissimilarity functions in another way as well. Not only are the miracles of Jesus culturally distinctive in important ways, they appear to be only incidental to early Christian preaching. In other words, the miracles and the lessons that they often teach do not regularly advance uniquely Christian ideas. A few do, of course. The Johannine miracles of the water turning into wine (John 2:1–11) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:38–44) advance important Christian doctrines (viz., the soteriological significance of Jesus' death, or "hour of glorification"). But these (relatively late) exceptions prove the basic point.<sup>78</sup> Most of the miracle tradition, especially that found in the earliest sources, does not function in this manner. Jesus casts out demons, cures lepers, raises up the lame. To be sure, some moral lessons are drawn from the miracles. (e.g. Gal 3:5), but they are at the fringes of the Christian kerygma, not its heart.<sup>79</sup> For Paul, the gospel centers on the death and resurrection of Jesus, not his exorcisms or healings. The apologetic found on the lips of the Lukan Peter (Acts 2:22: "a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which he did in your midst") is meant primarily to demonstrate the innocence of Jesus (Acts 2:23: "this Jesus . . . you crucified and killed"), not his messianic credentials. It is his resurrection, not

<sup>76</sup> For criticisms see W. Wink, "Jesus as Magician," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 30 (1974) 3–14; Meyer, *Aims of Jesus* 158; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 165–69; Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic* 115–17; Yamauchi, "Magic or Miracle?" 94–97. J. M. Hull concludes: "Jesus did not think of himself as a magician" (*Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* [Naperville: Allenson, 1974] 144–45). Sanders agrees, saying that Jesus' miracles were such that they were open to differing interpretations, and that critics could view them as acts of magic, if they wished (*Jesus and Judaism* 169). For more on this point, see M. J. Geller, "Jesus' Theurgic Powers: Parallels in the Talmud and Incantation Bowls," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 28 (1977) 141–55.

<sup>77</sup> A. Vögtle, "Jesu Wundertaten vor dem Hintergrund ihrer Zeit," in H. J. Schultz, ed., *Die Zeit Jesu* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1966) 83–90; Eng. trans.: "The Miracles of Jesus against Their Contemporary Background," in Schultz, ed., *Jesus in His Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 96–105; idem, "Wunder," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 10.1257–58.

<sup>78</sup> The miracle tradition has been thoroughly reworked in the Fourth Gospel. The miracles have been theologized as "signs," probably, in my view, as part of the Johannine community's polemic with the synagogue (cf. 1 Cor 1:22: "the Jews require a sign"; Mark 8:12: "Why does this generation seek after a sign?").

<sup>79</sup> It is worth noting that in the one New Testament writing that offers instruction concerning healing (Jas 5:14–15), anointing with oil is prescribed, something that Jesus, so far as our sources tell us, never did.

the miracles (or teaching, for that matter), that stands at the heart of the kerygma (Acts 2:32–36: “This Jesus God raised up. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ”; Rom 1:1–4: “the gospel concerning his Son, who was . . . designated Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead”). Even the aforementioned apostolic deeds of power were not understood as an apologetic for the kerygma, but as an apologetic for one’s claim to apostolic office.

3. *Embarrassment.* Edward Schillebeeckx and John Meier refer to the criterion of “embarrassment,” which calls attention to sayings or actions that were potentially embarrassing to the early Church and/or the evangelists.<sup>80</sup> The assumption here is that such material would not likely be invented or, if it was, be preserved. The preservation of such material, therefore, strongly argues for its authenticity. The baptism of Jesus by John is a prime example of tradition highlighted by this criterion. Mark, the earliest Gospel, records the event with little commentary and apparently with little embarrassment (Mark 1:9). Matthew has the Baptist initially protest, clearly acknowledging Jesus’ superiority (Matt 3:13–15). Luke reports John’s imprisonment and then narrates Jesus’ baptism, perhaps to avoid telling the reader that Jesus was baptized by John (Luke 3:18–21). The Fourth Gospel says that the Baptist hailed Jesus as the promised Coming One (John 1: 29–34) but says nothing of Jesus’ baptism. It appears that as we move from the earliest to the last Gospel this tradition is increasingly filtered, probably in response to a growing discomfort with the original form of the tradition.

A similar filtering process can be detected in several places in the miracle tradition. According to Mark 3:20–22 Jesus’ family “went out to seize him [Jesus], for people were saying, ‘He is mad.’” Assuming that the unity of 3:20–22 is original,<sup>81</sup> people evidently were saying

<sup>80</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (London: Collins; New York: Crossroad, 1979) 93; Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 168–71. Closely related to this criterion is the criterion of “tradition contrary to the evangelists’ editorial tendency”; see C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1967) 56–76; R. N. Longenecker, “Literary Criteria in Life of Jesus Research: An Evaluation and Proposal,” in G. F. Hawthorne, ed., *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 217–29.

<sup>81</sup> See the paragraphing in R. W. Funk, *New Gospel Parallels*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 1.192, and the discussion in Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 1.209–10. Many separate 3:20–21 from 3:22 ff. According to Bultmann (*History of the Synoptic Tradition* 13) and others, Mark 3:20–21, 31–35 may have been connected, with the evangelist inserting 3:22–30. Even if Bultmann is correct, it is likely that the saying that Jesus

this about Jesus because of his exorcisms: "He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons" (v. 22). Although Matthew and Luke retain this accusation, they omit the part about Jesus' family trying to seize him (cf. Matt 12:24; Luke 11:15). It is highly probable that Mark's tradition is authentic, but for obvious reasons the later evangelists wished to sanitize it.<sup>82</sup> Later Mark tells of the unimpressive results of Jesus' ministry in "his own country" (evidently Nazareth and vicinity; cf. Luke 4:16), where again Jesus' family is mentioned (Mark 6:1–6). We are told that Jesus "could do no mighty work there" (v. 5) and that he was amazed at the people's lack of faith (in him). It is difficult to believe that this tradition was invented either by pre-Markan tradents or by the evangelist himself, his secrecy motif notwithstanding.<sup>83</sup> Matthew mitigates the potential embarrassment of the passage by explaining that Jesus "did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief" (Matt 13:58). This version implies that Jesus did do a *few* "mighty works" and that the reason he did not do *many* was because of the people's unbelief (whereas in Mark, Jesus "marveled" because of their unbelief). The Lukan evangelist recasts the story completely, suggesting that the people took offense at Jesus when he implied that he would extend messianic miracles and mercies to Gentiles (Luke 4:16–30).

Two other Markan miracles are simply omitted by the later evan-

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was mad had something to do with his exorcisms; see Smith, *Jesus the Magician* 32–33; Pesch, *Markusevangelium* 1.212.

<sup>82</sup> This tradition receives further support by virtue of its coherence with another story that hints at the tension between Jesus and his family. According to Mark 3:31–35 members of Jesus' family, standing outside of the house in which Jesus is teaching, summon him. Jesus' response borders on disrespect and could imply that there was ill feeling between him and his family: "Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'" Whereas Matthew takes over the story with minor editing (Matt 12:46–50), Luke omits the potentially offensive rhetorical question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (cf. Luke 8:19–21). Pace Bultmann (*History of the Synoptic Tradition* 29–30, 56), the tradition in Mark 3:20–22, 31–35 did not likely originate in the early Church as a saying on the ideal disciple. Why would the early Church invent such a potentially embarrassing vignette in order to have Jesus say something about discipleship?

<sup>83</sup> Bultmann (*History of the Synoptic Tradition* 31) and D. A. Koch (*Die Bedeutung der Wundererzählungen für die Christologie des Markusevangeliums*, Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament 42 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975] 149) think that the saying in 6:4 is authentic but that the story itself is an "imaginary situation" built upon it, perhaps mirroring the "missionary experience of the Church." This is, of course, possible. Judging by Matthean and Lukan redaction, however, it is not at all clear that this story represents the experience of the Church. If it did, why do Matthew and Luke alter it the way they do? On the unity of the saying and the story, see Pesch, *Markusevangelium* 1.316, 321.

gelists. In the first Jesus treats a deaf man by putting his fingers in his ears and by spitting and touching his tongue (Mark 7:31–37). In the second Jesus must make two attempts to restore the sight of a blind man (Mark 8:22–26; cf. vv. 23–24: “Do you see anything? And he looked up and said, ‘I see men; but they look like trees, walking’”). The first story may have been omitted because of its oddness, and perhaps because of its magical connotations,<sup>84</sup> while the second is omitted because it portrays Jesus as struggling to heal.<sup>85</sup> The healing of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter offers a final example (Mark 7:24–30). After initially refusing the woman’s request (“Let the children [of Israel] first be fed, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”), Jesus acquiesces in response to the woman’s intelligent rejoinder (“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs”). The story does not appear in Luke (which is probably not remarkable, since it falls within the large block of Markan material that the Lukan evangelist omits), while in Matthew (15: 21–28) it is touched up (e.g. the woman respectfully addresses Jesus, the disciples urge Jesus to send her away, Jesus approves of her great faith, etc.). Two factors argue strongly for the authenticity of the Markan version. First, the story’s anti-Gentile orientation tells against a late (and Hellenistic) origin. Secondly, Jesus being bested in an argument (and by a Gentile woman at that!), something unparalleled elsewhere in the Gospels, surely argues for authenticity.<sup>86</sup> It is hard to imagine why the early Church would invent such a potentially embarrassing story.

4. *Context and Expectation.* It is not clear that healing miracles occupied an important place in first-century Palestinian messianic expectation. Messianic expectation, as diverse as it was, apparently did not anticipate miracles of the sort and concentration found in the Gos-

<sup>84</sup> Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* 85–86. Because of its supposed magical and thaumaturgical elements K. Kertelge believes the story derives from the Hellenistic church (*Die Wunder Jesu im Markusevangelium: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 23 [Munich: Kösel, 1970] 158). However, touching the disfunctional part of the body and making use of spittle was common enough in Jewish circles (John 9:6, *b. Ber.* 5b; *b. B. Bat.* 126b; *b. Shab.* 108b; cf. *t. Sanh.* 12:10 where spitting and uttering an incantation are condemned). J. M. Hull notes that Matthew consistently edits out material that connotes magic (*Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* [London: SCM; Naperville: Allenson, 1974] 116–19).

<sup>85</sup> V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952) 369; La-tourelle, *Miracles of Jesus* 62.

<sup>86</sup> See the discussion in B. D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible: Jesus’ Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1984) 64–66.



pels.<sup>87</sup> Davidic messianology primarily called for a king who would rule Israel and the nations with justice (Isa 11:1–10; 16:5; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 6:12–14), a king who would obey the Law, drive sinners out of Jerusalem (*Pss. Sol.* 17:21–42), and destroy Israel's enemies (4 Ezra 12:31–33). The Spirit, perhaps even a spirit of prophecy (*Tg. Isa* 11:1–2; *Tg. Ps* 72:1), it was thought, would rest upon the Messiah (Isa 11:1–2; 61:1–2). The Messiah was expected to gather and shepherd the people of Israel (Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24) and redistribute them on the land according to their tribes (*Pss. Sol.* 17:26–28). Qumran speaks of an “anointed [or Messiah] of Israel” (CD 12:23; 19:10–11; 20:1; 1QS 9:11; 1QSa 2:11–12, 14, 20–21), who may even be “hailed as the Son of God” (4QpsDan ar<sup>a</sup> 1:9; 2:1–2; cf. Luke 1:32–33).<sup>88</sup> But nothing is said of miracles. Mosaic messianology, rooted in the promise of Deut 18:15–19 (parts of which are quoted and applied to Jesus; cf. Acts 3:23; 7:37), hoped for a Priest who would serve with righteousness and justice (*T. Sim.* 7:2; *T. Judah* 21:2; *T. Benj.* 9:2; 4QTest. 5–8; cf. 1QS 9:10–11). But again there is no expectation of miracles.

However, this is not to say that miracles would have occasioned surprise. To the extent that Elijah and Elisha provided models for first-century messianic expectation (cf. Luke 4:25–27) there could have been some expectation of miracles.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, it seems that some “sign from heaven” was expected (Mark 8:11–12; cf. John 2:18; 4:48; 6:30; 1 Cor 1:22). Not only was Jesus himself pressed for such a sign, but several of the various prophetic and/or messianic claimants from the time of Herod until the time of Ben Kosiba promised validating signs of one sort or another, often modeled after the Exodus and the Conquest (cf. Mark 13:22).<sup>90</sup> During the administration of Fadus (44–46 C.E.), according to Josephus, “a certain impostor named Theudas persuaded the majority of the populace to take up their possessions and follow him to the Jordan River. He stated that he was a prophet and that at his command the river would be parted and would provide easy

<sup>87</sup> See Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 163: “[S]ubsequent Jewish literature does not indicate that Jews habitually looked for miracles as a sign of the coming end.”

<sup>88</sup> Although there is no mention of “Messiah” in the fragmentary 4QpsDan ar<sup>a</sup>, it is probable that this is the figure in view. Who else could it be?

<sup>89</sup> What role, if any, Elijah played in connection with first-century messianic expectation is not clear. As J. A. Fitzmyer has commented: “[N]either in the OT nor in any other pre-Christian Jewish literature is Elijah ever depicted as the precursor of the Messiah” (*The Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, Anchor Bible 28 [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981] 327). In what sense Elijah was a role model for the awaited Messiah is not much clearer.

<sup>90</sup> Horsley and Hanson rightly regard many of these kingly aspirants as in reality messianic claimants (*Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs* 88–189).

passage" (*Ant.* 20.5.1 §97–98; cf. Acts 5:36). A decade later an anonymous Jew from Egypt rallied to himself a large following by claiming that at his command the walls of Jerusalem would collapse, allowing them to possess the city (*J.W.* 2.13.5 §261–263; cf. Acts 21:38). These and others promised their people "signs" of freedom and salvation (*J.W.* 2.13.4 §259; 7.11.1 §437–438). Simon ben Kosiba also may have promised and possibly even performed signs. Something apparently convinced Rabbi Aqiba that Simon was Israel's Messiah and fulfillment of the star prophecy (Num 24:17; cf. *y. Ta'an.* 4:5), which in the Targums is explicitly messianic. This possibility is indicated elsewhere. According to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.6.2) "Bar Kochebas . . . claimed to be a luminary who had come down to them from heaven." According to Jerome (*Against Rufinus* 3.31) Simon deceived the people with fraudulent miracles. Rabbinic legends tell of Simon's remarkable, if not miraculous, feats in battle (*Lam Rab.* 2:2 §4). In the fifth century one Moses of Crete claimed that at his command the Mediterranean Sea would part and allow Jews to leave Crete and walk to Palestine. The sign did not occur, with the result that many drowned in the sea (Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7.38; 12.33).

In view of these ideas and experiences it seems highly unlikely that a tradition about Jesus' miracles grew up in order to fill out messianic beliefs about Jesus. Messianic beliefs simply did not require a prospective Messiah to heal and exorcize demons.<sup>91</sup> Therefore one should hardly expect early Christians to find it necessary to create such a large number of miracle stories. It is interesting to observe that when Jesus is given the opportunity to offer a sign, the one thing that apparently was expected of agents of salvation, he refuses. This refusal flies in the face of the critical assumption that the miracle stories originated in the Hellenistic church. If the tradition about Jesus' miracles originated in the Hellenistic church, then why not have Jesus perform a sign that dazzles his opponents? Jesus' refusal, which contemporary skeptics and critics would probably have viewed as *inability*—i.e. when put to the test Jesus failed (here we may invoke the criterion of embarrassment), tells strongly against such a critical assumption.

<sup>91</sup> Harvey thinks that Jesus' ministry of miracles was motivated and guided by the cures described in Isa 35:5–6 (*Jesus and the Constraints of History* 111). This could be, but there are two problems: (1) there is no evidence that in the time of Jesus Isa 35:5–6 was understood this way; (2) Jesus' miracles do not correspond exactly with the list. Exorcism, the most conspicuous of Jesus' miracles, is not one of the cures mentioned in Isaiah. I must agree with Sanders that it is more likely that Jesus performed those healings "which came to hand" (*Jesus and Judaism* 163).

5. *Effect.* According to all four Gospels, crowds listened to Jesus and followed him (Mark 2:13; 3:9, 20; 4:1; 5:31; 8:1; 9:14; and parallels). This could be an exaggeration, of course, but in view of the action taken against Jesus it probably is not. Many of the other messiahs and prophets who met violent deaths at the hands of the Romans had also drawn large followings. Smith reasons: “[U]nless Jesus had a large following he would not have been crucified.”<sup>92</sup> Most scholars, therefore, seldom question the veracity of the Gospels on this point. The *effect* of Jesus’ public ministry was the attraction of multitudes. What was the *cause* of this effect? Why did large crowds follow Jesus? An explanation is required.<sup>93</sup> Smith and Sanders believe, and I think rightly, that it was Jesus’ miracles that attracted the crowds (and not his teaching, at least not initially).<sup>94</sup> As Sanders puts it: “But if it is true that large crowds surrounded him in Galilee, it was probably more because of his ability to heal and exorcize than anything else.”<sup>95</sup> I think Smith and Sanders are correct. They reason that it is more likely that miracles, rather than teaching, would have generated large and enthusiastic crowds, crowds that would have alarmed Jewish and Roman authorities. This is corroborated to some extent by the misadventures of persons like Theudas and the Egyptian Jew who would later draw large crowds by promising to perform signs (or miracles).

6. *Coherence.* The miracle tradition also enjoys the support of the criterion of coherence, since several sayings, widely regarded as authentic, discuss or allude to the miracles. Accordingly, the authenticity of the sayings implies the authenticity of the miracle stories. Among these sayings five stand out as having the strongest claim to authenticity. First is Jesus’ reply to the charge that he casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul: “If I cast out demons by the power of Beelzebul, by whose power do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if by the finger [or Spirit] of God I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt 12:27–28; Luke 11:19–20). Bultmann believes that this saying can “claim the highest degree of authenticity which we can make for any saying of Jesus.”<sup>96</sup> As Meyer has pointed out, the “sheer offensiveness of the charge of sorcery” and the “risk of relativizing the exorcisms of Jesus by reference to those of others” are weighty factors that tell in favor of au-

<sup>92</sup> Smith, *Jesus the Magician* 24.

<sup>93</sup> Latourelle calls this the “Criterion of Necessary Explanation [critère de l’explication nécessaire]” (*Miracles of Jesus* 67).

<sup>94</sup> Smith, *Jesus the Magician* 9, 11, 23–24; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 164–65.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 164.

<sup>96</sup> Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* 162.

thenticity.<sup>97</sup> The second passage is the one in which Jesus likens Satan casting out Satan to a kingdom or house divided against itself (Mark 3:24–26). Again, Bultmann classifies this statement among the more certain authentic sayings.<sup>98</sup> Third is the passage in which Jesus likens his battle against Satan as binding a strong man (Mark 3:27). Bultmann thinks that this saying can be ascribed to Jesus with a measure of confidence.<sup>99</sup> The remarkable implication that Satan has already been defeated likely comes from Jesus, not the early Church. The lack of context and explanation of the saying (such as *when* Jesus defeated Satan) suggests that what we have here is an independent and somewhat isolated bit of authentic tradition.<sup>100</sup> Fourth is the passage in which Jesus replies to the Baptist's question: "Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear . . ." (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22–23). Bultmann thinks that the saying may be traced to Jesus, though with some hesitation.<sup>101</sup> In my judgment the authenticity of this saying is very nearly certain, since it is highly unlikely that the early Church would invent an answer to a question in which Jesus' role is called into question ("Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"). The fifth passage is found in the Lukan Gospel: "Behold, I drive out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I complete my course" (Luke 13:32). Despite its single attestation form critics tend to regard it as authentic.<sup>102</sup> In reference to several of the passages just reviewed Taylor rightly comments that "the incidental way in which they tell of 'mighty works' is the best evidence that Jesus wrought them."<sup>103</sup>

7. *Principles of Embellishment.* The observation of features and in some cases patterns of embellishment in later sources provides a measure of corroborating support for the authenticity of some of the mir-

<sup>97</sup> Meyer, *Aims of Jesus* 155.

<sup>98</sup> Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* 105. See also Meyer, *Aims of Jesus* 156.

<sup>99</sup> Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* 105. See also Meyer, *Aims of Jesus* 156.

<sup>100</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield regards Mark 3:22–30 as clearly "based on reliable tradition" (*The Gospel according to St. Mark* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1977] 135).

<sup>101</sup> Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* 128. See also Meyer, *Aims of Jesus* 157.

<sup>102</sup> Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* 162 (though he doubts that the saying was originally directed against Herod Antipas); Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* 35; V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1935) 75, 153. See also Meyer, *Aims of Jesus* 154–55.

<sup>103</sup> Taylor, *Formation of the Gospel Tradition* 120. Taylor also comments in reference to Mark 3:22–26: "The historical value of the narrative stands high" (*The Gospel according to St. Mark* 237).

acles already supported by other criteria. A diachronic comparative study of the miracles of Jesus and his approximate contemporaries illustrates this criterion. For example, the earliest and best attested miracles of Jewish holy men<sup>104</sup> approximate several of the earliest and best attested miracles of Jesus. But in the passing of time these traditions are noticeably embellished. The later, embellished versions of the miracles of the Jewish holy men in a few instances approximate the later, embellished versions of the miracles of Jesus.<sup>105</sup> Most of these embellishments appear to be motivated by theological interests. Rabbinic embellishments usually heighten the piety and scrupulousness of observance of the Oral Law, while Christian embellishments quite often are designed to heighten the divinity of Jesus. The value of these late embellishments lies principally in the contrast that they provide with the earlier stories which have a much stronger claim to authenticity.<sup>106</sup>

One interesting example documents how a given teaching, which may or may not have reflected an actual miracle, came to be embellished with illustrative miracles and sayings. According to the Mishnah, one was not to interrupt his recitation of the Shema' "even if a snake was twisted around his heel" (*m. Ber.* 5:1).<sup>107</sup> The Tosefta provides an example of this halakah: "They related about Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa that once while he was reciting the Prayer, a poisonous lizard bit him, but he did not interrupt [his recitation]. His students went and found it [the lizard] dead at the entrance to its hole. They said, 'Woe to the man who is bitten by a lizard. Woe to the lizard that bit Ben Dosa' " (*t. Ber.* 3:20).<sup>108</sup> It is possible that the tradition in Tosefta is genuine and perhaps explains what gave rise to the mishnaic halakah in the

<sup>104</sup> Such as exorcisms (Eleazar: cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 8.2.5 §46-48), healing (Hanina: cf. *y. Ber.* 5:5; *b. Ber.* 34b; *b. B. Qam.* 50a), and even prayers that affect the weather (Honi: cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.7.1 §22-24; *m. Ta'an.* 3:8; Gamaliel: *b. B. Mesia* 59b; Hanina: cf. *b. Yoma* 53b). The Mishnah refers to Hanina ben Dosa as one of the "men of deeds [*anshe ma'aseh*]" (*Sota* 9:15). In a portion of the *Testimonium Flavianum* that is probably authentic Jesus is called a "doer of amazing deeds [*paradoxōn ergōn poiētēs*]" (*Ant.* 18.3.3 §63); cf. E. Bammel, "Zum Testimonium Flavianum (*Jos. Ant.* 18,63-64)," in O. Betz et al., eds., *Josephus-Studien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974) 9-22.

<sup>105</sup> Such as stretching beams (Hanina: cf. *b. Ta'an.* 25a; Jesus: cf. *Latin Thomas* 11: 1-2; *Greek Thomas A* 13:1-2; *Greek Thomas B* 11:1-3) or finding an unusual supply of food for wife or mother (Hanina: cf. *b. Ta'an.* 24b-25a; Jesus: cf. *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* 20:1-2; see E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. [London: Lutterworth; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963] 1.411-12).

<sup>106</sup> See Latourelle, *Miracles of Jesus* 63.

<sup>107</sup> Trans. from H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933) 5.

<sup>108</sup> Trans. from T. Zahavy, "Berakhot," in J. Neusner, ed., *The Tosefta*, 6 vols. (New York and Hoboken: Ktav, 1977-86) 1.18.

first place. Then again, Tosefta may preserve nothing more than a pious legend about a famous "man of deeds." In the gemara all sorts of imaginative details are added to this story. Hanina is questioned by his pupils ("Master, didn't you feel anything?"); it is noted that a spring of water gushed up from the floor where Hanina had been standing and that by drinking from it while praying he had been spared the effects of the lizard's venom; by way of illustration Hanina places his foot over a lizard's hole to be bitten, with the result that Hanina is unharmed and the lizard is killed; and Hanina is able to draw the moral lesson that "it is not the lizard that kills, it is sin that kills!" (*y. Ber.* 5:1; *b. Ber.* 33a). A roughly parallel trajectory can be observed in the Jesus tradition. In the Gospels we have a saying about authority over evil: "Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you" (Luke 10:19).<sup>109</sup> The spurious ending to Mark's Gospel may very well reflect this saying: "in my name they will cast out demons . . . they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them" (Mark 16:17b–18a). Paul's experience with the serpent may also be an illustration (Acts 28:3–6). Finally, a story that probably originated in the fourth or fifth century may represent yet further development of this tradition: "Now Joseph sent James to gather straw, and Jesus followed after him. And as James gathered straw, a viper bit him, and he fell to the earth as dead from the venom. But when Jesus saw that, he breathed upon his wound, and from that moment James was made whole, and the viper died" (*Latin Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 14:1).<sup>110</sup>

Not only do we have late and obvious fictions, but in the transmission of the texts of the Gospels themselves we are able to observe the infiltration of pious legend and embellishment. One thinks of the sweat of drops of blood and the appearance of an angel (Luke 22:43–45 [omitted by P<sup>75</sup> N<sup>a</sup> A B T W]), the angel that stirs the pool (John 5:4 [omitted by P<sup>66,75</sup> N<sup>B</sup> C\* D]), and the aforementioned appearance of

<sup>109</sup> The authenticity of this saying is much disputed. Bultmann thought that it was a response to an exaggeration of the importance of miracles (*History of the Synoptic Tradition* 158). This line of reasoning, however, is questionable. J. A. Fitzmyer (*The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, Anchor Bible 28A [Garden City: Doubleday, 1985] 859) sees no compelling reason why it cannot be authentic. Jesus' saying may reflect the type of tradition found in *T. Levi* 18:12: "And Beliar shall be bound by him [the coming priest], and he shall give power to his children to tread upon the evil spirits."

<sup>110</sup> Trans. from M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953) 65. The Latin Infancy Gospel of Thomas is preserved in one manuscript that dates from the fifth or sixth century. The same story is found in the Greek Thomas A version of the infancy gospel (16:1–2; see James, 53–5). For discussion of the dates of the Greek, Syriac, and Latin manuscripts, see Hennecke and Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha* 1.388–92.

the risen Christ who promises his disciples that they can pick up serpents and drink poison (Mark 16:9–20 [omitted by NB 2386]). Another likely candidate, though admittedly there are no extant variants, is the story of the open tombs and the resurrection of saints in Jerusalem (Matt 27:52–53), a tradition, probably based on Ezek 37:12–13 and Dan 12:2, that has been inserted awkwardly into its present context. In the so-called apocryphal Gospels which parallel the New Testament Gospels more closely there is evidence of embellishment. The man with the withered hand (cf. Mark 3:1–6 par.) says to Jesus: “I was a mason and earned [my] livelihood with [my] hands; I beseech thee, Jesus, to restore to me my health that I may not with ignominy have to beg for my bread” (*Gospel of the Nazareans* §10; cited by Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 12:13).<sup>111</sup> The man cleansed of his leprosy (cf. Mark 1:40–42) tells Jesus that he got his leprosy by “wandering with lepers and eating with them” (Egerton Papyrus). According to Pseudo-Clement (*Hom.* 2:19; 3:73) the Syro-Phoenician woman (cf. Mark 7:24–30) was named Justa and her daughter Bernice. One of the strangest embellishments is the resurrection account of the *Gospel of Peter*, where the two angels assist Christ from the tomb and the cross follows and speaks in answer to the heavenly voice.

The fifth and final factor that I think has brought about the eclipse of mythology is the realization that an accurate and helpful picture of the historical Jesus cannot emerge if the miracle tradition is ignored or discarded. It is simply impossible to speak meaningfully about the “historical Jesus” if it is a Jesus stripped of what was probably the most distinctive feature of his public ministry—his miracles.<sup>112</sup> If Jesus was not known by his contemporaries to have performed miracles, and if miracles of such quality and quantity were not actually expected of an agent of redemption (whatever one’s messianic views), then how can we account for the sheer preponderance of miracles in the Jesus tradition?<sup>113</sup> In my judgment the miracle stories belong to the

<sup>111</sup> Trans. from Hennecke and Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha* 1.148.

<sup>112</sup> Meyer senses this when he says that it is “a mistake in historical interpretation to adopt a minimizing attitude toward the miracles of Jesus” (*Aims of Jesus* 158). Crossan agrees (*Historical Jesus* 303–53).

<sup>113</sup> Kee concludes that “the phenomenon of healing in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament is a central factor in primitive Christianity, and was so from the beginning of the movement. It is not a later addendum to the tradition, introduced in order to make Jesus more appealing to the Hellenistic world, but was a major feature of the Jesus tradition from the outset. Indeed, it is almost certainly a part of the historical core of that tradition, even though it is likely to have been embellished in the process of transmission” (*Medicine, Miracle and Magic* 128).

same "bedrock" of tradition to which scholars have in the past so confidently assigned the parables.<sup>114</sup>

#### ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

Our survey suggests that at least four significant developments have taken place in life-of-Jesus research. Together they strongly contribute to the conclusion that a major shift in recent years has indeed occurred. This shift, moreover, does not appear to be faddish, but deeply rooted and widely held.

First, one of the most apparent features in recent life-of-Jesus research is the emphasis on *continuity*. Jesus is viewed as part of Judaism. His Jewishness, his Israelite heritage, his commitment to the Law and sacred institutions, and his place within the political realities of his time are neither minimized nor caricatured. This has resulted in more realistic pictures of Judaism and, concomitantly, of Jesus himself.<sup>115</sup> Because of the greater care in this aspect of research the putative similarities and differences between Jesus and his contemporaries carry much more conviction. Jesus was not a bolt out of the blue who opposed Israel's established and God-given institutions.<sup>116</sup>

Secondly, there is also a remarkable amount of *consensus* in recent scholarship. The Gospels are viewed as yielding significant historical data. Jesus' mission and ministry seem to make sense against what we know of first-century Palestine. The origin of the Church is now understood as having its roots in Jesus' ministry (and not simply in the Easter faith of the disciples). That miracles played a role in Jesus' ministry is no longer seriously contested. Perhaps one of the most significant areas of consensus involves the factors lying behind Jesus' crucifixion. Virtually all agree that the Romans were the principal players and that Jewish involvement and responsibility have been greatly exaggerated.

Thirdly, *theology* is no longer the primary driving force behind life-of-Jesus research. Theological agenda remain operative, to be sure, but the question of "what is relevant" tends to be deliberately bracketed

<sup>114</sup> Crossan has concluded that "Jesus was both an exorcist and healer" (*Historical Jesus* 332). However, his preference for describing Jesus as a magician and his miracles as magic blurs the distinction between magic and miracle in antiquity.

<sup>115</sup> See M. Wilcox, "Jesus in the Light of His Jewish Environment," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.25.1 (1982) 131-95, as well as the studies by Borg, Charlesworth, Chilton, Crossan, Horsely, Sanders, and Vermes noted above.

<sup>116</sup> Not surprisingly, a Jewish scholar, J. Klausner was one of the first to underscore this fact (*Yeshu ha-Notzri*, 2 vols. [Jerusalem: Stybel, 1922]; Eng. trans.: *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* [London and New York: Macmillan, 1925] 369); the fact is alluded to with approval by Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism* 3).



off.<sup>117</sup> The historical Jesus may be relevant to Christian faith, but life-of-Jesus research can be undertaken without that question in mind.<sup>118</sup>

Fourthly, *philosophical factors* no longer drive life-of-Jesus research to the extent that they once did. Categorical assertions about the laws of science, doctrinaire philosophies of history and historiography, and naive distinctions between modern and ancient worldviews have rightly been called into question. The result of this new criticism is that the neat distinction between “myth” and “history”—a distinction assumed valid and whose boundaries have been hotly pursued since Reimarus—cannot be maintained.

In conclusion, then, we are in what I think should be understood as a post-mythological era in life-of-Jesus research. What is taking place has some roots in past research, to be sure. But research, methods, assumptions, and conclusions are fundamentally different from those of previous generations. We have been taught to think of the quest of the historical Jesus as involving three more or less distinct historical phases. All of us have grown accustomed to speak of an “Old Quest,” a “No Quest,” and a “New Quest,”<sup>119</sup> as if these represent truly distinctive eras in life-of-Jesus research. But these “quests” really amount to no more than three consecutive stages in a single and rather coherent era. It was the mythological era, the era whose agenda was all but dictated by the perceived problem of mythology. The earlier stage of the quest was characterized by a search for a myth-free history. For Reimarus this meant that myth had been deliberately superimposed upon history, i.e. the disciples of Jesus were liars and deceivers. For Paulus and others it meant that myth had accidentally become commingled with history, i.e. the disciples had been deceived. Strauss, however, was a major exception to these views of myth and history. For him myth was the very point of the story (an unhistorical story), the mode by which the religious truths of Jesus and Christianity were communicated. Similarly, Bultmann a century later, and representa-

<sup>117</sup> Note the way this is discussed in Meier, *Marginal Jew* 4–6.

<sup>118</sup> This is not to imply that theology has no stake in life-of-Jesus research. On the contrary, as a Christian I think that it does; and the ongoing theological debates are of great importance. But “life-of-Jesus” research, as opposed to “Christology,” is not, or at least should not be, controlled by a theological confession or agenda. Life-of-Jesus research is a historical-exegetical task; it is not theology. Theologians, of course, have every right to participate in the dialogue, but they cannot expect their theological interests to decide historical questions, any more than personal feelings about Socrates should influence historical judgments about Socrates’ life and thought.

<sup>119</sup> See, e.g., the survey in W. B. Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982); and in C. A. Evans, “The Historical Jesus and Christian Faith: A Critical Assessment of a Scholarly Problem” *Christian Scholars Review* 18 (1988) 48–63.

tive of the second stage, believed that myth was not to be discarded, but was to be interpreted. According to him, a myth-free history was impossible (and pointless). This approach characterized much of the 20th-century quest, including the third stage, whether Bultmann's conclusions were accepted or not.

In view of these considerations, I think that it is fair to say that the earlier and later phases of the Quest of the historical Jesus interacted with essentially the same agenda: that of myth. Today, however, this is no longer the case; myth has ceased to be an item of importance. In my judgment this has taken place primarily because the miracle tradition is no longer the stumbling block that it once was. The scholarly assumption now seems to be that a realistic, relatively myth-free historical picture of Jesus can, and does, emerge from the Gospels. What makes today's scholarship so different is that it does not find it necessary to formulate a theology or hermeneutic that deals with myth.<sup>120</sup> Backgrounds research, form criticism, redaction criticism, and other forms of literary criticism continue to make important contributions. Life-of-Jesus research could not proceed without them. But assumptions and conclusions are fundamentally different from those of previous generations. And they are different primarily because of a substantially altered perspective of what myth is and what relevance it has for biblical study. Therefore, I believe that it is not an exaggeration to describe the current scholarly mood as representing a substantial break with the past.

<sup>120</sup> Perhaps it is unnecessary to point this out, but the abandonment of the mythological agenda does not point to a new conservatism. In no way does the current life-of-Jesus research reflect historical exegesis that is less critical. In my judgment, the current assumptions and methods are *more critical*, in that they are not driven by questionable theological and philosophical agenda. The results of Bultmann and his pupils often reflected considerable skepticism, but skepticism is not to be confused with criticism.