The Jesus Project

CSER's Historical Inquiry

R. Joseph Hoffmann

Sometimes, jokes mirror reality. Here's one that circulated through the halls of Harvard Divinity School in 1976. It's about the famous New Testament theologian Rudolph Bultmann, called (wrongly) the father of "demythologizing" Scripture.

The scene is Jerusalem in 1947. A team of Vatican archeologists discovers a burial site close to Golgotha, the "place of the skull," where Jesus was supposedly crucified. Among fragments of ossuary and skeletal remains, they find a crudely engraved rectangular tablet, worn thin by the centuries but still bearing an easy-to-read inscription in Greek: "Here we have laid the body of our master, Jesus the Nazarene, the one we thought was the messiah."

A junior member of the team races into the city, places a call to Rome, and manages to speak to the pope's secretary. A moment later, the pope comes on the line: "Are you certain?" asks the pope. "Might it not be a hoax?"

"No hoax, your Holiness," says the archeologist. "Soon the news will go all around the world—the Arab students digging with us will not be able to keep this quiet."

The pope thinks for a moment, then, in a tone of resignation, tells his secretary to phone Professor Rudolph Bultmann in his office at the University of Marburg. "Are you sure, your Holiness? The Protestants have quite as much to lose from this discovery as we do." But the secretary relents, and a moment later, Pius XII is speaking to Bultmann.

"So," says the pope, "I'm afraid I must give you some bad news, professor. We have today discovered outside Jerusalem the site of what is almost certainly the burial place and the remains of our Lord and Savior, Jesus of Nazareth."

The pause is long. Then Bultmann says, chuckling: "You mean he really existed?"

How hard we laugh at this joke depends a little on what we know of the history that makes it funny. The idea that the life of Jesus is basically a concoction of ancient religious myths, some Jewish and some not, goes back as far as the eighteenth century, when Hermann Samuel Reimarus penned his famous but now nonextant *Apologia*. Reimarus was no atheist, but his attack on the Gospels was scathing. He denied not only the "super-naturalistic" elements of the Gospels, already crumbling under the weight of Unitarian and deist critiques, but also that any revealed religion *could* possess a universal meaning or count as a compendium for ethics and morality. Christianity, in particular, could not be the universal religion because many of its truths were unintelligible to reasonable men: "It abounds in error as to matters of fact, contradicts human experience, reason and morals, and is one tissue of folly, deceit, enthusiasm, selfishness and crime," Reimarus wrote. "The design of the writers of the New Testament, as well as that of Jesus, was not to teach true rational religion, but to serve their own selfish ambitions, in promoting which they exhibit an amazing combination of conscious fraud and enthusiasm."

By 1835, one of Reimarus's greatest antagonists, David Friedrich Strauss, published his distinguished *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*), which earned Strauss the nickname "Iscariot" among members of German theological faculties. For Strauss, the Gospels were "mytho-poetic," driven by the religious needs of a primitive religious community that had no interest in producing a biography of Jesus. If there was a Jesus of history, Strauss finally came to think (*The Old Faith and the New,* 1872), he was a fanatic whose prophecies were mistaken, whose death was unexpected, and whose failed mission was followed by mass hallucinations, Elvis-style, among followers who had fallen into depression and deep denial—outcomes that the Gospels record as "appearances" of a risen Jesus. For Strauss, a century of biblical criticism had brought to an end the "Christian era" as Europe had once known it: "We can no longer believe in this absurd nonsense," he wrote. "My conviction is, if we were to speak as honest and upright men, we are no longer Christians."

If Strauss raised the question of the historicity of a Jesus buried beneath blankets of wishful theological thinking, it took another Hegelian, Bruno Bauer, to tease out the implications of radical criticism. Bauer was deprived of his teaching post at Bonn in 1842 for arguing that the original Gospel was the work of a single author who lived during the reign of Hadrian (117–138 C.E.). Confessing in 1852 that he had lost confidence in his original aim of separating the "person of Jesus from the inanity to which the evangelists had reduced it," Bauer challenged even the authorship of the four "great epistles" of Paul—the ones left standing even after the most severe critical techniques had been applied to the text: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians. By this time, Bauer pointed forward to the beginning of the so-called thoroughgoing skeptical hypothesis: the theory that Jesus of Nazareth was the creation of a religious community in search of its ideal savior and redeemer and that the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, had never lived.

Following Schweitzer's inimitable survey of the "life of Jesus"-research (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, 1906), theological scholarship effectively suppressed the radical hypothesis of German and Dutch radicals—the "myth theorists"—who followed in Bauer's

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footsteps. A quiet exception was the Bremen pastor and scholar Albert Kalthoff, who bravely suggested in 1902 that *either* Jesus of Nazareth never lived or, if he did, he had been but one of dozens of Jewish messianic figures engaged in preaching God's judgment to his generation—yet another in the dull list of failed messiahs. Whatever the case, the story of Jesus as it stands today is the story of how an image of "the Christ" came into being, Kalthoff argued, a biography of the community and not of Jesus. Furthermore, Kalthoff challenged the by-then-familiar Protestant approach to "doing" history, which obliged the scholar-theologian to assume "an original pure principle" (the historical Jesus) and "an immediate declension from it" in the form of the early Church. Kalthoff's notion that the Church cannot be separated from the earliest image of Jesus—indeed, that it was the Church that *drew* the picture in the first place—was deadly for the way New Testament scholarship was used to doing business, and still does business. The title of a standard text by Boston University Professor Paul Frederickson reflects this: *From Jesus to Christ*—the former a real, historical individual, the latter a product of the Church, the maker of legends that disguise the particulars of his identity, message, and worldview.

The so-called nonhistoricity theories included a number of interesting and absurd attempts to locate the "master myth" behind the New Testament documents. But these would be overshadowed by other developments in New Testament studies at the start of the twentieth century. Especially influential were the various quests for the historical Jesus, beginning with Schweitzer's indictment of the Gospels as "dogmatic history." Nevertheless, on his view, they still served as history enough for one to read out of them the biography of a messianic, apocalyptic preacher who believed the world and its inhabitants stood under the verdict of a God sickened by sin and ready to bring the dome of heaven crashing down on unrepentant heads. This "eschatological world view," Schweitzer believed, was so strange to modern consciousness that Jesus himself would seem alien to us if he reappeared. Christianity had lost sight of the apocalyptic worldview and so had lost touch with the Jesus of history. "The whole history of Christianity down to the present day," he wrote, "the real history of it, is based on the delay of the parousia [second coming], the non-occurrence of the parousia, the abandonment of eschatology, and the progress and completion of the de-eschatologizing of religion." Yet, Schweitzer and his successors, however radical their views, remained firmly established in their belief that an historical figure stood at the beginning of the process: after all, it had been *his* views that were wrong, his prophecies that had gone unfulfilled. It was as though the only way to explain the origins of Christianity was to believe in a Jesus who had been sadly mistaken, and for that one needs to postulate a mistake-maker.

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By mid-century, Rudolph Bultmann was tacitly accepting the "disjunction" between the "Jesus of history" and the "Church's Christ" (a piece of theological jargon on the lips of every first-year divinity student by the 1940s). Many of the Bultmannians who succeeded their master, such as Ernest Kaesemann and James Robinson (the American editor of the Coptic Gnostic gospels from Upper Egypt)—clung with equal firmness to the "bare datum of Jesus' historical existence," though for reasons often expressed in contradictory terms. Between 1945 and the birth of the new millennium, the energy and enterprise of New Testament studies was chiefly devoted to Kaesemann's challenge: enlarging the data of the life of Jesus to include information that might shed light on the contours and context of an historical existence.

The new quests with their new questions were helped, hindered, sensationalized, and ultimately dead-ended by the promise of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Khirbet Qumran in 1947 and the Nag Hammadi materials (the Gnostic gospels), discovered in 1945. From these we learned that Christianity was a complex phenomenon, religiously; that so-called orthodox Christianity emerged as one option among many possible religious outcomes in the toss and pitch of Palestinian syncretism; that the books of the New Testament were canonized (i.e., recognized by important bishops) not because of their internal rectitude or accuracy but in an effort to put a stop to the factory-style production of gospels, letters, apocalypses, and assorted other writings—in short, that the canonical Jesus was the solution to the crisis of the proliferation of Jesuses, which the church father Irenaeus compared to "so many mushrooms sprouting up everywhere" in the garden of God. For those taught to believe Christianity was a lone star shining in the black sky of a pagan night, the possibility that it was really one point of light among thousands of both larger and smaller stars was potentially devastating—especially to Christian exclusivists who believed in a Jesus who claimed to be the way, the truth, and the light of life. For the historically inclined and the merely curious, these new materials represented an overdue repast after years of starvation, and they approached the possibility of rethinking and reconfiguring Jesus like Klondike speculators frantic to stake a claim.

It is pointless to list the dog's breakfast of Jesuses that came from these quests—the magician, cynic, rabbi, outcast, peasant, bandit, revolutionary, prophet—and the combination of any two of the above. As John Dominic Crossan diagnosed in 1991, having produced his own minority opinion concerning Jesus, "It seems we can have as many Jesuses as there are exegetes . . . exhibiting a stunning diversity that is an academic embarrassment." But Crossan's caveat had been expressed more elegantly a hundred years before by the German scholar Martin Kaehler: "The entire life of Jesus movement," he argued, was based on misperceptions "and is bound to end in a blind alley . . .

Christian faith and the history of Jesus repel each other like oil and water."

Given the outlawing of the question of the historical Jesus, it is hardly surprising that the so-called Jesus Seminar (founded in 1985) came into being without seriously questioning the existence of its subject. The Seminar practiced a theologically driven sort of history, heavily tinctured by the politics of scholars who had come of age in the late twentieth century. This looked radical to evangelicals and fundamentalists, courageous to liberal Christians and skeptics. Both the anxiety and the appreciation were misplaced. In the end, the Seminar simply turned the historical Jesus into a clay figure whose size was determined by the various contexts the members imposed on him. At its peak in 2000, associates of the Seminar had produced useful studies of Q, the so-called sayings gospel underlying the canonical Matthew and Luke; attempted a latter-day enshrinement of the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas (thought by some to be as old as versions of the canonical gospels); and tried to establish a "core" of Jesus' sayings based on established critical procedures that emphasized skepticism in the acceptance of any given passage or saying.

By the end of their most visible period in 2000, the members had pared the sayings of Jesus down to 18 percent of those attributed to him in the New Testament and pictured him as a wandering teacher of "wisdom" who preached in riddles and parables about a God of love who preferred sinners to the wealthy, comfortable, and wise of the world. Gone, by and large, was the utterly mistaken eschatological prophet who preached the end of the world and never expected to found a church—much less a seminar—in his name.

The Jesus Seminar was famous for all the wrong reasons—its voting method (marbles), the reductionist and sometimes posturing aims of its members, the public style of its meetings, even its openly defiant stance against the claims of miracles in the Gospels—including the resurrection of Jesus. Except for the marbles and the members, none of this was new. The use of additional sources to create fewer sayings and the use of context as though it provided content were at least innovative. But the Jesus who emerged from these scholarly travails was so diminished that—as I wrote in a Free Inquiry article in 1993—he could not exist apart from his makers: "The Jesus of the Westar project is a talking doll with a questionable repertoire of thirty-one sayings. Pull a string and he blesses the poor."

What the Seminar had tacitly acknowledged without acknowledging the corollary is that over 80 percent of "Jesus" had been fictionalized by the Gospel writers. That is to say that, if we are to judge a man's life by his sayings, the greater portion of the literary artifacts known as the Gospels is fictional. If we are to judge by actions, then what actions survived historical criticism? Not the virgin birth, the Transfiguration, the healing of the sick, the purely magical feats like in Cana, or the multiplication of loaves and fishes. The Resurrection had quietly been sent to the attic by theologians in the nineteenth century. The deeds—except, perhaps, the attack on the Temple (Mark 11:15–19)—had preceded the words to the dustbin years before, yet scholars insisted the historical figure was untouched. Only faith could explain this invulnerability to harm.

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On a pleasant day in January 2007, at the University of California, Davis, the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER) asked the question that had been in quest of a serious answer for over a hundred years: Did Jesus exist? The CSER fellows, invited guests, present and former members of the Jesus Seminar, and a wide variety of interested and engaged attendees applauded roundly after three days of lectures and discussions on the subject—appropriately—"Scripture and Skepticism." The Jesus Project, as CSER has named the new effort, is the first methodologically agnostic approach to the question of Jesus' historical existence. But we are not neutral, let alone willfully ambiguous, about the objectives of the project itself. We believe in assessing the quality of the evidence available for looking at this question *before* seeing what the evidence has to tell us. We do not believe the task is to produce a "plausible" portrait of Jesus prior to considering the motives and goals of the Gospel writers in telling his story. We think the history and culture of the times provide many significant clues about the character of figures similar to Jesus. We believe the mixing of theological motives and historical inquiry is impermissible. We regard previous attempts to rule the question out of court as vestiges of a time when the Church controlled the boundaries of permissible inquiry into its sacred books. More directly, we regard the question of the historical Jesus as a testable hypothesis, and we are committed to no prior conclusions about the outcome of our inquiry. This is a statement of our principles, and we intend to stick to them.

The Jesus Project will run for five years, with its first session scheduled for December 2007. It will meet twice a year, and, like its predecessor, the Jesus Seminar, it will hold open meetings. Unlike the Seminar, the Project members will not vote with marbles, and we will not expand membership indefinitely: the Project will be limited to fifty scholars with credentials in biblical studies as well as in the crucial cognate disciplines of ancient history, mythography, archeology, classical studies, anthropology, and social history.

At the end of its lease, the Jesus Project will publish its findings. Those findings will not be construed as sensational or alarming; like all good history, the project is aiming at a probable reconstruction of the events that explain the beginning of Christianity—a man named Jesus from the province of Galilee whose life served as the basis for the beginning of a movement, or a sequence of events that led to the Jesus story being propagated throughout the Mediterranean. We find both conclusions worthy of contemplation, but as we live in the real world—of real causes and outcomes—only one can be true. Our aim, like Pilate's (John 18:38), is to find the truth.