Part Three

FAITH AND REASON
HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

Since the seventeenth century scholars have aspired to write objective histories of Jesus. It has been hard for them to do. One major obstacle, even in accounts that have achieved the status of standard texts, has been overcoming ordinary bias. W. Boussett, the author of a widely used text that was published originally in 1913 and reprinted as recently as 1966, is a case in point. He contrasted Jesus and Judaism as follows:

On the one hand was the artificiality of a hair-splitting and barren erudition, on the other the fresh directness of the layman and the son of the people; here was the product of long generations of misrepresentation and distortion, there was simplicity, plainness, and freedom; here a clinging to the petty and the insignificant, a burrowing in the dust, there a constant dwelling upon the essential and a great inward sense of reality; here the refinement of casuistry, formula- and phrase-mongering, there the straightforwardness, severity, and pitilessness of the preacher of repentance; here a language which was scarcely to be understood, there the inborn power of the mighty orator; there the letter of the law and here the living God.”

E. P. Sanders has called Boussett’s comparison “a fairy tale” that was dictated primarily by theology and has little to do with historical scholarship. Understandably, contemporary academic historians, such as Sanders, have wanted to distance themselves not only from such
apologetics but from theology altogether. Many of them, especially recently, believe that they have done so. Sanders too, as we shall see, believes that he has done so. But on the plausible assumption that the denial of a theological claim itself involves a theological commitment, Sanders is mistaken. And so are the others mistaken.

The question at issue has implications that go well beyond the history of Jesus per se or, for that matter, even beyond religious history. It has implications, for instance, for such fields as the history of magic and the anthropology of shamanism. And since nonacademic history is such a ubiquitous part of our lives, it also has implications for the deeply existential issue, as we try to understand ourselves and the world, of how open we can be or should be to the possibility that we have been influenced in “non-natural” or at least exotic ways (by voodoo or angels, for instance). Can we be open-minded without being empty-minded? That is, if we do not believe in exotic sources of influence on our lives, can we suspend that disbelief without abandoning our critical standards? And even if we can, should we? These are large, unruly questions. For the time being, then, I want to return to our consideration of the quest for the historical Jesus, but without forgetting that what we decide in this limited domain has broader implications.

J. D. Crossan

In the two books by Crossan that we considered, he follows the same supposedly secular approach. In the later book, as we have seen, he asks you, the reader, to suppose that you wanted to know not what early Christians wrote about Jesus but what you would have seen and heard if you had been there as a more or less neutral observer of Jesus. He asks, What if you wanted “to move behind the screen of creedal interpretation and, without in any way denying or negating the validity of faith, give an accurate but impartial account of the historical Jesus as distinct from the confessional Christ?” Doing that, he says, is his goal.

Has Crossan succeeded in writing about Jesus “without in any way denying or negating the validity of faith”? In Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, he makes the following remarks:

- “I understand the virginal conception of Jesus to be a confessional statement about Jesus’ status and not a biological statement about Mary’s body.”
- “Since between 95 and 97 percent of the Jewish state was illiterate at the time of Jesus, it must be presumed that Jesus also was illiterate.”
- “The divine origins of Jesus are, to be sure, just as fictional or mythological as those of Octavius.”
- “I presume that Jesus, who did not and could not cure that disease or any other one, healed the poor man’s illness by refusing to accept the disease’s ritual uncleanness and social ostracization.”
- “I propose that other [miracle] stories in the gospels” are “not about Jesus’ physical power over the world but about the apostles’ spiritual power over the community.”

In my view, in assuming that Jesus could not have been born of a virgin, was probably illiterate, and could not have performed miracles, Crossan, in effect, has assumed that Jesus was neither God—by which I mean a being whose knowledge and power are unlimited—nor divinely empowered. If Jesus had been God or divinely empowered, then he might have been able to do the things that Crossan assumes he could not do. If I am right about this, then the question is whether in Crossan’s assuming that Jesus could not do any of these things, and thus was neither God nor divinely empowered, he has in any way denied or negated the validity of faith.

How one answers will depend on what one means by denying or negating the validity of faith. I assume that if a person of faith, because of his or her faith, assumes, asserts, or implies one thing—say, that Jesus was God or divinely empowered—and someone else either by assumption, assertion, or implication denies that very same thing, then the person who does the denying has in some way denied or negated the validity of the other’s faith. Granted, the denier may have denied or negated the other’s faith only temporarily and/or methodologically, say, for the purpose of composing a secular history of Jesus. Even so, the antifaith person has in some way, and it would seem in a fairly important way, denied or negated the validity of the other’s faith. Thus Crossan has not succeeded in doing what he set out to do.
Assume, for the sake of argument, that some historian has denied or negated the validity of someone's faith only temporarily and methodologically, for the purpose of composing a secular history of Jesus, and that the historian leaves open the option of letting that person's faith back in later. This seems to be what Crossan wants to do. For instance, in his remarks on the uses to which he thinks Christians should put secular histories of Jesus, including his own history, which come as addenda at the very end of each of his two books, he says, in brief, that Christian belief is "an act of faith in the historical Jesus as the manifestation of God." He assumes that there will always be divergent accounts of the historical Jesus and that there will always be divergent Christ's built upon these accounts. But, he says, "the structure of Christianity will always be: this is how we see Jesus—then as Christ—now, and that each generation of Christians must make its best historical judgment about who Jesus was then and, on that basis, decide what that reconstruction means as Christ now."

The key words in these remarks are "on that basis." Crossan's view is, first, that whatever ideas the best secular historians have about who Jesus was as a historical person should be the point of departure for Christians' views about who Jesus is as Christ and, second, that the transition from Jesus to Christ is the work of faith, which he allows may be perfectly valid. But these sentiments, which seem meant to be conciliatory, leave a crucial question unanswered: What role, if any, should the secular quest for the historical Jesus play in determining Christians' views about the historical Jesus—that is, about Jesus-then? Crossan suggests that secular historians should produce candidate portraits of Jesus-then, and that these should then exercise some sort of constraint on what sort of Christ-now Christians make out of Jesus-then. But it is not obvious that Christians should go to secular historians for their portraits of Jesus-then or, even if they do, that these should constrain them in any way in their elaborating a Christ as the focus of their religious belief. I am not saying that Crossan is wrong in his apparent view about how Christians ought to proceed, but merely that it is not obvious that he is right. And while he may be right, he has not given us any reason to think that he is right. That is, he has not argued for his view, but merely asserted it.

In a book that Sanders wrote with Margaret Davies on how to study the Synoptic Gospels, he stresses that secular historians study the New Testament not to proclaim or denounce the Christian faith, and not for purposes of worship, but objectively. They aim "at disinterested inquiry," he says, where "disinterested" means "not [being] committed to conclusions in advance of the study of the evidence," and hence they cannot aim "to establish the truth of Christianity" or to establish "the truth of one version of it over another," but "must study with open minds."

What I want to suggest, of course, is that Sanders is in fact committed to conclusions in advance of the study of the evidence. I say this not as a criticism, but merely because it is a fact, and one that needs to be taken into account in assessing the relative merits of secular and religious histories of Jesus. Secular historians, like all historians, bring to their study of the historical evidence a certain framework of real possibilities. It is only within this framework, if anywhere, that they are genuinely open-minded. What lies outside this framework has already been excluded from serious consideration.

As we have seen, in the later of the two history books by Sanders that we considered, he says that "the plan of God is difficult for a historian to study" and that consequently he "cannot deal with the question" of whether the theological views of New Testament authors are true. Presumably by this he means that he intends to leave the question open. But does he leave it open? One of the theological views of the authors of the New Testament Gospels was the conviction that Jesus was God or divinely empowered. Does Sanders leave open the question of whether that conviction is true?

In my view, he does not—at least for the purposes of his historical study, he does not. Instead, he denies that Jesus was God or divinely empowered, as, for instance, in the following remarks:

- "The view that Jesus died for grace thus ends with sheer invention about what would constitute an issue in first-century Judaism. . . . [It] is basically opposed to seeing Jesus as a first-century Jew, who thought like others, spoke their language, was concerned about things which concerned them,
and got into trouble over first-century issues. It is thus bad history. Though I am no theologian I suspect that it is bad theology.”

- “Jesus did not expect the end of the world in the sense of destruction of the cosmos. He expected a divine, transforming miracle. As a devout Jew, he thought that God had previously intervened in the world in order to save and protect Israel.”
- “These partial overlaps between Jesus and other Jews of his time... help us understand Jesus.”
- “Everyone, including Jesus and his followers, believed that God gave the law to Moses and that he had inspired the other scriptures as well.”
- “My own assumption about such [miracle] stories is that many of the ‘incredible’ ones are based on wishful thinking, others on exaggeration, and only a very few on the conscious wish to deceive.”

Obviously, Sanders has assumed, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that Jesus believed whatever most other Jews in his time and circumstances believed. And he has assumed that the miracle stories are false. But if Sanders had left open the real possibility that Jesus was either God or divinely empowered, there would be no non-theological reason to make such assumptions. Hence Sanders must have assumed that Jesus was neither God nor divinely empowered.

Is any scholar bothered by the fact that many secular historians interpret Jesus on the basis of what I am calling methodological naturalism? The answer is, yes, some are bothered, and understandably so. Ben Witherington, for instance, a religiously conservative historian, is a case in point. He says that he finds the discussion of miracles in Sanders’s and Crossan’s books “rather frustrating”:

[Sanders] argues that some of the claimed miracles are based on exaggeration (a psychosomatic illness is seen as something more, and thus the cure is seen as miraculous), some on wishful thinking, and a few, but only a few, on the conscious wish to deceive. He also argues that those “miracles” that actually happened are things that we cannot yet explain because of ignorance of the range of natural causes, because of lack of scientific knowledge. Presumably, then, in Sanders’ view those actual miracles that Jesus performed were simply manipulations of presently unknown natural causes.

Witherington continues:

These explanations may work for some of the exorcisms, or some of the unverifiable illnesses (a person with an internal problem), but they certainly do not explain things like the healing of the blind, or of the deformed, or of those with impurities of the skin and the like, and it certainly does not explain the raising of the dead, which is one of the best and most frequently attested motifs in the Gospels. If Jesus did not really heal these people, then when they went to report to the authorities it would surely have been obvious to them that the person was not well. If on the other hand he did heal them, are we to attribute to Jesus a scientific knowledge of cures and natural healing principles that have escaped other doctors in the last two thousand years? Is it not easier to believe that perhaps God does intervene in human lives in ways we would call miraculous? In view of how little we know about our universe, do we really know that nothing can happen without a “natural” cause?

For better or for worse, there seems to be no room in Sanders’s approach for admitting that, for all we know, sometimes Jesus did cure people miraculously.

- John Meier

As we have seen, in questions of theology in general and of miracles in particular, Meier bends over backwards not to step on anyone’s toes:

- “[I]t is not my intention here or elsewhere in this book to make the theological claim that Jesus actually worked miracles. It is sufficient for the historian to know that Jesus performed deeds that many people, both friends and foes, considered miracles.”
- “My major point is that a decision such as ‘God has worked a miracle in this particular healing’ is actually a theological, not a historical, judgment. A historian may examine claims about miracles, reject those for which there are obvious natural explanations, and record instances where the historian can find no natural explanation. Beyond that, a purely historical judgment cannot go.”
Methodological Naturalism

We have seen that even with the best of intentions it is difficult for historians of Jesus to avoid being methodological naturalists (which implies that they are methodological atheists as well). Why is it so difficult? Other secular scientists, it may seem, can be theologically neutral. Why must only secular historians be closet methodological atheists? The answer is that other scientists also are closet atheists.

If this is not obvious, think back to the earliest beginnings of scientific philosophy in the West. Consider the first steps that were taken toward what today we would call a scientific approach. One of the very first such steps was taken by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (ca. 540–470 B.C.E.) when he began using the Greek word kosmos in a new way. He was followed in this by the physiologoi, who were sixth- and fifth-century B.C.E. philosophers from Greece and Asia Minor. Previously kosmos had meant an arranged, beauty-enhancing order. Heraclitus, and then the physiologoi, used it to mean a natural system that is closed to supernatural interference. Along with other thinkers of the time, they believed that the physis of a thing, that is, its stable characteristics, set limits both on what it can do and on what can happen to it. Whereas these other thinkers made an exception in the case of supernatural intervention, Heraclitus and the physiologoi refused to make this exception. That is, they made the world into a cosmos by retaining in their conception of the world the physis of things and eliminating everything else. Historians of science often characterize that decision, which was crucial to the origins of science, in heroic terms. Gregory Vlastos, for instance, said of it that “for the first time in history man had achieved a perception of a rational universe” in which the destiny of everything is determined solely by its physis. On this point, he continued, the physiologoi stood united, “a handful of intellectuals against the world.”

No doubt it did not occur to the physiologoi to adopt their secular point of view only methodologically. Surely they also adopted it substantively. That is, in all likelihood, they did not just adopt it for the purpose of studying the world but also believed that only what is revealed from such a naturalistic perspective is actually real. Admittedly, their having adopted a secular point of view, even if only methodologically, was a major advance toward natural science. Even so, as a substantive thesis, their postulate went well beyond...
anything they could prove. There were many things the physiologoi could not explain. For all they knew, some of these unexplained happenings resulted from "supernatural" intervention. As a matter of secular faith, they believed that none of them did. But that was something they merely believed, not something they had good reason to think was actually true. The physiologoi were thus the first authors of a kind of secular, antitheological faith—the first, but, as we have seen, not the last. Ever since, scientists and scientifically minded historians, at least for the purpose of doing science and history, have excluded supernatural intervention from the world. The question I want to consider is whether this is the only responsible way for scientists in general and scientifically minded historians in particular to proceed.

Many feel strongly that it is the only responsible way for scientists and historians to proceed. Yet even though today we know a great deal more than the physiologoi knew about the natural world, we are not even close to being able to explain everything. The merest glance at any of countless controversies in the sciences or in historical studies will quickly confirm this. Thus, as a substantive thesis, the view that everything can be explained naturally still goes well beyond anything we can prove, even today. Some might argue that our success in explaining naturally so much of what previously was unexplained gives us good inductive grounds for claiming that everything can be explained naturally. But such arguments always depend on the assumption that everything we cannot explain is analogous in all relevant respects to what we can explain. There is no non-question-begging reason I can think of to make this assumption.

Consider, for instance, faith healings. At the shrine of Lourdes in France, teams of doctors of various theological and secular views have conducted before-and-after examinations of scores of people, many of whom claim that they were suddenly cured by divine power. In many cases, these doctors have determined to their own satisfaction that people claimed to have been cured were once seriously ill and, for reasons that currently cannot be explained scientifically, have suddenly overcome their illnesses. Or, to take another example, consider interactions with "the spirit world" that are regularly reported to have occurred in the context of Native American spiritual rituals. Allegedly neutral and scientifically trained observers have reported that bizarre things for which we currently have no "natural" explanation have happened there also. One can and, I think, should admit that a great many, perhaps most, stories both of faith healings and of interactions with the spirit world are based on incidents that have a natural explanation, whether or not anyone who ever discovered what it is. But do we have reason to believe that the incidents reported in all such stories can be explained naturally? Methodologically, for the purpose of doing history and anthropology, we may be entitled to act as if they all have natural explanations. Substantively, too, we may be entitled to believe that the incidents reported all have natural explanations. But, substantively, do we have so much reason to believe that they all have natural explanations that it would not also be rationally permissible for someone to leave the matter open? If we do, I cannot imagine what that reason might be.

Suppose we were all to agree that, as a substantive thesis, one is rationally entitled to leave it an open question whether everything that occurs can be explained naturally. Even so, we might still doubt whether, methodologically, for the purpose of doing science, and in particular for the purpose of doing "scientific" histories of Jesus, one can or should leave it an open question. Many, probably most, academic historians believe that historians cannot leave this question open. For instance, according to Morton Smith, a renowned New Testament historian, whether "supernatural beings exist is a question for metaphysics." But, he said, even if they do exist "and exercise some regular influence on the world," with consequences that "are taken to be a part of the normal course of natural events," the historian requires "a world in which these normal phenomena are not interfered with by arbitrary and ad hoc divine interventions to produce abnormal events with special historical consequences." Smith said that "this is not a matter of personal preference, but of professional necessity." In his view, the historian's job "is to calculate the most probable explanation of the preserved evidence." "The minds of the gods are inscrutable and their actions, consequently, in calculable." Hence, Smith concluded, unless the possibility of their special intervention is ruled out, there "would always be an unknown probability that a deity might have intervened." And so long as there is that unknown probability, "there can be no calculation of most probable causes." Smith was mistaken in that conclusion. Historians do not have to assume that God does not (or the gods do not) intervene ad hoc in
of the sisters with a glorious miracle.” However, “when he arrives, the distress of the sisters reveals that his plans have not proceeded precisely as he wished and expected.” Thus, in the interpretation that Evans endorses, in this instance Jesus expected one thing and something else happened. What, then, of Jesus’ supposed divine foreknowledge? Does it come and go? Does it come into play only on certain kinds of issues? Is it normally reliable but simply failed him this time? The closest Evans comes even to raising such questions, let alone answering them, is to say that “it is thus quite coherent with the story to see Jesus as empowered with supernatural insight at times.” True enough, but even conceding that it is coherent, we are still left with a huge question about how, as historians, we should proceed.

J.D.G. Dunn

Dunn is professor of divinity at the University of Durham, in England, and the author of several books on the history of early Christianity. In one of these, *The Evidence for Jesus* (1985), he addresses the quest for the historical Jesus. Dunn makes no bones about his being a believing Christian. And he admits that he wrote this particular book to quiet the fears of other Christians about historical Jesus studies. Like Evans, he makes the point that Christians have “nothing to fear from scholarship.” However, unlike Evans, he makes this point not by trying to put historians down but by arguing that Christians “should welcome the critically inquiring and investigative skills of scholars.” He thinks that Christians should welcome them partly because he thinks that eventually scholars will arrive at results that are congenial to Christians, but also partly for theological reasons: “Liberty of opinion, genuine respect for those who differ and a reverent agnosticism in many matters of secondary importance is a wholly proper and indeed essential response of faith”; “since we walk by faith and not by light, our confidence should be in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, rather than in what we can see and handle and control. ‘Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord!’”

Needless to say, Dunn’s methods differ sharply from those of Crossan and Sanders. They are closer to those of Meier. But whereas Meier thinks that it is no part of the historian’s task to assess the plausibility of claims that God intervened in the natural world,
Dunn thinks that it is part of the historian’s task. He agrees with other New Testament scholars that the authors of the New Testament Gospels were often inventive. But he trusts the New Testament authors to reveal what really happened much more often than do liberal historians, and he puts a different spin than do liberal historians on those passages of the New Testament that he admits are inventive. For instance, in response to the question, “Has New Testament scholarship undermined the ordinary Christian’s belief that the Gospels are historically trustworthy and accurate in what they tell about Jesus?” he answers, “Yes and No.” Yes, in that New Testament scholars agree that the authors of the Gospels did not just report, but also interpreted. “No, in that when the Gospel writers intended to provide historical information, that information can be trusted as reliable.” In explaining what he means, Dunn never mentions the birth narratives, focusing instead only on examples from New Testament accounts of Jesus’ public career and his resurrection.

In the case of the resurrection, Dunn says that the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead is of “fundamental importance to Christian faith” and that if this claim is false, or only vaguely true, many basic Christian doctrines would have to be revised, including Christian understandings of who Jesus was and is and of the significance of his death, and the hopes that Christians entertain for themselves and others. He says that the question of whether modern scholarship has “disproved the resurrection of Jesus, or even made belief in his resurrection more difficult,” is as important for Christians “as any question can be.”

Dunn begins his account of the resurrection by saying that we should start by recognizing that we cannot get back directly to the resurrection itself since it belongs to “the irretrievable pastness of history.” Even so, he continues, we have five sorts of historical evidence that it actually occurred: reports of Jesus’ tomb being found empty; reported “sightings” of Jesus after his death; the transformation of the first disciples and the subsequent initial spread of the new faith; the very high regard in which Christians soon came to hold Jesus; and claims of believers since the beginning of Christianity to encounter Jesus alive here and now.

Dunn says that many Christians want to include as basic data the testimony of believers today. He concedes that “in a full-scale evaluation of the evidence such testimonies would have to be examined with care” and that their potential value, “as ‘eye’-witness reports,” is considerable. He says, however, that he will pass over this evidence, since such testimonies “almost always depend to an important extent on the [witnesser’s] prior beliefs.” In other words, he explains, it is because Christians already believe that Jesus rose from the dead that they can recognize their experience in prayer or devotion as an encounter with Jesus. Dunn says that the same is true of the previous two sorts of evidence that he listed: the transformation of the disciples and the high opinion that early Christians had of Jesus.

Dunn’s reason for dismissing reports in our own times of people having seen Jesus is curious. Surely many contemporary “experiences of Jesus” are had by people who are not already Christians. In our own times, there must be hundreds of reported cases of people who in the throes of a conversion experience to Christianity came to believe that Jesus is alive. Are their experiences evidence that Jesus is alive, or not? If they are, then why don’t they count importantly in favor of the New Testament reports that Jesus rose from the dead? I shall return to these questions later.

Dunn rests his case for the veracity of the resurrection reports on his first two sorts of evidence: reports of the empty tomb, and early “sightings” of Jesus. So far as the empty tomb reports are concerned, he says there are two kinds of evidence that the reports are not reliable. One is that the various reports conflict, and the other is that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, does not say anything about an empty tomb. Counterbalancing these negative considerations, he claims, are four sources of evidence in favor of the reliability of the empty tomb reports: All four Gospels attribute the discovery of the empty tomb to women; the confusion between the different accounts of the resurrection in the Gospels; archaeological evidence; and the lack of any indications that Christians regarded the place where Jesus had been buried as having any special significance.

Regarding the first of these positive considerations, Dunn says that in first-century Judea, since women did not have much status, they “were probably regarded as unreliable witnesses.” Hence the fact that they were reported to be the primary witnesses is evidence that the reports are factual, since, in his view, the only good reason for attributing the empty tomb reports to women is that this is how it was remembered as having actually happened. Regarding the confusion between different accounts, Dunn says that it is “a mark of the sincerity of those from whom the testimony was derived” and shows
that "we cannot plausibly regard [the reports] as deriving from a single source." In particular, he adds, "the fact that the earliest Gospel (Mark) ends without any record of a 'resurrection appearance' [Dunn accepts that the original version of Mark ended at 16:8] has to be matched with the fact that the earliest account of 'resurrection appearances' (I Cor. 15) has no reference to the tomb being empty." Dunn says that there is nothing to indicate that one was contrived to bolster the other, and that this "speaks favourably for the value of each."

The archeological evidence, Dunn says, shows "that at the time of Jesus, a popular understanding of resurrection in Palestine would have involved some 're-use' of the dead body." Thus "a claim made in Jerusalem within a few weeks of [Jesus'] crucifixion, that God had raised Jesus—that is, the body of Jesus—from death, would not have gained much credence had his tomb been undisturbed or the fate of his body known to be otherwise. The absence of any such counter-claim in any available literature of the period, Christian or Jewish, is important." Finally, there is no evidence that the first Christians regarded the place where Jesus had been laid as having any special significance. This "strange silence," which Dunn says was exceptional in view of the religious practice of the time, "has only one obvious explanation": the first Christians did not regard Jesus' grave as having any special significance because it was empty. Dunn concludes that on the whole the evidence points firmly to the conclusion that Jesus' tomb was found empty and that its emptiness was a factor in the first Christians' belief in the resurrection of Jesus.48

Dunn's account of the "resurrection appearances," while shorter, follows a similar pattern. As evidence against the veracity of the reports, he mentions again conflicts in the New Testament accounts. As evidence in favor, he mentions the testimony of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, which Dunn says "goes back to within two or three years of the events described." The prominence of women in the records of the first sightings and the absence of any indication that the reports are contrived are also significant, he claims. In his view, the most plausible alternative explanation is that "the witnesses were deluded"—"not deceitful, but deceived"—in which case, the "resurrection appearances" would simply be hallucinations, perhaps born of frustrated hopes, "visions begotten of hysteria." It counts against this alternative explanation, he says, that the experiences reported by the early Christians were unexpected and that their reports differ from other life-after-death visions from the same period. In no other case, he says, did the person who saw the vision conclude, "This man has been raised from the dead."49

Dunn cautions that while historians have good evidence that the resurrection took place, they do not know in what it consisted. Not only do we have no record that anyone actually witnessed it, but also we cannot be sure that it could be witnessed. However, he says, we can say that by "resurrection" these earliest Christian witnesses meant that something had happened to Jesus and not just themselves. God had raised him, not merely reassured them. "He was alive again, made alive again with the life which is the climax of God's purpose for humankind, not merely retrieved from the jaws of death, but conqueror over death, 'exalted to God's right hand.'" Dunn says, "It was this glowing conviction that lay at the heart of the chain reaction which began Christianity."50

Clearly Dunn, unlike Meier, thinks that it is professionally appropriate for a historian to conclude that God intervened in the natural world. Even more clearly, he does not, as Crossan and Sanders did, rule out in advance divine intervention as a possible explanation. Still, it is hard to believe that his assessment of the plausibility of competing accounts of the evidence is not influenced by his extra-historical conviction that Jesus did rise from the dead. For instance, does the lack of "evidence that the first Christians regarded the place where Jesus had been laid as having any special significance" have as the "only obvious explanation" that Jesus' tomb was empty? For the early Christians, wouldn't the fact that Jesus rose from the dead out of that tomb have itself given the tomb quite a bit of special significance? If in fact Dunn's assessment of the evidence is influenced by his extra-historical conviction that Jesus rose from the dead, then he joins Crossan and Sanders, in that all of them are interpreting the historical evidence according to the backdrop of controversial and perhaps even question-begging extra-historical convictions. In the cases of Crossan and Sanders, these background convictions rule out the miraculous. In the case of Dunn, they seem to make it more likely, at least in connection with Jesus. Also, Dunn's refusal to consider contemporary reports of "experiences of Jesus" suggests that, like Meier, he recognizes that certain issues fall beyond the purview of the historian, even though he and Meier have different ideas about which issues those are.

Earlier, when we considered Evans's view, it turned out that what we needed to know from him—or someone—is how to determine
which circumstances are those in which we are entitled to assume that Jesus had foreknowledge. Evans did not tell us, and in fact he did not even raise the question. His not raising it left open the possibility that the kind of historical research that he endorses is a game without rules. I have the same worry about Dunn’s account, though admittedly others may feel differently about it. The assumptions of Crossan and Sanders that non-natural intervention into the natural world is out of the question may be high-handed and arbitrary, but at least we know the basis on which they are going to proceed. In my view, one cannot say the same about either Evans or Dunn. Should we conclude, then, that Morton Smith was right after all, and that historians must assume that God does not intervene ad hoc into human affairs? I don’t think so. Rather, what we should conclude is that historical research must proceed under the rubric of some rules or other. What leads to methodological chaos is to proceed without any appropriate rules, rather than not proceeding under the particular rules favored by Crossan, Sanders, and Smith. Methodological naturalism is only one among a large number of possible ways for historians to generate appropriate rules for interpreting evidence.

Faith-History

What I am suggesting, in effect, is that there is unexplored middle ground between Smith’s overly restrictive approach to historical research and Evans’s and Dunn’s overly permissive approaches. Put simply, it consists in three steps: First, except in certain kinds of circumstances, proceed on the basis of ordinary secular historical methodology, that is, on the basis of methodological naturalism; second, specify which kinds of circumstances are to be considered exceptions; and, third, explain which alternative methodology is going to be followed in these kinds of circumstances. I call the product of following these rules a faith-history.

So far as I know, in writing a faith-history, no historian has ever been explicit about which methodological rules he or she has followed (but I have not surveyed all of the attempts). Typically, what would-be faith-historians do is either to throw ordinary historical methodology to the winds or, as in the cases of Evans and of Farrar (Chapter 3), use ordinary historical methodology and then drop it, willy-nilly, without explaining the basis for their doing so or even addressing the possibility that they may be proceeding arbitrarily.

Sometimes historians who are at least trying to make room for exceptions to naturalism proceed more consistently, as Dunn and Meier surely have, but still without ever being explicit about which background assumptions are guiding their historical accounts or how these assumptions are affecting their assessments of the relative merits of competing interpretations. Hence, to the best of my knowledge, faith-historians (to whatever degree) have not done particularly well at explaining what they are doing. Even so, faith-history is clearly a possible option.

How should faith-historians proceed? I would suggest that the basic task of faith-historians is to explain, presumably on theological grounds, the ways in which some historical figures, such as Jesus, are more than human or have more than ordinary human powers. And they have to do this in a way that makes non-natural influences in the natural world the exception rather than the rule, so that for the most part historians can proceed on the assumption that what happens can be explained natu ralistically. How might the faith-historians do this? Consider, first, a limiting case, so far as the quest for the historical Jesus is concerned. It is a way in which Jesus might have been more than human that would not make any difference at all to historical methodology.

Suppose that a theologically oriented historian believes that although God has intervened in the natural world, He did so only once, by manifesting as Jesus. That would secure the doctrine of the incarnation, which, for Christians, is no small matter theologically. Suppose our historian also believes that, in manifesting as Jesus, God manifested as a human being subject to all of the limitations of ordinary human beings. In that case—except for the incarnation, which may have involved just a miraculous intervention in the physiological processes that led to Jesus’ conception, a matter about which historians rarely comment anyway—the task of such a theologically oriented historian would be the same as that of wholly secular historians. Hence Smith is wrong: Without unleashing methodological chaos, one can believe that God has intervened in the natural world, even that God has intervened miraculously.

What about historians of Jesus who take a more robust view of God’s interventions? How should they proceed? One way would be to start from the limiting case scenario just sketched and then to make exceptions to it. For instance, it might be the historian’s view that God, in manifesting as Jesus, manifested as a human being sub-
not have to describe their alternative methodologies in any more detail than secular historians (who, as I have been arguing, are really faith-historians of a different stripe) describe their secular historical methodologies, which is not in much detail at all. So the faith-historian’s task may not be so daunting after all. Still, the task is not an easy one, either. And until some faith-historian tries to perform it, the rest of us are stuck with an unpleasant choice: either the so-called secular history, with its methodological naturalism, or theologically inspired history, played without rules, or at least by unspoken rules.

Finally, how are historians of Jesus who take an even more robust view about God’s interventions to proceed in a way that allows them to continue to do history? The answer, I think, is that it all depends. Clearly, however, one could continue, step by step, in the way I have just illustrated, without necessarily being methodologically irresponsible, to enrich dramatically the scope of one’s taking into account what one assumes to be God’s interventions in the world. Equally clearly, at some point in such a step-by-step progression, if one kept going, eventually one would have gone too far. Even if one proceeded in small steps, and just kept going, methodological chaos probably would creep back in gradually, in a variety of ways. There is no point in trying to enumerate them. That theology can undermine secular historical methodology is not controversial. The controversial question is whether theology, if it were allowed to exert its influence on an otherwise secular historical inquiry, would necessarily undermine it. Many, perhaps most, secular historians believe that it would. I have argued that they are wrong.

It may seem that in opting for the procedure I have sketched, faith-historians are stuck with an impossibly daunting task—that of describing their alternative historical methodologies. But they would
Borg, a professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University, has been chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. His major book, *Jesus, A New Vision* (1987), has been quite influential. He has written several other widely read books, including his more recent *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (1994) and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994). I shall draw on all of these sources. Since my concern in this chapter is primarily with questions of method, I will reverse the order of exposition that I followed in the previous chapters, sketching for each author first his results, and then his methods.

**Results**

Borg’s Jesus was Jewish, and remained Jewish all of his life. He did not intend to found a new religion but to bring about a change within Judaism. All of his early followers were Jewish. In Borg’s view, we do not have any historically reliable stories about Jesus before he was about thirty years old, but we do have some historically reliable information. We know that he was born shortly before 4 B.C.E., that his parents, Joseph and Mary, were Jewish, that he had four brothers and some sisters, that he grew up in Nazareth, and that Joseph probably died before Jesus began his public ministry. We also know that Jesus’ family would have had very low social status—less than that of subsistence farmers—and that the environment in which Jesus grew up, though rural, was remarkably “cosmopolitan.” For instance, many Jews in Jesus’ environment spoke both Aramaic and Greek.

At some point, Borg says, Jesus must have become a religious seeker and embarked on a quest. Otherwise it is hard to explain his having become a follower of John the Baptist. In Borg’s view, probably Jesus underwent a “conversion experience” or “internal transformation,” as a consequence of which “religious impulses and energies” became central to his life, and probably this transformation had something to do with John the Baptist. In any case, soon after Jesus began associating with John, Jesus began his public ministry, perhaps stepping in to carry on when John was arrested.

Borg stresses that Jesus probably did not think of himself as the Messiah or as the Son of God in some special sense. Contrary to the impression one gets from reading the New Testament, Jesus’ message was neither eschatological nor about himself and the importance of believing in him. Rather, his message was about God. Borg says that Jesus was a teacher of wisdom, a social prophet, a movement founder, and, most important, a “person of Spirit.” In characterizing Jesus as a person of Spirit, Borg means that Jesus had “an experiential awareness of the reality of God” and of “other dimensions of reality,” which were foundational to everything else he was.

Borg explains that persons of Spirit are found in every religious tradition, and that their exotic experiences take different forms: visions; journeys into other dimensions of reality; strong impressions that another reality has descended upon them; experiences of natural objects “momentarily transfigured by the sacred,” such as a bush that burns without being consumed; and so on. Common to all of these forms, Borg says, is that the special experiences of such persons are vivid and revealing, making ordinary perceptions of the world seem like “blindness.” As a consequence, persons of Spirit “become funnels or conduits for the power or wisdom of God to enter into this world,” and often they are mediators who connect their communities to other dimensions of reality. These other dimensions of reality, Borg says, are nonmaterial, yet “charged with energy and power.” They are not “somewhere else” but in us and we in them. Borg says that whereas the modern, naturalistic worldview is “one-dimensional,” the worldview of persons of Spirit is “multidimensional.”

According to Borg, in Jesus’ view, our goal in life should be to live in imitation of God, who Jesus believed is compassionate. Jesus’ main message was, “Be compassionate, as God is compassionate.” His view and orientation, though not dominant in the Jewish tradition from which he sprang, were nevertheless rooted in that tradition. The dominant view was, “Be holy, as God is holy.” Jesus, in effect, proposed that holiness, as an ideal, be replaced by compassion. Borg says that “for Jesus, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue: it was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community.” Thus Jesus advocated a “politics of compassion.” This brought him into conflict with the prevailing purity system, at the center of which were the temple and the priesthood. Jesus challenged this purity system by word and deed, including by his practice of open and inclusive table fellowship.

Borg says that Jesus was a teacher of wisdom, or a sage, in that he explained to people how to live in accordance with reality. But Jesus was the type of sage who teaches “subversive” rather than “conventional” wisdom, which he conveyed primarily in parables and aphorisms, often one-liners that were meant to be “striking, enigmatic and evocative.” Borg suggests, for instance, that Jesus’ saying, “Leave the dead to bury the dead” was intended to wake people up by drawing attention to a way of living “that amounts to living in the land of the dead.” Borg thinks that although Jesus probably believed in an afterlife, his message was not about how to get there or about the threat of hell, but about the danger of living unconnected to Spirit. Whereas conventional wisdom is preoccupied with requirements, Jesus’ subversive wisdom emphasized “the graciousness of God.”

In Borg’s view, the gospel of the historical Jesus—the good news of his own message—is that there is a way to live that moves beyond both secular and religious conventional wisdom and beyond a life of requirements and measuring up, with its attendant anxiety and the bondage of self-preoccupation. This way to live moves toward a God-relationship, with its ensuing peace and trust, and the freedom of self-forgetfulness. In sum, Jesus’ message was that it is both possible and desirable to move from a “life centered in culture” to a “life centered in God.”

Methods

Borg says that when he initially went to seminary it had not occurred to him that the Jesus of history might be different from the Christ of faith. At seminary, however, he soon learned that although the Christ of faith is spoken of as divine, of one substance with God, the second person of the Trinity, and so on, the Jesus of history would not have known any of this about himself. Borg says that this came to him as quite a shock. Previously, he had assumed that Jesus talked about himself as he does in John. In seminary, he learned that the contrast between John and the Synoptics is so great that one of them—and it had to be John—must be nonhistorical. Borg says that this made him so angry that he would have been happy to have seen John excised from the New Testament. He also learned then of two further views that were dominant at the time in Jesus scholarship. One was that we cannot know much about the Jesus of history, not even from the accounts in the Synoptics; and the other was that the little we can know is not attractive. For instance, Borg learned that Jesus was an eschatological prophet who expected and proclaimed the end of the present world and the coming of the kingdom of God in the very near future, and that this false expectation—not his own identity or the importance of believing in him—was the heart of Jesus’ message and the basis of his urgent call to repent. Borg says that his dissatisfaction at finding this out was not much relieved by the received view that since the historical Jesus is theologically irrelevant, our not being able to know much about him, except for a few unattractive tidbits, does not really matter. Borg says that this new “knowledge,” together with the tension that he had already been feeling between his image of God and his otherwise modern image of reality, quickly propelled him from “closet agnostic” to “closet atheist.” Increasingly, he says, he began to see not only Christianity but all religions as cultural products: “The notion that we made it all up was somewhat alarming, but also increasingly compelling.”

Borg says that his skepticism about God caused him to concentrate his historical research on Jesus’ involvement with social and political issues, especially his challenge to the prevailing Jewish purity system. His main conclusion then was that in a social world dominated by the politics of purity, Jesus advocated a politics of compassion. Then, when he was in his thirties, Borg had several experiences that were “moments of transformed perception in which the earth is seen as ‘filled with the glory of God,’ shining with a radiant presence.” These experiences led him to a “rediscovery of mystery,” not as “an intellectual paradox,” but as an experiential confrontation with the sacred. As a consequence, he came to understand God differently. Instead of as a supernatural being “out there,” God became “the sacred at the center of existence, the holy mystery that is all around us and within us”—the “non-material ground and source and presence,” in which “we live and move and have our being.” Gradually it became obvious to him “that God—the sacred, the holy, the numinous was ‘real,’” and no longer merely a concept or an article of belief, but “an element of experience.”

Borg’s new understanding of God soon transformed his old understanding of the historical Jesus. He says that he was now able to see the centrality of God (or “Spirit”) in Jesus’ own life. This perception became for Borg “the vantage point” for what he now regards as “the key truth about Jesus”: that Jesus was both deeply involved in
the world of everyday social issues and deeply grounded in the world of Spirit, and that Jesus’ grounding in Spirit was “the source of everything that he was.”

As a consequence, Borg says that he now understood why the Christian community out of which John’s gospel came falsely portrayed the pre-Easter Jesus as saying such things about himself as, “I am the light of the world,” “I am the bread of life,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” and so on. They portrayed Jesus in such ways because that is how they experienced the post-Easter Jesus. Borg concluded that “John’s gospel is ‘true’” even though it is not, by and large, historically accurate. And whereas before, Borg had seen Christian life as being primarily about believing, now he sees it as being primarily about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which, he says, is no more the property of the Christian tradition than it is of other religious traditions.

Analysis

For present purposes, two things are initially intriguing about Borg’s autobiographical revelations: first, that he put a realist theological interpretation on his “mystical” experiences; and, second, that these experiences, so interpreted, profoundly affected his interpretation of Jesus. What I mean by saying that Borg put a realist theological interpretation on his experiences is that he took (and still takes) his experiences to have revealed truths about “God” and “dimensions of reality” that are unavailable to scientific investigation. In other words, he does not merely think that he and others have had exotic experiences that they have believed or that they now believe to be experiences of God and other dimensions of reality. Instead of merely making such a psychological claim about beliefs, Borg claims that he and others have had experiences that actually were experiences of God and other dimensions of reality. Thus his claim is not merely about human beliefs but about transcendent realities. Moreover, it is about transcendent realities that, currently and for the foreseeable future, are beyond the reach of any conceivable sort of scientific test.

It is clear from Borg’s autobiographical remarks that his “mystical” experiences, as he interpreted them, profoundly affected his interpretation of Jesus. By his own account, he interpreted the evidence regarding Jesus in one way before he had his mystical experiences. Then, after his experiences and at least partly because of them, he interpreted the evidence in a different way. Although Borg does not put it this way, the unmistakable implication of his remarks is that in having these mystical experiences, he became (at least to some extent) a person of Spirit himself and thereby was enabled to see that Jesus also had been a person of Spirit. In short, Borg’s mystical experiences, interpreted in the theologically realistic way that he interpreted and interprets them, affected his assessment of the historical evidence, not just marginally but in a central way.

Another intriguing thing about Borg’s autobiographical revelations is that in his self-understanding of his work as an academic historian, he seems to think that he has been able to proceed without being influenced by extra-academic religious convictions. Yet, by his own account, in interpreting Jesus, his acceptance of the view that persons of Spirit experience God and other dimensions of reality affected his evaluation of the historical evidence. Hence if the question is, did Borg allow his acceptance of a particular view about God and dimensions of reality to which science has no access to affect his evaluation of evidence, the answer is clearly yes. In this sense, Borg interpreted his experiences in ways that had definite theological content, and these experiences, so interpreted, affected his evaluation of the evidence.

Yet, in my view, in doing this Borg did not violate any reasonable norm having to do with secular scientific methodology. The main reason he did not is that the theological dimension of his interpretation is easily excised, leaving a naturalistic thesis intact. What I mean by this is that even though Borg interpreted Jesus’ experiences as genuine experiences of God and of “other dimensions of reality,” all that he really needed for his interpretation of Jesus as a person of Spirit is to have said that Jesus (and some of his followers) believed that his (and their) experiences were genuinely of God and/or of other dimensions of reality. Quite apart from whether mystics actually experience God or other dimensions of reality, anyone can recognize that some people do have mystical experiences and that these may profoundly affect their lives. Thus, so far as historical methodology is concerned, at least the core of Borg’s theology and also its influence on his interpretation of Jesus are completely innocuous.

In one respect, however, it may seem that Borg’s “theology” is not innocuous, namely, in his handling of the miracle stories. In short,
Borg is “soft” on miracles. Like Meier, but perhaps for different reasons, he wants to leave it an open question whether Jesus did things that more naturalistic thinkers would regard as genuine miracles. For instance, after accounting for Jesus’ exorcisms and healings in ways that more naturalistically inclined historians could also accept, Borg turned to the harder cases: resuscitations of dead people, the stilling of storms, walking on water, and so on. Borg asked whether these stories should be taken seriously. He replied that, for two reasons, “it is very difficult to know.” The first is that Jesus was a “charismatic mediator,” and “we simply do not know” what the limits are to the powers of a charismatic mediator. The second is that “symbolic elements” abound in these miracle stories, which suggests that those who wrote them may have had a motive for writing them other than that of telling the literal truth about what actually happened. In the end, Borg concludes that so far as the literal truth of these miracle stories is concerned, “a clear historical judgment is impossible.”

Here again I think that Borg is innocent of any inappropriate mixing of theology and secular historical studies. In my view, in saying that we do not know the limits of what is possible in such cases and hence are not in a position to rule out the possibility that Jesus actually did perform some of the miracles that are attributed to him, Borg is simply telling the truth. I think a better case could be made for saying that Crossan and Sanders, in summarily brushing aside the possibility that any of the miracles stories might be true, are relying inappropriately on a kind of “anti-theology theology.” They, more than Borg, are pretending to know something that it seems to me no one actually knows.

In my view, Borg’s approach also contrasts favorably with the approach taken by Meier, who reaches a similar conclusion—agnosticism—about the miracle stories. As you will recall, Meier refrains from making a judgment about the reliability of the miracle stories because he does not think that it is part of his job as a secular historian to make such judgments. But who determines “the job requirements” for secular historians? And whoever determines the job requirements, who gave them the right to set the limits? Meier does not address such questions. Perhaps he should have. In my view, Borg’s approach is better: Historians cannot say whether any of the miracle stories are true not because it is not their job as historians to say, but because they do not know. Yet Borg’s admirable willingness to accept responsibility for his own interpretation comes at a price.

The price is that Borg should be more forthcoming than he is about how he knows that certain other incidents that he regards as nonhistorical merit that judgment. For instance, he says that “the image of the historical Jesus as a divine or semi-divine being, who saw himself as the divine savior whose purpose was to die for the sins of the world, and whose message consisted of proclaiming that, is simply not historically true.” This image, he claims, “is the product of a blend produced by the early church—a blending of the church’s memory of Jesus with the church’s beliefs about the risen Christ.” In other words, in Borg’s view, the early church remembered through a lens that was colored by its beliefs about the risen Christ, that is, through a lens “of faith.” But how does Borg know this? If we should leave it an open question whether the historical Jesus could perform miracles, such as bringing the dead back to life, shouldn’t we also leave it an open question whether the historical Jesus saw himself as a “divine savior”? After all, he would not even have had to perform a miracle to have done that.

N. T. Wright

Wright, Dean of Lichfield, has taught New Testament studies at Oxford, Cambridge, and McGill Universities and has written many books that in one way or another are related to the question of interpreting Jesus. Most of these books are histories, with some theology mixed in, but some are primarily devotional. His latest and most fully developed contribution to historical Jesus studies may be found primarily in his (projected) four-volume Christian Origins and the Question of God, two volumes of which have been published: The New Testament and the People of God (1992) and Jesus and the Victory of God (1996). Both of these volumes, while quite readable, are massive works of staggering erudition. Like Meier, though not with as much attention to arguments, Wright tends to survey the views of other historians before presenting his own, and so these volumes, like Meier’s, can be used to get an overview of the current state of historical Jesus studies. Wright has also written a shorter, more popular book, Who Was Jesus? (1992), the purpose of which is primarily to refute the interpretations of Barbara Thiering, A. N. Wilson, and Bishop John Spong.
Results

Wright, whose views on the historical Jesus are unusually elaborate and finely nuanced, rejects altogether the idea that history should be kept separate from theology. Sometimes he seems even to reject the very distinction between history and theology. This adds to the excitement and interest of his work, but it also makes it harder to summarize. A good place to start, though, is with his answers to four questions that he says all historians of Jesus need to address.

How Does Jesus Fit into Judaism? Wright says that many historians have erred in regarding Jesus as either too typically Jewish or not Jewish enough. For instance, he thinks that Geza Vermes, who portrayed Jesus as a wandering Hasid (Jewish holy man), and S.G.F. Brandon, who portrayed Jesus as a common sort of Jewish revolutionary, erred by making Jesus too Jewish, and that Bultmann, in portraying Jesus as a teacher of timeless truths, and J. Downing, Burton Mack, and Crossan, in portraying Jesus as a Cynic sage, failed to make Jesus Jewish enough. Wright also categorically rejects what he calls the “well-worn” traditional Christian position of distinguishing Jesus from his Jewish background by portraying first-century Judaism as a morass of legalism and formalism and Jesus as the teacher of an interior, spiritual religion.25 Wright says that first-century Jews were hungry for God to act within history, and that if Jesus had been primarily a teacher of abstract, interior truths, he would have been “incomprehensible” and “irrelevant.”26

Imagine, Wright suggests, that you had been a Galilean peasant, working on your small parcel of land, and that you had heard that a prophet named Jesus was announcing that God was now at last becoming king. This could only mean, Wright says, that Jesus was announcing that Israel was at long last going to be rescued from oppression. He says that when people set down their tools and trudged up a hillside to hear Jesus talk, they were not going to hear someone tell them to be nice to each other or that if they behaved themselves or acquired the right beliefs, a rosy future would await them in heaven. Nor were they going to hear someone tell them that God had decided at long last to do something about forgiving them for their sins. Wright says that first-century Jews already knew that they ought to be nice to each other, and to whatever extent they thought about life after death, they also knew that God would look after them, eventually giving them new physical bodies in a renewed world. Neither were they glumly wandering around wondering how their sins were ever going to be forgiven. For that, they had the temple and the sacrificial system. In other words, according to Wright, if Jesus had said what a lot of commentators seem to think he said, he would have put his audiences to sleep, whereas what he actually said woke them up.27

In Wright’s view, Jesus was very Jewish, and first-century Judaism can be understood only within the context of “intense eschatological expectation.” However, like some others (he mentions Borg as an example), Wright thinks that Jesus must have confronted Judaism by reinterpretting a key part of its heritage.28 In particular, he says, Jesus’ warnings about imminent judgment must have been about social and political events, “seen as the climactic moment in Israel’s history and, in consequence, as a summons to national repentance.” Wright says that Jesus must have appeared to be “a successor to Jeremiah and his like.” But part of Jesus’ warning was that since Israel’s history was drawing to a close, he was not merely one more in a long line of prophets, but the last in the line. The rest of his warning to Israel was that business as usual would bring “political disaster,” as “the judgment of Israel’s own god.”29 Finally, Jesus proclaimed that Israel’s God was going to establish his kingdom through his (Jesus’) own work. Wright says that this way of viewing Jesus not only makes him intelligible as a product of his culture but also explains how he got into so much trouble: “To tell all sides that their vision for the nation is wrong, and to act as if one has glimpsed, and is implementing, a different vision, is to invite trouble.”30

What Were Jesus’ Aims? Wright says that the traditional, pre-critical Christian view is that Jesus was born on Earth to die for the sins of the world and to found a church. In contrast to this view, the first critical historians claimed that Jesus was essentially a teacher, primarily of ethical truths. And in the twentieth century, historians have supposed that Jesus’ aims had to do with the kingdom. But beyond that, Wright says, interpretations are varied: Brandon and others, for instance, claim that Jesus was trying to foment revolution of one sort or another; M. Hengel and Borg, that Jesus was against revolution; Sanders, that Jesus intended to initiate a “restoration eschatology” involving the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple; and so on. However, one thing about which previous historians in this
century have agreed is that it is “outlandish” to suggest that Jesus intended to found a church. 31

In Wright’s view, Jesus intended to found a “church.” He agrees with other historians that Jesus never intended to found an institution that would have the career that the Christian church has taken. But, he says, if instead we “see Jesus’ aim as the restoration, in some sense, of Israel, beginning with the highly symbolic call of twelve disciples,” then the seemingly outlandish “idea of Jesus ‘founding’ a community designed to outlast his death gives way to a more nuanced, and perfectly credible, first-century Jewish one: that of Jesus restoring the people of God,” in some sense “around himself.” Wright says that an advantage of supposing that Jesus may have had this intention is that it raises the question of whether Jesus thought that he himself was to have a special role in the kingdom that he was proclaiming. In Wright’s view, Jesus did think so. After all, Wright says, Jesus welcomed sinners and outcasts into a kingdom that he calmly and quietly implied was being redefined around himself, in and through his own work. 32

Wright says that what Jesus grasped—which so many others, both among his contemporaries and modern readers, missed—was that Israel’s destiny was moving swiftly toward its climax and that if Israel did not watch out, “she would fall to her doom.” Wright says that it did not take prophetic insight for Jesus to know that Israel might be in for trouble. Anyone could see that the Romans would tolerate only so much provocation before smashing Jerusalem and the nation “into little bits.” “Where Jesus’ prophetic insight came into play was in the awesome realization that when this happened, it would be the judgment of Israel’s God on his wayward people.” In other words, “Jesus saw the judgment coming, and realized that it was not just from Rome, but from God.” 33 In sum, Jesus’ first aim was to deliver the message that if Israel failed to repent, disaster would swiftly follow.

Jesus also had a second aim, one that even 2,000 years later, Wright says, “still sends shivers down the spine.” It was that he would go out ahead, in place of Israel, and meet the terrible judgment alone. Jesus drew on ancient Jewish beliefs to predict a time of bitter, harsh suffering and testing for the people of God. But he believed that “if he went out to meet it, to take it upon himself, then he might bear it on behalf of his people, so that they would not need to bear it.” 34 Wright says that whereas “the Jewish hope was that when Israel’s strange destiny reached its fulfillment, the world would be saved,” Jesus’ variation on this theme was his belief that all of this would happen “through his own life, death, and resurrection,” which he foresaw. 35

Why Did Jesus Die? Wright says that even if one were to take the view that Jesus intended to die, and that he invested his death in advance with a theological interpretation, there would still be unanswered questions, such as what the Romans thought they were doing in crucifying Jesus. What we need in the first instance, Wright says, is not a theology of the cross—such as that Jesus died for the sins of the world or to save people from eternal death—but a history of the cross. This history would then reveal what the various people involved were trying to accomplish, thereby explaining why Jesus was crucified.

In Wright’s view, to explain Jesus’ death in the manner in which he died, one has to suppose that he offended either official Israel or official Rome or both. “Someone, or more likely some group,” Wright says, “wanted Jesus out of the way.” But why? Wright says that the Romans had a political motive for Jesus’ death, in that they were convinced, or persuaded, that he was some sort of a troublemaker. But who convinced or persuaded them? Wright says that there are two mainstream answers: the Pharisees, and the Temple hierarchy. He agrees with Sanders that it is not historically plausible that the Pharisees were as petty as they are depicted of being in the New Testament. In any case, he says, there is no evidence whatsoever that they were linked directly to Jesus’ death. That leaves the Temple hierarchy.

Why would the Temple hierarchy want Jesus out of the way? Wright thinks, as does Sanders, that it is because Jesus threatened the Temple. 36 In other situations, Wright says, Jesus acted with deliberate scriptural overtones. Hence the most plausible interpretation of the Temple incident—Wright says it is “irresistible”—is that Jesus intended that his actions in the Temple be taken to symbolize its imminent destruction. Jesus intended this to express his view that Israel’s god was in the process of judging and redeeming his people, as the culmination of Israel’s history, and that God’s judgment would involve the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, who would be acting as the agents of God’s wrath. Ultimately, in Wright’s view, that is why Jesus was sentenced to die. 37
How and Why Did the Early Church Begin? Wright notes that many historical Jesus scholars regard this question as extending beyond the scope of their inquiries. But he says that interpretations of Jesus have to postulate a large gap between Jesus and the early church are weaker than those that do not. For his part, he aims to show that there are continuities as well as discontinuities between Jesus and the early church. He begins by saying that he agrees with Sanders that but for the resurrection, Jesus' disciples probably would not have endured any longer than did John the Baptist's. But, he asks, what content do we then need to give to the resurrection? Wright again approvingly quotes Sanders, who says that Jesus' followers, by carrying through the logic of Jesus' position "in a transformed situation," created a movement that would grow and continue to alter. But Wright asks, transformed how? His answer is that whereas first-century Jews looked forward to a public event in and through which "their god would reveal to all the world that he was not just a local, tribal deity, but the creator and sovereign of all," the early Christians "looked back to an event in and through which, they claimed, Israel's god had done exactly that."

Methods

Among prominent historians of Jesus, Wright is far and away the most sophisticated and articulate philosopher of historical methodology. In fact, among historians in general, whatever their field, he would get high marks in this respect. Foundational to his approach is his denial that it is either possible or desirable for historians, in their work as historians, to insulate their interpretations from their larger worldviews. In the case of historians of Jesus, he thinks that these larger worldviews all but invariably include either theologies or antitheologies. Moreover, he recognizes, as few seem to, that appropriately integrating one's historical views and one's larger worldview is not merely a challenge for Christians, or even for historians of Jesus, but should be an issue for every thinking person. What we all need to do, he says, but especially in connection with our consideration of historical Jesus studies, is to rethink our worldviews in light of the internal collapse of the one that has been predominant in the West for the past two centuries; and we need to be cognizant while rethinking them that it was due to this collapsing worldview that we came in the first place to believe "that 'history' and 'theology' belong in separate compartments." He says that this task is one that "faces modern Western culture in its entirety."

A continuing theme in Wright's philosophy of historical methodology is that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted fact or an objective history. More explicitly than anyone else whose views we have considered except for Schüssler Fiorenza, he questions what he takes to be an outmoded concept of objectivity that he says was born during the Enlightenment and has outlived whatever usefulness it may once have had. But whereas Schüssler Fiorenza questioned this conception of objectivity mainly on the grounds that historical studies are always at least covertly ideological, Wright questions it also on the grounds that historians necessarily interpret against the backdrop of a larger worldview, and hence are not as "neutral," even in a scientific way, as many of them present themselves as being. Wright thinks that discarding the prevailing concept of objectivity has implications not only for how historians should conduct historical Jesus studies but also for how Christians should respond to these studies. He says, for instance, that "all sensible readers see at once" that the Gospels "are written from a position of Christian faith" but then asks, "So what?" Only when we have abandoned "the myth of neutrality," he says, whether our own or that of any single source, can we "start engaging in real history," after which "we will discover that the gospels make remarkably good historical sense."

In Wright's view, it will not do to try to keep history and theology in separate compartments. He says that Jesus "is either the flesh-and-blood individual who walked and talked, and lived and died, in first-century Palestine, or he is merely a creature of our own imagination, able to be manipulated this way and that." He adds that to this extent he totally agrees with skeptical historians of Jesus, from Reimarus to the present, who have claimed that the church has distorted the real Jesus. Wright says that while the church "needs to repent of this and rediscover who its Lord actually is," this does not mean that the church has been totally mistaken in what it has said about Jesus, but that "only real no-holds-barred history can tell us whether that is so." In his view, the problem with skeptical historians is not that they have portrayed Jesus in ways that the church must resist in order to protect "its cherished traditional faith," but that they have offered us a Jesus of their own invention, which any one interested in serious history ought to resist. Wright cautions,
however, that serious history will challenge some Christians, who, he says, are as prone to “muddles and misconceptions” as anyone else. But he thinks that Christianity will emerge from its confrontation with historical inquiry “more solid and robust.” Instead of bad portraits of Jesus, he says, Christians need good ones.42

Such is Wright’s case that theology ought to take history seriously. But should theology also influence how history is actually done? His answer is a qualified yes. It’s a yes because he thinks that one’s theology (or anti-theology) cannot help but influence the results of one’s historical work. It’s a qualified yes because he thinks that the influence of theology on history has to be mediated by some sort of “public” justification of results, which, for Wright, means by more or less ordinary historical evidence. He says that “history, like magic, has got to get the details right,” and that in historical Jesus studies one determines whether this has happened in the same way that one determines it in any other area of history.43

How does Wright’s philosophy of historical methodology work out in practice, particularly in connection with those parts of the New Testament accounts that are most offensive to secular rationality—the virgin birth, the miracle stories, and the resurrection? Wright says that the attraction of Christianity for some Christians is basically that it is supernatural. He says that it is not so much that these Christians first believe in Jesus and then find that they have to stretch their worldviews in order to make room for things they had not counted on. Rather, their basic commitment is to there being a supernatural dimension to life, and “they find this conveniently confirmed by Jesus.” In response to the observation that this sort of supernaturalism has been under attack for the past 200 years, he replies, “Frankly, it deserved it.”44

Wright derides those who think that being Christian commits one to believing in “miracles,” in the sense of “irrational suspensions of the normal laws of nature.” But it is not so clear what he would put in the place of such beliefs. In part, he thinks that God works miracles “by being within his creation, within ‘instinct’ and hidden motivations.”45 But Wright emphasizes that Christianity makes claims not just at the level of isolated occurrences, such as the virgin birth and miracles, but also at the level of worldviews. In his opinion, a central worldview claim of Christianity, one that is based on the resurrection of Jesus as seen in the context of the whole Jewish tradition, is that “the creator God was active in and as Jesus to redeem Israel and the world.”

On the assumption that this is what the early Christians believed, Wright says that it is less surprising than it might otherwise be to find them saying that Jesus’ mother remained a virgin at the time of his conception. In other words, whereas from the perspective of a strictly naturalistic worldview, the claim of a virgin birth is not only surprising but outrageous, Wright thinks that from an early Christian perspective, the claim fits.46 But then, in the midst of explaining why the early Christians might have believed what they did about God’s activity in the world, Wright shifts to talk that now includes the theological question of what God’s activity actually was. He says that the doctrine of the virgin birth “is precisely the sort of strange truth which creeps up on you unawares, which takes you by surprise, but which then makes itself at home.” He adds that although no one could prove to the satisfaction of post-Enlightenment skepticism that the virgin birth occurred, “in the light of the resurrection we are called to be sceptical about scepticism itself.”47

It is the resurrection, Wright claims, rather than the virgin birth or other supposed miracles, that is the key to understanding the early Christians as well as the truth about Jesus. He points out that for Jews of the period resurrection was not resuscitation, that is, a matter of returning to the same sort of life, and it did not imply immortality, or the transmigration of a disembodied soul or spirit. Rather, it was a matter of going through death into a new world, in which the resurrected person has some sort of physical body. In addition, he claims, first-century Jews were not expecting people to be resurrected one at a time, on an individual basis. Rather, they thought that resurrection was something that would happen to all dead Jews, and perhaps to all dead human beings, on the great future occasion when God finally brought history around its last great corner “into the new day that was about to dawn.” For Jews of the period, Wright says, resurrection “was about God’s restoration of his whole people, about his coming Kingdom, about the great reversal of fortune for Israel and the world,” about “the birth of a whole new world order.”48

In light of this, Wright continues, there is a crucial question that must be addressed: Why did the early Christians, who had these Jewish beliefs about resurrection, say that Jesus, as a single individual, was resurrected? Obviously, he says, they did not think that Israel had suddenly become ruler of the world. And it hardly suffices to say, as many have, “that the disciples had a wonderful inner expe-
rience and sense of the love and grace and forgiveness of God.” He notes that without introducing talk of resurrection, the Jews had well-developed ways of talking about their experiences of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness. Nor is it plausible, he adds, to say that Jesus’ disciples were so shocked by his death and unable to come to terms with it that they “invented the idea of Jesus’ ‘resurrection’ as a way of coping with a cruelly broken dream.” Whatever the apparent psychological plausibility of this suggestion, Wright says, it is not serious first-century history, since we know of many other messianic and similar movements in the Jewish world roughly contemporaneous with Jesus, many of whose leaders died violently at the hands of the authorities, yet we never hear of the disappointed followers claiming that their leader had been raised from the dead. Wright says, “They knew better.” For first-century Jews, resurrection involved human bodies and empty tombs. According to Wright, a Jewish revolutionary whose leader had been executed by the authorities and who managed himself to escape could either give up the revolution or find another leader, and we have evidence of revolutionaries doing both. But claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option. “Unless, of course, he was.”

Wright makes even stronger claims about the case to be made for the resurrection. He says that as historians we are “forced” to take “very seriously” the Christian claim that “Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead three days after his execution,” and he says that “the alternative explanation, when examined, turns out to be remarkably lame.” Presumably, by “the alternative explanation,” Wright means any competing explanation of how the early Christians came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. But while one might agree with Wright that as historical explanations go, even the best of the competing explanations are “pretty lame” in the sense that they are speculative, it is less obvious that they are also pretty lame in comparison to Wright’s preferred explanation. I shall return to this issue.

Wright of course recognizes that if we accept his preferred explanation of the resurrection, then we are forced to throw naturalism to the winds. The resurrection, he says, “breaks open all other worldviews and demands that the closed systems with which humans try to make sense of their world must be held open to allow for the God who, having created the world, has never for a moment abandoned it.” But he cautions that “this does not mean that the resurrection throws open the door, after all, to a miscellaneous ‘appeal to the supernatural.’” Rather, he says, the resurrection opens the door to two different beliefs: that “the creator,” who “never abandoned his world, called Israel to be the spearhead of his redeeming purposes for it; and that the creator “has now, in Jesus, drawn together the threads of Israel’s long destiny, in order to deal with evil in the world and to begin, dramatically, the creation of a new world.” This new world, Wright says, is not superimposed on the old one, but “grows out of its very womb in a great act of new creation, like the oak from the acorn.”

Analysis

The first thing to notice, I think, is that from the point of view of historical methodology, there is nothing particularly pernicious about introducing a theological perspective, especially if one argues for it, as Wright does, by trying to show the difficulties with naturalistic alternatives. One of the reasons for this, as we saw also in the case of Borg, is that usually it is relatively easy for naturalists to excise the theological part so that the resulting interpretation is compatible with naturalism. Consider, for instance, Wright’s discussion of the resurrection, which is pivotal for his interpretation of Jesus. As we have just seen, he argues, first, that for first-century Jews, resurrection was not a private event but one that involved human bodies, so there would have to be an empty tomb somewhere; and, second, that a Jewish revolutionary whose leader had been executed by the authorities could give up the revolution or find a new leader, but not claim that the original leader was alive again, unless he was. But, of course, all that really follows from this line of reasoning is that the revolutionary could not claim that the original leader was alive again, unless he sincerely believed that he was.

Assume, then, that early Christians sincerely believed that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, in the sense in which Wright claims that first-century Jews understood the notion of resurrection. In that case, the secular historian is left with the burden of explaining how, presumably (though not necessarily) in the absence of an empty tomb, early Christians could have sincerely believed that Jesus had been resurrected. One possibility, of course, is that they may have believed this as a consequence of visions that some of them had. If I understand Borg correctly, this is how he explains the seminal early
Christian beliefs in a resurrected Jesus. Of course Borg may regard the post-Easter visions of Jesus not as hallucinatory but as glimpses into other dimensions of reality that are just as real as (or perhaps even more real than) the only one to which most people have experiential access. But, as we have seen, such extranaturalistic embellishments can be excised from Borg's view too. The point is that to answer Wright's argument, all a historian has to do is to suggest that the early Christians may have sincerely believed that Jesus rose from the dead as a consequence of visions that they had, leaving the metaphysical status of these visions an open question.

What about the empty tomb? According to Wright, if Jesus really rose from the dead, then there would have to have been an empty tomb somewhere, a detail, presumably, that could easily be checked. But, as Crossan has argued, there may have been no tomb for Jesus, empty or not. And even if there had been a tomb that at one point had Jesus' body in it, at some point before the claim was made about Jesus' being resurrected, the body could have been removed—not necessarily to deceive people into thinking that Jesus had risen from the dead, but for some other reason. And so on.

Wright unquestionably interprets the history of Jesus in a way that is more congenial to traditional Christians than the interpretations of most purely secular historical Jesus scholars. He claims that since history of whatever sort involves interpretation, there is no reason why one should rule out in advance theological interpretations, such as the one he advances. Whether such an interpretation is true has to be judged, he says, on its ability to explain the evidence. Well and good. But then Wright seems to want to draw the line at the sort of theological interpretation for which he has labored to make room and exclude other extranaturalistic contenders. And, for me, there's the rub. For instance, Wright derides Christians who believe in “miracles” as “irrational suspensions of the normal laws of nature.” But calling these alleged suspensions of the laws of nature, or the belief that they occurred, “irrational” simply begs the question. Why should miracles as exceptions to the normal laws of nature be ruled out of court? Meier wants to leave the door open to this possibility. And even without insisting on some sort of sharp boundary between the natural and the supernatural, there is always the option of a view like Borg's, according to which persons of Spirit—among whom Borg is willing to include not just Jesus but also some Zen masters, shamans, and the like—may have extraordinary powers that normal people lack. More generally, but in the same vein, Wright claims that the resurrection challenges not only all views of the world, and of history, that insist on reducing everything to “materialistic analysis” but also those that explain things by appeal to “pagan superstition or magic.” But why if we are going to let Israel's god into the picture should we be in such a hurry to kick pagan gods out of it? If YHWH can work wonders, why not also Dionysus?

I'm not sure how Wright would answer these questions. The only answer that I have been able to find in his long, insightful discussion of historical methodology is his view that “the proof of the pudding is in the eating.” By this, of course, he means that the proof of the interpretation is in its ability to make coherent sense of the data. But this is not nearly enough of an answer. On the face of it, it seems very likely that radically different sorts of interpretations are going to make coherent sense of the data to different sorts of people. To Sanders and Crossan, for instance, one or another naturalistic interpretation is bound to make more coherent sense of the data than any interpretation that involves theological or other sorts of eschatological expectations. To Borg, an interpretation that allows for there being individuals who have special access to other dimensions of reality is bound to make more coherent sense than any that closes the door on that possibility. And for Wright, as we have seen, only an interpretation that is based on his version of Jesus' appropriation of Jewish eschatological expectations and that includes Jesus' resurrection is going to make the most coherent sense. So if, as he says, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then we need to take a very careful look not only at the pudding but also at who is doing the eating.