Part Four

RESPONSES
What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?
—Tertullian (ca. 200 C.E.)

The more the church has sought to ground itself in something other than the transforming work of the Spirit... [the more] it has missed the point of its existence... [The church's discourse] should not be the same as the academy's, nor should it be subject to the same rules or the same criteria of validity. It is time for a return from the academic captivity of the church.

The secular quest for the historical Jesus has challenged many thoughtful Christians. How should they respond? In my view, there are just three basic responses, which I call the Only Faith response, the Faith Seeking Understanding response, and the Only Reason response. However, rather than neatly defined categories of responses, these three should be understood as points on a spectrum, at one end of which—Only Faith—is the view that Christians should be totally dismissive of even the expert opinions of secular historians, and at the other end of which—Only Reason—is the view that Christians should be totally submissive to the expert opinions of secular historians.
Midway between these two extremes is the Faith Seeking Understanding response, according to which Christians should arrive at some sort of harmonious integration of what they think they know about Jesus by faith and what historians claim to know about Jesus on the basis of evidence. The first two of these responses are alike in that both refuse any compromises. The Faith Seeking Understanding response is usually chosen only by those who think that compromise is not only possible but essential.

Christians who respond to the challenge to their beliefs posed by historical Jesus studies, rather than neatly fitting into any of these categories of response, tend to lean toward one or another of them. For instance, even those who are drawn to the Only Faith response generally concede that there are a variety of limited roles that may be assigned legitimately to historical evidence, such as allowing it to be used to fill in small gaps in, or even to correct in minor ways, beliefs that are arrived at through faith. Thus a person who is drawn to the Only Faith response might leave it to the historians to determine, say, how many siblings Jesus had or what languages he spoke, but not whether he worked miracles or rose from the dead.

Few Christians who defend their religious beliefs against the challenge from historical studies explain where they draw the line between what is determined by faith and what is left to the historians, or on what grounds they draw it. Most are intent on making the more fundamental point that Christians do not have to knuckle under to secular historians, at least not across the board or on any important point. For present purposes, I am going to suppose that Christians who draw the line between what faith contributes and what secular scholarship contributes to their beliefs, in such a way that only crumbs are left to scholarship, subscribe to the Only Faith response, even though they may not be pure instances of that type. Christians who, while insisting on the importance of faith, nevertheless envisage a more genuine engagement with scholarship are more usefully regarded as Faith Seeking Understanding types. And Christians who basically accept the results of secular scholarship, leaving only crumbs to faith, are more usefully regarded as Only Reason types.

It is natural to suppose that the current conflict between faith and secular historical scholarship is a child of the Enlightenment, recently grown to maturity. In a way, that supposition is right. However, the underlying issues at stake in the conflict between faith and historical scholarship have to do not so much with anything that is peculiar to historical scholarship per se as they do with the deliverances of secular rationality more generally, whether these come from historical scholarship, science, philosophy, or just plain thinking. And in that more general form in which the conflict is not between faith and secular historical scholarship but between faith and secular rationality, the conflict is as old as Christianity. In the second and third centuries C.E., the conflict in this more general form arose within the emerging Christian community when some church fathers, including Origen, Clement, and Gregory of Nyssa, tried to integrate what they believed on the basis of Christian scripture with what they had learned from Greek philosophy (in effect, the “science” of the day), while others, such as Tertullian, argued that their attempt to integrate the sacred and the profane was a big mistake.

Tertullian, then, represents an earlier advocate of the Only Faith response. In his day, the center of Greek philosophy was Athens, and the center of Christianity, Jerusalem. Hence in asking, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” he posed the crucial question. In his more conservative moments, his answer was “Nothing.” This is the answer that I am calling the Only Faith response. Characteristic of those who take this extreme view, Tertullian was not always consistent. Sometimes he too tried to integrate faith and “science”; for instance, he accepted from the Stoics—a school of Greek philosophy established in Athens about 300 B.C.E.—that the soul is corporeal, and then tried on that basis to explain immortality.

Tertullian is one of the few Christian intellectuals who have sided with the Only Faith response. Almost all of them have adopted the Faith Seeking Understanding response. Of course intellectuals’ preference for the Faith Seeking Understanding response is partly due to their being intellectuals in the first place. On the face of it, the Only Faith response is an anti-intellectual response. This is not to say that it is an unintelligent response. It may in fact be a Christian’s best response to the challenges posed by secular rationality. However, those whom we know about historically who have embraced the Only Faith response tend not to be philosophers and theologians.

There are exceptions. Pierre Bayle, whose views we considered briefly in Chapter 2, may have been an exception. He suggested that one should give the back of one’s hand to rationality and blindly follow faith. However, no one has been able to figure out whether in making this suggestion he was serious. In any case, historically the
most interesting and influential exception to the rule that those advocating the Only Faith response tend not to be philosophers or theologians is the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. He not only thought that faith should override reason when the two conflict, but that faith is more valuable when it does override reason. In his view, the value of someone's believing something on faith is directly proportional to how improbable the belief is when it is assessed on the basis of secular rationality. Tertullian is famous for having said, “I believe because it is absurd.” Kierkegaard might have expressed his own point of view by saying, “My belief is spiritually authentic to whatever degree it is absurd.” And, as we saw in Chapter 3, in a famous paper published in 1896 the theologian Martin Kähler, echoing Kierkegaard, argued that a faith that needs support from historical evidence is inauthentic.

Today, among educated people who are neither theologians nor philosophers, it is difficult to find pure cases of the Only Faith response. The Enlightenment has taken its toll. One of the “lessons” of European intellectual culture that is widely accepted among educated people is that one has to be something of a yaho to give reason (and ordinary procedures for gathering evidence) the back of one’s hand. Yet one does not have to be a yaho to think that a Christian’s best response to the challenge posed by secular historical scholarship is the Only Faith response. There are thoughtful and articulate advocates of this response—not many, but some. In the United States today the most highly visible of these thoughtful respondents is Luke Johnson, a theologian at Emory University. In a series of articles and now in a book, The Real Jesus (1996), Johnson defends the Only Faith response. As we shall see, like Tertullian, Johnson does not defend the Only Faith response in a way that is wholly consistent. Often he wavers and makes concessions to the opposition that make his view as a whole hard to understand. In the final analysis, it may be that even he endorses the Faith Seeking Understanding response. But this more moderate side of Johnson is not the side that one notices first, or the side that has made him a darling of theological conservatives. And it is not the side that has made him so highly visible.

In the main part of what Johnson has to say, he defends the Only Faith response, and it is this part that I want to consider first, after which I’ll explain how he qualifies his commitment to this view. The reason for not bothering now with his concessions and qualifications is that my goal is not primarily to explain his views but to consider the best case that can be made for the Only Faith response, so that we can assess its strengths and weaknesses. Johnson has defended the Only Faith response in a way that has better expressed how a lot of conservative Christians feel about the challenge posed to Christian belief by secular historical scholarship than has anyone else with whom I am familiar. That is why we are considering his views.

Johnson begins his defense of the Only Faith response by criticizing a number of contributions to the secular quest for the historical Jesus on the grounds that they are sensational, speculative, and sloppy. In this part of his defense, Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar come in for special criticism. However, Johnson thinks better of the work of a few secular historians. He says, for instance, of John Meier’s account that it is “carried out with the utmost sobriety and seriousness” and “as solid and moderate and pious” as a secular history of Jesus is ever likely to be. Yet, in Johnson’s view, even Meier’s account is too limited to be useful.

Johnson says that the main problem with Meier’s account and with secular histories of Jesus generally is that historians begin their work by dismantling the narrative structures of the canonical Gospels. They do this to determine what in the Gospels is historically reliable. But in Johnson’s view, once historians have taken this initial step, they are left only with a pile of fragments, and they have no responsible way to reconstruct the fragments into a meaningful whole. Hence the secular historians’ project is merely destructive, lacking the resources also to be constructive. In the case of Meier, for instance, Johnson concedes that he identifies those pieces of the Gospel narratives that our best evidence suggests reach back to Jesus himself, or to traditions very close to Jesus. But, Johnson says, “we are not on that account allowed to make inferences from such a collection of facts to the frequency, connectedness between, sequence, proportion, relative importance, and above all, the meaning of these facts.” In Johnson’s view, secular historians are, in effect, spiritual terrorists. In one fell swoop, he suggests, they reduce a beautiful, deeply meaningful structure—the New Testament Gospel narratives—to a pile of useless, ugly rubble.

But are secular historians guilty of leaving everything in shambles? As we saw in Chapter 4, Meier does in fact reassemble the “pieces” of the New Testament that he regards as authentic into what seems to be a meaningful whole. In his view, Jesus emerges as a marginally
Jewish, (perhaps) miracle-working, eschatological prophet. And it is not just Meier who reconstructs the pieces into a meaningful whole—virtually all high-visibility secular historians of Jesus do that as well, though they do not do it in the same way. Even in the case of someone as revisionist as Schüssler Fiorenza, the Jesus that emerges from her studies is in fact deeply meaningful to many contemporary feminists. So what’s the problem?

The problem, in Johnson’s view, is not so much with Meier's reconstruction per se—and, by implication, with the reconstructions of other historians—as it is with what he sees as the fact that Meier is not entitled to his reconstruction. Johnson says that “the synthetic picture of Jesus’ ministry” that Meier advances, “however true it might be,” is “not strictly derivable from the methods that he himself has employed, and owes more than a little to the contribution made by the Gospel narratives that the method began by excluding.” In other words, Johnson’s complaint is that the destructive parts of historians’ attempts to ferret out the real Jesus are more scientifically reputable than the constructive parts. But if in constructing an alternative portrait of Jesus one is going to go beyond where one is entitled to go strictly on evidential grounds, then why not simply stick with the traditional New Testament portrait of Jesus? The only reason for criticizing the New Testament portrait in the first place was that on evidential grounds one is not entitled to believe it. So where is the gain?

There is some truth in Johnson’s criticism. As we discussed in Chapter 5, not just Meier but virtually all high-visibility secular historians of Jesus go well beyond their evidence in proposing their positive accounts of who Jesus was and what he was about. Their positive accounts are based on their best educated guesses, not on their secure, evidentially grounded conclusions. In my view, that is largely why there is so much disagreement among historians of Jesus. But historians might well respond as follows: If what we’ve done—solely on the basis of historical evidence—is the best that anyone can do, what’s the matter with it? The most reasonable answer, in my view, is that if what the secular historians have done is the best that anyone can do solely on the basis of historical evidence, then for the purpose of promoting the objectives that animate the secular historical project, nothing is the matter with it. After all, it is not their fault that there is not more and better evidence.

Johnson would not agree. In his view, and presumably in the views of many Christians, plenty is wrong with what the secular historians have done. The secular historians, he is saying, are destroyers. Even when, like Meier, they rebuild in an attractive way, they are not rebuilding on firm foundations. Hence in Johnson’s view, traditional Christians are ill advised to follow them, especially when Christians already have a beautiful, accommodating structure, resting securely on the rock-solid foundation of faith. Why wrench themselves out of the security and comfort of that structure to inhabit another that is less beautiful and accommodating and rests precariously on the speculative pretensions of secular historians? Still, there is something ironic about Johnson’s singling out Meier for criticism. In almost everyone’s opinion who has an opinion about secular historians of Jesus (the only exceptions would be some liberal historians), Meier stands at the top of his field. One may not agree with his results, but it is hard not to admire his erudition, skill, thoroughness, and even his evenhanded way of dealing with historians who have opposing views. One might have expected someone like Johnson to criticize Meier for being too skeptical. Ironically, Johnson criticizes Meier for not being skeptical enough!

It is tempting to suppose—and this is merely supposition—that Meier comes in for special criticism from Johnson precisely because he is both so respectable and reassembles the pieces of his puzzle in a way that is fairly close to what many Christians already believe about Jesus. To conservative Christians, Crossan and Schüssler Fiorenza will look like the enemy. Meier, by contrast, can look like a friend. That may be why Meier, rather than more liberal historians, emerges in Johnson’s view as the biggest threat. It is as if Johnson does not want Christians to get to choose between faith by itself and faith informed by, and possibly integrated with, the account of someone like Meier. Rather, he wants them to face a starker choice: either offensively liberal histories, such as those of Crossan and Schüssler Fiorenza, who presumably represent the abyss, or the familiar and, to conservative Christians, profoundly more meaningful New Testament Gospel narratives.

Johnson does not conclude that there should be no secular histories of Jesus, however. He concedes that for secular historians and their students “it is obviously important to study Christian origins historically” and that “in such historical inquiry faith commitments should play no role.” His point, rather, is that this secular project has virtually nothing to do with what Christians should believe. One of his reasons, as we have seen, is that the evidence is too slender
and ambiguous “to enable a truly comprehensive reconstruction of Christian origins.” Another is that secular accounts—merely because they are secular, and regardless of how well they might be done on their own terms—do not proceed from “the perspective of faith.” It is not clear whether Johnson thinks there can be more than one perspective of faith. He gives no indication that there may be different perspectives of faith. In any case, in his opinion, “the perspective of faith” is the only perspective from which results can emanate that should influence the beliefs of Christians. He says that “the most destructive effect” of the secular quest for the historical Jesus “has been the perpetuation of the notion that history somehow determines faith,” that is, that for faith in what happened historically “to be correct, the historical accounts that gave rise to it have to be verifiable.” In his view, it is on the basis of faith, not secular scholarship, that Christians should make up their minds about what Jesus said and did during the first century C.E.

But how should faith determine what one believes—does “anything go” so long as one believes it on faith, or are there constraints? Philosophically, this is the crucial question. Johnson gives three answers to it. Perhaps his answers might somehow be unified into one coherent answer, but he does not unify them and it is not obvious how to do so. For present purposes, which have to do with understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the Only Faith response, I am going to treat his “three” answers as if they really are three, with an acknowledgment that this may not be fair to Johnson.

The question, recall, is how, in Johnson’s view, faith should determine what one believes. In what I am going to call his religious experience answer, he writes, somewhat Gnostic-like, that each Christian’s own personal experience of Jesus, and that alone, should be the standard for his or her interpretation. Thus, in this answer, there seem to be no limits—none certainly imposed by historical evidence—on what one can believe about Jesus. The only constraint is that one’s beliefs must accord with one’s own personal experience, and Johnson puts no limits on the conditions under which one has those experiences or on how thoughtful and circumspect one is in interpreting the experiences, or on what one learns about Jesus as a consequence of having had experiences, and so on. In short, his view seems to be that so long as one’s own experience sustains one’s faith, anything goes.

An obvious problem with this view is that it would sanction believing some pretty weird things. You may recall that many of the disciples of David Koresh in Waco, Texas, who in 1993 met a fiery end at the hands of the FBI, accepted on faith that he was Jesus. Presumably many of his disciples felt that this belief was confirmed by their own experience. Assume, for the sake of argument, that they felt this. Assume also that most of the rest of us, had we been in the place of these disciples of Koresh, would have interpreted our experiences of him not as proving that he was Jesus, but as proving that he was a fake. Nevertheless, in Johnson’s view, what Koresh’s disciples believed on faith is perfectly acceptable.

Naturally Koresh’s disciples have a right to believe whatever they want, including that he was Jesus. I am not questioning that. The question, rather, is whether in basing their faith as they did on their experiences of Koresh, they might have made some sort of interpretive mistake, say, by interpreting their experiences in a way that was incorrect, or at least less than ideal. In the part of what Johnson has to say that we are examining, he does not try to answer any question of this sort. He does not even acknowledge, as it seems he should, that some question of this sort might need to be answered.

Had Johnson tried to respond to the possibility that many of Koresh’s disciples may have interpreted their experiences in a way that is less than ideal, there are only two sorts of answers that he might have given. First, he might have said that what Koresh’s disciples believed about Koresh was perfectly acceptable, regardless of what experiences formed the basis for their beliefs, so long as their beliefs really were based on their experiences. In other words, he might, as Tertullian and Kierkegaard did, have bitten the bullet and taken the view that when it comes to faith, anything goes. Or, instead of that, he might have said that in order for what Koresh’s disciples believed about Koresh to be acceptable, it is not enough that their beliefs were based on their experiences, but some further constraint also had to be satisfied. But, of course, if some further constraint had to be satisfied, then the question arises as to whether this constraint, or any part of it, has anything to do with historical evidence. Apparently Johnson’s answer to this latter question would be no.

Johnson says that “Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus.” He concedes that Christians “assert continuity” between the historical Jesus and the living Lord Jesus, but insists that “their faith is confirmed” not by evidence regarding the past but by “the reality of Christ’s power in the present.” He says that if Christian faith were “directed to a hu-
man construction about the past, that would be a form of idolatry." Instead, authentic Christian faith is directed to "the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus." In other words, it is only the present that matters. The past is irrelevant. Or, more modestly, present experiences, not ordinary historical evidence, should determine one's view of the past. According to Johnson, to allow ordinary historical evidence to determine one's view of the past would be to direct one's feeling about what one takes to be those past events not to the past events themselves but to "human constructions" of those past events.

But Johnson's accusation of idolatry cannot be right. If someone were to be informed by some secular historian's interpretation of Jesus and, as a consequence, conceived of Jesus somewhat differently than before, there is no reason to suppose that his or her faith in Jesus would be directed "to a human construction about the past." The Christian presumably would still be directing his or her faith at Jesus—the same Jesus Johnson says should be the focus of any Christian's faith, and the same Jesus that the secular histories purport to be about. This should be clear in the following analogy:

Suppose that I dislike President Clinton because of some things I think he did as president. And suppose it is because of what I've read and heard in news reports that I think he did these things. Even so, in disliking Clinton, I do not dislike the news reports, each of which, admittedly, is "a human construction about the past"; rather, I dislike Clinton. If the news reports are incorrect or misleading, I may dislike Clinton for mistaken reasons. But that would not change the fact that it is still Clinton whom I dislike. The same thing would be true, of course, if on the basis of news reports, I liked (rather than disliked) President Clinton. The general moral is that what we appeal to in order to form beliefs about someone is one thing, and what (or whom) the beliefs are about is another. I may appeal to my current experience, to my memory of what I experienced in the past, to historical evidence, or whatever, to form a belief about some past person. My belief is still about that person, even if that person happens to be Jesus.

What about Johnson's view that it is only the present that matters or, more modestly, that to whatever extent the past matters, it is acceptable to base one's views about the past solely on one's present experiences, with no constraints on how one should interpret those experiences? To me, this does not sound right either. Johnson uses an analogy to try to explain what he means. He says, "The situation with the Christians' memory of Jesus is not like that of a long-ago lover who died and whose short time with us is treasured," but, "like that of a lover who continues to live with the beloved in a growing and maturing relationship." Then, drawing on his own personal experience, he says that even though he experiences the love shown him by his wife as continuous with the love that she showed him in the early years of their relationship, "in no way do I find that love dependent on the right interpretation of those earlier experiences." But unless Johnson is an extremely unusual person, I doubt that he means what he says—that is, that his current love for his wife "in no way" depends on how he interprets their past together. Suppose, for instance (with apologies for the example), that one day, while rummaging around in the attic of his house, he were to discover a large envelope full of correspondence between his wife and another man. . . .

Let's change the example. Suppose, to take the focus off of Johnson, that you are a middle-aged man who believes himself to have been happily married for twenty years to your current wife and that one day, while rummaging around in the attic of your house, you discover a large envelope full of "love letters" between your wife and another man, all bearing postmarks from the first ten years of your marriage. How would you react? Imagine that you were to read the letters. Perhaps initially you would read them in shock, unable to believe what you were reading. Your mind would race in search of comforting explanations—the letters are a hoax, and so on. But eventually what you had discovered would reassert itself. The truth could no longer be denied: During the first ten years of your marriage, your wife had had a secret lover in a nearby town. Among other reactions you might naturally have, probably you would rethink a great many things you remember your wife having said to you during those years, such as that she loved only you. Up until a few minutes ago, her having said such things had always been deeply significant to you. Now you imagine that during the same time she was telling you that, she was telling her secret lover the same thing.

Would your discovery affect your feelings toward your wife or would you simply disregard your discovery as an irrelevant part of the dead past, not as a "vibrant part of the living present"? If you are a normal human being, with normal emotions, of course your
discovery would affect your feelings. It would matter deeply. The “love” shown to you now by your wife would not only be experienced by you as continuous with the love she showed you in the earlier years of your marriage, but in many ways how you experienced her love in the present would be deeply “dependent” on the right interpretation of those earlier experiences.” The moral of this alternative version of Johnson’s own example is that contrary to what he has suggested, to virtually everyone, probably even including Johnson, history matters. And the history that matters is not history constructed entirely independently of ordinary historical evidence, but history determined largely, if not solely, on the basis of ordinary historical evidence. In the case of our example, this evidence would include the letters. To suggest, as Johnson does, that history determined by ordinary means does not in general matter is to reveal that in this respect one’s theories are out of touch with the actual bases of one’s emotional life, or at least of most people’s emotional lives.

I say these things not to reject the religious experience version of the Only Faith response. My goal, rather, is to show what is involved in being committed to that version of the response. In my view, part of what often (but not necessarily always) is involved, as in Johnson’s self-characterization, is the illusion that we are mentally compartmentalized in ways that few of us actually are. For most of us, I suspect, our experiences in the present are not segregated and insulated from our interpretations of the past, any more than our interpretations of the past are segregated and insulated either from our experiences in the present or from what we learn on the basis of ordinary historical evidence. Everything goes into the same hopper.

Although the human capacity for self-deception sometimes seems boundless, for the most part we are holistic enough that we want some sort of harmony, first, between how we interpret our present experiences and our views of the past and, second, between our views of the past and whatever ordinary evidence we are aware of about what happened in the past. Were we not this way, we would have a much more difficult time making sense of our lives than we actually do, and whatever sense we did make of them would be merely personal. Such personal histories could not easily be integrated with the personal histories of others, say, family members and coworkers, into a shared representation of what happened.

The fact is that almost all of us believe that at least in most of our lives there are constraints on what it is acceptable to believe about what happened. And ordinary historical evidence, together with personal memories (not only our own but also those of others), is the backbone of these constraints. We could, of course, decide that although it is appropriate for these constraints to be in place when it comes to determining most of what we believe about the past, when it comes to Jesus, it is all right to throw these constraints to the winds. In effect, this is what Johnson has proposed. But before embracing this proposal, thinking Christians may want to explore other ways to meet the challenges posed by historical scholarship.

In the case of the secular quest for the historical Jesus, we can, if we like, avoid the inconvenience of having to grapple with historical evidence by simply avoiding ever becoming acquainted with that evidence. Most Americans, whether Christians or not, do that for most of history anyway. And all of us do that for at least some portions of history. One cannot be concerned with everything—there is not enough time. However, in the long run, it may not be so easy for most Christians simply to turn away from the secular quest for the historical Jesus. The scholarship being generated by that quest has only recently come into public view. It may be tempting to suppose that if one just ignores this scholarship, it will go away. But how likely is that? As the years and decades roll by, probably it is going to be harder and harder for even ordinary, history-ignorant, television-addicted Americans not to learn what secular historians think about Jesus and why. Whether we like it or not, we are going to get treated to these new, revisionist portraits of Jesus in movies, books, and, yes, even television programs. Eventually almost everyone will find out about them.

Books by secular historians of Jesus are already on the shelves of most shopping-mall bookstores (see for yourself, go to your local shopping mall bookstore and ask for a book by J. D. Crossan or Marcus Borg). Books by secular historians of Jesus are in most public libraries. Soon they will be in most high school libraries. Movies based on these books will be playing occasionally in neighborhood theaters (remember The Last Temptation of Christ). And television series based on these books, at least series made for public television, will continue to be beamed into our living rooms (this has already happened, both in the United States and England). The bottom line is that even if you and I were to choose to ignore the portraits of Jesus that have emerged from secular histories, eventually our children and some of our neighbors are going to notice them. In relatively
free societies, there is no way of keeping people, particularly inquisitive young people, from confronting the results of secular scholarship about Jesus. Some of the portraits of Jesus generated by secular scholarship are too sensational to be kept under wraps. Sooner or later they will enter the common culture. And what then?

Note that I am separating two questions here: whether Christians should pay any attention to secular scholarship about Jesus, and whether in the long run they will be able to avoid paying some attention to it. I am addressing only the second of these questions. What I am suggesting is that for most of us, rejecting ordinary historical evidence in the way Johnson suggests that we should may not, in the long run, be a realistic option. Eventually many of us are going to become aware of the new evidence and interpretations. And eventually many of us are going to understand what it is that we have become aware of. What I am questioning is whether when that time comes many of us will be able simply to give historical evidence the backs of our hands; some will be able to, but how many?

In my view, most of us are too psychologically holistic to segregate and insulate our experiences in the present from our interpretations of the past, and also too holistic to segregate our interpretations of the past from evidence that we are aware of concerning what happened. In other words, what I am suggesting is that even if we wanted to compartmentalize our psyches and our lives so as to keep experiences, interpretations, and evidence completely insulated from each other, most of us are too holistic to succeed in doing it. Just as in the case of the wife example, what most of us think about one important part of our lives and how we experience that part both affects and is affected by what we think about other important parts of our lives and how we experience them—especially parts as big and significant as “the past” and “the present.” And what most of us think about “the past” both affects and is affected by whatever evidence we are aware of concerning what actually happened. We can say that we are going to keep everything in separate compartments in our minds, isolated and insulated from each other. We can try to do that. But neither saying nor trying is the same as actually doing. If we confuse our reach with our grasp, we are simply kidding ourselves.

Johnson has a second answer to the question of how faith should determine what one believes. According to his first answer—religious experience—faith alone should determine our view of the past.

Surprisingly, according to his second answer, which I shall call the Holy Scripture answer, the past—specifically the New Testament—should determine the content of our faith. In defending his Holy Scripture answer, Johnson says that although “the premise” of the secular search for the historical Jesus is that “the only way to find ‘the real Jesus’ is to bypass the Jesus found in the canonical Gospels,” in fact the very thing that appears to historical Jesus scholars as the core problem is “seen by Christians as the best and truest aspect of the Gospels, namely, their postresurrection perspective.” By “the postresurrection perspective,” of course, Johnson means the perspectives of the New Testament authors, particularly the authors of the four canonical Gospels. “For a community of faith that lives in the presence of the resurrected One,” Johnson continues, “it is absurd, even a betrayal of the truth,” to consider the passion of Jesus “apart from” the interpretation of those events given by the Gospels.12

Thus in Johnson’s Holy Scripture answer, he takes it as axiomatic that the interpretations of Jesus in the four canonical Gospels will assume great importance in a Christian’s attempt to understand Jesus. No doubt, to Christians, these Gospel interpretations almost always do assume great importance, but in light of Johnson’s first answer, why should they? The point of his bringing up the wife example was to reveal what he took to be the irrelevance of the past as well as the irrelevance of how we or anyone else interprets it. Now, it seems, the past together with how we interpret it—in this case, by appropriating the interpretations conveyed in the four canonical Gospels—suddenly are immensely relevant. How did they become so relevant?

The answer, I suspect, is that not even Johnson can stick consistently to his religious experience answer. Perhaps he would not want to abandon it altogether. On reflection, he might want to say that religious experience and sacred scripture should work together to determine the proper content of a Christian’s religious faith: religious experience informing one’s reading of Holy Scripture, and one’s reading of Holy Scripture nourishing and giving content to one’s religious experience. Fair enough, if this is what he really thinks. But would he want to leave it at that? That combined answer would leave the content of a Christian’s faith entirely up to the individual Christian, provided that his or her faith was based on an interpretation of the New Testament. Does Johnson really want to give the individual Christian believer that much autonomy? It would seem not.
In defending his Holy Scripture answer, Johnson suggests that it is not up to each of us to arrive at our own interpretation of Jesus in our own way—either on the basis of current experience, Holy Scripture, or anything else—but that interpretations favored by “the community of faith” are somehow normative. But he never explains who is included in “the community of faith” or who gave them the right to decide questions of scriptural interpretation for the individual Christian. This latter is a strange omission for him to make. When the question was that of who gave secular historians the right to decide for “the” community of Christians how they should interpret the New Testament, Johnson is quite definite. His view is that no one gave historians the right to decide what as a matter of faith any community should believe, and until someone who has the authority does give historians that right, they do not have it. On this latter point, I agree entirely with Johnson.

However, Johnson then goes on to say that “without a community’s commitment to acknowledge ‘a more adequate history’ as normative, the criticism of tradition carried out by historical research is strictly beside the point.” He says that “Christian faith and Christian theology have never made such a commitment” to secular historians. Instead, he says, they have “made a commitment to the ‘history’ limned in the texts of the New Testament, and above all to the story of Jesus inscribed in the Gospel narratives.” In such remarks, Johnson talks blithely about “the community,” “Christian faith,” and “Christian theology” as if there were just one Christian community, one version of Christian faith, and one Christian theology, and that this community, faith, and theology are automatically normative for all believing Christians, regardless of whether all Christians acknowledge it as normative. But surely it is not obvious that there is just one community, one faith, and one theology, and even if there is, that each is automatically normative for all believing Christians. At the very least, Johnson needs to tell us why we should assume this with him. In my view, we should not assume it with him because it is not true.

To sum up, Johnson’s first answer to the question of how Christians should arrive at an understanding of Jesus—religious experience—stresses the importance of the present. His second answer—Holy Scripture—stresses the importance of the past, in particular the perspectives of the authors of the New Testament. Based on how Johnson defends this second answer, it seems that he may want to combine his first two answers and, in doing so, mix in a third ingredient: the normative-conferring authority of “the community of faith.” But if he does want so to combine his answers, surely now he has backed away completely from the simple straightforwardness of his initial endorsement of present experience. Apparently, in his view, it is no longer the case, if it ever was, that anything goes. Far from it. In this part of his remarks, Johnson repeatedly talks approvingly about community constraints on individual belief. But which community? Why, of course, the community of Christian theologians!

Surprisingly, in defending this—his third—answer, Johnson stresses the importance of critical thinking. He says that for “loyalty” to “the Christian tradition” to be “an authentic expression of faith,” it “must also be critical.” But who gave him the right to define when an expression of faith is authentic? Johnson seems to assume that “Church theology,” which is informed by scholarship and driven by “critical thinking,” gave him the right. For instance, he says that while “ultimate human loyalty is appropriately directed to the living God rather than to community memory,” “the task of theology in the church is not only discernment of God’s word and praise of God’s work” but “also critical reflection on the received tradition and the adequacy of the human response to God.” Biblical scholarship, he says, plays “a key role” in such critical reflection. Then he stresses—sounding now more than a little like his archenemy, Crossan—that this scholarship must take into account anthropological, historical, literary, and religious perspectives. Appeals to divine inspiration, he continues, are “claims about the ultimate origin of the texts and their authority,” not keys to their interpretation. In interpreting the texts, anthropology is important, he says, because the texts were written by real people who were interpreting their experience in terms of “available cultural symbols.” History is important, since the New Testament authors were first-century Mediterranean Jews and, as such, “necessarily interpreted” their experiences and convictions within “a symbolic framework specific to that place and time.” Literature is important, first, because “the meaning of texts is inextricably connected with their literary construction” and, second, because the final literary form of the New Testament texts was “canonized” (there’s that community, exercising its normative power again). Religion is important, he continues, since the New Testament texts arose out of religious experiences and convictions,
and hence to read them simply for the historical information they provide is to miss what is most important about these texts, namely, “how the experience of the powerful transforming power of God that came through the crucified Messiah Jesus, created not only a new understanding of who Jesus was but, simultaneously, a new understanding of God and God’s way with the world.”

A striking thing about Johnson’s list of relevant considerations, given how anxious he has been to dismiss historical expertise as religiously insignificant, is how much every item on the list, with one possible exception, is a matter about which some historians are experts. For instance, if, as Johnson says, for religious purposes it is crucial to remember that the New Testament authors were first-century Mediterranean Jews and, as such, necessarily interpreted their experiences and convictions within a symbolic framework specific to their place and time, to whom does the religious person turn to discover what that symbolic framework actually involves? Are not secular historians and other social scientists the experts on such matters? And so on, with the other items on the list, except for considering how the texts were influenced by the experience of “the powerful transforming power of God” that came through Jesus. However, if Johnson were to reformulate that latter condition as the need to take into account how the experience of the transforming power of God influenced the authors of the Gospels, but rather how the authors of the Gospels interpreted as the experience of the transforming power of God influenced them, then we are back again in the arena of secular historical expertise.

One could argue that the historical experts are not really experts, a point that Johnson comes close to making. These days, with a few notable exceptions, trashing the expertise of secular historians practically has the status of a pro forma ritual in conservative Christian apologetics. However, a problem with this sort of trashing is that, as we saw earlier in our survey of historians’ views, it’s clear that the historical experts really are experts. Granted, secular historians sometimes overstep the bounds of their expertise, a point to which I shall return in the next chapter, but their sometimes overstepping their bounds does not strip them of their status as experts when they stay within their bounds.

One final thought about Johnson. In Chapter 6 I argued that secular historians, no matter how much they might try to keep from making assumptions that have theological implications, all but inevitably slip into making them. It is interesting to note that even Johnson—who among living thinkers is as sophisticated and articulate a champion as I have found of the Only Faith response—claims that it is crucial for us to remember that the New Testament authors were first-century Mediterranean Jews and, as such, “necessarily” interpreted their experiences and convictions within a symbolic framework specific to their place and time. My question is this: If the New Testament authors were divinely inspired, as Johnson clearly thinks they were, why is he so quick to assume that necessarily they interpreted their experiences in such a restricted way? Surely God has access to broader perspectives, and hence could have influenced New Testament authors to transcend their cultural limitations and write from these broader perspectives. In assuming that necessarily this did not happen, that is, that necessarily New Testament authors were not sufficiently divinely inspired to transcend their cultural limitations, Johnson comes close to assuming that New Testament authors were not divinely inspired at all, which, as we have seen, is what most secular historians, at least in their role as secular historians, also assume.

Quite apart from worries about how the restricted perspectives of New Testament authors might have influenced what they wrote, Johnson goes on to say that there are entirely independent bases for criticizing interpretations in New Testament texts. He says that these texts “can be challenged morally, religiously, and theologically for their adequacy, consistency, and cogency.” For instance, he asks whether New Testament texts, when taken at face value, support societal arrangements in which women are oppressed. He answers that if they do, they “can best be criticized, not by constructing an imaginary, alternative history of early Christianity in which women enjoyed equality, but on the basis of theological convictions that God’s Spirit has brought to maturity within the church.”

Surely Johnson is right that if New Testament texts encourage the oppression of women, probably the texts are not best criticized by constructing imaginary, alternative histories. But how does Johnson know that such secular histories are imaginary? From whom did he learn that in first-century Israel there were no traditions of sexual equality, such as the one Schüssler Fiorenza describes, and how did he learn this, if not from secular historians and via processes of ordinary scholarly criticism? Did Johnson learn this on ordinary historical grounds—say, from Meier, whom he so much admires—or did he
learn it from faith? And what if Schüsler Fiorenza’s version of the facts about Jewish communities of the time is true, rather than imaginary? In Johnson’s view, would that make any difference to how New Testament texts could best be criticized?

Or, to take another example, consider the views of the historian Elaine Pagels, who has not written about Jesus per se but about what she takes to be a contrast between early Gnostic Christian communities and those that became identified with the institutional church. Pagels portrays the Gnostic communities as being much more sexually egalitarian. That is, according to her, in many Gnostic communities, in striking contrast to practices in communities fostered by the emerging institutional church, women tended to be treated as equals. Many historians seem to accept at least that much of Pagels’s characterization. Is Johnson suggesting that Pagels’s history is merely “imaginative,” that is, that it is bad history? And, if he is suggesting this, how does he know?

Assume, for the sake of argument, that all histories according to which there was greater equality between the sexes in some subcultures that existed in early Christian times than there was in the emerging institutional church are bad histories. Even so, would the only remaining basis for criticizing New Testament texts for encouraging the oppression of women (supposing that these texts do encourage it) be “theological convictions that God’s Spirit has brought to maturity within the church”? Why should one have to turn to theologians, or to the church, for a basis for criticizing the oppression of women? For that matter, why should one have to turn to theologians, or to the church, for a basis for criticizing the oppression of anyone? Does one have to turn to theologians or to the church for a basis for criticizing societies that tolerate slavery or child abuse?

Sometimes, it almost seems as if what really irks Johnson is that secular historians have challenged, and perhaps even usurped, the authority that used to be conferred unquestioningly on theologians.

In sum, it seems that Johnson has strayed a long way from his initial posture as one who recommends the Only Faith response. He began by encouraging us to put our faith in our own personal experience. Then he encouraged us to put it instead in the “structure of meaning” ingredient in the canonical Gospels. In the end, he seems to be recommending that we give high marks to the structure of meaning ingredient in the interpretation of history of some group of theologians that he admires—in effect, that we withdraw our faith from, say, the Gospels of Luke and John and put it instead in the gospel of Luke Johnson! If that is the sort of thing he has in mind, it seems a heavy price to pay just to ward off secular historians.

The Only Faith response may be much better than Johnson’s defense of it would suggest. However, it is clear from my critique of his defense that those who would defend it need to address six issues. First, they need to be clear about whether in their version of the Only Faith response “anything goes,” or instead there are constraints on what one can rationally believe about Jesus on the basis of faith. Second, they need to address the question of whether it is realistic to suppose that what people believe on the basis of faith can effectively be insulated from what they believe on the basis of whatever ordinary historical evidence they are aware of and understand. Third, they need to address the question of whether thus insulating the deliverances of faith from other normal sources of belief is healthy. That is, even if by some sort of disciplined mental compartmentalization we could learn to insulate what we believe on the basis of faith from what we believe on the basis of ordinary historical evidence, would we harm ourselves psychologically by doing it? Fourth, advocates of the Only Faith response have to explain whether everyone’s faith, or just their own, is going to be assessed simply on internal criteria. Fifth, they need to respond to the obvious fact that by faith different people come to believe different and even contradictory things. And, finally, since it is of the essence of the Only Faith response that one rejects secular histories of Jesus as irrelevant to what one believes about Jesus, defenders of this response should also ask whether one should also reject secular histories of everyone else—Socrates, say, or the Buddha, or Abraham Lincoln, or a convict who continues to proclaim his innocence—as irrelevant. Or, instead, does one toss out historical studies as irrelevant in assessing one’s own cherished beliefs and then bring them back in to assess everyone else’s beliefs? And is it just evidence from historical studies that gets the ax? What about evidence from biology or physics—say, evidence that the universe is older than 4004 B.C.E.? Is such evidence also irrelevant?

In sum, in trying to protect Christian religious beliefs from the potential challenge of secular historical studies, the Only Faith response, in effect, insulates and isolates to a remarkable degree what a Christian believes religiously from what he or she believes on other grounds. Some will be willing to pay this price to defend Christian
relational beliefs from the challenge of secular historical studies. Others will think that it is too high a price to pay. The latter may well wonder whether there isn't some other way to defend Christian religious beliefs. The answer, of course, is, yes, there are other ways. Whether they fare better has still to be determined. We have seen one version of one of these other ways—although, in my view, not the best version—in the last of Johnson's three responses, and we shall see other versions of it in the next chapter.

9

FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

Whatever God hath revealed is certainly true; no doubt can be made of it. This is the proper object of faith. But whether it be a divine revelation or no reason must judge.

—John Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1689

According to the Faith Seeking Understanding response, when expert historical opinion conflicts with the prompting of faith or religious experience, some sort of compromise must be worked out in which both faith and reason have to give. But what should determine how the compromise is made? John Locke's famous remark, quoted above, may sound as if it is an answer to this question. But it is hard to tell whether it is an answer without knowing how much room reason leaves for divine revelation. For instance, if Locke is saying that reason always refuses to admit as divine revelation the report of any event that transcends the limits of the workings of nature as understood by science—such as Jesus' miracles and his resurrection—then presumably his proposal would exclude divine revelations, since they would seem to transcend the bounds of ordinary natural processes. But in this interpretation of Locke, faith would give, but reason would not. Hence when it comes to assessing the Faith Seeking Understanding response, a lot

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depends on how the compromise between faith and reason is made and, in particular, which, if either, gets the upper hand. I want now to illustrate the importance of this issue by considering the views of several thinkers who subscribe to the Faith Seeking Understanding response but make the compromise in different ways.

John Meier

Meier begins by pointing out that for him even to address the question of why, if at all, a Christian should bother with historical evidence in trying to figure out who Jesus was and what he was about, he (Meier) has to doff the hat of the modern, critical historian and don that of the theologian. For the historian, he says, the “real” has to be defined in terms of what exists in the world of space and time; and it has to be capable, in principle, either of being observed by anyone or reasonably inferred from what can be observed by anyone. As a Christian theologian, however, he says that he affirms “ultimate realities,” such as “the triune God and the risen Jesus,” that may not be capable of being observed or proven rationally. Thus, he says, to ask about the relation between the Jesus who can be reconstructed from modern historical research and the risen Jesus is to pass from the narrower realm of the merely observable and rational into the larger one of faith and theology.2

In Meier’s view, the historical Jesus “is not and cannot be the object of Christian faith.” For one thing, many Christians who do not know much, if anything, about the historical Jesus have believed and still do believe in Christ, “yet no one will deny the validity and strength of their faith.” And even if all Christians were acquainted with historical Jesus studies, the church could not make the historical Jesus the object of its preaching and faith, since historians propose different and often contradictory portraits of Jesus and are always modifying their views. So which Jesus should be the object of Christian faith? Beyond that worry, Meier says, there is another, more important one. The object of Christian faith “is not and cannot be an idea or scholarly reconstruction, however reliable,” but must be Jesus himself, who lived as a human being on earth in the first century C.E. and “now lives, risen and glorified, forever in the Father’s presence.” In Meier’s view, Christian faith is directed primarily to this real Jesus, the one “existing and living now,” the

“risen Lord, to whom access is given only through faith” and only secondarily to ideas and affirmations about him.3

Why, then, one might ask, should Christians bother their heads at all about historical Jesus studies? Meier says that if we are “asking solely about the direct object of Christian faith,” then the answer is that they should not bother; however, if we are asking, in a contemporary cultural setting, about faith seeking understanding, that is, about contemporary theology, then the price Christians will pay for not bothering about historical Jesus studies is to have their views dismissed as irrelevant by educated people, including by many Christians. He says that once a culture has become imbued with a historical-critical approach, as has Western culture since the Enlightenment, theology can speak credibly to that culture only if it takes historical research into account.4 Thus, in his view, the reason Christians might want to be concerned with historical Jesus studies is to construct a more “credible” theology. He adds that this appropriation by theology of the quest for the historical Jesus is not faddishness, but rather “serves the interest of faith” by its reminding Christians that faith in Christ is neither a vague “existential attitude,” nor a way of life, nor adherence to some “mystically divine entity,” but rather an affirmation of an actual person, Jesus, who said and did specific things in a particular time and place in human history.5

Meier says that Jesus was “as truly and fully human—with all the galling limitations that involves—as any other human being.” Against any attempt to domesticate Jesus for the purposes of respectable, middle-class Christians, the quest for the historical Jesus, he says, is a reminder that Jesus was not respectable in that sense: Among other things, Jesus associated with religiously and socially disreputable people and was a critic of merely external religious observances. Finally, in Meier’s view, it is useful to view Jesus through the lens of historical research because Jesus was remarkably silent on many social and political issues of his day and “can be turned into a this-worldly political revolutionary only by contorted exegesis and special pleading.”6 In short, “by refusing to fit into the boxes we create for him,” the historical Jesus “subverts not just some ideologies but all ideologies,” and thereby “remains a constant stimulus to theological renewal.”7

Implicit in these remarks is the idea that historical Jesus studies put rational constraints on faith. For instance, Meier suggests that
one cannot accept on faith that Jesus was a political revolutionary if
the historical evidence does not support that conception of Jesus.
But why can’t Christians simply give the backs of their hands to his
torical evidence? In particular, since Meier, along with many Chris-
tians, thinks that faith provides independent access to truth about
Jesus, why, for Christians, should faith give way to reason if there is
a conflict between them? Meier does not answer or even address this
question except to say that if faith does not give way, Christian the-
ology will cease to be credible. But credible to whom? It will still be
credible to those who have faith and do not care about historical ev-
idence. And why should someone with faith care if his or her theol-
gy is credible to someone without faith? Chances are that it will not
be credible anyway.8

C. Stephen Evans

Evans, a religiously conservative Christian, is a professor of philo-
sophy at Calvin College. In his recent book, The Historical Christ and
the Jesus of Faith (1996), he says that although “the Spirit of God”
can quite independently of evidence and arguments produce faith
that counts as knowledge, the Spirit can also work through evidence
and arguments, and in those who are educated the faith thus formed
is enriched by confirmation of its truth.9 In other words, Evans’s
view is that what one believes on faith does not have to be integrated
with secular learning to be knowledge, but if it is integrated, it may
be “enriched.”

For expository reasons, Evans imagines a hypothetical Christian,
whom he calls James, in whom the Spirit has done its work but who
nevertheless is threatened by secular historical scholarship. Evans
says that because of James’s confidence in the original ground of his
beliefs, he would have been rationally entitled simply to have ig-
nored historical scholarship. However, having read some secular his-
torians, James now has grounds both for believing and for doubting
“the incarnational narrative.”10 Even so, Evans says, James is under
no rational obligation to defer to the secular experts. Evans then lists
approvingly several reasons for discounting expert opinion, such as
that experts often get caught up in fads and address issues that are
beyond their narrow areas of expertise. He concludes from his litan-
y of potential problems with expert opinion that even after encoun-
tering a challenge from secular historians James may well be on solid

ground, so far as rational considerations are concerned, in simply ig-
oring the evidence and clinging to his original beliefs.11

But wouldn’t it depend rather on which of James’s historical be-
iefs we are talking about, and on how much and what kinds of evi-
dence against his beliefs historians provide? Consider an analogy.
Suppose that before a murder trial even begins, a juror is disposed to
believe “on faith” that the defendant is innocent. The juror simply
accepts the defendant’s word that at the time of the murder he was
nowhere near the scene of the crime. Subsequently, on the basis of
historical evidence, the prosecution shows conclusively that at the
time of the murder the defendant was at the scene of the crime. Is the
juror rationally entitled on his original grounds to continue believing
in the innocence of the defendant? It would seem not. But a murder
trial is a historical inquiry. Hence if such a juror would not be rati-
onally entitled on his original grounds to continue believing in the
innocence of the defendant, why in the case of a conflict between what
James accepted initially on faith and what historians show on the
basis of evidence is James nevertheless entitled to persist in his be-

If, in Evans’s view, James is rationally entitled simply to dismiss
the views of the historians, then Evans faces the same sorts of ques-
tions that we saw arising for those who appeal to the Only Faith re-
sponse to the challenge posed by secular historical studies: How far
day James go in clinging to his original beliefs? Does anything go,
or are there limits? If there are limits, what are they, and what is
their source and scope? If, say, James is convinced that the Spirit of
God is working through him in producing his religious beliefs,
would he be entitled, without sulliving his claim to be a rational per-
son, to cling, say, to his biblically inspired belief that the universe
was created in 4004 B.C.E.? Would he be entitled to believe that
David Koresh is Jesus?

I am not suggesting that Evans would want to answer the latter
two questions in the affirmative. My point, rather, is that there
seems to be nothing in his account of rational belief that would
block affirmative answers to them. Indeed, there is nothing in his ac-
count that would block the result that if James thought the Spirit of
God was working through him in generating some consistent belief,
James would be rationally entitled to persist in the belief, no matter
what it was, in the teeth of any amount and any kind of contrary ev-
dence from merely secular sources. If Evans does not want his view
to sanction affirmative answers to such questions, then he needs to
tell us where to draw the line, and on what basis, between what
James is and is not rationally entitled to believe. Then we might be
able to determine whether James’s dismissing the views of historians
would be justified. But instead of telling us where he would draw
that line, Evans leaves it up to us to draw that line for ourselves. The
result of this strategy of silence is that his view is much less interesting
than it might otherwise have been.12

On the surface, Evans may come across as more moderate than he
does in my characterization of his views. For instance, he concedes
that James may realize, on reflection, that his belief in the reliability
of the New Testament accounts is motivated by factors that are not
conducive to truth, such as wish-fulfillment. However, he may also
realize that his skeptical doubts are similarly motivated. So, in
Evans’s view, James’s best option, in the absence of further evidence,
is “simply to examine the situation as honestly as he can,” and then
to believe whatever seems to be true on the basis of that examination.13 Fair enough. But in examining his situation, what exactly is it
that James is supposed to review?

We have already seen some of the things James might examine in
questioning the credentials and pronouncements of the so-called
historical experts. Later in his account, Evans even extends his list of
the potential problems with expert opinion. But what should James
examine on his side of the ledger? Evans mentions only “wish-
fulfillment.” But that is not nearly enough. In fact, wish-fulfillment
may not even be a problem, since there is nothing wrong with want-
ing your beliefs to be true, so long as your wanting them to be true
does not cause you to ignore or misconstrue evidence. James’s recog-
nition of the fact that he wants the New Testament accounts to be
reliable would not be a reason for him to reject them, any more than
a historian’s wanting his thesis to be true would be a reason for the
historian to reject his own thesis.

Yet we can say what would be rational grounds for a historian to
dismiss his own thesis: evidence or reasons on the basis of which
some competing hypothesis emerges as more likely. What sort of evi-
dence or reasons? The sorts I canvassed earlier in my characteriza-
tions of the views of Sanders, Meier, Schlüssler Fiorenza, Crossan,
Borg, and Wright and that routinely emerge in the course of schol-
arily debate over the merits of competing historical interpretations.
No reputable historian ever publicly dismisses another historian’s

views just because he or she does not like them. Rather, historians al-
ways give reasons for dismissing others’ views—evidence that they
think the other historian has overlooked or assessed incorrectly,
well-confirmed theories that they think the other historian has failed
to take into account or to weight properly, and so on.14 What, then,
would be good reasons for James to dismiss his original view? Evans
does not say.

Evans does explain why James came to accept his original view in
the first place. He accepted it, Evans says, on the basis of “the total
circumstances of his life in which the truth of the Gospel has become
evident as he has responded in faith to the assertions, promises and
demands he perceives God to be making upon him in Jesus.” Evans
says that the question is whether these beliefs on James’s part con-
tinue to be reasonable after they have been challenged by critical his-
torical scholarship. He answers that they do: “In this case the dis-
agreements within critical historical scholarship undermine any
pretension that historical criticism has some strong claim to be a
sure authority for the layperson and leave the original ground for
the belief undefeated.”15 Perhaps so. I shall return to the issue of dis-
agreement among historians. The problem for now is that what
Evans has identified as the question and then answered is not the
question for which we wanted an answer. We wanted to know what
might give James rationally persuasive grounds to conclude, in the
light of historical scholarship, that what he had accepted until now
on the basis of faith he should abandon. Evans’s assertion that James
does not have to abandon anything does not answer this question.

It might have been helpful if Evans had been more explicit about
James’s grounds for those of his beliefs that he accepts on faith. His
characterizing these grounds as “the total circumstances of James’
life” is not informative, for it includes too much to shed any light on
what in particular James should be reevaluating when he reevaluates
his grounds. Later, Evans is more explicit. He says that James
“might for example be impressed by the lives of the people that he
has encountered” in his local church “or by his own experiences
with church life.” Evans supposes that James “has acquired a strong
consciousness of meeting God in the communion services, or a
strong sense of God’s presence in times of prayer with others.” He
says that “through these kinds of experiences James might well rea-
sonably come to believe that the church is a visible instrument of the
work of God and concludes that its teachings are likely to be reli-

able."\textsuperscript{16} Such reasons, Evans concludes, are enough to defeat the challenge posed by secular historical scholarship.

But are they? What Evans is asking us to accept is that James’s being “impressed” with people he has met at church or by his “experiences with church life” is as likely to make him a good judge of historical truth as the special training and knowledge of professional historians. But if James can in this way override expert opinion with respect to history, then presumably he can in the same way override expert opinion in other areas as well. If what Evans is suggesting were true, it would be a good reason for shutting down the history departments in all of the schools in the land. Instead of going through the arduous and expensive business of acquiring professional training, we could just ask students who “impresses” them. Since Evans puts no restrictions on what it is about the others that is impressive, he has left the door wide open for all sorts of absurdity. We are back to the problem of “anything goes.”

Evans seems to think that disagreement among the experts, in effect, disqualifies them as experts with respect to issues about which they disagree. Yet he never then addresses the question of whether, in his view, what James isrationally entitled to believe would be more constrained if the experts were to agree. Instead, it is sufficient for Evans—and is of overwhelming importance, judging from how often he brings it up—that the historians of Jesus do in fact disagree. In his view, disagreement among historians, in effect, levels the playing field: Since the people who most of us might have thought were the experts are not worthy of being believed, everyone, including James, becomes a sort of expert in his or her own right. “One might wonder,” Evans asks, whether “it is arrogant of James to rely on his own judgment when by hypothesis he knows much less than the scholars in the field. Should he not defer to the judgments of scholars?” Evans replies that “the illusory force of this rhetorical question dissipates as soon as one asks, ‘Which scholars should he trust?’”\textsuperscript{17}

But surely there is more to the issue of whose view should be trusted than merely asking whether James should have deferred to this or that historical scholar. Suppose, for instance, that on the basis of “the total circumstances of his life” James thinks that he knows what really happened with respect to some specific issue, even though what really happened is a matter about which expert opinion is directly relevant, the experts do not agree, and James has not even acquainted himself with the evidence that experts ponder in trying to decide the issue. For instance, suppose that what James thinks he knows on faith is that the entire Gospel of Thomas was formed at a later date than everything in the Synoptic Gospels.\textsuperscript{18} Wouldn’t James be just a tad arrogant if he were to suppose that even though the experts disagree about whether the entire Gospel of Thomas was formed later than everything in the Synoptic Gospels, he, as a non-expert who has not even bothered to acquaint himself with the relevant evidence, does know that Thomas was formed later? In such circumstances, wouldn’t it be more reasonable of James to suspend judgment?

Perhaps, though, James has had a dazzling religious experience in which the veil dropped from his eyes and the truth about the Gospel of Thomas was revealed. Fair enough. If that is how James came to his views and he has good reasons for thinking that his revelatory experience was in fact genuine, then, in my opinion, James is rationally entitled to his view. But, according to Evans, perceptions much less than such a revelatory experience—say, James’s being “impressed” with people he has met at church—will also entitle James to his view. James in effect becomes his own source of expert opinion—even though the “expertise” on which his opinion about the Gospel of Thomas is based involves no study or training, but only socializing.

Evans says that in addition to simply consulting his own opinion, another option available to James is to appeal to “the authority of the Church.” Evans concedes that of course someone may challenge the church’s competence to decide such matters. But he quickly dismisses this worry with the observation that “such a challenge can in principle be raised with respect to any authority, including the guild of historical scholars.”\textsuperscript{19} Yes, and including also mathematicians, physicists, brain surgeons, bridge builders, baseball batting coaches, potters, and so on. Evans takes the fact that such a challenge can be raised as being decisive. But isn’t it also relevant how the challenge, once raised, is answered? Surely the mere fact that a challenge can be raised does not mean, as Evans assumes, that all attempts to answer it are equivalent. For instance, we could challenge the competence of a computer scientist to design some software, even though he has been specifically trained to design it and he is universally regarded by other experts in the field as highly competent to design it. And we could challenge the competence of someone like me, who knows practically nothing about computers, to design the very same soft-
ware. So far as just the challenges are concerned, the two cases are parallel. But when it comes to the crucial matter of responding to the challenges, surely a better case could be made that the computer scientist is more competent to design the software than I would be. To deny such obvious facts would be to take flight into epistemological la-la land. But then why isn’t something analogous also true, and for pretty much the same reasons, when we are comparing the competence of highly trained professional historians to figure out whether certain things really happened in the first century C.E. with James’s competence, or the church’s competence, to answer the very same questions?

Evans never explains how the church can meet challenges to its competence to be an authority on questions of historical fact as well as trained professional historians can. Nor does he explain whether the church could also meet challenges to its competence to be an authority in other areas where there are also trained professional experts: physics, biology, and so on. Throughout, Evans relies on the idea that trained secular historians obviously cannot meet challenges to their competence. For instance, he says that “the answers which the New Testament scholar gives are very largely the result of his own presuppositions and prejudices.” Hence, if trained historians are far beyond the pale, then, when it comes to assessing historical evidence, apparently the church can do at least as well as trained historians. But then why do even good Christian schools, such as Calvin College, have rigorous programs of training for would-be historians comparable to what would-be historians get in a secular institution? Wouldn’t it be easier, and cheaper, if we wanted to know what had happened with respect to some specific question of history, just to ask the church, or James?

Evans seems to think that James, even without any special training in historical scholarship, could do quite well, if not as a historian per se, then at least as an evaluator of historical scholarship. Evans says that when scholarly disagreement is pervasive it does not imply that no scholar has good grounds for his scholarly beliefs or ever knows that any such disputed beliefs are true. Rather, what it implies, he thinks, is that the scholars’ views on such disputed questions “cannot provide a strong basis for other people to form beliefs.” I agree. But does it then follow that other people are then free to form their own beliefs on such disputed questions willy-nilly, without thereby undermining their reputations as rational people? Evans, it seems, would answer yes. He says that “if James is or becomes a New Testament scholar himself the situation [i.e., his competence to make judgments on matters historical] does not appreciably change.” Apparently it is easy to be a competent historian.

In Evans’s view, one of the basic problems with secular historians of Jesus is that in their work as historians they are closet philosophers. That, he seems to think, is what explains their inability to agree. It is also largely why, in crucial respects, James may well be the equal of professional historians. Evans says, for instance, that a “good deal of this disagreement [among historians] is rooted in factors where the scholars in question may not have any special expertise either,” such as, “philosophical, theological, and literary assumptions” with respect to some of which “James may be competent to evaluate the views of the scholars.” Among the philosophical assumptions that Evans thinks matter is a prejudice that many historians share against the miraculous and, in general, against any supernatural intervention into the natural world, including against prophecy. He points out, for instance, that many historians date Acts after the fall of Jerusalem because they think that otherwise they would have to admit that its author had prophetic powers. In the process of criticizing this particular dating and then arguing for an earlier one, Evans says that it is important to challenge the implicit assumption that accurate “prophesies” must have been made after the events that they prophesied. This assumption, he says, makes it impossible to give the New Testament accounts, with their stories of miracles and prophesies fulfilled, “a fair historical test.”

Evans says that one “cannot begin by ruling out as impossible any supernatural knowledge or insight on the part of Jesus, if one wishes fairly to test the claim that God was at work in Jesus in a special way, or that Jesus was actually God incarnate.” From my discussion in Chapter 6, it should be clear that I agree with Evans about this. However, after making this plausible methodological criticism Evans not only says almost nothing about how an enlightened historian is supposed to deal with the possibility that Jesus may have had foreknowledge, but, as we saw in Chapter 6, in enthusiastically endorsing Eleanor Stump’s interpretation of the story of the raising of Lazarus, he even presupposes without comment that on some occasions Jesus did not have foreknowledge.
In the previous chapter, I criticized Johnson's defense of the Only Faith response. I did this not to put the Only Faith response down, but to reveal some of the problems that have to be resolved in order to put that response in its strongest form. Johnson's defense of that response is the best contemporary defense of it with which I am familiar, or at least the best that is specifically addressed to the challenges posed by secular historical scholarship. Yet his defense, I argued, is not very good. In this chapter, I have criticized, in the same spirit, Evans's defense of the Faith Seeking Understanding response. Once again, my criticisms are intended not to defeat a version of the Faith Seeking Understanding response that would give faith the upper hand, but to show how problematic it can be and, in particular, that some of the main problems that arise for Evans's defense of it are the same as those that arose for Johnson in his defense of the Only Faith response. What, though, if one were to try to defend the Faith Seeking Understanding response in a way that gives reason the upper hand? We turn now to the views of a philosopher who has done just that.

Basil Mitchell

Mitchell is a professor of the philosophy of the Christian religion at Oxford University. He is the author of many widely discussed papers and books, including *Law, Morality, and Religion in a Secular Society* (1967), *The Justification of Religious Belief* (1973), and *Faith and Criticism* (1994). The latter book is devoted to explaining how liberal theologians can solve a problem that Mitchell says arises in their view of Christianity. The problem is that while they assume that Christianity has a truth to impart about the world on the basis of which salvation is to be understood, they also assume that there are other sources of truth, such as science and historical studies, which sometimes yield results that conflict with what was assumed to be a truth of Christianity. Conservative theologians, Mitchell says, avoid this problem simply by rejecting claims to truth that conflict with what they take to be truths of Christianity. Mitchell says that he agrees with the conservatives that as Christians, we "hear God speaking to us in the Bible and in the tradition of the Church." He adds, however, that "simply to repeat what is said in the Bible without any attempt to understand it" is neither really listening to it nor sufficiently respectful of the word of God. In addition, he says, simply repeating ignores "the instruction of scripture itself to 'mark, learn, and inwardly digest.'" In any case, he claims, since the Bible is not always consistent with itself, there has to be a process of subordinating some parts of it to others.  

In defending liberal theologians, Mitchell first points out that usually the contrast between the faith of theologians and the reason of scientists is overdrawn. There is faith too in science, he says, which shows itself in scientists' persevering in their commitment to theories even when they acknowledge that there are problems with the theories that they do not know how to solve. He says that this persevering behavior, although often shown in the physical sciences, is more prevalent in the social sciences and the humanities. There, he says, it is evident that, as a rule, convictions do not change radically as a consequence of particular pieces of evidence. Rather, when in the social sciences and humanities convictions change, it is as a result of steadily accumulating considerations that collectively persuade theorists that their approaches are no longer viable. In such processes of change, Mitchell says, strong emotions, entrenched habits, and even loyalty, say, to like-minded colleagues, play their parts. Thus, until the case against a theory has become very clear, which may not happen until a competing theory has been established beyond reasonable doubt, theorists may feel that they should not act on their doubts about their theories, for fear of hurting others. And, Mitchell says, when it comes to the attachments that people develop to their philosophies of life, which by their own admission often afford them "a faith to live by," it is even more obvious that this is how reason works.  

Thus, Mitchell, like Evans, believes that a certain amount of persistence in sticking to one's beliefs in the face of criticism is a good thing. However, their attitudes toward the tension between reason and faith are entirely different. Evans is combative, anxious to make sure that reason does not get the upper hand. Mitchell is conciliatory, anxious to show that the seeming opposition between faith and reason is largely illusory. In Mitchell's view, what we take to be reason is up to its neck in commitments that are born of faith. But, he thinks, even though reason includes faith, reason still has teeth of its own. In recognition of this, he says that in the pursuit of truth it is essential that the overall state of the evidence be continually reviewed since otherwise theoretical problems will not be acknowledged, and hence needed corrections will not be made. Evans, you
theory is so well justified that no reputable scientist would think of disputing it, such as, say, the broad outlines of the Darwinian theory of natural selection, then, says Mitchell, theologians must accept it. But if scientific findings are in dispute, then theologians are not required to accept the majority view. He says, for instance, that contemporary physiologists tend to adopt as a methodological assumption that all mental events consist of changes in the brain, and may, for that reason, subscribe in their philosophies of life to some form of scientific determinism. But Christian theologians and others who emphasize human freedom and responsibility are not bound to accept this view.

Here Mitchell seems to be conflating two issues: whether the experts agree, and, if they do, their reasons for agreeing. Consider first the matter of whether the experts agree. To keep things simple, consider only questions about which almost everyone would agree that one needs expertise to form a responsible independent opinion. Most, I suppose, would concede that when there is a substantial amount of disagreement among the experts even about such matters, no one is under any obligation to believe what only a slight majority of the experts favor. For instance, although all historians of Jesus agree that he spoke Aramaic, suppose that a slight majority of them think that he also spoke Greek and hence was bilingual. Then, it would seem, nonexperts are under no rational obligation to go along with the majority view. However, that does not mean, as Mitchell sometimes (and Evans almost always) seems to suggest, that when it comes to the question of what language Jesus spoke, nonexperts are thereby entitled to believe whatever they want. If agreement among experts puts constraints on what a nonexpert may rationally believe, then so, it would seem, does disagreement.

Suppose, for instance, that on the question of what language, or languages, Jesus spoke, 45 percent of the experts think that Jesus spoke only Aramaic, and 55 percent of them think that Jesus spoke both Aramaic and Greek. Suppose, further, that the question of what languages Jesus spoke is one that requires expertise to decide on the basis of primary evidence. Finally, suppose that nonexperts have no access to information relevant to answering the question other than knowledge about how expert opinion is divided (and perhaps also the evidence that the experts have access to). Under these circumstances, it would seem, there are only two responses that nonexperts can have that would be rationally permissible. The first would be to
suspend judgment on the issue (since the experts are substantially divided). The second would be to believe that Jesus was bilingual (since a majority of the experts believe that). It would not be rational, under these circumstances, for nonexperts to believe that Jesus spoke only Aramaic (since it would be arbitrary of them to side with the minority expert view).

There is an unfortunate tendency among those who would defend religious faith against historical scholarship to think that if the experts disagree, then anything goes. One can understand this in the case of someone like Evans who seems to think that anything goes regardless of whether the experts agree. It is enough for him if James, for whatever reason, is “impressed” by the people he has met at church. However, this attitude is harder to understand in the case of someone like Mitchell, who has a high regard for expert opinion. If one places a high value on expert opinion, then (with one qualification, to be discussed in a moment) regardless of whether the experts agree, expert opinion will be consequential to what it is rational for nonexperts to believe. If the experts disagree, the consequences for nonexperts will be different than if the experts agree, but that does not mean that there will be no consequences.

The qualification is that it matters why the experts agree or disagree. This is the second of the two issues that Mitchell conflates. In particular, it matters whether the experts agree for methodological or for substantive reasons, that is, because they think that assuming the claim in question will facilitate their inquiry (methodological reasons) or because they think that the claim in question has been shown to be true on the basis of evidence (substantive reasons). Thus a historian may for methodological reasons, and strictly for the purpose of doing “scientific” history, assume that Jesus was neither God nor divinely inspired because he or she does not see how it is possible to do scientific history on any other basis. Yet the historian may want to leave open the question of whether Jesus actually was either God or divinely inspired. But no historian would assume as a matter of historical methodology that Jesus spoke only Aramaic or that Jesus spoke both Aramaic and Greek. If a historian has a professionally held view on this question, it will be because he or she believes that it is supported by historical evidence.

Mitchell is quite right to think that nonexperts are under no obligation to believe what scientists or historians assume for methodological reasons. But the absence of any such obligation has nothing to do with whether scientists or historians agree among themselves about the methodological desirability of making the assumption in question. Even if the experts all were to agree that it is methodologically desirable to make the assumption, nonexperts would still be under no obligation to go along. The reason they would be under no obligation is that the thing about which the experts agree is not something that they have shown on the basis of evidence, but something that they have assumed for the purpose of getting on with their investigations in what they take to be the best way.

In fairness to Mitchell, later in his discussion he considers the point that some of the things that historians agree about they have merely assumed for methodological reasons. In such cases, he says, others are under no obligation to go along. The Resurrection, he thinks, is a case in point. Liberal theologians, he says, often argue that scientific history cannot acknowledge supernatural causes, and so cannot allow for the occurrence of the Resurrection as it is traditionally understood. Hence, in their view, the evidence of testimony in the reports of early Christians is irrelevant. The Resurrection either has to be accepted entirely on faith or else “demythologized,” that is, interpreted as the expression of a change in attitude on the part of early Christians to Jesus’ death, but not as implying his actually being raised from the dead. “However,” Mitchell says, “to argue in this way is to ignore entirely the crucial difference that is made to our evaluation of the historical evidence by belief in the creative power of God.” He says that “scientific” history, for good reason, does not take into account the creative power of God; however, “this methodological restriction on the part of historians does not permit them to claim, on the basis of the evidence, that the Resurrection did not happen” but at most that, “given entirely naturalistic assumptions, some other explanation is to be preferred” or that “it is impossible to settle the question.”

Mitchell points out that many theologians as well as many ordinary Christians both believe and think they are justified in believing that there is a God who created and sustains the world, and acts within it for its redemption. Given this assumption, which Mitchell says many Christians rightly think they have independent reasons for accepting, “they both can and should take [historical] evidence as showing that God raised Jesus from the dead.” Mitchell says that historical evidence, and with it all that goes to make up the critical scholar’s apparatus, has its own integrity and cannot be made to
support equally any thesis whatever. But when it comes to choosing between overall interpretations it becomes a matter of judgment how much final weight to give to the various elements in it. It simply will not do to leave it to the historians to decide what actually happened and to require theologians to accept their decision as final, as determining definitely the basic historical foundations on which they have to build.  

I agree. All that I would add to this is, first, that the reason it would not do to leave it to the historians to decide such questions has nothing to do with whether historians agree but, rather, with the fact that they agree, if they do, as a matter of historical methodology, not as a matter of substantive result. And, second, even if Mitchell is right, all that he has established is that Christians do not have to accept the results of historical work that is based on methodological assumptions that Christians would reject as substantive truths. This is an important point, but it is, in effect, only the point that Christians are rationally entitled to strike a balance between the claims of faith and those of secular rationality. Mitchell’s point leaves untouched the crucial question of how Christians should strike that balance.  

On a related issue, when the theologian, in believing something, disagrees with the scientist or historian, is the theologian’s commitment to his belief merely tentative, or is it unconditional? As we have seen, Mitchell stresses that even if in the long run the theologian’s commitment is tentative, it may be long-lasting in that he would be entitled to stick with it throughout his life, and it may be total in the sense that “he stakes his whole being” on the correctness of his opinion. Mitchell says that the theologian’s commitment to what he accepts on faith can be like Shakespeare’s commitment to the reality of love: Although Shakespeare concedesofar the theoretical possibility that he might be mistaken, he bets his life that he is not.  

Still, it might be objected, this means only that the theologian’s faith may be total, in the sense that it is wholehearted. It does not imply that his faith may be unconditional. Mitchell answers that he has been talking all along about faith as if it were always a question of believing, say, that there is a God, who created us, loves us, and so on. Mitchell says that there is another dimension to faith that has to do not with believing but with “trusting reliance upon God” and that this trust may well be unconditional.  

Indeed, Mitchell claims, it is just the unconditional nature of this trust that allows the theologian to expose his faith to criticism. The theologian assumes that “if we are honest in our search for truth and at the same time loyal to the signs we have been given, we shall not ultimately be misled.” Mitchell asks which attitude shows greater trust in God—one that refuses to submit traditional beliefs to criticism, or one that is confident that if we put our traditional beliefs to the test of reason and experience, we shall be led in the end to understand them better and be more firmly convinced of their truth?  

How, then, should the compromise between faith and reason be struck? In Mitchell’s view, if I understand him correctly, it should be struck in a way that, in the long run at least, leaves secular reason in the driver’s seat. However, reason is in the driver’s seat only with respect to those results of secular reasoning that are free of methodological assumptions that Christians are entitled to reject. Except for what I have already summarized, Mitchell does not elaborate on how this works out in practice.  

**N. T. Wright**  

Wright, though in many ways as religiously conservative as Evans, is more wholeheartedly in the Faith Seeking Understanding camp. It is central to his view that Christian faith is inextricably rooted in history. And for him this means that historians not only can but also should question the claims of faith, and people of faith not only can but also should listen to their criticisms. He says that if Jesus was as Reimarus, or Schweitzer, or even Sanders has portrayed him, then Christians would need to revise their faith quite substantially. However, Wright says that Christians often imagine that in defending themselves against historians they are defending Christianity, when what they are actually defending is just a pre-Enlightenment worldview that is no more specifically Christian than any other. What Christians need to do, he thinks, is not to attach themselves slavishly to the outmoded worldview of early Christians but to discover a modern worldview that “makes sense of the world as we know it” and “stands in appropriate and recognizable continuity” with earlier Christian worldviews.  

It is past time, Wright thinks, to get beyond the idea that the story of the historical Jesus must be told only from the perspective of religious faith. Fundamentalists, he says, in insisting on this approach, divorce the New Testament from the intentions of its authors and,
effect, interpret it to support their own views of its call to a particular sort of spirituality or lifestyle. For them, he says, the New Testament is a sort of “magic book” that exists “to sustain the soul,” but “not to stretch the mind.” Wright says that it is also past time to get beyond the idea that the story of the historical Jesus should be told only from the perspective of secular history. Most New Testament academic scholars, he says, in officially subscribing to this approach, think they are reading the New Testament in a thoroughly historical way, “without inflicting on it the burden of being theologically normative.” But, he says, all historians of the New Testament and early Christianity known to him, “without exception,” have begun with their own ideas about the importance of the events under discussion, and rather than remaining “content with bare description,” have tried to make their stories relevant to the present.47

Wright says that when it comes to historical Jesus studies, the most salient question is not that of whether to do either theology or history, but of how properly to mix theology and history.48 One of the intended purposes of his own work as a historian is to show that “rigorous history” and “rigorous theology” belong together, and never more so than in the discussion of Jesus. He says that if this means that we need a new metaphysic, then “so be it.” He says that “it would be pleasant if, for once, the historians and the theologians could set the agenda for the philosophers, instead of vice versa.”49

How, then, for the purposes of historical Jesus studies, would Wright mix theology and history? He says that he would employ a new approach, one that is a creative synthesis of the premodern (fundamentalist) emphasis on the text as in some sense authoritative; the modern emphasis on the text and indeed all of Christianity, including its theology, as irreducibly integrated into history; and the postmodern emphasis on the reading of the text.50 His hopes for this new approach are not only that it will contribute to private edification and academic satisfaction but also that it will advance “the kingdom of God.”51

Wright answers the question of how his new approach is supposed to work in two different ways. One is in a long, philosophical preface in which he answers it directly. The other is in his historical work itself, which exemplifies his new approach. So far as the philosophy is concerned, he begins by endorsing an epistemological view that he calls critical realism, which is a view that fully acknowledges both the independent reality of the thing known and that our only access to this independent reality is through interpretive structures that are internal to us. These structures, Wright says, confine the knower to fewer points of view than are available, and they are colored by the knower’s expectations, hopes, and so on. They also have a great deal to do with the communities to which the knower belongs. Wright says that just as there is no such thing as a neutral or objective knower, so also there is no such thing as a detached knower.52

Historical interpretations, Wright says, always reflect the worldviews of their authors, which contain irreducibly narrative components. Wright thinks that our most fundamental stories underlie our explicitly formulated beliefs, including our theological beliefs. When human beings try to assimilate new information, he says, they do it by trying to integrate the information into preexisting story forms. When the new information is itself a story, then for someone to assimilate the information the new story must be close enough to stories the hearer already believes for a spark to jump between them, yet far enough away that the spark, “in jumping, illuminates for a moment the whole area around, changing perceptions as it does so.” Tell someone to do something, Wright says, and you change his or her day. Tell people a story, and you change their life. Get everyone to believe the same story, he might have added, and you change the world. Get everyone to believe the same true story, and you advance the kingdom of God.53

How does one tell whether a story is true? Not by proving it neutrally or objectively. There are no such “proofs,” Wright says. Rather, the story we are asked to believe must make more sense, both as a whole and in detail, than competing stories. “Simplicity of outline, elegance in handling the details within it, the inclusion of all the parts of the story, and the ability of the story to make sense beyond its immediate subject matter: these are what count.”54 In sum, Wright recommends, within the larger model of worldview, a critical-realist theory of knowledge that acknowledges the essentially “storyed” nature of human knowing, thinking, and living. In his view, even though there is an external world to be known that can be known, all knowledge of it takes place within the framework of a worldview, of which stories are an essential part.

Knowledge of the world progresses, Wright says, by setting up as hypotheses competing stories about the world or parts of it, and then testing these stories by assessing their “fit” with stories that are
already accepted. Although experience plays a role in this process, neither it nor anything else is foundational. There are no foundations. Wright says that the larger stories to which we subscribe, which themselves form the framework for more specific views we have, including his own critical-realist epistemology, "are tested not by their coherence with a fixed point agreed in advance," but "by their simplicity and their ability to make sense of a wide scope of experiences and events." In the end, he says, "the proof of the pudding remains in the eating."

The rest of Wright's answer to how the theological/historical approach he recommends actually works is his historical work itself. In Chapter 71 sketched some of his main methods and results. Suffice it to say here that the differences that matter most between Wright and other historians are not so much in their views of what they are doing as in their doing of it, that is, in their historical interpretations themselves. And the main difference here between Wright and more secular historians is that in trying to decide how best to explain some event, such as the resurrection, Wright assigns a much higher initial probability to certain theological explanations than would secular historians. When all of the competing naturalistic explanations are weak, a more secular historian would either choose the best among them or else just admit that he or she does not know. Wright, on the other hand, is often willing to adopt a theological explanation.

History and Theology Revisited

Everyone who subscribes to the Faith Seeking Understanding response agrees that when expert opinion or empirical evidence conflicts with the prompting of faith, some sort of compromise needs to be worked out in which both faith and reason have to give. They disagree among themselves about how the compromise is to be struck. Conservatives such as Evans are eager to strike it in a way that gives faith the upper hand. The problem for them is basically the same as the problem for those who would defend the Only Faith response: Anything goes. Liberals such as Mitchell (some of the time) are ready to strike the compromise in a way that gives reason the upper hand. The problem for them is basically the same as the problem for those who would defend the Only Reason response: Not enough goes. If anything goes, then there are few, if any, ra-