10

ONLY REASON

We have already considered two responses to the challenge posed by secular historical scholarship to traditional Christian beliefs. The first—Only Faith—was to reject secular scholarship whenever it contradicts the claims of religious faith. The second—Faith Seeking Understanding—was to integrate the diverse claims of secular scholarship and religious faith into a single coherent account. A third response—Only Reason—is the polar opposite of Only Faith. Only Reason enjoins Christians to be totally submissive to the agreed-upon expert opinions of secular historians (but not to the opinions experts express that transcend their areas of expertise). In addition to Only Reason, in this chapter I want to consider a related response that results from taking a small but crucial step beyond Only Reason. This latter response is actually a version of Faith Seeking Understanding, but one that differs significantly from the others considered thus far in the way it is related to the Only Reason response. I call it multiperspectivalism.

As we saw in the previous two chapters, although there is something to be said for the Only Faith and Faith Seeking Understanding responses to the challenge posed by secular historical scholarship to traditional Christian beliefs, each also has its drawbacks. The main things to be said in favor of the Only Faith response is that it respects the autonomy of religious faith and preserves its character as total commitment. Its main drawback is that because it completely denies the claims of secular scholarship, it is vulnerable to the criticism that “anything goes.” An additional drawback, perhaps not of Only Faith itself but of the way it is almost always defended, is that
its proponents, from Tertullian to Luke Johnson, have had a hard time sticking to it consistently. Because it is such an extreme view, they tend, in defending it, to soften its edges by denying its implications.

The main thing to be said for the Faith Seeking Understanding response is that it acknowledges the value of both religious faith and secular reason. Its main drawback is that out of the infinite number of ways in which a genuine compromise between religious faith and secular reason might be struck, there seems to be no good reason for striking it one way rather than another. A possible additional drawback is the difficulty in this response of preserving for religious faith its character as total commitment. Finally, there is a tendency on the part of some proponents of the Faith Seeking Understanding response to understand it in a way that gives faith the upper hand, hence making it vulnerable to the same problems as the Only Reason response, and on the part of other of its proponents to give reason the upper hand, hence making it vulnerable to the same problems as the Only Reason response, to which we now turn.

**Only Reason**

Historically, Only Reason has been not so much a response to the challenge posed to Christianity by secular historical scholarship as to what gave rise to that challenge in the first place. Only Reason depends for its plausibility on acceptance of the assumption that secular rationality is our only source of knowledge, from which it follows, first, that if our objective is knowledge, then in conflicts between secular rationality and religious faith, secular rationality always prevails; and, second, that even when there is no conflict, religious faith is not an additional source of knowledge. Not surprisingly, Only Reason is the view of secular critics of traditional Christian beliefs. However, for those who have never looked into the matter, it can be surprising to learn how popular Only Reason has been even among Christian theologians and clergy. It is, for instance, implicit in Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing approach to early Christianity, and it is deeply implicated in Bishop Spong’s more recent reinterpretations of traditional Christian beliefs. Somehow, the wolf got inside the door.

The Only Reason response has three main advantages. One is that if everything can be explained naturalistically, then by excluding, from the beginning, consideration of possible “non-natural” sources of influence, this response tremendously simplifies and hence facilitates the search for historical explanations. In fact, it is exactly this simplification in the realm of the physical world that led to the development of modern science in the first place. And many think that a similar simplification is required in order to have truly scientific historical studies. Another advantage is that in Only Reason we seem to know, at least implicitly, what the rules are on the basis of which we should evaluate competing historical interpretations. Very roughly, the rules are, first, to toss out interpretations that cannot be justified except by appeal to religious faith, and second, to test the others in accordance with the same procedures that are used in secular historical studies generally (that would be used, for instance, in trying to reconstruct the history of Alexander the Great). A final advantage of Only Reason is that these standard procedures, in bringing competing interpretations before the bar of empirical evidence and testing them there, are relatively well grounded.

The main drawback of the Only Reason response, particularly in the case of historical Jesus studies, is that its simplifying assumption that everything can be explained naturalistically may be false. When its proponents insist that this assumption is not false, Only Reason becomes vulnerable to the charge of epistemological imperialism, that is, of closing off possibilities that ought to be left open. Although the proponents of Only Reason often do this under the guise of remaining theologically neutral, as we have seen, far from being theologically neutral, they are committed in advance to a form of naturalism that implies that Jesus was neither God nor divinely empowered (by “in advance” I mean not as a result of historical scholarship on Jesus, but rather as a presupposition of even engaging in that scholarship).

One could, of course, subscribe to an exclusively naturalist approach to historical studies only methodologically, for the purpose of doing so-called scientific history, but as we have also seen, it is not clear what the advantages are of closing the door even methodologically to non-natural influences when there are alternative methodologies available that would leave the door open without inviting methodological chaos. And in any case, most who subscribe to Only Reason as a response to the challenge posed to Christianity by secular historical scholarship go beyond merely subscribing to it methodologically, and subscribe to it substantively as well. That is, they sub-
scribe to it not only for the purpose of composing histories, but also because they are committed to its being true. And therein lies the main problem: In the context of historical Jesus studies, proponents of Only Reason assert, as a matter of secular faith, that knowledge of Jesus can be obtained only through historical scholarship that is free of religious faith. As a consequence, the real contest between Only Reason and the other two responses is not between reason and faith, as proponents of Only Reason would have it, but between, on the one hand, a secular approach that presupposes the denial of religious faith and, on the other, approaches that are more hospitable to religious faith. But in presupposing the denial of religious faith, Only Reason is not thereby free of faith, since secular reason, while an alternative to religious faith, is not an alternative to faith altogether.

Even if Only Reason were not guilty of imperialistically asserting the superiority of secular faith over every version of religious faith, the main challenge that it poses for traditional Christian belief is not, as its proponents often claim, wholesale revisionism, but rather skepticism. To see why the challenge is mainly skepticism, remember that the vast majority of us who are interested in who Jesus was and what he was about are not expert historians. Hence if we base our beliefs about Jesus on historical evidence alone, the evidence upon which we have to make a decision about what to believe depends crucially on the testimony of expert historians, who, on many important points of interpretation, disagree among themselves. Hence, in accordance with Only Reason, the most rational response for us nonexperts is not to subscribe to the interpretation of any particular historian (say, Crossan) or even any group of historians (say, the liberals) but to suspend belief on any question about which naturalistically inclined historians as a group tend to disagree. Of the historians whose interpretations we have considered in the present book, the only one whose interpretation would clearly be excluded from consideration is Wright, though suspicious glances would also have to be cast toward Dunn and Borg.

So far as nonexperts are concerned, in the Only Reason response the views of conservative, naturalistically inclined historians, such as Sanders and Meier, would not be rejected altogether. Hence even on its own terms, in the Only Reason response few traditional Christian beliefs are actually shown to be mistaken. Rather, what is shown is that if we suspend judgment about whether liberal or conservative interpretations of Jesus are more reliable on issues about which liberal and conservative historical Jesus scholars disagree, then we cannot know, on historical grounds alone, that many traditional Christian beliefs are true. In other words, with two notable exceptions, the challenge posed by historical Jesus studies to traditional Christian beliefs is skepticism rather than revisionism. The exceptions are that virtually all secular historians agree, first, in dismissing the birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as fictional and, second, in rejecting as nonhistorical the portrait of Jesus in the Gospel of John. But if a Christian can accept these findings, then his or her religious views about the historical (pre-Easter) Jesus can fairly comfortably be accommodated to the findings of secular scholarship. As a consequence, even in the Only Reason response the challenge posed to Christianity by secular historical studies may not seem that threatening.

The Only Reason response is guilty of epistemological imperialism, however, in its excluding from consideration unabashedly religious interpretations of Jesus. Currently, with the exception of the views of N. T. Wright, there are no unabashedly religious interpretations of Jesus that among educated people have achieved all that much visibility, and hence (for all practical purposes) are available as candidates to be believed. So, for the nonexpert who is aware only of highly visible contributions to historical Jesus studies, currently (for all practical purposes) the Only Reason response is vulnerable to the charge of epistemological imperialism only in excluding Wright's interpretation from consideration.

In my view, one of the reasons Wright's interpretation of Jesus is so valuable is that he is so deeply erudite that his views cannot be dismissed out of hand even by more naturalistically inclined secular historians, and yet he challenges their interpretations not just on their own turf but also in insisting that the contest among historical interpretations of Jesus be held in an enlarged arena. For secular historians the price of admission to this larger arena is their admitting that their commitment to naturalism is merely a dogma of secular faith. One could make the case, even if there were no N. T. Wright, that secular historians ought to be more forthcoming about admitting this. But one can make this case much more forcefully because of Wright's work. Without his interpretation of Jesus, secular historians might be able to ask rhetorically what is the alternative to pro-
ceeding as we are proceeding—the unspoken implication being that there is none. With Wright's interpretation of Jesus on the table, however, the question is hollow and its unspoken implication obviously false. The alternative, one can reply, pointing to Wright's impressive tomes, is this!

However, it does not take much sophistication to see that even Wright is involved in a form of epistemological imperialism of his own. In my view, it is not quite as bad as that of the proponents of Only Reason, but almost. What makes it not quite as bad is that Wright cheerfully admits that he is taking a lot for granted and perhaps even arguing in a circle. His defense is that if there is no alternative to doing this, it is not just his own practice: Everyone is taking a lot for granted and arguing in a circle. Even so, by inviting his readers to join him in asserting the superiority of his own interpretation, Wright is inviting his readers to take with him a leap of faith. If one accepts this invitation and asserts on faith the superiority of his interpretation, or even the superiority of his approach, how is this any less imperialistic than the secular historians' arguing for faith the superiority of their interpretations or their approach over Wright's? In my view, it isn't. If Wright, or someone else, were to reply that there is no alternative to taking a leap of faith and asserting the superiority of some interpretation or other, or at least of some approach or other, he would be wrong. There is an alternative.

**Multiperspectivalism**

Just as the Only Reason response would require nonexperts to suspend belief among competing secular interpretations but exclude religiously inspired interpretations from consideration, one can easily envisage an approach that would require nonexperts to suspend belief among all kinds of expert interpretations, including religiously inspired ones. In other words, instead of viewing the historical Jesus only from the perspective of naturalism, one can take a more relaxed, multiperspectival view that spans the gap between narrowly naturalistic interpretations and more expanded approaches.

There is nothing radical in general about recommending multiperspectivalism. In fact, the widely acknowledged desirability of taking a multiperspectival view in the humanities generally, and in historical studies in particular, is arguably one of the "defining" differences between science and the humanities. Suppose, for instance, that you were to go to a professional historian seeking the "true interpretation" of the American Revolution. In all likelihood, and certainly if the historian responded in the best way, he would not recommend just one book—say Gordon Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*—and not even just several books written from a single interpretive perspective. If he responded in the best way, he would not even do this if he were Gordon Wood, or a proponent of one particular interpretive perspective. Rather, a historian who responded to your question in the best way would first point out that it is naive of you to suppose that there is just one "true interpretation" of the American Revolution, and that if you want to understand the Revolution, you will have to study several books, written from different interpretive perspectives. Then, if the historian really wanted to be helpful, he would recommend several books that collectively cover the range of interpretive approaches that expert historians of the period currently think are worthwhile. In the case of the American Revolution, no one would regard such a historian's advice as bizarre. Instead, most of us would regard his advice as wise. But if, in the case of the American Revolution, such a multiperspectival approach can be wise, why not also when it comes to historical Jesus studies?

One might think that because of the great importance of the difference between naturalistic and non-naturalistic interpretations, interpretations of Jesus are not analogous to those of the American Revolution. I doubt that this is so. There may be problems in a historian's thinking that he could do history without taking some stand or other on most of the issues he considers; recall, for instance, the problems that Meier encountered in trying to remain theologically neutral. But for students of history the situation is different. My suggestion is that nonexperts can approach historical Jesus studies so as to leave it genuinely open whether Jesus had "supernatural" powers. They can do this not by committing themselves to a single interpretation, whether that of Meier or of anyone else, but instead by adopting a multiperspectival approach that embraces a variety of interpretations on both sides of the naturalism divide. Quite reasonably, they can take the view that understanding Jesus historically is best achieved not from the perspective of only one interpretation, or even from only one kind of interpretation, or even from only natu-
ralistic interpretations, but from the perspectives of a more inclusive range of interpretive approaches.

Adopting such a multiperspectival approach in historical Jesus studies is analogous to what many of us might do if we personally witnessed, say, a shaman apparently doing something that, so far as science is concerned, cannot be done. Suppose, for instance, that while attending a Native American “spirit quest,” you saw something apparently happen that according to science cannot happen—say, an ordinary person walking through a closed wooden door without altering either the person or the door. On the one hand, if all the internal and external conditions under which you made this observation were favorable (you were well rested and free of drugs and alcohol, the lighting was good, others present claimed to have seen what you think you saw, etc.), then since you seemed to see the impossible happen, you might take seriously the possibility that what you seemed to see happen actually did happen. On the other hand, since you “know”—suppose—that such things as you think you saw cannot possibly happen, you might question whether, in this instance, you should trust your own eyes. In the end, rather than resolving this conflict, you might hold both of these two incompatible accounts of what happened before your mind, in a kind of uneasy equilibrium, neither affirming nor denying either. And, so far as your understanding of what happened is concerned, in doing this you might be at least as well off, if not better off, as you would be if you felt compelled to choose, on the basis of both what you know from science and your own observation, between incompatible accounts of what you saw.

In the case of historical Jesus studies, then, the chief advantage of a multiperspectival approach, at least for nonexperts, lies in its honest acknowledgment of two realities: First, there is a great difference between expert historians of the first century C.E. and nonexperts; the experts are much more competent to form a judgment, based mainly if not exclusively on primary historical evidence, about what actually happened. Second, on matters about which the experts widely disagree, nonexperts who want to form their views on the basis of historical evidence are not in a good position to say which experts are right and which are wrong. Of course, in the exclusively naturalistic Only Reason approach one also has these advantages, but only by incurring the considerable disadvantage of making one’s view vulnerable to the charge of epistemological imperialism. In multiperspectivalism, one can have these advantages seemingly without being vulnerable to the charge of epistemological imperialism.

An additional advantage of a multiperspectival approach, especially for Christians, is that the rationale for adopting it applies equally to everyone, including to secular historians who are committed to naturalism. Hence the rationale for adopting a multiperspectival approach is also a defense of the legitimacy of interpretations that are constructed from non-naturalistic perspectives, such as Wright’s. Thus, in adopting a multiperspectival approach to historical Jesus studies, Christians could get out of a defensive posture. In other words, they would be in a good position not only to answer more naturalistically inclined critics of traditional Christian beliefs, but also to object to the naturalism that is a central tenet of the secular faith of most academic historians, including Sanders and Crossan. One of the reasons Christians would be in a good position to make this objection is that presumably they would then not be vulnerable themselves to the charge of epistemological imperialism. Other Christians, who have committed themselves (in the last analysis, on faith) to the superiority of religiously inspired interpretations of Jesus, such as Wright’s, have lost this advantage.

From the point of view of a Christian, there are two possible drawbacks to multiperspectivalism. First, one might feel that if one is not going to choose among competing interpretations, then there is no point in even considering historical Jesus studies in the first place. In my view, the answer to this objection is that although in following a multiperspectival approach one may not ever be led by historical Jesus studies to commit to the one and only “true” interpretation of Jesus, nevertheless one can reasonably expect to enhance considerably one’s understanding of the historical Jesus. By analogy, when we refrain from choosing even between two competing naturalistic interpretations of Jesus—say, those of Sanders and Crossan—we are not then left with nothing. In studying these two interpretations, we may have learned a lot. For one thing, Sanders and Crossan agree on many things, and we are under no obligation to suspend judgment on matters about which they agree. But even on matters about which they disagree, we would have learned a lot—perhaps not about who Jesus actually was and what he was actually about, but who he might have been and what he might have
been about. In other words, in trying to learn who Jesus actually was and what he was about, we would have learned something important about what are the most plausible options.

Naturally, we long for more than that. We want answers. But if the best we can do on the basis of historical evidence is to learn what are the most plausible options, then we do not learn anything more by committing ourselves to one interpretation or to one kind of interpretation. Rather, we merely take an arbitrary stand. Such commitments are commonly thought to be more psychologically satisfying. In my own case, I do not find this to be true. I find it more psychologically satisfying not to pretend. But even if it were true that committing oneself to one interpretation or to one kind of interpretation of Jesus were more satisfying, doing so still would not enhance one's understanding of Jesus one whit. One does not enhance one's understanding by pretending to know what one does not know.

From the point of view of a Christian, another possible drawback to the multiperspectival response is that it may seem that it requires one to suspend judgment about some truth that one thinks one knows, such as that Jesus rose from the dead. I think this criticism points to a way in which even multiperspectivalism is vulnerable to the charge of epistemological imperialism. Although multiperspectivalism does not enjoin Christians to make their decision about what to believe on the basis of historical evidence alone, purged of the influence of all religious faith, it does enjoin them not to assert the superiority of the perspective of their religious faith over that of secular reason. In other words, whereas multiperspectivalism makes room for the consideration of religiously inspired interpretations, such as Wright's, it does not allow that any such interpretation should ever prevail. Hence, although multiperspectivalism does not close the door on religiously inspired historical Jesus studies as firmly as does the Only Reason response, it does not open the door as widely as do some versions of the Faith Seeking Understanding response.9 In other words, multiperspectivalism substitutes for the secular faith of Only Reason a more relaxed kind of methodological, multiperspectival faith and becomes, in effect, one among many versions of Faith Seeking Understanding, with no resources for showing that its way of striking the balance between faith and reason is superior to competing ways.

The Bottom Line

In earlier times the problem of how a Christian might respond to the challenge posed by secular historical scholarship to traditional Christian beliefs seemed simpler. It seemed then that there was religious belief on the one hand and science on the other. Science was radically different from religious belief. Whereas religious belief was nourished by faith, science was nourished only by secular reason, which had been purged of faith. In those days, science seemed to be solid ground, and we all knew how to stand firmly on it. The only question was whether our heads could then reach to the heavens, that is, whether we could on naturalistic grounds alone justify religious truths.9 Determining whether this could be done was the challenge bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment.

Times have changed. The source of tension is still the contest between religious faith and secular reason. But now secular reason looks more like religious faith than it used to. In fact, to many, secular reason looks as if it includes at its core a kind of secular faith. If it does, that makes all the difference. It is then no longer a question of planting our feet on the solid ground of science purged of faith and seeing if our heads will reach to the heavens, for as N. T. Wright so aptly put it, there is no solid ground. We have to make assumptions even to get the knowledge enterprise going, and if we are going to make some assumptions that we cannot prove, why not also make others that we cannot prove? Of course the assumptions we make, taken together, have to be capable of sustaining a coherent account of ourselves and the world. But there are many different kinds of coherent accounts, some naturalistic, some not, some Christian, some not, and many different kinds of assumptions that will serve as the basis for coherent accounts of each of these kinds. So, how to proceed?

On all sides, it seems, we are encouraged, first, to leap, and then to assert the superiority of the view that results from our leaping.10 In following this procedure some of us will leap one way, some another. Naturally, then, we will end up in different places, at different bottom lines. And what then? If we assert the superiority of our various leaps, and hence also of our destinations, what have we gained? Certainly not knowledge or understanding. And we have thereby become guilty of epistemological imperialism. But if we refrain from
asserting the superiority of our leaps, and even from asserting the superiority of our refraining from doing that, then we are not vulnerable to the charge of epistemological imperialism. And what then? From that vantage point, the bottom line is that there is no bottom line.

NOTES

Chapter 1


7. I shall return to this topic in Chapter 7, in which I consider the views of Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright.

Chapter 2


2. Traditionally scholars have thought that Jesus spoke only Aramaic, but many think that he may have been bilingual and even have taught in Greek. See, for instance, Meier, A Marginal Jew, vol. 1, pp. 255–268, and vol. 2, p. 1040, and Robert Funk, Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 79.

3. Sanders, for instance, has written that “scholars have not and, in my judgment, will not agree on the authenticity of the sayings material, either in whole or in part,” in Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 4 (emphasis added). Sanders’s skepticism on this point is endorsed by the religiously conservative historian N. T. Wright, in Jesus and the Victory of God (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 85, n. 2.

4. See, for instance, Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus, pp. 61–62.


6. The oldest biblical manuscript for any one of the Gospels is Papyrus 52, which dates from around 125 C.E. and contains a small fragment of John, chapter 18. Papyrus Egerton, which contains fragments of an unknown, noncanonical gospel referred to as the Egerton Gospel, is about the same age. See Stephen J. Patterson, “Sources for a Life of Jesus,” in Hershel Shanks et al., The Search for Jesus: Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994).

7. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus, p. 64; E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, Studying the Synoptic Gospels (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), pp. 7–15, 21–24.


12. Albert Lord, as he reports in The Singer of Tales (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), interviewed and recorded bards from Yugoslavia, who were believed (by themselves and others) to have memorized verbatim long tales and ballads that had been passed down unchanged for centuries. When Lord compared recordings of different performances of what were supposed to be the same songs, he discovered radical differences. Confronted with the evidence, the bards themselves did not dispute Lord’s findings. See Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (New York: Methuen, 1982).


14. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

15. Sanders and Davies, Studying the Synoptic Gospels, pp. 56–57.

16. For readable, nontechnical accounts of the Synoptic Problem, see Robert Stein, The Synoptic Problem (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), and the overview in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (New York: G. Chapman, 1995). One should be aware that there is still debate over whether our Gospel of Mark has lost its original ending. On this question, see Robert Gundry, Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).


19. Ibid., p. 102.

20. For instance, Sanders and Davies, Studying the Synoptic Gospels, p. 116.


22. However, the recent discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, which is exclusively a “sayings gospel,” considerably exposes the problem for Q.


Chapter 3

2. For naturalist methods to have become available for use in reconstructing the life of Jesus, first there had to be science, in the modern sense of the term. Science arrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, astronomy first and then physics. Then thinkers had to develop a naturalized approach to historical inquiry, and to biblical studies in particular. That is, they had to adapt the methods that physical scientists had used, or were thought to have used, in investigating nature, to the study of the human past. This happened in the seventeenth century. Finally, this naturalized approach to historical studies had to be applied specifically to accounts of Jesus in the New Testament. This too began to happen toward the end of the seventeenth century and continued unabated during the early eighteenth century.


4. Ibid., p. 41.

5. Ibid., pp. 101–103.

6. Ibid., p. 83.


13. A good selection of both historical and contemporary contributions to the debate over Hume’s argument may be found in Richard Swinburne, ed., Miracles (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

14. See Brown, Jesus in European Protestant Thought, pp. 1–55.


17. Ibid., p. 151.


19. Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, pp. 38–47. While there is little evidence for such fanciful speculations, they had the advantage—a very important one at the time (and, for many, even in our own times)—of explaining away the Gospel stories of miraculous events without endangering naturalism. A. N. Wilson, the contemporary popular historian of Jesus, in his book entitled Jesus (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), sometimes travels down this same road. For instance, he explains some of the resurrection reports as the disciples’ mistaking Jesus’ brother, James, for Jesus himself: “If the stranger were not the dear friend, but the dear friend’s brother, who bore a strong resemblance, then this is just the sort of ‘double take’ which we should expect” (p. 244).


25. B. Bauer, Criticism of the Gospels and History of Their Origin, 2 vols. (Berlin: 1850–1851). In our own times G. A. Wells has taken up the cudgels for the thesis that Jesus of Nazareth is a mythical figure rather than a real person. See Wells’s The Jesus Legend (Chicago: Open Court, 1996) and The Jesus Myth (Chicago: Open Court, 1998).


30. Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, pp. 9, 23.


32. What are the believer’s options for responding to this claim from historical studies? There are basically three, the same three as those for dealing with any of the ways in which historical studies challenge Christian faith: Stick with one’s faith and dismiss historical scholarship; work out a compromise between what one accepts on faith and what one learns through historical scholarship; or let historical scholarship dictate the content of one’s “faith.” In the last three chapters of the present book, we shall explore these options in detail.


34. Ibid., p. 399.


Chapter 4


2. E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); The Historical Figure of Jesus [New York: Penguin Books, 1993].


4. In his later book, however, Sanders gives more weight—and gives it sooner—to sayings material. Also the two books have different tones. In
the earlier book Sanders sounds a more skeptical note about what can be known about Jesus. In the later book he is more optimistic; after admitting that the "remarkably diverse" interpretations of Jesus that have been proposed by historians have led many to the view that "we do not really know anything," he stresses that "this is an overreaction" and that "we know quite a lot," especially about the effects of what Jesus did and taught. Sanders says that from this knowledge we will try to infer what Jesus "thought, deep inside." However, by his own admission, even in the later book, he cannot infer much about what Jesus thought. See Sanders, *The Historical Figure*, pp. 5, 10, 54, 76, 280.

5. Ibid., p. 77.
7. Ibid., pp. 42–45.
8. Ibid., pp. 80–81.
9. Ibid., p. 83.
11. Ibid., p. 94.
12. Ibid., p. 64.
13. Ibid., p. 76.
15. Ibid., p. 91.
16. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 11. In the later book Sanders begins with a longer, slightly modified list: Jesus was born around 4 B.C.E., near the time of the death of Herod the Great; he spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth; he was baptized by John the Baptist; he called disciples; he taught in the towns, villages, and countryside of Galilee (not the cities); he preached "the kingdom of God"; in about the year 30, he went to Jerusalem for Passover; he created a disturbance in the Temple area; he had a final meal with his disciples; he was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest; he was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate; his disciples at first fled, then (in some sense) saw him after his death, as a consequence of which they believed that he would return to found the kingdom, formed a community to await his return, and sought to win others to faith in Jesus as God's Messiah. *The Historical Figure*, pp. 10–11.
17. Sanders, *The Historical Figure*, pp. 13–15.
18. Ibid., pp. 85–86.
19. Sanders says that the urge to revise Luke's text arises in the first place only because people assume that the text must be true; if they revise it, they think they can still claim that it is true. But if it needs to be revised, Sanders says, then it is not true.
20. Ibid., p. 86.
21. Ibid., p. 100.

22. Ibid., p. 108.
23. Ibid., pp. 117–124. My sketch of Sanders's results is based primarily on his later book. For present purposes, doing this is harmless. In a more critical study, though, it would be worth discussing some troubling inconsistencies between Sanders's two accounts. For instance, he says in his earlier book, "The call of the early disciples, so forcefully presented in the synoptics (Matt. 4:18–22/Mk 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–15) is intended for the edification of the church and gives us no knowledge about how Jesus gathered about himself a small group of followers, at least some of whom turned out to be devoted to him after his death" (*Jesus and Judaism*, p. 103, emphasis added). (This negative judgment of authenticity coincides with the majority view of the Jesus Seminar, in Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, et al., *The Five Gospels* [New York: Macmillan, 1993], pp. 41, 135, 281–282.) However, in Sanders's later, less skeptical book, he says of this very same passage, "I regard the basic story (Matt 4:18–22/Mk 1:16–20) as historically reliable: the earliest disciples were Galilean fishermen; among them were Peter, Andrew, James and John; they left their nets to follow Jesus" (*The Historical Figure*, pp. 118–119). Compare also *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 222 n. 1, and p. 395 n. 1, with *The Historical Figure*, p. 103.
24. Sanders, *The Historical Figure*, pp. 140–141, 145.
25. Ibid., p. 163.
26. Ibid., p. 168.
27. Ibid., pp. 149, 152.
30. Ibid., p. 194.
31. Ibid., p. 195.
32. Ibid., pp. 202–204.
33. Ibid., pp. 205, 238.
34. Ibid., pp. 210, 220, 234.
35. Ibid., pp. 236–237.
36. Ibid., p. 243.
37. Ibid., p. 248.
38. Ibid., p. 265.
39. Ibid., pp. 269, 272–274.
40. Ibid., pp. 274–275.
41. Ibid., pp. 276–280.
43. The author of the first remark is Jack Dean Kingsbury, of the Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, and of the second remark, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The quotations are taken from the book jacket.
44. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 1046.
45. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 1; vol. 2, pp. 4–5. Meier has been criticized on the grounds that if he means to enhance objectivity by including people with different points of view, he should also include both conservative and liberal Catholics and Protestants as well as Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims—by C. Stephen Evans, in The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith (New York: Oxford, 1996), who asks, “Is there any reason to hope that such an expanded conclave would actually agree on anything?” (p. 41n).
51. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 6–9. Among the historians whose views we shall consider, Meier is the only one who claims that Jesus was celibate, though, so far as I can determine, he offers no argument in favor of this claim.
52. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 3.
53. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 108, 116. What of John the Baptist’s view of Jesus? Meier thinks that at the time of Jesus’ baptism, probably John did not have an individualized view of Jesus. He says that the Baptist’s testimony to Jesus, in the Gospels of Matthew and John, are “clearly later Christian theology,” designed to take the sting out of the embarrassment of Jesus’ having been baptized. Meier also doubts that Antipas’s second wife, Herodias, had previously been the wife of Antipas’s half brother, Philip. Instead, he thinks, John met a violent death of a different sort than that depicted in the Gospels, but still at the hands of the (ostensibly) Jewish ruler of Galilee, the very place where Jesus was beginning his ministry. Meier concludes that Jesus knew the dangers of what he was doing (vol. 2, pp. 116, 172, 175).
54. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 264–265, 349.
56. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 450–454.
57. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 9–10.
58. As we shall see, liberals have an answer to this argument.
60. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 1045–1046.
62. In response to Crossan’s enthusiastic endorsement of the suggestion by the Jewish historian Geza Vermes that Jesus should be lumped with Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, Meier replies that we do not know enough about either of the latter two to make a comparison. See ibid., vol. 2, pp. 581, 630, 970.
63. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 628, 630, 970.

Chapter 5

11. See, for instance, Borg, Meeting Jesus Again, p. 2.
12. See note 8.
15. Androcentrism, in the sense used here, refers to a mind-set that understands everything from a male perspective. Patriarchy refers to objective political and social relations in which power is sharply stratified and only some men have most of it.
17. Ibid., pp. 42–43.
18. Ibid., pp. 45–46.
19. Ibid., pp. 45.
20. Ibid., pp. 46–47. In Schüssler Fiorenza’s view, Andronicus and Junia, a man and woman, were an “influential missionary team who were acknowledged as apostles.”
21. Ibid., pp. 50.
22. Ibid., pp. 52.
23. Ibid., p. 60.
24. Ibid., pp. 142–143.
28. Ibid., p. 152.
29. Ibid., pp. 119–120; also pp. 111–112, 121.
33. Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread, Not Stone, p. 148.
34. Ibid., pp. 110–115, 120–121.
35. See note 9.
37. N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 44, 65. However, after showering Crossan’s The Historical Jesus with praise, Wright ends the paragraph by remarking, “It is all the more frustrating, therefore, to have to conclude that [Crossan’s] book is almost entirely wrong.” Of course, Crossan has had other critics as well. For a good sampling of this criticism together with Crossan’s replies to it, see Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwig, eds., Jesus and Faith: A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994). See also Birger Pearson, “The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar,” Religion, vol. 25 (1995), pp. 317–338; and for criticism of Crossan from an evangelical perspective, see Gregory A. Boyd, Cynic Sage or Son of God? (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint Books, 1995).
40. Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 20.
41. Ibid., p. 20.
43. Crossan, The Historical Jesus, p. 430.
44. Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. xi.
46. Borg, in Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship, p. 22, quotes from unpublished papers of Mack.
50. Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, pp. 94–95.
51. Ibid., pp. 66–74.
52. But, as we shall see in Chapter 7, some conservatives, such as N. T. Wright, have a different view of Jesus’ eschatology.
54. Ibid., pp. 49–50.
55. Ibid., pp. 130–131.
56. Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 152.
58. Ibid., p. 145.
60. Sanders, The Historical Figure, pp. 198–200, 263.
61. What this means is that in the opinion of the Fellows of the Seminar, “Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own.” Robert W. Funk et al., The Five Gospels (New York: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 36, 88.
62. Ibid., pp. 88–89.
Chapter 6


4. Ibid., p. 23.


6. Ibid., pp. 26–27.

7. Ibid., p. 82.

8. Ibid., p. 170.

9. In a later essay Crossan says that he never formulates the questions about Jesus that he investigates in terms of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith but instead asks: What did Jesus do and say in the late 1st c.e. that led some to say, “He is criminal; we must execute him,” and others to say, “He is divine; we must follow him.” Crossan says that this way of asking the question “avoids the Jesus/Christ dichotomy, with its twin extremes of pro- or antidogma, theology, or faith that simply skew the discussion in opposite ways” (“Jesus and the Kingdom: Itinerants and Householders in Earliest Christianity,” pp. 21–53 in Marcus J. Borg, ed., *Jesus at 2000* [Boulder: Westminister Press, 1997], p. 22). But in assuming that Jesus could not have performed miracles, Crossan has ruled out one possible explanation of why some people responded to Jesus by saying, “He is divine; we must follow him.” Hence Crossan has not avoided, as he seems to think he has, taking a stand against an important aspect of the faith of many Christians. Yet it would seem that Crossan did not intend to contradict faith, but did so in spite of himself; for instance, in his remarks to critics in Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwik, eds., *Jesus and Faith: A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), he says that the only thing “more pathetic than the dogmatic search” for the historical Jesus is “the antidogmatic one” (p. 153). In this latter opinion, I am in complete agreement with Crossan.


12. In *The Historical Jesus* Crossan reminded Christians that they should not reject the results of secular historical scholarship, presumably including the results of his own scholarship, merely because those results are reconstructions, “as if reconstruction invalidated somehow the entire project. Because there is only reconstruction. For a believing Christian both the life of the Word of God and the text of the Word of God are alike a graded process of historical reconstruction.” Hence “if you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in” (p. 426). But however respectable on secular grounds such a view may be, it begs the question against certain sorts of believing Christians. Even if every account is a reconstruction, it may be that some accounts, such as Crossan’s, are mere reconstructions and hence dismissible whereas others, such as those of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, are divinely inspired reconstructions and hence the word of God. I do not say that this is so, but only that Crossan has not explained why he is entitled to assume that it is not so.


16. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 183.

17. Ibid., p. 187.


19. Ibid., 1993, p. 136; see also p. 143.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.; see also p. 788.
24. More precisely: In the context of writing a history of Jesus, it is natural to suppose that if Jesus could perform miracles, then it is because he is God or was divinely empowered. As a historian, Meier clearly wants to remain neutral on the question of whether Jesus is God or was divinely empowered. Does he succeed in remaining neutral?


27. Ibid., p. 407.

28. The physiologoi included most of those whom historians of philosophy usually think of as the "pre-Socratics."

29. I am indebted throughout this paragraph to Gregory Vlastos, Plato's Universe (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), chapters 1-3.

30. See, for example, the views of George M. Marsden's critics, as quoted by him in his The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a discussion of similar issues in a Jewish context, see David Weiss Halivni, Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

31. Although I gave a rough-and-ready definition of naturalism earlier, defining naturalism precisely can be a tricky business. I am assuming, for the sake of this discussion, that we know what it means to explain naturalistically.


36. Evans points out, for instance, that many secular historians of Jesus date Acts after the fall of Jerusalem because they think that otherwise they would have to admit that the author of Acts had prophetic powers. Evans argues for an earlier dating, noting that "it is important to challenge the implicit assumption that any accurate 'prophecy' must have been made after the events in question," since "such an assumption makes it impossible to give the incarnational narrative, with its ineradicable miraculous elements, a fair historical test" (ibid., p. 33).

37. Ibid., p. 332.

38. Ibid., p. 341.

39. Ibid., pp. 333-334.


42. Ibid., p. 1.

43. Ibid., pp. 53-54.

44. Ibid., p. 56.

45. Ibid., pp. 56-63.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., pp. 62-63.

48. Ibid., pp. 65-68.

49. Ibid., pp. 71-72.

50. Ibid., pp. 74-75.

51. In Chapters 7 and 9 I shall discuss the interesting possibility that Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright are exceptions to this rule.

Chapter 7

1. Citing books by L. Johnson, M. Wilkins and J. Moreland, B. Witherington, and G. Boyd, Borg has written that the Jesus Seminar has "become the target of considerable criticism and attack. . . . Criticism of any scholarly position is, of course, warranted. But both the tone and content of many of these criticisms seem unfair. As one who has been deeply involved with the seminar for the past ten years, I must say that I simply do not recognize the group of scholars portrayed by some of our critics." In Marcus J. Borg, ed., Jesus at 2000 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), p. 157, n. 7.

2. The sort of apocalyptic interpretations that Borg primarily criticizes are not the sort that Wright defends. The latter sort, as it happens, fits rather comfortably into Borg's very Jewish portrait of Jesus. For a brief but fascinating discussion of these differences between Borg and Wright, see Wright's remarks on pp. xxiii-xxiv of his foreword to the revised edition of Borg's Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998 [1st ed., 1984]).


6. Jesus' message was not eschatological in the sense that it was not about "the supernatural coming of the Kingdom of God as a world-ending event in his own generation" (ibid., p. 29).
7. Ibid., pp. 30–31. Borg thinks that Jesus’ wisdom originated in an “enlightenment experience” similar to those that other great sages are said to have had (ibid., pp. 66–88).

8. Ibid., p. 32.
9. Ibid., pp. 32–33.
10. Ibid., p. 34.
11. Ibid., pp. 46–58.
12. Ibid., pp. 11–12.
13. Ibid., p. 12.
15. Ibid., p. 13.
17. Ibid., p. 15.
18. Ibid., pp. 16–17.

19. For one of the most sophisticated (but also most abstract) defenses of the claim that one would be justified in believing that to some, God is actually presented in experience, see William P. Alston, Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

20. More precisely, Borg said that in his role as academic historian it would have been “inappropriate” for him to have approached the study of Jesus with specifically Christian presuppositions in mind or with concern for Jesus’ significance for Christian faith. But surely what he meant (or at least should have meant) is that it would have been inappropriate for him to have had any “specifically” theological presuppositions in mind. See, for instance, Marcus J. Borg, “The Palestinian Background for a Life of Jesus,” pp. 37–57 in Hershel Shanks et al., The Search for Jesus: Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society).


22. In saying that no one “knows,” I mean that no one has sufficient, non-question-begging reasons for believing. I am aware, of course, that in the so-called reliability accounts of knowledge, one might know without having reasons. See, for example, Fred Dretske, Seeing and Knowing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); David Armstrong, Belief, Truth, and Knowledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); and Robert Fogelin, Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For an explanation of how such accounts of knowledge can impinge on discussions specifically of historical knowledge, see my “Critical Study: Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, Telling the Truth About History,” History and Theory, vol. 34 (1995), pp. 320–329.


24. N. T. Wright also publishes under the name Tom Wright.

25. For a sample of this traditional approach, see the quotation from W. Bousssett at the beginning of Chapter 6.


28. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 93. In Who Was Jesus? Wright says, “The great achievement of Marcus Borg, in my judgment, is to have demonstrated that the severe warning which the gospels attribute to Jesus have little or nothing to do with either hell-fire after death or with the end of the world, in the sense of the end of the space-time universe. Instead, the warnings are to be read as typical pieces of Jewish ‘apocalyptic’ language, as prophecies about a this-worldly judgment which is to be interpreted as the judgment of Israel’s God” (p. 15).

29. Wright, Who Was Jesus? p. 58; see also Wright’s summation of Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God in Jesus and the Victory of God, pp. 96–98.

30. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, p. 98.

31. Ibid., p. 103.

32. Ibid., p. 104.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., p. 102.

36. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, p. 108.

37. Ibid., pp. 413–417.

38. Ibid., pp. 111–112.

39. Ibid., pp. 110–111; see also Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 456, 458, 476; quoted in Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, p. 110. Wright also mentions a fifth question: Why are the Gospels what they are? He says that the way to find the historical Jesus is by “a pincer movement: forwards from the picture of first-century Judaism; backwards from the gospels.” In asking this fifth question about the gospels, he sees himself as being on one (temporally remote) edge of a giant jigsaw puzzle, the middle of which is an accurate portrait of Jesus. However, he does not try to answer this question about why the Gospels are as they are on the grounds that it would take another whole book to do so. He mentions the question, he says, to make the point that “it would enormously strengthen an interpretation of Jesus if it also explained why the gospels are what they are.” See Jesus and the Victory of God, pp. 112–113.

40. In Wright’s view, it is necessary to invent “new categories” that will transcend the distinction between history and theology, without collapsing either into the other, and yet also do justice to historical Jesus studies. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, p. 25.

42. Ibid., p. 18.
43. Ibid., p. 40.
44. Ibid., p. 80.
45. Ibid., p. 81. For instance, Wright says that when the Bible reports that God told Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply,” it is highlighting the fact that God put “into their inmost beings, as creatures made to reflect his image into his world, a deep desire for one another, and a deep longing to create and nurture order and beauty within creation.” In remarks like this, it can look as if Wright is playing the old accommodation game, in which traditional Christian beliefs are reinterpreted to make them compatible with science. But compare what he says about miracles in such discussions as the one in The New Testament and the People of God, p. 93.
46. Wright says that he has heard it seriously argued that we can no longer believe in the virgin birth now that, with the aid of modern medical research, we know so much about the process of conception and birth. He says that writers who say this sometimes say that because the ancients lacked modern science they were open to the possibility of all sorts of odd things happening. Wright counters that this “simply misses the point.” Conceding that we do, of course, know much more about conception and childbirth than people did in the first century, he says that first-century Jews knew as well as we do that babies are produced by sexual intercourse. He adds that “when, in Matthew’s version of the story, Joseph heard about Mary’s pregnancy, his problem arose not because he didn’t know the facts of life, but because he did.” In Who Was Jesus? p. 79.
47. Ibid., p. 85.
48. Ibid., pp. 61–62.
49. Ibid., pp. 62–63.
50. Ibid., pp. 81–82.
51. Ibid.

Chapter 8

1. I shall suggest that there is also a variation on the Only Reason response, according to which Christians should be totally submissive to the expert opinions not just of secular historians but also of historians more generally. Toward the end of the final chapter, I shall explain how this response works.
3. In the rural, conservative area where I live, I sometimes see displayed on a car my favorite bumper sticker: Jesus Said It. I Believe It. That Settles It. I imagine—rightly or wrongly—that the mental landscape of the person who would display such a sticker is neatly divided into straight, definite lines: No probably’s or probably not’s, no maybe’s, no I don’t know’s, no fuzzy lines—just yes’s and no’s. I also imagine that he is an Only Faith type.
5. Ibid., pp. 127–128.
6. Ibid., p. 132.
7. Ibid., pp. 132–133.
8. Ibid., p. 172.
9. Ibid., p. 141.
10. Ibid., pp. 142–143.
11. Ibid., p. 143.
12. Ibid., pp. 144–146.
13. Ibid., p. 175, emphasis added.
15. Ibid., pp. 173–175.

Chapter 9

1. This may have been Locke’s view. See, for instance, John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), book 4, chapter 17, section 24, pp. 687–688.
3. Ibid. Here, for the same sort of reasons that I explained in connection with my criticism of Luke Johnson in Chapter 8, it seems to me that Meier is confusing two questions: that of where information about Jesus comes
from, and that of whom the information is about. Even if you get your information about Jesus from historians, the object of your faith could still be, and presumably would be, not the information itself, but Jesus.

4. Ibid., p. 198.


6. For an alternative to this view, see Wright’s foreword to Borg’s Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, in which Wright endorses Borg’s view that Jesus was a political revolutionary but expresses some differences with Borg about Jesus’ views and activity. For more on Wright’s views on this topic, see his The New Testament and the People of God (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 185-203. And for criticism of Wright’s view, see J. D. Crossan, “What Victory? What God?” Scottish Journal of Theology, vol. 50 (1997), pp. 345-358.


8. Suppose, to switch examples, that through faith a believer “knows” that the world was created in 4004 B.C.E., and through reason, unguided by faith, he or she knows that the world must be much older than that. Why, in such a believer’s mind, should faith give way to reason? Is it because believers, in addition to having faith in what they take to be divine revelation, also have faith in reason or in the harmony of faith and reason? But is the latter true of all believers or just some? For those, apparently like Meier, who do have faith in the harmony of religious faith and reason, does that faith in harmony include just one’s own religious faith, or the religious faiths of other people also? If it includes the religious faiths of other people, how does one reconcile the conflicting things that people believe on faith? So far as I know, Meier does not address such questions.


10. Ibid., p. 315.

11. Ibid., p. 316.

12. In other words, what I am suggesting is that since Evans thinks that James is rationally entitled to subscribe to the extreme Only Faith response, naturally James is rationally entitled to subscribe to the more moderate Faith Seeking Understanding response. Evans’s procedure is a little like that of a trapeze artist who, practicing his art with an imposing safety net firmly in place, brags that he can try his hand at more and more difficult tricks without ever hitting the ground. True, one might observe, but with the safety net so firmly in place, it would be more impressive if he were to actually hit the ground.


15. Evans, The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith, p. 327.

16. Ibid., p. 318.

17. Ibid., p. 327.

18. See the evidence described earlier, in Chapter 4.


21. Such questions as Evans does ask about professional expertise need to be sorted out. When he suggests that the church can meet challenges to its competence to be an authority on questions of history as well as trained professional historians can, does he mean on questions of history when the answers to those questions are determined solely on the basis of ordinary historical evidence, or does he mean on questions of history when the answers are determined at least partly on the basis of Christian theology? If he means the former, his view seems a little silly—after all, trained professional historians do seem to know their business better than people who lack their training. On the other hand, if Evans means the latter, then he is surely right. The church would be at least as good—probably better—at determining through the lenses of its own particular theology the answers to historical questions than would trained secular historians. But then other churches and adherents of other theologies would also be better qualified to determine historical truth through their particular theological lenses. In my view, it seems that all of this historian bashing, something crucial is being lost: So far as competence at doing history is concerned, everyone is not in the same boat. In general, professional secular historians seem to be doing what they do better than theological historians—or James—could do it. Amazingly, Evans seems to have his doubts. But see his conciliatory remarks, ibid., pp. viii-ix.

22. Evans says that a striking fact that will be evident even on a superficial examination of secular historical scholarship is “the fundamental and radical disagreements that permeate it” (The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith, p. 321).

23. Evans makes this point by drawing on an analogy between philosophy and history (ibid., p. 325).

24. Evans apparently thinks that the scholarly qualifications of trained professional historians, even those acknowledged to be, so to speak, at the top of their game, are so shaky that he does not hesitate to enter the game himself. He disputes specific interpretations of historians on various diffi-
cult questions and endorses those of other historians (or of himself) on other difficult questions. See, for instance, The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith, pp. 329, 337, 338; pp. 342–344, 353–354.
25. Ibid., p. 345.
26. Ibid., p. 332.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., p. 33.
29. In other ways too, Evans's discussion is flawed. For instance, he says at one point that it seems overwhelmingly likely that if the authors of the New Testament Gospels preserved, as some of them did, material that is embarrassing and unhelpful, then they are even more likely to preserve authentic material that supports their agendas (ibid., p. 336). True enough, but who denies it? The more crucial consideration is whether the authors would also preserve material that is inauthentic but that supports their agendas. And if, as almost all secular historians believe, the authors of the New Testament Gospels not only would invent inauthentic material, but for liturgical or evangelical reasons actually did so on numerous occasions, then the fact that a story that appears in only one of the Gospels fits in with the theological agenda of the author of that Gospel obviously counts against the historian's accepting that story as authentic. It is not that the historian necessarily knows that the story is inauthentic, but rather that under the circumstances he or she may not be able to know that the story is authentic and hence, without being overly speculative, may not then be entitled to rely on it importantly in arriving at an overall interpretation of what happened. And while we are on the topic of speculation, it is worth pointing out that Evans seems to employ a double standard. When secular historians speculate, he is critical of them; for instance: "Whatever the outcome of such an endeavor [going -- behind the text] to discover earlier sources] and though it certainly leads at times to interesting and helpful findings, it appears inevitably to be a speculative, uncertain enterprise in many cases." But then when it is the religiously inspired interpreters who are doing the speculating. "There is just as much risk in a skeptical [interpretive] policy as in a more trusting policy;" and: "We are being no more cautious or safe in our procedure if we discard doubtful material than if we retain it" (The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith, pp. 338–339).
31. In Mitchell's view, within the liberal camp there is an additional tension between "traditionalists," whose primary concern is to safeguard tradition, ensuring that no truth that it contains is lost, and "progressives," whose primary concern is to acknowledge modern discoveries and contemporary experience. In this debate, Mitchell does not choose sides. The dispute itself, he says, is both unavoidable and desirable, since in the hands of traditionalists alone the tradition would tend to ossify, and in the hands of progressives alone it would tend to dissolve into the secular culture (ibid., p. 3).
33. Ibid., pp. 54–55.
34. Ibid., pp. 27–28.
35. Ibid., pp. 32–37.
36. Ibid., p. 45.
37. Ibid., p. 59.
40. Ibid., p. 65.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., p. 66.
43. The question is meant to be rhetorical. In Mitchell's view, even though knowledge of God is not merely a matter of detached theoretical inquiry but rather of direct encounter, it does not follow that there is no need for criticism. By analogy, we have knowledge both of other people and of ourselves that comes from "direct encounters," yet to understand people, including ourselves, we need to approach them in two ways: first, by observing them, and second, by interpreting what we observe "in terms of conceptions of character and personality that are, so far as we can make them, coherent and defensible." Mitchell says that however intuitive the first process may be, it cannot be divorced from the second. We need data that are immediate and intuitive, but also reflection on those data, ultimately including reflection on what it is to be a person. And the views we hold that result from that reflection, Mitchell claims, like the theories of theologians that result from their personal encounters with God, always are and always should be both tentative and subject to criticism (ibid.).
45. Ibid., p. 9.
46. Ibid., p. 12.
47. Ibid., p. 16.
48. Ibid., pp. 4–5.
51. Ibid., p. 27.
52. My way of putting Wright's view is a simplification of his way of putting it, but one that I think captures what is essential to his view. See *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 32–36.
53. Ibid., pp. 38–42.
54. Ibid., p. 42.
55. Ibid., pp. 42, 45–46.

Chapter 10

1. This is merely a possible additional drawback, because, as we have seen in our discussion of Mitchell's views, it is not clear, first, that in the Faith Seeking Understanding response one cannot preserve for religious faith its character as total commitment, and, second, that even if one can preserve it, one should.
7. If a historian refused to commit himself to the superiority of just one interpretation or just one interpretive approach, no sensible person would regard him as somehow suffering from "a failure of nerve." Yet in the context of historical Jesus studies those who refrain from committing themselves to the superiority of just one interpretation or just one interpretive approach are sometimes so regarded. But how much nerve does it take to pretend to know more than one actually knows? And is that sort of "nerve" a good thing?
8. It is tempting to reply that this objection fails, since all that multiperspectivalism commits one to suspending judgment about is the question of what one should believe, on the basis of historical evidence alone and on matters about which historians disagree. The multiperspectival approach, it may seem, has nothing to do with what one should believe on the basis of faith. For instance, suppose that a Christian were to think that she does know, on the basis of historical evidence alone, that, say, Jesus rose from the dead, and hence that she shouldn't suspend judgment about that. But how, on the basis of historical evidence alone, does she know that Jesus rose from the dead? Perhaps she thinks she knows it as a consequence of having been convinced by Dunn's argument (see Chapter 6). Dunn said that his argument is based on historical evidence alone and makes no appeal to faith. But recall, first, that Dunn's argument was crucially dependent on his claim (among others) that unless we suppose that Jesus rose from the dead, we cannot explain the empty tomb, and second, Crossan's argument that there is little reason to believe that Jesus even had a tomb. If Crossan is right, Dunn's argument collapses. Is Crossan right? Who's to say? Note that this particular disagreement between Dunn and Crossan does not hinge on disputes about the status of naturalism. The question is only whether Jesus was buried in a tomb. Although Dunn claims to be arguing in general on naturalistic grounds alone, even if he were not, presumably the question of whether Jesus was buried in a tomb is one that he would want to settle on naturalistic grounds alone. But if the experts disagree, as they do, about whether Jesus was buried in a tomb, then on what grounds, on the basis of historical evidence alone, is a nonexpert entitled to side with one group of experts against another? Our hypothetical Christian is left with three options: First, she can believe on faith that Jesus rose from the dead; second, she can believe on the basis of historical evidence alone that Jesus rose (or did not rise) from the dead, and third, she can leave open the question of whether Jesus rose from the dead. The first option, it may seem, has nothing to do with the multiperspectival approach, which concerns only what one should believe on the basis of historical evidence alone. The second option is incompatible with the multiperspectival approach, but it requires of a nonexpert that he or she side with one group of experts against another on a question to which their expertise, which the nonexpert lacks, is directly relevant. And the third option is the multiperspectival approach.
9. There have always been—and there still are today—thinkers who claim that our heads can reach as high as the heavens, that is, that on scientific grounds alone one can justify traditional religious beliefs. Among historical Jesus scholars, Dunn, for instance, claims that on the basis of histori-
Dooly evidence alone, crucial traditional Christian beliefs, such as the Resurrection, can be adequately justified. 

One is reminded here of Albert Camus: "Let us insist again on the method: it is a matter of persisting. At a certain point on his path the absurd man is tempted. History is not lacking in either religions or prophets, even without gods. He is asked to leap. All he can reply is that he doesn't fully understand; that it is not obvious. Indeed, he does not want to do anything but what he fully understands. He is assured that this is the sin of pride, but he does not understand the notion of sin; that perhaps hell is in store; but he has not enough imagination to visualize that strange future; that he is losing immortal life, but that seems to him an idle consideration. An attempt is made to get him to admit his guilt. He feels innocent. To tell the truth, that is all he feels—his irreparable innocence. This is what allows him everything. Hence, what he demands of himself is to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned; he wants to find out if it is possible to live without appeal." The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 39.