

The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith examines the conflicting views of Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright on the long-standing question of the relationship between the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of faith as depicted in the New Testament. Demetrian has created a study designed to supplement and expand on the discussion laid out in Borg's and Wright's widely read, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Views*. While the author is more empathetic to Wright's emphasis on the continuities between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, as illuminated throughout the New Testament, he is critical of Wright's overemphasis on history. In placing his interpretive emphasis on the revelatory dynamic of the canonical Scripture and the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy, Demetrian calls for a fourth quest for the historical Jesus that starts from a position firmly rooted in biblical faith and works backwards in search of historical roots. In this, he draws on the Pauline vision of "God . . . reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Cor 5:19) as his underlying hermeneutics. In exploring the broad range of issues that underpins the continuity/discontinuity question, Demetrian has provided a resource designed to span a wide audience, from Christian adult study groups interested in tackling books like *The Meaning of Jesus* to graduate level seminary students and professors.

The Historical Jesus AND THE *Christ of Faith*

Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright in Critical Dialogue

GEORGE DEMETRION

foreword by Glen Scorgie

"By means of his insightful comparison of the views of Borg and Wright on the historical Jesus, George Demetrian addresses the central questions surrounding the interplay of history and faith in our knowledge of Jesus. Demetrian's reading of both authors is empathic and generous, as he attempts to build bridges between postliberalism and evangelicalism. This is a stimulating book. . . . Highly recommended!"

—DONALD A. HAGNER

George Eldon Ladd Professor Emeritus of New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary

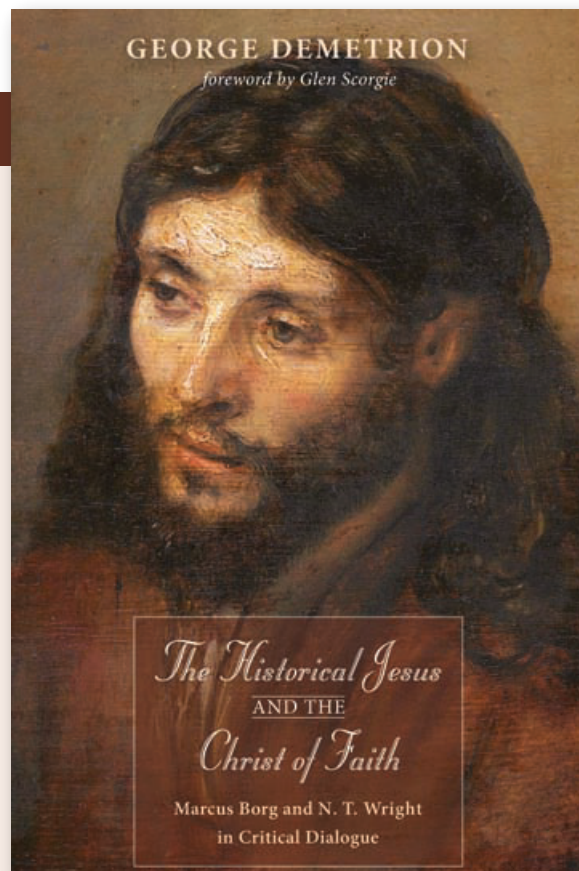
"Demetrian provides an insightful analysis and critique of two very different visions of the historical Jesus. This book is a helpful tool for navigating the philosophical foundations of historical Jesus studies. Demetrian proposes a middle way, where historical research is not ignored but builds on the solid foundation of God's self-revelation through Scripture."

—MARK L. STRAUSS

PhD, University Professor of New Testament, Bethel Seminary San Diego

"Demetrian has done us a great service. He invites us into his own informed exploration of this perennial question of the truth about Jesus. His strategy is both humble and informed. . . . [T]he questions engaged in this little book are far from trivial, and warrant our close reading."

—GLEN G. SCORGIE, from the foreword



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George Demetrian is a self-educated Christian scholar who has audited courses at Bethel and Hartford Seminaries. He has taught courses in the Virginia Commonwealth University Online Adult Literacy Certification Program. He is the author of *In Quest of a Vital Protestant Center: An Ecumenical Evangelical Perspective* (2014) and *Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education: In Quest of a U.S. Democratic Politics of Literacy* (2005).

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George Demetrian
Foreword by Glen Scorgie

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THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE CHRIST OF FAITH
Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright in Critical Dialogue

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to you, Sue, my most beautiful wife, for your love, support, understanding, and for the life we have shared these past thirty-eight years. It is an understatement to say that this project would not have been undertaken without your support. For you have given me the space to live the life to which I feel called, in which I hope I have provided similar space for you. I continue to appreciate our daily reading of Scripture, devotional books, and studies by such authors as John Piper, C. S. Lewis, R. C. Sproul, Charles Stanley, Dallas Willard, and others that keep us both grounded in prayer, meditation, theologically-based spirituality, and the presence of God's Spirit, without which, any work that I might undertake in biblical and theological studies would be utterly meaningless. This devotional time provides the foundation for everything we do and everything we are. Thank you for being my life partner. We have been graced by much through these past decades in our life together in Hartford, Syracuse, and San Diego.

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Foreword

JESUS IS *THE* TOWERING figure in the history of humanity. Even the giants among us must line up somewhere behind him. Allegiance to him is the defining feature of the Christian faith experience. And Jesus's identity remains—as indeed it has been from the very beginning—paramount in Christianity's engagement with the world's other great religions and secular worldviews. The question Jesus once posed to his band of followers still asks for response: Who do you say that I am?

Almost everything known or assumed about Jesus of Nazareth is found in the four Gospel narratives, located at the front of the canonical New Testament. These Gospels are tantalizingly brief portraits—each skillfully depicting Jesus from a particular authorial perspective and with a particular authorial agenda. Classic Christianity has assumed that these four portraits were so superintended by the Holy Spirit in their composition as also to constitute the very words of God. And classic Christianity inferred from this claim of divine authorship (or, more precisely, divine co-authorship) that the portraits mirror the perfect truthfulness of God's own character and word.

As long as such assumptions about the verbal inspiration of the four Gospels prevailed, the Christian answer to the question of Jesus's identity was straightforward: simply take the Gospel portraits at their face value. In recent centuries, however, at least a couple of developments have unsettled the composure of the faithful in their perceptions of the real Jesus. One has been the widening gap

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between the wonder-world of the Gospel narratives (filled as they are with divine-human communication and staggering supernatural events) and the modern worldview with its profound skepticism about any suggestion that the natural laws of the physical universe can be, or ever were, suspended. As a result, modern readers of the Gospels often experience enormous cognitive dissonance. Many events recorded in the Gospels exceed what their sincere but thoroughly modern mindsets can plausibly entertain.

A second challenge to classic Christianity's unencumbered embrace of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels has also emerged. It surfaced as scholars took a harder look at reconciling the New Testament portraits of Jesus into a single, synthesized account. So many things didn't appear to add up—didn't perfectly fit together—that questions surfaced about the Gospel authors' absolute commitment to factual reporting. Perhaps the Gospel writers thought of themselves as working in a different genre of literature, one that allowed for a degree of stylizing in their writing practices. Perhaps, then, the fault lies not with the original writers, but with contemporary readers who try to impose upon the Gospels a standard of objective, photographic-like reporting that is actually alien to the original authors' intentions.

The history of Christian mission and evangelization offers convincing proof that the Jesus proclaimed in the Gospels has the power to win worshipful allegiance, to transform lives, to give hope in the face of death, and to inspire all manner of good works. This *kerygmatic* Jesus—the Christ of apostolic proclamation and classic Christian faith—changes individual lives and sometimes whole societies.

But the question persists: To what extent is this Savior a pious fiction, an imaginary figure disconnected from earthy, ordinary reality? In the end, how is the Christ of classic faith any different, ontologically, from a movie character, a Disney creation or a Marvel comics super-hero?

Persons of integrity find it impossible to perpetuate the myth of Jesus Christ purely for its therapeutic effects. All Christian virtues are grounded in a prior and antecedent love for truth, and a vision

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of truth as that which corresponds to reality. It requires submission to what *is*. The Christian faith is not grounded solely in noble ideals, but also in the conviction that certain things actually happened. In no sphere is this truer than in the domain of Christology.

George Demetrian has done us a great service. He invites us into his own informed exploration of this perennial question of the truth about Jesus. His strategy is both humble and informed. He joins a stimulating conversation between two accomplished New Testament scholars as they wrestle with the question of the degree to which the Gospel accounts of Jesus correspond to historic reality. Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright are world-class scholars at opposing ends of a spectrum of conviction, and George weighs the arguments of each in an insightful yet respectful way. In the end, we discover where George personally lands. But more importantly, we are able to join him in his journey so that we can find the way to our own answers.

We live in an age of trivialization and distraction, one that grows quickly impatient with protracted arguments and scholarly details. But the questions engaged in this little book are far from trivial, and warrant our close reading.

In *Higher Superstition* (1994), Paul Gross and Norman Levitt have written: “Science succeeds precisely because it has accepted a bargain in which even the boldest imagination stands hostage to reality. Reality is the unrelenting angel with whom scientists have agreed to wrestle.”¹ So, like George Demetrian, must all honorable Christians as well.

Glen G. Scorgie

Professor of Theology and Ethics
Bethel Seminary San Diego

1. Quoted by Jeeves, *Human Nature at the Millennium*, 144.

Preface

LIKE MANY OTHER WORKS, this project has been long in the making. I originally intended this study as one of two introductory chapters in my recent book, *In Quest of a Vital Protestant Center*. In my planning model, these chapters were designed to highlight what I refer to as the great divide between modernism and fundamentalism on the role of the Bible in relation to the culture that undergirds virtually all aspects of twentieth- and twenty-first-century U.S. Protestant theology and religious culture. This fissure would need to be worked through as part of the essential work for discriminating evangelicals and postliberal theologians and biblical scholars to establish more mediating frames of reference without minimizing areas of persisting disagreement. For this effort, I built on the work of Phillips and Okholm in *The Nature of Confession: Postliberals and Evangelicals in Conversation*, as well as various texts by Gabriel Fackre, as summarized in the title of one of his more influential books, *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective*.

In its initial chapter format, as well as in its current short monograph design, I sought through the essay review format of Marcus Borg's and N. T. Wright's, *The Meaning of Jesus*, to highlight the divides in current Protestant discourse between what is commonly referred to as the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. As I was formulating the structure of *In Quest of a Vital Protestant Center*, I intended that chapter to serve as a contemporary correlative to the book's current historically-focused second chapter that tracks the tensions within the great divide through three

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pivotal time periods throughout the twentieth century. In the end, I reasoned that two introductory chapters of this sort represented too complex of a dialectic for the more constructive work that comprised the main focus of *In Quest of a Vital Protestant Center*.

This current book examines the sharp differences between the Jesus Seminar perspective of Borg, who emphasizes the discontinuities between the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of faith, with the more clearly equivocal, theological traditionalist, Wright, who draws out the continuities. Throughout the descriptive first four chapters, I focus on the ways in which Borg and Wright diverge on a variety of critical issues. I concentrate on sources of evidence upon which each author stakes out his argument, their opposing views on the messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth, and Christological issues, particularly on the incarnation and the atonement, the latter of which Borg places in the category of a historical accident. In the process, I highlight my disagreements with Borg, whose vision of Jesus, while rooted in first-century Jewish religious thought and the gospels narratives, finds its ultimate meaning in a more universal religious vision that transcends the radical particularity of any given tradition.

I find persuasive much of Wright's argument pointing to greater continuity between the Jesus depicted in the gospels and the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth, including an appreciation of the extensive evidence he amasses in arguing for the historical validity of the post-resurrection sightings. For Wright, the ultimate significance of Jesus and the basic meaning structure of the Christian faith reside within the core claims of the gospel itself, as well as the entire New Testament, when his specialized studies and popular books and New Testament study guides are looked at together as a unified body of work. For him, these claims gain a great deal of credibility through their substantial congruity, as far as can be determined, with the historical record.

My concern is that Wright relies too much on history in linking the claims of the gospels, as well as the letters of Paul, to the actual events surrounding the life and ministry of the historical Jesus. It is one thing to argue, as he does, that the gospel writers believed that

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what they reported actually took place as written. It is also one thing to argue, as Wright does, that the historical events surrounding the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth are central to the faith in the risen Christ that emerged in early Christianity. It is another matter, altogether, to claim that we can have knowledge of those events to a high degree of certitude, especially of the post-crucifixion events. While Wright notes the distinction, in appropriating a critical realist historical methodology to his analysis of the evidence, he downplays the significance of the potential gaps between the claims and the realities of what actually happened in a specific time and place, to the extent that the latter can be ever be discerned.

That there was a correlation of some profound sort seems almost tautological. Yet, whatever historical knowledge emerges in the study of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth, the primary source remains the New Testament, a specific Christological text that, in terms of historical illumination, is both revealing and veiled. With Wright, I find much value in interpreting the life and ministry of Jesus through the similarities and dissimilarities of Second Temple Judaism, particularly in its first century manifestations. This is a central focus of Wright's magnificent *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Nonetheless, much remains beyond definitive historical disclosure, especially concerning the consciousness of Jesus and the post-crucifixion events. While the life, ministry, and crucifixion of Jesus in its relation to the faith in the resurrected Christ, as it emerged initially in the decade of the 30s, is connected in some ineradicable way, the manner of its occurrence remains the critical issue.

As depicted in the scholarship over the past two centuries, it is not beyond the realm of reasonable conjecture that there may be more discontinuity between the events as portrayed in the gospels and what actually transpired in real time and place than Wright envisions. At the least, this is a contestable matter. To the extent that there is more discontinuity than Wright acknowledges, this would require him to expand his interpretative reach beyond his emphasis on the continuities, particularly when the post-Pauline epistles and the Gospel of John are factored in. This would call for

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some rethinking about the role of history in its relation to faith, particularly on the relationship between Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, as Wright interprets it, and the incarnate Christ begotten as the very Word of God, both of which are highlighted with varying degrees of emphasis when the entirety of the NT canon is taken into account.

Borg opens up such a prospect of exploring the discontinuities. However, he does so only by a metaphorical interpretation of the risen Christ in finding its meaning in a more universal depiction of the holy that transcends the specific language claims of the New Testament. With Wright, I find the textual claims of the New Testament canon, taken as a whole, central to the vital proclamation of an authentic Christian faith, which I cannot separate from the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy. While the Christian revelation has taken place in and through history, it also transcends history in its ultimate orientation in an incarnational and Trinitarian God that can be drawn out of the New Testament, as processed through the ecumenical multi-century orthodox Christian tradition. Wright embraces this view, especially in his more popular books, where he brings together his role as a historian and his pastoral calling as an Anglican bishop.¹

In even partially working through the continuity/discontinuity issue, there are a variety of critical factors to take into account. One is that the period immediately following the post-crucifixion events remain largely opaque to exacting historical analysis, which is an enduring sticking point underlying all research on the Jesus of history. The positions of Wright and Borg are invariably rooted in the presuppositions that give shape to the specific inferences and conjectures they make. Regardless of the stances they take on the relationship between the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and the rise of the Christian faith in the risen savior, their respective conjectures extend beyond the evidence needed to adequately support them.

Another consideration is the highly likely prospect, based on the evidence presented by Paul (1 Cor 15:3–8), that the crucifixion,

1. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 138–40.

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burial, and resurrection sightings, together, were part and parcel of the earliest post-crucifixion foundational set of beliefs, rather than a product of a developing church tradition, which is not to deny later gospel accretions. How and why that early Christian vision emerged remains, in many ways, unclear. That it took place within history is a given, a topic, itself, worthy of much historical analysis, as Wright notes.² Nonetheless, given the very nature of the proclamation of the risen Christ, it is, in the language of faith, an enduring mystery that, while breaking forth in and through history, has a transcendent dimension that cannot be fully explained or grasped through historical analysis.

From a faith perspective, I can only assume that some profound occurrence between what is commonly referred to as supernatural and natural causes were at work, which I link to an underlying hermeneutical stance “that God . . . in Christ [is] reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19, NKJV). In this, I posit that the very mediation of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith took place in a realm of what the Christian historian Gary Dorrien depicts as “true myth,” what C. S. Lewis portrays as the mysterious merger of fact and myth, what Hans Frei identifies as a storied narrative, and what J. I. Packer refers to as a mystery. However different the perspectives of these authors may be in their nuanced relationship between faith and history, they share a common belief that God, in fact, acted in and through the historical Jesus in a manner that has ontological standing in the real world of actual existence. To a person, these authors insist that there is more than *merely* the mythical in their various depictions of the risen Christ of faith, without reducing one iota the mystery of revelation. In this they share the perspective of the New Testament writers in viewing the risen Christ through the prism of a believing faith community, without which one would remain without spiritual sight (Luke 24:24–30, John 20:24–29, Heb 11:6).

By linking what those earliest followers of Jesus believed to what is stated in the synoptic gospels as closely approximating what actually happened, Wright places his interpretation firmly

2. Wright, *Contemporary Quest for Jesus*, 68–87.

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within what he refers to as the third quest for the historical Jesus, one situated within the apocalyptic setting of Second Temple Judaism. In his interpretation, Jesus' messianic identity was thoroughly rooted in the post-exilic vision of the greater-than-David Davidic "king through whose work YHWH was at last restoring his people."³ Wright notes that this is a good distance from any acknowledgement that Jesus envisioned himself as the savior of the world or had any foreknowledge that his death was related to the propitiation of sin through the shedding of his blood (Rom 3:25). He also rejects any notion that Jesus of Nazareth viewed himself as the incarnation of God in human flesh or as the Second Person of the Trinity, as discerned through the Johannine prologue and John 17, or had any notion of himself as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col 1:15). Nonetheless, as Wright understands it, as the climax of the covenant, Jesus fulfills Israel's destiny of restoring the world to a right relationship to the living God by becoming a light onto the Gentiles.

He acknowledges that "the attempt to move from Jesus to Christology," which the Christian faith demands, "calls for further reflection"⁴ that, for him, requires pushing history and faith as far as he can and working through the dialectic that invariably bursts forth through such an encounter. I seek to engage in a similar dynamic, but one that places the priority on faith, revealed, first and foremost, in and through, the canonical Scripture, drawing on history for further illumination. To put a twist on Wright's depiction, this is a move from Christology to Jesus, which draws on history for supportive insight, in which *Jesus and the Victory of God* is one most valuable resource.

Regardless of whether one accepts the "collapse of history" in contemporary biblical hermeneutics, as some have posited,⁵ there is an emphasis, particularly in postliberal biblical interpretation,

3. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 2:477. For the greater than Davidic reference, see Wright's discussion on Jesus' appropriation of Psalm 110. Ibid., 508–10.

4. Wright, *Contemporary Quest for Jesus*, 87.

5. Perdue, *Collapse of History*.

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on two interweaving strands leading to a post-critical reading of Scripture. One is the impetus in narrative theology of interpreting the Bible as a realistic-like text “that is often ‘history-like’ even when it is not likely history.”⁶ The closely related other is that such an interpretation opens up an imaginative pathway of appropriating the Barthian dictum of reading the world through the prism of the revealed Word.⁷ Envisioning the Bible through such a mode opens up a way of working through the literature on the various quests for the historical Jesus, in part, by bypassing the fact/fiction dilemma that underlay the quest. This allows the Bible to speak in and through its own unique idioms in its depiction of Jesus Christ in a manner that can incorporate the synoptic narratives with the gospel of John and the highest of the Christological epistles in a complexly unified vision of the Word made flesh.

It is not that the historical questions about the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth, including the post-crucifixion sightings, are unimportant; they most assuredly are, but they are not “determinative.”⁸ In part, that is because they are inconclusive, as the evidence stands. If one assumes that the disclosure of the Word-become-flesh is a given for the faith community, in no small measure, through a canonical-spanning revelation of the inscripturated NT canon, the specific biblical genres through which that understanding emerges (including the historical) are less important than the revelation itself. Viewed in this way, knowledge of the various genres upon which the canon is comprised provides invaluable insight in better understanding the dynamics of biblical revelation, but are not determinative of it.

No doubt, a radical gap between the person portrayed in the totality of the biblical image of Jesus Christ and the person who actually lived and died in real time and place would present a

6. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 122.

7. The classic postliberal texts are Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, in which both authors acknowledge their debt to Barth. Both of these works underlie Purdue’s *Collapse of History* and Dorrien’s *Word as True Myth*, which I draw on in the concluding section of the book.

8. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 120.

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theological crisis of no minor proportions. History matters. Whatever limitations there may be in the third quest for the historical Jesus, the messianic figure portrayed in *Jesus and the Victory of God* provides sufficient basis for an embrace of the high Christology that characterizes John and some of the epistles when the entirety of the New Testament is taken into account. Through such a comprehensive embrace of the NT canon, I seek to complement Wright's study by building bridges between postliberal and evangelical biblical scholars and theologians on the nature of revelation of God in Christ reconciling the world and to search out its historical roots. By the very nature of the search, any such attainment can only be highly partial; it represents an area of research that would require much discerning acuity, well beyond what I can explore here. Putting such caveats aside, I posit that a fourth quest would start with the Christ revealed throughout the New Testament as the starting point for looking to history in search of vital points of connection to the living past. This would call for a different set of hypotheses than those laid out by Wright in his critical realist historical methodology, ones that would complement his, while directing the ongoing research project in some new directions.

Acknowledgments

I AM GRATEFUL THAT at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, I had the opportunity to audit the fall 2015 seminar, “Exploring Continuity and Discontinuity between Early Christianity and Formative Judaism,” offered by Donald Hagner, George Ladd Professor Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary. The course required a close reading of two important books by New Testament scholar, Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* and *Reading Backwards: Figural Theology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*. As a result of the course I gained a deeper appreciation of the many Old Testament echoes that were on the surface or could be teased out in a wide range of New Testament passages and the importance of a figural reading in understanding the relationship of the two testaments. Through further research, I became aware of the close association between the scholarship of Hays and N. T. Wright. As a way of following up on the work of Hays and Wright, Don’s seminar gave me the impetus to complete *The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith*.

I am especially indebted to Bethel Seminary Professor of Theology and Ethics, Glen Scorgie for the detailed attention he has generously given to this project. In an initial review of the book, Glen encouraged me to strengthen the concluding chapter. I’m not sure I met all of his concerns, but the result is that I concentrated a great deal on sharpening my concluding remarks. Glen’s more recent commentary on this project is reflected in the Foreword. Through his own interpretive lens on the critical issues confronting

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

contemporary believers in coming to terms with the truth claims of the Christian revelation in light of the powerful challenges of science, history, and literary studies, Glen aptly draws out the subtext of my book. I am honored that Glen has lent such energy and time to this book.

In addition, I have gained much by auditing several courses that Glen taught at Bethel Seminary. His seminar titled, “History of Christian Thought: 19th Century to the Present,” was most germane to this current project. The assigned text, Roger Olson’s, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction*, provided the most comprehensive overview of the past two centuries of Western theology that I had ever encountered. Through Glen’s lectures, seminar discussions, and Olson’s text—which I supplemented with Gary Dorrien’s indispensable, *Word as True Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology*—I greatly increased my understanding of the history underlying the various quests for the historical Jesus so pervasive throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a result of the seminar, I also took a close look at Stanley Grenz’s postconservative evangelical theology, which filled an important gap in my knowledge.

I learned a good deal, as well, from Glen’s other courses. His seminar on the theology of the atonement significantly expanded my understanding of this topic and opened me up to the rich diversity and range of evangelical theology, of which I was largely unaware. His course on the pietistic tradition, of which I had limited knowledge, supplemented my appreciation of Puritan spirituality. The result is that I now have a deeper awareness of how these two central streams of Protestant devotional literature converge, and in places, diverge. Here is gist for additional work that continues to pull on me. What I appreciate, as well, is Glen’s capacity to blend rigorous theological analysis with his deep sense of Christian spirituality, which is very much in keeping with the mission, vision, and values of Bethel Seminary. I also appreciate Glen’s dedication to the theological and spiritual development of his students, to which he is most solicitous. I, for one (an auditor),

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have been very enriched by his attentive consideration of my theological and spiritual development.

I am grateful to the pastoral and staff team and the excellent lay leaders at College Avenue Baptist Church in San Diego for the spiritual nurturance that my wife and I gleaned through worship, the preached word, and small group study. What we found at CAB were individuals across the congregation with deep biblical faith, high character and integrity, and a searching quest for a penetrating understanding of the faith in all dimensions characteristic of Christian adult education at its very best. The Bethel and CAB experience, together, have made a permanent mark on my own Christian formation, for which I remain forever thankful.

I am also grateful for the unique niche of Wipf & Stock publishers for making available studies like this that seek to probe into critical theological topics that, for a variety of reasons, would have a hard time gaining traction in more traditional Christian publishing markets. In looking at the range and depth of texts that Wipf & Stock has made available over the years, in their countercultural publishing orientation, they are helping to redefine the realm of legitimacy in the academic Christian publishing sector. Brian Palmer, Editorial Administrative Assistant, Matthew Wimer, Assistant Managing Editor, Matthew Perkins, and Joshua Little, my copy editors, and Ben Dieter, Digital Content Editor, have been most helpful. I am grateful, as well to my sister-in-law, Audrey Lapointe for closely editing portions of this book. Audrey has a keen eye for the nuances of grammatical detail and word choice, which has been quite helpful.

George Demetrian

September 26, 2016

East Hartford, CT

Abbreviations

ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NKJV	New King James Version

Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical references are from the (NIV) New International Version.

To discern God's purpose and to be obedient to it among all the ambiguities and perplexities of life is always a struggle. We may be often wrong both in our understanding of what God is doing in our attempted obedience, just as it is made clear in Scripture that the people whose stories it tells were often wrong, or only partially right, in their discernment of God's purpose. At best, we can hope to choose the relatively better and to reject the relatively worse. We can never claim that either our understanding or our action is completely right. That kind of proof belongs only to the end. As part of the community that shares in the struggle, we open ourselves continually to Scripture, always in company with our fellow disciples of this and former ages and in the context of the struggle for obedience; and we constantly find in it fresh insights into the character and the purpose of the one who is "rendered" for us in its pages. We read these pages, naturally, as part of our real history, secular history, the history of which we are a part. What other history is there? There are not different histories, but there are different ways of understanding history. We recognize this because another way of understanding history is being applied to contemporary events around us all the time. It is possible, and in our culture normal, to exclude the name of God altogether from our account of public affairs, and to construe history as a continuum of cause and effect, an area where 'historical forces' are at work and events take place in accordance with the only purposes at work are those of individual human beings.

But it is idle to suppose that any kind of peaceful coexistence is possible between these two ways of understanding history. It is clearly an illusion to imagine

that there are two kinds of history—sacred and profane, salvation history and secular history. We who are at the moment making and suffering history know that there is only one history, but we know that it can be understood theistically or atheistically. It is true that a methodological atheism may be required in the course of historical study, just as a scientist may eliminate any concern with the music while he studies the movement of the pianist's fingers. But those who belong to the community that is controlled by the rendering of God in Scripture will surely be precluded from a dichotomizing of their lives into a private sphere where God is acknowledged and a public sphere in which events are finally interpreted without reference to God. The long-running debate about the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is simply one manifestation of the illusion that has haunted our culture ever since the Enlightenment. There is only one Jesus and one history. The question is whether the faith that finds its focus in Jesus is the faith with which we seek to understand the whole of history, or whether we limit this faith to a private world of religion and hand over the public history of the world to other principles of explanation.

—NEWBIGIN, *FOOLISHNESS TO THE GREEKS*, 60–61.

Overview

THE WIDELY READ *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, co-authored by Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, provides an excellent entry point for probing critical issues in contemporary Protestant thought and religious culture. Borg was one of the members of the Jesus Seminar and Distinguished Professor in Religion and Culture at Oregon State University. His two books, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, have provided many mainline clergy and theologically astute lay persons a way of reconciling their understanding of modern reality with the ancient and timeless truths of the Christian revelation without the need to take the Bible literally, or as synonymous with actual historical fact. Wright is currently Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of Saint Andrews in Scotland and former Anglican Bishop of Durham. He is one of the major authors of the “New Paul” school of biblical interpretation.

The alternative perspectives of these highly influential Christian authors, whose cumulative work spans a wide range of scholarly and more popular church-based discourse communities, crystallize key theological disputes between liberal Protestant and evangelical theology, particularly on the relationship between

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what is commonly dubbed as the “historical Jesus” and “the Christ of faith.” The back cover of the book hypes the contrast between the liberal and “traditional” credentials of Borg and Wright respectively, a point well taken, yet with advisement in that, as a major proponent of the “New Paul” scholarship, some of Wright’s claims have raised major concerns among traditional evangelicals over the role of the atonement and the central Reformation doctrine of justification by faith.¹

The contrast is clear enough in that Borg points to the many retrojections of key Old Testament passages and allusions by the early church in the New Testament that the biblical writers drew upon to highlight the Christological significance of the Risen One, depicted as the “son of God.” Borg notes that the New Testament contains deified depictions of Jesus, which, according to the proponents of the Jesus Seminar, are beyond any self reference to the historical personage of what Jesus of Nazareth would have likely said about himself.²

In faith, Borg accepts the Christological claims of God indwelling in Christ and discovers both Jesus and the Bible anew. However, it is a depiction which is metaphorical—the way in which God speaks to a specific faith community in and through its own particular idiom. This keeps open the possibility—and on Borg’s reading—the likelihood that God speaks as fully to other

1. There is a great deal of pro and con material available on the New Paul literature. For a representative critique see Piper, *Future of Justification*. I bypass a discussion of the New Paul literature because (a) this essay is focused on interpretations of Jesus rather than Paul; (b) in contrast to Borg, Wright does argue for a more traditional, biblically-based interpretation, even as it is one that places a great deal of weight on history as lived by the Jewish Jesus as sifted through the “third quest” for the historical Jesus literature. In *Contemporary Quest for Jesus*, Wright provides a useful overview of the research on the historical Jesus, extending back to the nineteenth century.

2. Borg rejects “a sharp either-or choice between” (*Meaning of Jesus*, 252) the historical Jesus and the Jesus portrayed in the gospels as the sole arbiter of significance, maintaining that his faith has been shaped in a reflection on their interaction. Nonetheless, in contrast to Wright, Borg posits a radical distinction between the historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth and the portrayed Christ of the New Testament.

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faith communities in other ways. The claim of the radical particularity of Christ as the full embodiment of God in human flesh is categorically rejected by Borg, even as such imagery speaks profoundly to the believing faith community. In his primary focus on the existential significance of Christ's mediation of God in the light of the compelling epistemological challenges of the contemporary era and the ongoing work of constructing the historical record, the question of ultimate truth remains largely unexamined in Borg's depiction of Jesus.

Building on the work of E. P. Sanders, J. D. Dunn, and others in reconstructing the "Jewish Jesus," Wright places the mission of Jesus within the historical context of Second Temple Judaism. From such a vantage point, this makes plausible the view that Jesus self-understood his calling as Israel's Messiah, which was not simply a later retrojection by the early church. Notwithstanding this grounding in Israel's history, the Messiah, as embodied by Jesus, radically reconstructed prevailing perceptions of a liberating king in the image of a conquering David. This somewhat altered perception of God on a cross could find justification in Jewish scripture as a plausible hypothesis retrospectively, once the vision was unleashed of Christ as crucified *and* resurrected redeemer king. In this respect, Wright takes on the challenge of historical Jesus scholarship and gives it a new twist in drawing out what he views as the ample ground of considerable continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, as expressed particularly in the synoptic gospels and the letters of Paul. In his various work, Wright presents a plausible depiction of Jesus' self-understanding based on this reconstructed messianic vision, thoroughly congruent with the deepest teachings of Israel's God as suffering servant.³

The lurking concern remains the place of historical accuracy as the basis for faith. From the perspective of narrative theology, establishing greater linkages between history and the biblical text

3. For Wright's most extensive statement of this thesis, see *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 2, titled *Jesus and the Victory of God*, which includes an important one hundred page overview of the scholarly literature, through what he describes as the "third quest" for the historical Jesus. That overview is repeated in a short, separate volume, *Contemporary Quest for Jesus*.

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enhances credibility, if only in the respect that if an utterly radical disconnect between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith existed, credulity would, at the least, be severely strained. That is, narrative theology works—to the extent that it does—because there is an inextricable (though far from thoroughly explainable) analogue between that which is depicted in the text and that which actually existed, as far as the historical record can disclose.⁴

In the very process of establishing a tighter connection between faith claims and the historical record, a concern arises that Wright places too much emphasis on historical accuracy as the basis for a faith stance that needs to remain grounded in “the substance of thing hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1, KJV). With Wright, I recognize the significance of the historical events surrounding the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth for an incarnational faith, which is not synonymous with necessarily

4. This leaves open the matter on whether the viability of scriptural revelation depends on the historical accuracy of the text, in contrast to the genre of a realistic narrative, which incorporates both historical and fictive elements, an issue that goes to the heart of the difference between traditional evangelical and postliberal narrative biblical theologies (Phillips and Okholm, *Nature of Confession*). While the Bible includes a variety of genres in addition to the narrative mode, in the broadest of strokes, the Christian story, to use Fackre’s designation, is rooted in the grand narrative that extends from creation to consummation, in which each biblical “chapter” delineates an essential component of the story. In his view of narrative theology—which incorporates both evangelical and postliberal perspectives—“the Bible is a book that tells [in the language of postliberal theologian, George Lindbeck] an ‘overarching story.’” Fackre, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 3. More specifically, the Bible unfolds through a plotline that incorporates “the imaginative role of the narrator in telling the tale [that] does not preclude the historical core of the account” (20). Through this “Great Narrative [italics removed] within Scripture” (6) the primary source of the revelation of God in Christ is “traced by canonical hand” (3). In referring to the Bible as the primary *source* of revelation, Fackre identifies “Jesus Christ,” himself, as “the interpretive key to the whole narrative” (5), in which the source and the very essence of revelation can be grasped, only in their interaction. Such interplay includes the *illumination* of the Holy Spirit in the mind and spirit of the writers and readers of the biblical narrative through which the mystery of God in Christ reconciling the world is disclosed. For a broader discussion of the biblical trajectory of Fackre’s narrative theology, see *Christian Story*, 1 and *Doctrine of Revelation*. For an interpretive overview of Fackre’s theology, see Demetron, *In Quest of a Vital Protestant Center*, 115–66.

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accepting the historical accuracy of the descriptive New Testament narratives of the events surrounding the empty tomb and resurrection sightings. A surer basis—one grounded in faith, as discussed in some depth in the fourth and fifth chapters—is that of God working through Christ (2 Cor 5:19) and placing him, as Christian theology has it, as the central figure in human history, even if the events described in the New Testament are not, in their totality, historically accurate.

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not us (2 Cor 4:6-7).

Wright does not deny this in his embrace of both history and faith, allowing each to have its say at their appropriate levels of discourse. In seeking credibility, a question of major proportion remains the extent to which the gap can extend between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, particularly if the former is to serve as a simultaneously opaque and perspicacious reflector through which the light of God, as revealed throughout the New Testament, illumines the latter. On this, Borg and Wright diverge, even as both acknowledge, in their different ways, the invariable tension and harmonization between the claims of history and those of faith. These issues go to the heart of *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*.

Source Materials and the Christian Revelation

Borg

BORG REFERS TO THE gospels as “a developing tradition,” “a mixture of history remembered and history metaphorised.”¹ As he states it more fully:

The gospels are the churches memories of the historical Jesus transformed by the community’s experience and reflections in the decades after Easter. They therefore tell us what these early Christian communities had come to believe about Jesus by the last third of the first century. They are not, first and foremost, reports of the ministry itself.²

Wright does not object to Borg’s depiction of the gospels as a developing tradition, even as for Borg, a much smaller core falls within the category of history as lived than it does for Wright. Particularly important for Borg is the sharp distinction between the Jesus of history that can be established by historical methodologies,

1. Borg and Wright, *Meaning of Jesus*, 4.
2. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 10.

and that of the early Christian community, which placed pivotal texts into the mouth of the New Testament Jesus. For Borg, it is exceedingly unlikely that Jesus referred to himself as “the light of the world.”³ Rather, this was a metaphor used by the early church to signify that the risen Christ could be compared to light, even as this begs the broader issue as to what the vision of “light” actually referred. There are two issues in play.

The first is the imagery of the risen Christ in the gospel of John, in which the metaphor of light is but one symbol in a constellation of images. Thus, Christ was also the living water, the bread of life, and nothing less than God’s own son through whom no person comes to the father except through him; elsewhere, the true vine. All of this imagery is grounded in the overarching belief announced in the prologue that in the beginning was the Word and that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. However metaphorical John’s language, there was something quite literal in the key claim that unless one is born again into the light of Christ “one cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5b). That claim is that in Christ the very “image of the invisible God” is manifest, in whom “all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form” (Col 1:15, 2:9). A most related second issue is the question of who Jesus was and his self-defined purpose, for which Borg posits a significant difference between a pre- and post-Easter (which he conflates with a pre- and post-New Testament) vision; namely in the former, high Christological attributes do not pertain, even of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, which Borg, unlike Wright, rejects as an authentic self-perception of the historical personage.⁴

The “lenses” through which Borg constructs his interpretation of Jesus are those of critical historical scholarship and cultural

3. Borg and Wright, *Meaning of Jesus*, 5.

4. Since Borg views the constructed notion of the “historical Jesus” from a Jesus Seminar point of view, he interprets the composite NT picture of Jesus as reflecting a post-Easter phenomenon, while acknowledging pre-Easter—that is, authentically historical—threads that can be discerned, as more or less reliable. While acknowledging the imprint of the early church on the NT, Wright argues for a much greater continuity between the lived history of Jesus of Nazareth and the core narratives of the synoptic gospels, a case he argues for in much depth in *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 2.

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analysis, which he defines as “foundational.”⁵ Borg was raised in a traditional orthodox Protestant setting, which had a profound influence on his early Christian nurturance. His university training introduced him to the depth and richness of the secular intellectual world to which he gravitated for some considerable time.⁶ In the process he became a scholar of the “historical Jesus” through which he grounded his intellectual identity, and to some degree, his personal being. This required rejection of what he viewed as the simplifications of his early faith stance, in which the Jesus of history and the Jesus portrayed in the New Testament, were viewed as synonymous figures. Borg ultimately came to discover the Christian revelation as an *experiential* reality in a manner that enabled him to transcend the dichotomy he felt between his earlier uncritical faith stance and his understanding of the scholarship on the historical Jesus, as reflected, largely, through the prism of the Jesus Seminar literature.⁷

The faith that Borg discovered anew “is the Jesus who is for us,” which he is quick to point out, is not synonymous with any universal claim that Christ is the full embodiment of God in human flesh. Rather, “the gospels . . . are Christianity’s primal narratives” because “these are the most important stories *we* (italics added) know, and we know them to be decisively true.”⁸ How Borg defines decisiveness is uncertain; based on what he has written, it can be reasonably surmised that he means something less than Christ is the full embodiment of God in human flesh as an ontological reality having universal significance. If he only means decisive for Christians, there is some question begging to consider; namely, in what sense and on what basis. Notwithstanding the insurmountable gap between the search and fulfillment, the issue of ultimate truth is a matter that requires substantial confrontation.

5. Borg and Wright, *Meaning of Jesus*, 8–9.

6. *Ibid.*, 10.

7. See Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 3–15, for an autobiographical profile of his scholarly, theological, and spiritual odyssey. For a summary statement on the Jesus Seminar, see Funk, *Five Gospels*.

8. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 218.