

Chapter 1

Revisiting Reimarus

To say that [Reimarus's] fragment on “The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples” is a magnificent piece of work is barely to do it justice. This essay is not only one of the greatest events in the history of criticism, it is also a masterpiece of world literature.

—ALBERT SCHWEITZER¹

He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.”

—EZEKIEL 37:3²

Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), the founder of modern historical Jesus study, was essentially correct—Jesus’ aims were different from those of his post-Easter disciples—but Reimarus’s views need to be modified by social-scientific criticism and restated in the light of “Current Quest” investigations (“Current Quest” is my term).³ The argument of this present book is quite

1. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, introduction by James M. Robinson, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 16.

2. Most biblical translations in this book follow the New Revised Standard Version; in a few places, translations are my own. Abbreviations where used follow those listed in Patrick Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

3. There is disagreement about what to call the outpouring of recent scholarship on the historical Jesus: “Third Quest” (N. T. Wright, John Meier); “Renewed Quest” (Robert Funk);

straightforward: in the eyes of his Palestinian contemporaries, Jesus' interests and historical activity were materially political in aim; after his death, those who remained loyal to Jesus' memory began to proclaim him as the center of a new Greco-Roman religious *cultus*—first in Syro-Palestine and then in the eastern Roman cities. As many Jesus scholars have long noted, the Jesus of history became the Christ of faith (David F. Strauss); the proclaimer became the proclaimed (Rudolf Bultmann). Apocalyptic Judean conceptions provided the first major frameworks for interpreting Jesus' significance (as Albert Schweitzer showed in his discussion of “thorough-going eschatology,” and as Wilhelm Wrede showed regarding what he called the “messianic secret”). These conceptions, of course, distanced Jesus automatically from mundane concerns. The displacement of the center of Jesus-memory from rural Galilee to the Christ followers of the cities, close to the imperial elites, led to further revisions in the statements of Jesus' worldly significance.

The second and enduring framework for interpreting Jesus was the Christ *cultus* with scripture, prayer, meal, and participation in the household assembly (church). High Christology and Christianity as a Greco-Roman salvation religion separated from Judaism were the enduring legacies of post-70 CE interpretive developments. The writers of the New Testament consequently took pains to depoliticize memories of the historical Jesus, even though adherence to the name “Christian” later could become grounds for condemnation. The canonical Gospels all appeared in the Flavian period of the first century and are hardly unbiased when it comes to situating Jesus amid imperial politics. Somewhat ironically, Christology eventually embraced all of the powers of the cosmos (Colossians). I write in the conviction that the recovery of an original “political Jesus” at the root of the tradition, and the tracing of what happened to his memory, can still have important ramifications for contemporary communities that continue to keep faith with Jesus the Christ.

“Continuing Quest” or, better, “Current Reconstructions” (David Gowler). Because of the confusion of terminology, this book adopts the potentially neutral term “Current Quest.” See Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 379–403; Pieter Craffert (who follows Wright in identifying a *Schweitzerstrasse* and a *Wredestrasse*), *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective*, Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 40–41; Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 62–76. See further Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 10–12; and David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying about the Historical Jesus?* (New York: Paulist, 2007), 27–30.

Strands of the Previous Discussion

Reimarus stated his proposals in a document titled “On the Aims of Jesus and His Disciples” (“Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger”), part of a larger fragmentary work that appeared too dangerous to publish during his own lifetime.⁴ Reimarus is intent in the thirty-three sections of Part 1 to show that (1) Jesus was a first-century Judean with messianic consciousness who brought nothing new; (2) he established no new doctrines or institutions, certainly not a new religion, but all was understandable within contemporary Judean thought; (3) his preaching of a “Kingdom of God” was consistent with contemporary Judean thought; and (4) the apostles and post-Easter community converted Jesus from a temporal savior of Israel (as he presented himself) to a spiritual savior of humankind and revised the history of Jesus in light of emerging Christian conceptions of him. Reimarus also anticipates many themes of modern Gospel criticism, such as historical-critical handling of materials (passion predictions are inventions of the post-Easter community; the New Testament is shaped by the delay of Jesus’ *parousia*), redaction criticism in the awareness of the difference between tradition and redaction (evangelists preserved authentic words of Jesus but also inscribed new doctrines as history), and ideological criticism (early Christianity transformed the historical Jesus from temporal to spiritual savior under the impact of its developing interests).

In Part 2, sections 1–8, Reimarus unfolds the political theme in greater detail.⁵ In the temple attack, where Jesus “lays aside his gentleness, begins a disturbance, and commits acts of violence,” he attacks the Jerusalem senate and the magistrates. According to Reimarus: “[In these actions] peeps out from the histories of the evangelists their true old notion of a worldly deliverer” (146–47).

4. Hermann S. Reimarus, *Reimarus: Fragments*, trans. Ralph S. Fraser, ed. Charles H. Talbert, Lives of Jesus Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 60–269. Reimarus feared what would happen to his family should his views become known. After G. E. Lessing’s publications of the fragments, attacks on them and their unknown author by Hamburg pastors and eventually by J. S. Semler proved the fear justified. Further, after “The Aims of Jesus” appeared, the censor and the government took action to hinder further publications. See Colin Brown, “Hermann Samuel Reimarus,” in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1998), 346–49; William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 1, *From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 170–77; Carl Bertheau, “Wolfenbuettel Fragments,” in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1951–55), 402–3.

5. Page numbers in parentheses refer to the Talbert edition. For a detailed overview of the “revolution theory,” see Ernst Bammel, “The Revolution Theory from Reimarus to Brandon,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 11–68.

For him, this theme is a matter of Jesus' self-consciousness as a worldly messiah. His proclamation, and that of the disciple-delegates, is that the "Son of Man" is about to appear. This proclamation pertains to the hopes of Israel for worldly preeminence. Jesus' following, according to Reimarus, is largely the vulgar and ignorant. When Jesus is betrayed by the crowds in Jerusalem, however, he goes into hiding until betrayed. His word from the cross—"Why have you forsaken me?"—is in Reimarus's view additional evidence that Jesus expected a worldly crown rather than a crown of thorns (150). Reimarus writes: "When this worldly deliverer belief had been discredited by events, his disciples found themselves mistaken and deceived by the condemnation and death, and [invented] the new system of a suffering spiritual savior, which no one had ever known or thought of before" (151).

Reimarus's work drew heavily on that of the English Deists. Stephen Toulmin has shown that views similar to Reimarus's were first developed by Nonconformists and correlated with their strong political aspirations for freedom from established religion and autocratic politics. (English Nonconformists were non-Christians or non-Anglicans who resisted the 1662 Act of Uniformity. Deist critics of the Gospels were important Nonconformists of the late seventeenth century.) Interestingly, within a few decades of Reimarus's death, J. G. Fichte, "the first great representative of German idealistic philosophy" and student of Immanuel Kant, would make an impassioned defense of academic freedom upon his installation as rector of the University of Berlin. By 1850, Germany enshrined academic freedom in law and "became the land of academic freedom. The spirit of freedom permeated more and more all academic institutions."⁶ It would seem that Reimarus's interest in a nonconformist picture of Jesus was inspired by aspirations for freedom of thought from political and religious authorities. This was, indeed, the hallmark of the Enlightenment. The establishment of academic freedom by law in Germany after 1850 certainly provided a culture congenial to the appearance of numerous lives of Jesus in the later nineteenth century, the "assured results" of criticism especially in recognition of Markan priority and Q, and the opening for "history of religion" (*religionsgeschichtliche*) research that would lay the groundwork for further developments.

Subsequent investigations into the history of Jesus have sometimes developed Reimarus's ideas but more often ignored them. Albert Schweitzer began his

6. Quote from A. Lodewyckx, "Academic Freedom in Germany," *Australian Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (September 1941): 87; see also Walter P. Metzger, "The German Influence," in *Academic Freedom in the Age of the University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 93–138; on the relationship of Nonconformity and Deism, see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 119–23.

classic treatment of the modern study of Jesus, as indicated by the German title *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, with the work of Reimarus.⁷ Schweitzer's powerful survey of the nineteenth-century "Lives of Jesus" marked a monument to those writings, which came subsequently to be called the First Quest for the historical Jesus and a turning point in scholarship. As already noted, Schweitzer began with Reimarus's efforts in the eighteenth century because he thought Reimarus had both seen all of the major questions and been essentially right about the domination of Jesus' thought by eschatology. The First Quest efforts largely left out Reimarus's emphasis on Jesus' apocalyptic mission and proceeded under various rationalistic and apologetic aims. As Schweitzer perceived, these efforts failed to establish a consensus due to their imprecision of method and subjectivity.

As the twentieth century dawned, "history of religions" research opened up new perspectives on Judean eschatology. Both Johannes Weiss and Schweitzer emphasized eschatology as the key to understanding Jesus of Nazareth. Schweitzer argued that Jesus must be understood through a "thorough-going eschatology," such that his words and actions were governed by an otherworldly expectation. In this view, Jesus' ethics could not be concerned with world reform or reconstruction, but only as an exaggerated form of repentance. The injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount, in other words, were impossible to fulfill precisely because they were preparations for the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

Schweitzer himself formulated a view about Jesus' worldly-spiritual significance, although, for Schweitzer, Jesus was in essence apolitical as a proponent of thorough-going eschatology. Jesus indeed believed that the announced apocalyptic end of history—in which he played a key role—would happen very soon, and he undertook his final journey to Jerusalem in order to catalyze the final events. In a famous passage from the first English edition, Schweitzer summed up the end of Jesus:

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Soon after that comes Jesus and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all

7. *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* appeared in 1906; English translations, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, introduction by James M. Robinson, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1968 [1910]), and *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery et al., ed. John Bowden, first complete ed., Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him.⁸

For both Reimarus and Schweitzer, Jesus had been a failed Judean apocalyptic prophet. He had announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God, and for Reimarus the inauguration of Israel's world ascendancy under his own messianic leadership, but had been entirely mistaken. Jesus' Jerusalem journey betrayed all his hopes about the direction of history. Jesus was discredited by events, although he was raised from the dead (experienced as alive after death) for his followers and thus was sustained in memory at first by a motif encountered only in Judean apocalyptic literature.

Schweitzer recognized that there were other proposals in the field at the time. Especially important were those of Wilhelm Wrede, who promoted a purely historical method of New Testament study, methodologically devoid of concern with establishing Christian dogma or theology.⁹ In his view, much of the New Testament theology was post-Easter interpretive tissue (this type of view was also anticipated in Reimarus's text). Wrede argued that tensions within the New Testament christological tradition showed that Jesus had never claimed to be a messiah. These tensions were especially perceptible in the pattern of motifs that Wrede called the "messianic secret" in Mark.¹⁰ For Wrede, if Jesus had claimed to be a messiah, then Mark's messianic secret would never have made sense as a stage in the later tradition (being obviously false in the memory of the early community).¹¹ Conversely, one could easily see the Markan secret as a step in the direction of the "out-in-the-open" messiahship of Jesus in Matthew, Luke, and John. Such a proposal obviously presented a problem for the

8. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1968), 370–71; this passage does not appear in the 2001 edition. William Herzog II draws attention to the same passage in *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 5.

9. Dennis C. Duling has written in a response to a draft of this material at the March 2011 Context Meeting that "in Germany Weiss, not Schweitzer, points the way to the future since Kingdom teaching was more compatible with Bultmann's focus on *words*, while Schweitzer took up Jesus' whole life, saw the Gospels more *historically* than Wrede, and defended a 'ruling hypothesis' based on Matt 10, not Mark and Q. For Perrin, *methodologically*, the *Wredestrasse* became the *Hauptstrasse*."

10. Wilhelm Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969 [1901]); Wilhelm Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 1971). Paul's statements in Rom. 1:3–4 or 2 Cor. 5:16 also support the view that Jesus made no messianic claim.

11. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, 228.

Schweitzer thesis (Jesus the messiah openly announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God).¹² Moreover, Wrede was quite skeptical that much could be known about the historical Jesus. After Schweitzer and Wrede, this skepticism and the attention to Judean apocalypticism would dominate much of twentieth-century German work on the question.

An otherworldly, apocalyptic Jesus logically had little concern for worldly politics. At best, he promoted an “interim-ethic” of extreme repentance before the world’s end. Under the impact of Wilhelm Wrede’s skepticism and the meager historical Jesus results of form criticism, scholars like Rudolf Bultmann felt justified in saying that very little could be said for certain about Jesus. Further, concern for a subjective, individualistic, existential kerygma left little expectation for a Jesus grounded in politics. For Bultmann, Jesus’ historical message was merely a “presupposition” for New Testament theology.¹³ The Bultmann School was pre-eminent at midcentury but soon issued in a New Quest for the historical Jesus in the 1950s. Indeed, after Bultmann’s student Ernst Käsemann wrote the famous essay in 1953 that inaugurated the “New [or Second] Quest,” the matter of how or whether the Christian movement was continuous with Jesus has remained a major topic of concern.¹⁴ Initially, this continuity was pursued through theological inquiry, in an effort to demonstrate that the kerygma of Jesus was taken up in the kerygma of the early church. For Ernst Käsemann, for instance, Jesus’ eschatological kerygma was preserved in the apocalyptic concerns of the New Testament writers. He wrote: “Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology—since we cannot really class the preaching of Jesus as theology.”¹⁵

At least one exception to this trend of apolitical readings of Jesus in Germany appeared in the work of Robert Eisler. Eisler’s book (in German, with Greek title *Iēsous Basileus ou Basileusas* [Jesus, A King Who Did Not Rule], 1929–30), based on a reading of Slavonic Josephus, argued that Jesus was indeed a revolutionary

12. Schweitzer attempted to rescue the historicity of the secrecy motif by having Jesus identify (without telling the followers) with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Thus, Jesus invested his own death with theological significance. But how would the disciples have known? Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (2001), 349: “Because it was written in Isaiah that the servant of God must suffer unrecognized . . . his suffering could, and indeed had to, remain a mystery. . . . Therefore, also, there was no need for them to understand his secret.”

13. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. in 1 vol. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951–55), 3.

14. Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” trans. W. J. Montague, in *New Testament Questions of Today*, The New Testament Library (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 15–47.

15. Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” trans. W. J. Montague, in *New Testament Questions of Today*, The New Testament Library (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 102.

political figure, a messianist who seized the temple for a time before his crucifixion.¹⁶ Eisler repristinated several themes from Reimarus and nineteenth-century lives of Jesus (with some interesting twists) but argued with insufficient critical basis. Cadbury rendered a balanced judgment about the book:

Parts of Eisler read like the vagaries of Drews or W. B. Smith, other parts lean heavily upon hypotheses of interpolation and censorship, borrowings and lost sources, official Roman records and continuous Jewish sects. Yet everywhere there is abundance of careful learning and scientific method. It is a rather baffling combination.¹⁷

A. D. Nock's statement about Eisler's positing a twin brother of Jesus as the basis of the resurrection belief might epitomize much of the book: "It belongs to the realms of imaginative romance, and not to those of historical enquiry."¹⁸

Across the Atlantic, the Social Gospel movement in the United States would provide impetus for research seeking alliance with a more political Jesus. Works like Shirley Jackson Case's *Jesus: A New Biography* or Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (with a chapter called "The Social Aims of Jesus") would pioneer integration of the study of Jesus and "the Social Question."¹⁹ It is clear that the strains of industrialization in late-nineteenth-century America posed new questions to the Christian tradition.

After the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1946–47, new life was given to the idea that Jesus should be understood within a Judean apocalyptic world, for the scrolls offer insight into a number of Judean messianic figures and messianic beliefs contemporaneous with the emergence of the New Testament and Christianity. Recent works of Bart Ehrman, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright continue to promote the Schweitzerian apocalyptic portrait of Jesus.²⁰ These scholars

16. Robert Eisler, *Iésous Basileus ou Basileusas* (2 vols.; Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1929–30); *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist according to Flavius Josephus' Recently Rediscovered "Capture of Jerusalem" and the Other Jewish and Christian Sources*, English edition by Alexander Haggerty Krappe (New York: Lincoln Macveagh, Dial Press, 1931).

17. H. J. Cadbury, "Review of Robert Eisler, *Iésous Basileus ou Basileusas* ET," *Jewish Quarterly Review* (new series) 23, no. 4 (April 1933): 373–76.

18. A. D. Nock, "Review of Robert Eisler, *Iésous Basileus Ou Basileusas* ET," *Classical Review* 43, no. 6 (December 1929): 224–25.

19. Shirley Jackson Case, *The Social Origins of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).

20. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 246–60; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993); N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1,

stress the continuity among apocalyptic Judean conceptions, John the Baptist, Jesus the apocalyptic prophet, and the apocalypticism of early followers. The apocalyptic portrait of Jesus without doubt remains the dominant viewpoint in the field. There have also been refinements, for example, based on comparative study of millennialism. Dennis Duling and Dale Allison respectively have attempted to read either the earliest Jesus tradition (Q) as evidence for a millennialist movement or Jesus as a millenarian movement leader.²¹ The liabilities of an apocalyptic or millenarian ascetic reading of Jesus will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

Perhaps the best-known English-language book on the political theme and Jesus in the last fifty years is S. G. F. Brandon's *Jesus and the Zealots*.²² In some ways, that work anticipates ideas to be developed in this present treatment (for example, that Jesus did things that deserved death on a Roman cross, or that the canonical Gospels attempt to depoliticize Jesus). Brandon's alignment of Jesus' sympathies with armed insurrectionists and Judean nationalism has been adjudged unpersuasive. Beyond sympathy with the anti-Roman cause, Brandon did not think there was evidence to say that Jesus or "Jewish Christianity" advocated armed resistance to Rome. Brandon did claim that Jesus' most significant action was against the priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem. After his death, his followers expected his return as a conventional messiah who would establish Israel's rule over the nations.²³

Brandon's book has been reviewed very carefully and critically since its appearance and especially faulted for positing an organized "Zealot" political party at the time of Jesus. Brandon's methods and arguments have been considered not always convincing as well.²⁴ The collection of essays edited by Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule give virtually a point-by-point critical assessment

The New Testament and the People of God, vol. 2, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 3, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992–2003).

21. Dennis C. Duling, "Millennialism," in *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Richard L. Rohrbaugh (Cambridge, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 183–205; Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 64.

22. S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967); S. G. F. Brandon, *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968).

23. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*, 355 (Jesus' sympathies with Zealots); 331, 339 (attack in the temple); 201–5 (traditional messianic hopes in Jesus after his death).

24. John T. Townsend, "Review of S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*," *JBL* 89, no. 2 (1970): 246–47; Seán Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, and Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 221–29.

of Brandon, and Bammel examines the “revolutionary hypothesis” through a series of advocates from Reimarus up to the time of Brandon.²⁵ Martin Hengel’s thorough study of “The Zealots” came under equal scrutiny and question, although he did not attribute Zealot attitudes to Jesus himself; he simply observes points of contact between the history of Jesus and “Judean zealotism.” For Hengel’s Zealots, the Jesus who promised the meek the earth could only appear as a theological idealist.²⁶ Criticism of Brandon, and scholarly evaluations like those of Bammel, Moule, Hengel, Smith, Horsley, and others, on the whole, have led to the discrediting of crude messianic expectations as applied to Jesus (for example, expectations based on Psalm of Solomon 17 that the messiah would appear to triumph over Israel’s political enemies). Further, criticism has rejected such theses as “Jesus was aligned with Jewish nationalism” or “the Zealots were an organized political party in Jesus’ day.”

With the turbulent 1960s, the Vietnam War, and the rise of liberation theology, a number of works began to relate Jesus with new energy to “political theology.” Bammel again gives a good account. Jon Sobrino epitomizes this approach in *Jesus the Liberator*. For instance, Jesus is seen “from below,” from the standpoint of the lowly and powerless, and chooses the option for the poor. He confronts the powerful, which leads to his death. This presentation has many echoes of experiences in Sobrino’s own El Salvador of the 1970s and 1980s.²⁷ The 1970s also witnessed the appearance of John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*. In contrast to Brandon’s stress on active resistance to Rome, Yoder stressed Jesus’ nonviolent pacifism. Yoder bypassed the criteria of historical Jesus studies and based his portrait exclusively on Luke; consequently, the result cannot count as a critical reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Likewise, Richard Cassidy’s *Jesus, Politics, and Society*, though it contains a good deal of useful historical information, is

25. Ernst Bammel, “The Revolution Theory from Reimarus to Brandon,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 11–68.

26. Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.*, trans. David Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989). Morton Smith, “Zealots and Sicarii: Their Origins and Relation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 1 (January 1971): 1–19, and Richard A. Horsley, “The Zealots: Their Origin, Relationships and Importance in the Jewish Revolt,” *Novum Testamentum* 28, no. 2 (April 1986): 159–92, have demolished the idea of an organized “party” of Zealots between 6 and 66 CE.

27. Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Continuum, 1994).

basically a study of Luke.²⁸ These scholars anticipate important elements of the present concern but do not always argue convincingly about historicity.

Prominent representatives of the Current Quest, such as E. P. Sanders or John Meier, hardly focus on Jesus and politics.²⁹ By contrast, Gerd Theissen and Richard A. Horsley, in a series of articles and books starting in the late 1970s and coming down to the present, have opened a promising new line of approach with the aid of the social sciences. Theissen's work on Jesus and Palestinian society contributes important insights into the Jesus movement as adaptive to social stresses.³⁰ Horsley, by contrast, emphasizes conflict and offers a lengthy critique of Theissen's functionalist approach.³¹ Horsley's contributions are especially strong in showing that neither zealotism nor quietism comprehensively characterizes the political options of Jesus' day or the political activity of the historical Jesus himself. In many ways, because of his persistent attention to Jesus and agrarian social issues, Horsley's views are similar to those of this work. He also deploys ideas of James C. Scott to good effect. (Scott is considered one of the foremost students of peasantry, peasant culture, and peasant politics in the world today.) However, there are a number of points at which the arguments of this book do not follow Horsley's reconstructions, and a number of unique accents in my treatment. As the reader will see, for instance, I am doubtful (based on my reading of a multistage, written Q) that Jesus promoted a covenant renewal movement in the Galilean villages (as Horsley has consistently advocated).³²

Likewise, the excellent contributions of William Herzog II follow social lines similar to Theissen's or Horsley's. Herzog is intent to recontextualize nine of the parables of Jesus in *Parables as Subversive Speech* in a social context understood through the work of Gerhard Lenski and John Kautsky on the socioeconomic

28. Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics, and Society: A Study of Luke's Gospel* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978).

29. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (New York: Doubleday, and New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1991–2009).

30. Gerd Theissen, "Die Tempelweissagung Jesu: Prophetie im Spannungsfeld von Stadt und Land," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 32 (1976): 144–58; Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

31. Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

32. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); most recently, Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 8, no. 2 (2010): 99–145.

dynamics of agrarian empires.³³ These agrarian recontextualizations identify a number of troublesome political dimensions of agrarian tributary economy for the Galilean villagers. In contrast to the use of Torah by the elites of Palestine, Herzog argues, “Jesus proposed a prophetic reading of the Torah that critiqued injustice and appealed to another order, the reign of God.” The sequel, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation*, carries the parable insights through to a more complete argument about the historical Jesus. Jesus’ “public work” is contextualized “to interpret it in light of the dominant institutions and ideologies of his day.”³⁴ Jesus is portrayed as a prophet and reinterpreter of Torah and temple, engaged in a religious ministry. Herzog indeed places major emphasis on Jesus’ critique of the Jerusalem temple as an oppressive institution.³⁵

This powerful depiction is complemented by Seán Freyne’s description in *Jesus: A Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story*. Freyne further includes a section on “Confronting the Challenges of Empire”; in Freyne’s view, Jesus’ proclamation “called for the emergence of a new and different household which Jesus and his community of alternative values were in the process of re-assembling.” Further, Jesus’ faith “was grounded in a trust in the goodness of the creation. . . . It was also a faith that had been nourished by the apocalyptic imagination that this creator God was still in charge of his world and had the power to make all things new again.”³⁶

An entirely unique contribution to the discussion appeared in Bruce Malina’s *The Social Gospel of Jesus*.³⁷ Malina quite overtly employs models and theory from the social sciences. His Jesus is a faction leader, who announced a theocracy, the Kingdom of God, as a “political institution” on earth. Malina’s theoretical reasoning and, to a degree, his results have positively influenced the shape of this book’s presentation, although, as shall become clear, I take Jesus in several other directions from Malina’s presentation.

Marcus Borg took up the political question in his 1984 book *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*. This book casts a strong light on one theme of political religion related to the Jerusalem temple and its adherents, namely, that of priestly purity. Borg argues that Jesus promoted an inclusive “politics of

33. William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 53–73.

34. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 264; Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God*, 109.

35. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God*, 191.

36. Seán Freyne, *Jesus: A Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 149.

37. Bruce J. Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

compassion” in contrast to an exclusive “politics of holiness” promoted by the Judean temple elites. Borg’s work is a significant contribution, though it remains a bit too general about the social situation. The conflict remains too much at the level of concern for holiness, and the political theme is reduced too much to religion. Borg’s new edition of *Conflict, Holiness and Politics* and his recent book *Jesus* give more sustained consideration to the political-economic context of agrarian societies.³⁸

John Dominic Crossan, too, in the last twenty years has made numerous important observations about the politics of Jesus.³⁹ Crossan’s promotion of Jesus as a “Jewish peasant” is consonant with my approach here.⁴⁰ He too draws on important ideas of James Scott. With Jonathan Reed, Crossan provides fruitful perspectives on the Herodian development of Galilean economy.⁴¹ Further, Crossan’s recent emphasis on seeing Jesus in relation to the Roman imperium is salutary. Certainly, there are certainly many points of contact between his results and my argument here.

All of these scholars have, indeed, positively influenced in one way or another the formulation of this book. Yet, their views remain still a bit too diffuse or off the mark regarding Jesus’ political agenda in first-century Galilean context. Some overemphasize a conflict between Jesus and Judea. All tend to see Jesus as a prophet, or a prophet-sage, forming and guiding a social renewal movement. As will be argued, this labeling and characterization posits too much of a movement or confuses the historical Jesus with the views of his first interpreters. Also, most of these writers have not tried, from the Galilean soil or lake on up, to depict Jesus in sharpest focus as an illiterate peasant artisan within his social world—that is, to see things as clearly as possible from the standpoint of the villages in

38. Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984); see Borg’s “Where I Have Changed My Mind,” *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, new ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 10–18; Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 77–94.

39. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991); John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998); John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperOne, 2007); John Dominic Crossan with Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

40. Indeed, Crossan expresses his debt to some of my early writings in regard to understanding Jesus as a peasant, e.g., *The Historical Jesus*, 278, 319.

41. Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus*.

Herodian Galilee.⁴² And so, it seems, there is still call for additional comment on Jesus' political aims.

The Present Moment in Historical Jesus Scholarship

Certainly the First and Second (New) Quests had come a long way from Reimarus in terms of clarifying the difficulties of historical reconstruction. However, there were still certain basic historical questions about Jesus that could not be stilled or papered over by an exclusive concern with (apocalyptic) theology or theological continuity between Jesus and the Christian tradition. In the last thirty years, several major developments especially have provided a better critical basis to situate and depict the historical Jesus and his political interests and aims. Since about 1980, as previously indicated, the Current Quest of the historical Jesus has been under way.⁴³ This quest has several distinctive features. It places renewed emphasis on situating Jesus and the materials of early Christianity within a "history of religions" perspective, including new materials such as the Dead Sea Scrolls or the *Gospel of Thomas*, and has enlivened new questions and debates about the historical Jesus. James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester in 1971, for instance, argued that Jesus and early Christianity had to be discussed on the basis of all available traditions, not just the canonical New Testament.⁴⁴

The Current Quest has made it a central point to elucidate Jesus' first-century, Palestinian context, and in terms that are consonant with Israelite traditions. Julius Wellhausen (echoing Reimarus) said over a century ago, "Jesus was not a Christian, he was a Jew."⁴⁵ "Jesus the Jew" is one of the key emphases of

42. Of course, it would become tedious in the extreme to indicate every point of convergence or divergence with the work of these scholars and colleagues in the Quest. The synthesis in this book indicates only certain special debts or major points of convergence or divergence.

43. Summary assessments of major contributions can be found, to give a selective listing, in Marcus J. Borg, "Portraits of Jesus in Contemporary North American Scholarship," *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 1 (1991): 1–22; Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994); Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God*, 3–46; Pieter F. Craffert, *The Life of a Galilean Shaman*, 35–100; and Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Historical Jesus?*

44. James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

45. Julius Wellhausen, *Einleitung in die Drei Ersten Evangelien* (Berlin: Reimer, 1905), 113, "Jesus war kein Christ, sondern Jude."

the Current Quest.⁴⁶ Jesus had certainly not envisioned a Christian church apart from first-century Israelite institutions. His relationship to Judean apocalyptic eschatology still has not been settled in current discussions. Jesus' "ideas about himself" (as messiah) are still debated. In addition, the Current Quest has promoted a more refined criticism of the Jesus traditions that must be incorporated into new proposals. This is particularly evident in Q studies, where the separation of Greco-Roman and Judean modes of discourse is particularly important. The Current Quest raises severe questions for treatments of Jesus that continue to treat him as merely a "religious" figure, or his conflicts as "merely religious," without clear conceptions of the place of religion in first-century society or Jesus' social or political situation.

The discussion thus has been enormously enriched by explicitly incorporating Palestinian archaeology and deploying social theory and models in the historical interpretation of Jesus and Christian origins. Archaeological data can be said to represent the material side of the Current Quest interest in Palestinian contextualization and Jesus "the Jew from Galilee." Two prominent representatives here are Jonathan Reed and David Fiensy. Archaeology forces a confrontation with questions of social contextualization, but neither Reed nor Fiensy attends in sustained fashion to politics (though both have dealt directly with population and economics). Both are more concerned to see Jesus within Galilean culture, or to explore Judean ethnicity in Galilee, and to assess his historical significance from those vantage points.⁴⁷ The Crossan/Reed collaboration is more satisfying in providing a political account through archaeology.⁴⁸ In general, it might be said that most Palestinian archaeological interpretation to date

46. This book adopts the use of "Judean" rather than "Jew" for reasons explained in K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 11; see also John H. Elliott, "Jesus the Israelite Was Neither a 'Jew' Nor a 'Christian': On Correcting Misleading Nomenclature," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 5, no. 2 (2007): 119–54. "Judean" stresses ethnic and regional practices of Judea seen by outsiders; "Israel" is the more comprehensive label for insiders (e.g., Q²/ Luke 7:9; Matt. 10:23). The English terms *Jew* and *Christian* best correlate with post-70 CE developments after rabbi-led synagogue and bishop-led Christian church come into historical view.

47. Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000); Jonathan L. Reed, "Galilean Archaeology and the Historical Jesus," in *Jesus Then and Now: Images of Jesus in History and Christology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 113–29; David A. Fiensy, *Jesus the Galilean: Soundings in a First Century Life* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007). A larger overview is given by the chapters in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

48. Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus*.

has proceeded without sustained, explicit concern for interpretations informed by social or political theory and models.

Most importantly, the emergence of self-conscious social-scientific study of the Bible has introduced powerful models and theoretical resources for approaching the politics of the first century. An example of this interdisciplinary trend has been the work of the Context Group (since 1990). Social-science resources still have not been exploited as fully as they might be with regard to Jesus and politics. Thus, the failure of otherwise excellent recent major treatments of Jesus to incorporate explicit social-scientific models and theory dealing with peasant politics suggests that there is at least one very good reason for at least one more book about Jesus.

Method in the Quest for Jesus' Political Aims

In the explorations and reconstructions of the chapters that follow, the terms *Jesus tradition* and *Jesus traditions* will be used somewhat interchangeably depending on the point in view. The use of the singular *tradition* points to the unity of the tradition's focus on Jesus; the plural, *traditions*, points to the diverse representations, interpretations, and meanings projected from or placed on the historical Jesus. Modern critical scholarship perceives the Jesus tradition as a many-faceted prism, filled with colors and distortions. This prism seems to reflect a pluralism of "Jesus groups" and "Jesus interpretations" in the decades following his death. Yet, modern Jesus scholarship has also sustained the Enlightenment conviction that some definite things can be asserted about the historical figure. To change the image, the Jesus traditions incorporate many stained-glass windows through which the historical Jesus can be discerned, in some pieces more clearly than in others, but these "windows" have also obscured that historical figure behind the editorial composites of his early interpreters. Beyond the early communities of Jesus, of course, the anachronistic needs and projections of modern scholars have added to the distortions, a point that Schweitzer especially stressed. And, most recently, social-scientific approaches have stressed the problem of ethnocentrism. *Ethnocentrism* is an anthropological term, coined by William Graham Sumner (1906), to indicate the propensity to interpret other cultures in terms of one's own. Recent work on the history of Jesus has stressed the need to see his cultural context with the help of comparative and Mediterranean anthropological studies.⁴⁹

49. See Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 3–14, 181; see also Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *The New Testament in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007), 1–17.

If the Jesus traditions are thus handled selectively in the quest for the historical figure, they must also be weighed critically. Some traditions are certainly better than others for revealing Jesus in first-century context. This is a fact easily demonstrated by the multitudinous divergences even within the canonical Gospels. The Synoptics have long been preferred over John's Gospel as providing a portrait of Jesus closer to the Galilean soil. On the one hand, no modern critical scholar of Jesus conceives of the canonical Gospels as though they give a unified and harmonious portrait, along the lines of Tatian's *Diatessaron* in the second century. Apart from uncritical fundamentalism, even Evangelical scholars read the Gospels with more or less critical nuance. On the other hand, few modern scholars have adopted wholesale skepticism about Jesus-knowledge. While Wrede and Bultmann came close to this position due to their evaluations of the theological bias in all Jesus traditions, their opinion did not prevail. Deconstructionist readings of the Gospels deny historical Jesus knowledge as epistemologically possible, due to uncertainties everywhere, but this sweeping certitude remains logically inconsistent. For all its procedural faults, the Jesus Seminar and *The Five Gospels* dramatized the critical dilemma in a sensational way.⁵⁰ Careful study of the synopsis of the Gospels will show significant degrees of dependence and variation. The best recent work on Jesus proceeds on the assumption that critical reconstruction can recover some credible knowledge about the historical Jesus. Of course, there remains a range of credible claims clustering around various positions (for example, the apocalyptic Jesus of Schweitzer over against the nonapocalyptic Jesus of Borg).

The inclusion of the *Gospel of Thomas* and other extracanonical Jesus traditions in recent work has made the weighing and sifting of historical details even more complex. Some scholars, like Crossan or the fellows of the Jesus Seminar, have analyzed and classified the various pieces of the tradition down to the smallest units. Databases have been constructed that attempt to indicate which units have the strongest likelihood of historical worth. Appeals to context have also come to play a role in determining good Jesus material, especially with the inclusion of archaeology, or texts like the Dead Sea Scrolls, or social-science models.

The history of scholarship, as outlined, and all of these critical methods and approaches play a role in the thinking of this book; but even more important is a rather simple set of methodological warrants—that is, the form-critical and

50. Robert Funk and Roy Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993). The Seminar was criticized especially for its use of voting to determine authentic Jesus materials as well as the overwhelmingly negative outcome of many votes. For instance, there is very little red material identified in *The Five Gospels*. See Appendix 1 for a brief explanation of the Seminar's four colors.

rhetorical study of the first-century Jesus traditions can perceive a general movement *from material* with a *deliberative* accent on first-century Palestinian ground, especially sayings material that requires the reader or audience to think in an open-ended way about how to act or respond toward (social or even ultimate) reality, *to material* that intermixes narrative and sayings to provide comments on Jesus' own honor, importance, example, or significance. Thus, aphorisms or short wisdom *chreiai* (sharp sayings with a brief setting) or parables provide us with the most likely windows onto or insights into the intentions and interests of the historical Jesus. Conversely, longer narratives and elaborated *chreiai* with dialogue, such as the controversy stories or Passion Narratives, seem to move more into the rhetorical modes of "praise or blame" (*epideictic* material) or even *forensic* speech (determination of guilt or innocence). These were all basic rhetorical forms known to Greco-Roman (including Judean) scribes who compiled Jesus traditions.⁵¹

Moreover, whereas the parables or earliest Q materials seem to focus on ordinary events or the natural world as sources of insight into the nature of things, later synoptic materials involve Jesus in controversies with Judean leaders about his authority, or disputes about Judean theology and law, or Jesus' identity (Christology), or Jesus' relationship to God.⁵² The differences between earliest Q (for example, considering the rain that falls upon just and unjust) and the materials added to the final redaction of Q (for example, including reference to the fate of the prophets and a future Son of Man who will vindicate Jesus' eschatological wisdom), or the elaborative development of a passage like Luke 11 (moving from the Lord's Prayer to consideration of the man at midnight to a father's provision for a son to the Beelzebul controversy over the source of Jesus' power to exorcize) illustrate the general point.⁵³ And finally, it is most important to deploy social-scientific understandings to seek clues as to Jesus' historical political aims.

51. Burton L. Mack and Vernon K. Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1989); Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

52. Additional comments about the nature and critical evaluation of Q will be made later; by convention, Q is cited according to the location in Luke. The earlier version of Q is designated Q¹; the later, Q². Appendix 1 provides a brief synopsis of my "reading" of the authentic parables in light of domestic-economic and political-economic concerns of Jesus.

53. See the arguments in Ronan Rooney and Douglas E. Oakman, "The Social Origins of Q: Two Theses in a Field of Conflicting Hypotheses," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 38 (2008): 114–21. The difference between Q and Mark is particularly striking—the Q *chreiai* are clearly introduced by deliberative questions, but Mark's Beelzebul pericope focuses on the source of Jesus' authority to exorcise.

Situating Jesus's politics within the peasant world of Galilee, and "reading" Jesus through peasant eyes and issues, is a core methodological objective.⁵⁴

Throughout the discussion, therefore, the following core methodological procedures are deployed as appropriate (and without extensive commentary):

- Rhetorical assessment of early Jesus traditions, especially Q and the parables, and connection of deliberative material with domestic-economic or political-economic issues in Herodian Galilee (criterion of the *ipsissima vox*)
- Situation of Jesus within a peasant context and Galilean political-economic lines of force in the early first century (various criteria of contextual fit)
- Articulation of social-scientific models and theory in relation to the question of historical politics (comparative criteria of social plausibility)
- Awareness of embarrassment, surprise, and irony in the Jesus traditions (criterion of dissimilarity)
- Search for coherence and consistency in Jesus' praxis and evaluation of historical results (criterion of coherence)

The prismatic nature of the Jesus traditions ensures that good historical information can still appear in relatively late material. While this book attempts to derive main points about the political aims of Jesus based on earliest deliberative type material, a principle of coherence will demand that later material cohesive with the earlier can be drawn on as well. That same prismatic nature also ensures that scholarly controversy over precisely who the historical Jesus was will never be entirely settled.

In sum: For much of the last 250 years, German biblical scholarship has held preeminence in the field of Jesus studies and, with some exceptions, kept biblical research under the influence of German idealism. In practice, this meant that predominantly "theological" questions were entertained in relation to the historical study of either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. The political question, as a result, was difficult to pursue properly and again and again was eviscerated.

During the 1960s and 1970s, there was growing discontent with the limitations and impasses of theological treatments. Beyond consideration of the history of religions, the importance of the social sciences for investigation was

54. A pioneer in this regard has been Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976) and *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980). Bailey, however, is more interested in interpretations informed by cultural dynamics than directly in politics. See also the work of Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *The New Testament in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007).

increasingly appreciated. In 1980, Robin Scroggs could speak of the “methodological docetism” of previous New Testament work.⁵⁵ Moreover, social and political disruptions following postwar decolonization and globalization injected new sets of questions for the study of Jesus and Christian origins. Liberation theologians urged a more materialist approach. Further, a commitment to interdisciplinary work emerged to disturb the theological ivory tower. A number of scholars began self-consciously to pose questions and interpretations influenced by the social sciences (for example, John H. Elliott, John Gager, Richard Horsley, Bruce J. Malina, Wayne Meeks, Richard Rohrbaugh, Robin Scroggs, and Gerd Theissen).

The Current Quest of the historical Jesus, as it would unfold after 1980, was particularly intent to examine Jesus as a figure within a real social world. This would necessarily include political contextualization as well. Regarding the political question, the appearance of S. G. F. Brandon’s book, positive as it was for the political theme, seemed mostly to continue the biases of the First Quest and Anglo-American scholarship (flawed in the ways previously discussed, especially by uncritical treatments of the Gospels and Gospel traditions). Martin Hengel’s studies gathered enormous data, but yielded relatively little insight into the agrarian grounds for political discontent.⁵⁶ There was still much more to do. The increasing attention paid to trajectories and contexts of Jesus material, and the embracing of social theory and frameworks to amplify the study, injected entirely new lines of argument and insight into the study of historical Jesus. Particularly important in these new efforts were the realizations that Jesus’ activity embodied Mediterranean peasant culture, values, and attitudes.

55. Robin Scroggs, “The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research,” *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 164–79.

56. Morton Smith wrote somewhat derisively in “Zealots and Sicarii,” 10: “When, however, one goes behind the monumental annotation and examines the actual structure, it turns out to be built on the old, unjustified assumptions”—that is, Zealots and *sicarii* (“knife-men”) as nationalistic political parties.