The Historical Jesus

1. The Historical Jesus: Introductions & Overviews
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1. THE HISTORICAL JESUS: Introductions & Overviews

David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Historical Jesus?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007). A good place to start. Gowler has chapters on the early quest (from Reimarus to Schweitzer), the Jesus Seminar (Robert Funk, Markus Borg, John Dominic Crossan), and the new mainstream (E.P. Sanders, John Meier).


Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee*, rev. ed. (Westminster John Knox, 2013) paperback, $30. NEW.


### 2. THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS: 18th-Mid 20th Centuries

Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, ed. John Bowden (Fortress Press, 2001). This book, published originally in German in 1906, is a work of genius, brilliantly charting the 18th and 19th-century quest, showing how each of the early questers created a Jesus in his own image—one quite removed from the Jesus of history. This is the first complete edition in English. A reprint of a translation from the 1920s is also available from Johns Hopkins Press (1998).

Leander E. Keck, ed., *Lives of Jesus Series* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press). In the early 1970s, Keck oversaw the editing and translating of the great 18th- & 19th-century lives of Jesus done during the first quest, the one so sharply criticized by Schweitzer. The volumes in the series are:

Bibliographies for Theology, compiled by William Harmless, S.J.


3. THE JESUS SEMINAR & ITS CRITICS

From the mid-90s to mid-2000s, the Jesus Seminar, founded by Robert Funk and John Dominic, attracted headlines for their radical and often outrageous interpretations of the historical Jesus. The Seminar used a unique voting method to try and arrive at a consensus of what in the Gospels goes back to the historical Jesus. Funk published their results in a pair of work, *The Five Gospels* and *The Acts of Jesus* (see below). Their flamboyant style, radical conclusions, and flair for self-promotion drew strong and able critics. The mass of literature on this helped fuel new interest in the scholarly study of the historical Jesus—in part, to refute their work. On the positive side, they helped bring this complex theological quest into the popular forum.

John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992). Crossan is flamboyant, outspoken, and co-founder of the Jesus Seminar. One reviewer has noted that Crossan “seems incapable … of thinking a boring thought or writing a dull paragraph”; this book “is a book to treasure for its learning, its thoroughness, its brilliant handling of multiple and complex issues, its amazing inventiveness, and above all its sheer readability … It is all the more frustrating, therefore, to have to conclude that the book is almost entirely wrong.” Crossan thinks of Jesus as a social revolutionary. He treats apocryphal gospels like the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Gospel of Peter* on par with the 4 canonical gospels. His most radical interpretations come out most clearly in his later books (see below). In *Jesus: A Radical Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), he argues that Jesus’
body was never buried, but was eaten by dogs and birds and dumped by the Romans in a trash heap.

Marcus J. Borg & N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1999). Marcus Borg, like John Dominic Crossan, is one of the leaders of the Jesus Seminar and, while he claims to be a Christian, his Jesus is far removed from the Jesus of the mainline Christian churches. This book brilliantly illustrates the clash of interpretation between the (extremist) views of the Jesus Seminar and mainstream scholarship. Borg and Wright, while at opposite sides of the debate, are good friends and co-wrote this book, alternating chapters, with each putting forward his view on teaching of Jesus, on the death of Jesus, on the resurrection, etc. It is well written and accessible to beginning students—so much so that I have used it as a textbook for classes on the historical Jesus.

**The Jesus Seminar: Major Works**


The Critics


4. THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS: The Contemporary Mainstream

John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press / New York: Doubleday, 1991-2009). This is the most thorough and well-balanced study of historical Jesus in decades. It is an extraordinary achievement—and massive (volume 2 alone is nearly 1000 pages). Meier writes with great clarity, and relegates technical issues to the (very lengthy)
endnotes. Basically for more advanced students. At least one more volume is forthcoming.

• Vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (1991)

N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Like Johnson, Wright offers a shrewdly argued (and often humorous) challenge to the Jesus Seminar. But his deeper concern is to offer a plausible interpretation of Jesus which takes seriously his Galilean context and his character as a 1st-century Jew—in all its complexity and variegated textures. Wright understands Jesus as an eschatological prophet whose message and ministry offered a radical retelling of Israel’s story in light of the coming Kingdom. Wright does not share the fashionable skepticism about the accuracy of Gospel accounts. He has been labelled a “traditionalist”—but this is the freshest and most original traditionalism to appear in many a year, and traditionalists, I would guess, will find this portrait deeply offensive.

Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).


Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).


J.D.G. Dunn & S. McKnight, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005).


Chris Keith, *Jesus Against the Scribal Elite: The Origin of the Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014) paperback, $23. NEW.


Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).


E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).


5. NEW TESTAMENT PORTRAITS OF JESUS

N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Vol. 3 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). Another 700+ page tome from Wright. This award-winning book, as the title indicates, focuses not on the pre-Easter Jesus (and thus not the “historical Jesus”), but on the post-Easter Risen Lord. Given the huge mass of recent literature on the “historical Jesus,” this in-depth study of the Gospels’ resurrection narratives is refreshing.


