

Class Objectives – After this class you will be able to:

- Identify key names and positions associated with each of the three quests for the historical Jesus.
- Critique the five main criteria employed in historical Jesus scholarship.

Key Terms:

- Jesus Seminar
- First Quest / New Quest / Third Quest

Contemporary Historical Jesus Research (cont.)

I. Midterm:

II. Introduction (cont.):

A. American Jesus scholarship

1. the “Jesus Seminar”

III. Historical Notes on the Historical Pursuit of Jesus:

A. The “First Quest”

1. H. S. Reimarus (*Wolfenbüttel Fragments*, published by Lessing 1774-1778) — Jesus was a Jewish revolutionary who sought to die a martyr’s death; his disciples later developed the idea of the resurrection and return of Christ.
2. David Friedrich Strauss (*Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 1835-1836) — The Gospels provide a basic outline of Jesus’ life; but they also add mythological elements to Jesus’ life because of the early church’s belief that Jesus was the Messiah.
3. Johannes Weiss (*Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, 1892) — Jesus announced the coming of an eschatological kingdom.

4. Albert Schweitzer (*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 1906) — Jesus sought to provoke the eschatological kingdom of God by his ministry and, ultimately, by his death.

B. The “New Quest”

1. Ernst Käsemann (“The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” 1953) — suggested that the quest for the historical Jesus was a valid endeavor (despite his teacher R. Bultmann)
2. Günther Bornkamm (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 1956) — Jesus actually understands himself as bringing in the kingdom of God in his own preaching
3. James M. Robinson (*A New Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 1959) — an English apology for the “New Quest”

C. The “Third Quest” and some contemporary trends

1. question of historical environment
2. Jesus as “Cynic” — Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence* (1988)
3. Jesus as Jewish
 - Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (1973) — Jesus is a Galilean charismatic miracle-worker
 - Ben F. Meyers, *Aims of Jesus* (1979) — Jesus proclaims the restoration of Israel
 - E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) — Jesus sought to bring in a new age by invoking the overthrow of the Temple; and this brought the authorities (but not the Pharisees) out against him.

N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1999) — Jesus announces the restoration of Israel from exile, the inclusion of the Gentiles, and the coming judgment; he is put to death for appearing an insurrectionist; he then is resurrected.

IV. The Question of Criteria:

A. Issues

B. Five Typical Criteria

1. *Dissimilarity* with Judaism and with the early Church
2. *Consistency* with other material known to be authentic (generally by criteria #1)
3. *Multiple attestation* in many levels of tradition
4. Linguistic tests involving whether the sayings material appears to be *Aramaic-based*
5. Cultural tests involving whether the material could be attributed to a *Palestinian Jewish* person

C. Critiques

D. Gerd Lüdemann

V. Strengths and Weaknesses:

A. Strengths

B. Weaknesses

“Crucify Him!” — The Historical Accuracy of the Trial of Jesus

VI. Introduction:

VII. Charges against the Gospel accounts:

1. The Sanhedrin was capable of capital punishment, so it would not have needed to deliver Jesus to the Romans.
2. A nocturnal trial by the Sanhedrin was not permissible in rabbinic law, nor was a trial on a festival day.
3. There is no blasphemy in Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.
4. Jewish leaders would have opposed crucifixion of any Jew.
5. The Romans are portrayed too kindly in the Gospels.

VIII. Short Responses:

1. The Sanhedrin apparently lost the right of capital punishment just prior to Jesus' death (i.e. 40 years before the destruction of the temple, see *y. Sanh.* 1:1; 7:2; *b. Sanh.* 41a; cf. John 18:31). The example of Stephen (Acts 7) represents a populist stoning without completion of the trial. Other examples have similar extenuating circumstances — James, the brother of John, is killed by a king not the Sanhedrin (Acts 12:1-2); James, the brother of Jesus, is killed much later when the Romans had briefly lost control (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.200ff.).

2. The Synoptic Gospels actually portray two meetings of Jesus and the Jewish officials — one at night where the charges were determined (Matt 26:57-68), and one during the day when he was officially condemned to be taken to the Romans (Matt 27:1-2; cf. Luke 22:54, 66-71). The Sanhedrin avoided capital verdicts the day before festival days, since rabbinic rules required verdicts and executions to be carried out the day immediately after the trial; but there appears to be an exception with a blasphemer who leads Jewish people astray (*t. Sanh.* 10:11). In any case, with a Roman execution this was no obstacle (since the Romans could execute on the same day as a trial).
3. While some have suggested that Jesus' messianic claim may have been sufficient by itself to merit a charge of blasphemy (especially combined with his leading others astray), the blasphemy offense officially is confirmed by Jesus' claim that they will now see "the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt 26:64 and parallels; cf. Acts 7:56). The appeal of Jesus to his self-designation as the Danielic Son of Man, his claim to sit on the right hand of "Power" (a circumlocution for God), and his prediction that he will come on the clouds of heaven, all associated Jesus' words with a claim to deity. See further Bock's collection of evidence in his book noted below.
4. While there is rabbinic evidence that some rabbis considered it unlawful for Jews to crucifying others (*Sifre Deut* 221; *b.Sanh* 46b), there are historical examples of Jewish leaders crucifying (Alexander Jannaeus, possibly Simeon b. Shetach). Clearly other Jewish communities read Deut 21:22-23 as permitting crucifixion or at least a death by suspension (Philo, *Spec. Leg.* iii.151-152; 11QTemple 64.6-13; cf. *Tg. Ruth* 1:17). Most importantly, the Romans were the ones actually carrying out the crucifixion itself.
5. The Gospels actually portray the Roman actions as quite cruel (e.g. the beating of Jesus, their responses to him on the cross). Pilate, in particular, is portrayed as a man who will not stand up for what he knows to be right. Further, the early Christian understanding of this event was likely to be similar to the words of Peter in Acts:

"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know — this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." (Acts 2:22-23)

IX. Questions for Consideration:

1. How would you critically engage with the criteria used for the quest for the historical Jesus?
2. How would you defend in your own words the Gospel accounts of the trial of Jesus from each of the five objections covered above, under the "Trial of Jesus".

X. Recommended Reading:

1. Corley, B. "Trial of Jesus," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 841-854.
2. Bock, Darrell L. *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).