

Stories, Hypotheses, and Jesus: N.T. Wright, John Meier, and Historical Jesus Research

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More than ten years ago John Dominic Crossan mused with characteristic Irish wit that historical Jesus research had become something of a scholarly bad joke, and in the face of many recent contributions there are more than a few scholars who would continue to support such an evaluation. However, the voluminous contributions of N. T. Wright¹ and John P. Meier² on the subject have helped to make historical Jesus research less susceptible to the derisive comments of some scholars. In their attempts to “rethink the historical Jesus” both Wright and Meier work to overcome the blind spots that have caused historical Jesus research to falter in the past. They wrestle with the methodological issues inherent in critical history, including the question of the relationship between historical inquiry and Christian faith. Their respective positions on historical methodology are brought to life in their performances of historical research, and their respective performances provide occasion for assessing the adequacy of their methodological proposals. While it is one of the sad ironies of their otherwise thoroughly documented efforts that they do not engage each other’s work significantly, it does leave open an invitation to bring their works into dialogue. This paper is a limited response to that invitation in three parts. The first part of the paper will provide a brief summary and evaluation of Wright’s approach to historical methodology, including his explicit position on the significance of historical inquiry for Christian faith. The second part will provide a very brief overview of Wright’s performance of historical Jesus research, and the third

¹ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), hereafter *NTPG*; *idem.*, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), hereafter *JVG*.

² John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols., Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994, 2001), hereafter *AMJ*.

part will bring the contributions of John Meier into dialogue with Wright's work.

Wright's Approach to Historical Inquiry

In the first two volumes of his projected six-volume work on the origins of Christianity and the question of God, N.T. Wright has taken a position on the historical Jesus which many have found provocative. Wright has subverted the critical character of historical Jesus research by insisting, through his adaptation of a critical realist and narrative epistemology, that such research is essential, and perhaps even normative, for Christian theological reflection.³ It is clear that Wright does not insist that specific historical judgments ought to provide the foundation for Christian faith or Christian doctrine. But as a critical realist, Wright is committed to historical knowledge, knowledge that is the result of making true judgments about reality. As such, history, to the extent that it makes true judgments about the 'real' world, and 'what actually happened' (no doubt something of an asymptotic goal) is normative. History and Christian faith are intertwined for Wright. He states:

history and theology function well together; in fact they are distorted when one functions without the other. History, then, prevents faith from becoming fantasy. Faith prevents history from becoming mere antiquarianism. Historical research, being always provisional, cannot ultimately veto faith, though it can pose hard questions that faith, in order to retain its integrity precisely as Christian faith, must struggle to answer, and may well grow strong through answering. Faith, being subject to the vagaries of personality and culture, cannot veto the historical enterprise . . . but it can put hard questions to history, not least on the large topic of the origins of Christianity, and history may be all the better for trying to answer them.⁴

As Wright employs critical realism in historical Jesus research he takes account of the essentially narrative character of human experience and human knowing. This move is to be applauded to the extent that Wright is able to overcome the positivistic ideal of the

³ N.T. Wright, argues that "theology must not conform to every last hypothetical reconstruction ('history-W[r]itten'), an impossible task in any case. Rather, as historians approximate to 'history-E[vent]', that history itself—Jesus himself, in other words, as a figure of 'history-E[vent]' and not simply of the historians' approximations—confronts, disturbs and beckons us in new way." ("In Grateful Dialogue," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N.T. Wright's 'Jesus and the Victory of God'*, ed. Carey Newman [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999], 251).

⁴ Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999), 26–27.

Enlightenment understanding of history.⁵ Wright's focus on narrative and community is becoming more influential among many evangelical and neo-orthodox theologians who seek to emphasize the centrality of tradition and community in human living and knowing, thus placing the artifacts of the tradition and the community at the center of any historical reconstruction.⁶ The investigation of the aims, intentions, and beliefs of Jesus, the goal of Wright's project in *JVG*, must therefore include an investigation into the worldview of first-century Palestinian Judaism and how that worldview was redefined by early Christianity. For Wright, the reconstruction of these worldviews involves an investigation into the symbols, customary behavior, and literature of both communities,⁷ but the account of these worldviews has troubled some scholars who believe that Wright privileges the early Christian worldview in such a way as to distort the picture of first-century Palestinian Judaism (e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson,⁸ Paula Fredriksen,⁹ and John Dominic Crossan¹⁰).

Part of the problem many scholars have with Wright's methodology is his use of large scale hypotheses and his process for verifying his hypotheses. For Wright, a good hypothesis will (1) include the data—the bits and pieces of evidence, (2) it will construct a basic and

⁵ Wright is not alone in this. Alister McGrath ("Reality, Symbol, and History: Theological Reflections on N.T. Wright's Portrayal of Jesus," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 164) lists several other figures who have embraced critical realism in theology including William Alston (*A Realist Conception of Truth* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1996]), John Millbank (*Theology and Social Theory* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993]), Ian Barbour (*Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Religion and Science* [New York: Harper & Row, 1974]), and Wentzel van Huyssteen (*Theology and the Justification of Faith* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989]). These figures have embraced a form of critical realism close to that articulated by Wright. Critical realism, for these authors, is primarily a way of understanding and mediating truth-claims in science and theology by asserting that both fields are constantly subject to shifting boundaries and modes of reflection defined by social and historical contexts. B. Lonergan's approach to critical realism, adopted by B. Meyer, emerges from an investigation into the structure of human interiority rather than through a critique of the natural sciences. Critical realism emerges as one becomes attentive to the blunders of empiricism and idealism and discovers the self-transcendence proper to the human process of knowing. Through a grasp of what Lonergan calls "the virtually unconditioned" we come to know the real. One's judgment is virtually unconditioned when the evidence for its affirmation is sufficient, and there are no further relevant questions because all of its conditions have been fulfilled. For Lonergan, a verified hypothesis is probably true, and being probably true, refers to what in reality probably is so (*Method in Theology* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1972], 76, 239).

⁶ McGrath, 164.

⁷ *NTPG*, 112.

⁸ Johnson, "A Historiographical Response to Wright's Jesus," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 206–224, at 210.

⁹ Paula Fredriksen, "What You See is What You Get: Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus," *Theology Today* 52/1 (1995): 75–97.

¹⁰ John Dominic Crossan, "What Victory? What God? A Review Debate with N.T. Wright on *Jesus and the Victory of God*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997): 358.

simple overall picture, and (3) the hypothesis will be able to explain other problems.¹¹ What is striking about Wright's understanding of the nature of a hypothesis is that it is meant to be explanatory, to 'fit' the data instead of averting to the question 'was it so'. In his concern for worldviews and mindsets and in his attempt to keep judgments of fact joined with judgments of meaning, Wright has forgone providing an adequate account of the nature of the sources which would then provide a basis for using those sources to establish a set of facts, the first step in historical investigation. Wright adopts an approach to the Gospels that is trusting, placing the burden of proof on those who wish to deny that a particular passage is authentic. Wright clearly prefers the Synoptic Gospels as historically reliable. His use of Kenneth Bailey's work on parables and oral tradition to argue for the general historical reliability of the Synoptic Gospels is remarkable,¹² especially since Bailey's major works have received mixed reviews,¹³ and the main article to which Wright appeals provides a rather thin basis on which to authenticate the Synoptic tradition.¹⁴ Additionally, Wright seems uninterested in form criticism or redaction criticism as providing keys for assessing the historicity of Gospel material. It is not clear at what point Wright would set the limits of the historical reliability of the Gospels. He quickly drafts biblical texts as support for very general conclusions based on his hypotheses; in other words, he does not assess the historicity of a particular passage and then make a hypothesis; rather, the hypothesis controls the assessment of the passage.¹⁵

Wright's concern to situate or 'fit' Jesus in between the worldviews of Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity yields several important positive developments in his reconstruction of the

¹¹ *NTPG*, 100.

¹² Johnson, "A Historiographical Response," 216–218.

¹³ E.g., Reviews of *Poet and Peasant*: Schuyler Brown, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 585–586; Neil McEleney, *Theological Studies* 38 (1977): 565–567. See also Luke Timothy Johnson's review of *Through Peasant Eyes*, *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 102–103.

¹⁴ K. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels." Wright also appeals to Henry Wansbrough ed., *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, n. 64 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991). It is unclear how Wright intends the reader to understand this reference. The text is a collection of conference papers from two different conferences. The contributors agreed on several points. For our purposes, the most relevant conclusion they made was that the oral tradition was characterized by both fixity and variation, but it was unclear to what extent the tradition may have been controlled and by whom it was controlled (pp. 12–14).

¹⁵ Marsh, "Theological History," 81. With regard to the question of the synoptic problem and the reliability of the Christian sources Wright states that "[w]e are not in a position to solve one part of the puzzle first and then use it as a fixed point from which to tackle the rest." Rather, any hypotheses offered must not only settle questions concerning the historical Jesus but also every other relevant issue, including the question of the nature and reliability of sources (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 23).

historical Jesus, including a consistent emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus, even if his account of Judaism has proven problematic. For Wright, the full story of the ‘inside’ of an event comes to be known through the tradition generated by the event, thus enabling him to locate his account of the historical Jesus in the life of the early church,¹⁶ thus generating Wright’s primary criterion of historicity—coherence of Jesus words and deeds with the early church.¹⁷ Wright’s concern for coherence, however, is seen by some as a covert attempt to allow Christian doctrine to control Wright’s reconstruction of the historical Jesus.¹⁸ This point is substantiated when one looks at Wright’s use of NT material in his reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

Wright’s Performance as a Historian

Wright’s primary criterion of validity for historical hypotheses—whether the given hypothesis ‘fits’—is telling. The hypothesis which Wright offers concerning the metaphorical nature of Jewish apocalyptic language¹⁹ creates the pattern within which he situates the ‘pieces’ of biblical data. The pattern of political and religious

¹⁶ Wright’s concern for coherence between Jesus and the early church is not new. Morna Hooker’s critique of the criterion of dissimilarity (“Christology and Methodology,” *New Testament Studies* 17 [1970]: 480–487, and “On Using the Wrong Tool,” *Theology* 75 [1972]: 570–581) has helped to temper the use of the criterion of dissimilarity in historical Jesus research. While the criterion is still used, it is always prefaced with a cautionary note about separating Jesus either from his Jewish background or from the early Christian church. Additionally, French historians have engaged in a debate regarding the significance of the ‘event’ in history. In the context of this debate, an ‘event’ is an occurrence which gives rise to discernible discontinuity between one state of affairs and another in the flow of history. Wright appears to be operating in this tradition as he emphasizes the impact of Jesus on the early Christian community. An overview of this debate can be found in Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–1989* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ *NTPG*, 117; *JVG*, 132.

¹⁸ Clive Marsh has wondered whether Wright’s critical realism “has not slipped into a form of the nineteenth century positivism which he goes to such lengths to oppose. However much Wright may claim that he is merely constructing a comprehensive hypothesis (on critical realist lines), one of the driving forces of his undertaking appears clearly to be to maximize the historical data available, in the defense of theological assertions (made in the first century, even if not today) point for point” (“Theological History?” N.T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God*,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 [1998]: 77–94, at 87–89).

¹⁹ Wright has been accused of setting up a ‘straw person’ in his argument concerning the metaphorical nature of apocalyptic language. His characterization of Schweitzer’s position on the nature of apocalyptic language as referring to the end of the “space and time” universe/world has been challenged by Dale Allison (“The Victory of Apocalyptic,” in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, 128–130, 310 n.12). Schweitzer is Wright’s foil in his presentation, but Schweitzer does not even use the expression “space-time universe” (Albert Schweitzer, *The Kingdom of God and Primitive Christianity* [London: A & C Black, 1968] and *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 408–411, 432–437), and Allison’s criticism of Wright for mischaracterizing Schweitzer is appropriate.

metaphor “very much determines the selection and interpretation of the pieces.”²⁰ This is evident in the Wright equivocates in his use of the word ‘exile’. In places, Wright discusses the political and practical dimensions of the exile (e.g., the loss of sovereignty, loss of the ark, the monarchy²¹), but he can then discuss ‘exile’ in a more abstract way so that all of creation is in ‘exile’.²² For Wright, the meaning of ‘exile’ is so broad that it can mean almost anything and can support Wright’s overall claim about Israel’s continuing exile and the meaning of apocalyptic language. Luke Timothy Johnson has accused Wright of adopting, among other historical fallacies, the ‘aesthetic fallacy’.²³ According to this fallacy, Wright has created a portrait of Jesus which blends seamlessly his understanding of the literature of first-century Judaism with his account of what actually happened in the first-century. This move on Wright’s part is particularly insidious given the fact that one of the dominant forms of literature during this period was apocalyptic. The paucity of other literature from the period makes Wright’s work with the available literature difficult to contravene.

Wright’s performance has many strong points. For example, his effort to place Jesus’ concern about violence at the heart of his message and the heart of the controversy surrounding him provides a rich soil from which historians and theologians will gain further insight into the heart of Jesus’ ministry and death. Wright’s approach to apocalyptic language is directly tied to his emphasis on Jesus’ repudiation of nationalistic violence. Unfortunately, Wright’s wholesale reinterpretation of apocalyptic language, while provocative and engaging, has left many scholars unconvinced, even if his goals in pursuing this reinterpretation are noble.

John P. Meier’s Performance of Historical Jesus Research

In the first three volumes of his projected four-volume work on the historical Jesus, John P. Meier has articulated a position on the nature of historical inquiry that would exclude theological concerns from the pursuit of properly historical questions. For Meier, historical inquiry proceeds by means of a rigorous and commonly accepted methodology and finds confirmation in the emergence of a consensus among historians. In his early articles on the historical Jesus and in

²⁰ Johnson, “Historiographical Response,” 208.

²¹ *JVG*, 204–206.

²² *JVG*, 218.

²³ Johnson, “Historiographical Response,” 211; Johnson cites the fallacies enumerated by David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper, 1970).

volume one of *A Marginal Jew*, Meier describes the historical Jesus alternately as “the Jesus who is knowable or recoverable by the means of modern historical-critical research,” a “modern abstraction and construct,”²⁴ and “an idea.”²⁵ Meier intends to reconstruct the historical Jesus by asking, “What, within the Gospels and other sources, really goes back to the historical Jesus?”²⁶ The historian makes these judgments by conducting a “purely empirical”²⁷ investigation, using the tools and methodology common to historical critical exegetes. His use of these tools is tempered by the work of those who, following upon the work of the original form critics, found their thoroughgoing skepticism unwarranted. Thus while Meier concedes that this methodology yields only a sketch of Jesus’ ministry and death, this sketch is very much rooted in the biblical witness. Meier, however, emphasizes that this hypothetical sketch should not be confused with “the real Jesus,” i.e., the sum total of all that Jesus thought, said, did, and experienced in his lifetime. This distinction makes the historical Jesus stand as a necessary, but very limited, historical project, a bulwark against contemporary attacks on the Christian faith, as well as a defense against pious distortions of Christian faith.

As his project has progressed, Meier has remained faithful to his understanding of history and historical methodology, even while his practice of historical Jesus research went beyond the narrow methodology and the modest goals he has articulated.²⁸ For example, having established the authenticity of material in relevant sources, Meier is able to raise further questions regarding the intelligibility of that material based on his knowledge of first-century Judaism. This is apparent even in volume one of *A Marginal Jew* where he treats the question of Jesus’ family. Through his knowledge of intertestamental history, and by reflecting on the name of Jesus and family members mentioned in the Gospels (i.e., James, Joses, Simon, and Jude) Meier is able to utilize his knowledge of the social and political world of the first-century to paint a picture of Jesus’ family as an Israel in miniature, looking to the future, to a time when YHWH’s eschatological salvation and national restoration would be realized.²⁹ In volume two

²⁴ Meier, “Jesus,” 1317.

²⁵ *AMJ* I, 198.

²⁶ *AMJ* I, 10. This approach to history is pejoratively labeled “scissors and paste history” by R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 257–263, 269 f., 274–82 as quoted in Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994), 205.

²⁷ John P. Meier, “The Present State of the ‘Third Quest’ for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain,” *Biblica* 80 (1999): 463.

²⁸ This point has formed the nucleus of Luke Timothy Johnson’s negative assessment of Meier’s project (see *The Real Jesus* [San Francisco: Harper, 1995]; see also his reviews of *A Marginal Jew* in *Commonweal* April 24, 1992, pp. 24–26; Nov., 18, 1994, pp. 33–35; Nov., 9, 2001, pp. 21–23).

²⁹ *AMJ* I, 207–208.

of AMJ, Meier situates himself in the very center of the mind of Jesus. The message of Jesus is reconstructed using the primary criteria, especially the criterion of multiple attestation of forms and sources, but Meier is not content to determine that Jesus spoke about the 'kingdom of God', but he reconstructs the myth that this phrase would have evoked in the mind of a first-century Jew.³⁰ Meier thus provides us with the narrative world of Jesus in an effort to better understand other words and deeds of Jesus in the canonical Gospels. Additionally, when treating Jesus' announcement of the kingdom, Meier's attention is focused on the Last Supper and Jesus' vow of abstinence in Mark 14:25//Luke 22:18. Meier makes conclusions about "what is central to Jesus' faith and thought"³¹ and includes Jesus' conscious and intentional self-portrayal as an Elijah-like miracle worker—one who, among other things, has raised the dead (John 11:1–44).

In the performance of his work as a historian, Meier proves to be attentive to the artistry of the discipline and always cognizant of the fact that he needs to make arguments as well as historical judgments in order to generate some semblance of consensus and allow those who disagree with him the opportunity to pinpoint precisely where they disagree (and there are several places where Meier goes against the grain of scholarly consensus). Meier is forced beyond his stated goal of determining what material in the sources might indeed come from Jesus; rather, Meier seeks to make sense of the context of Jesus, impart motivation, and make tentative connections and correlations in an effort to fill out a picture of the historical Jesus—a Jesus that may have more relevance for Christian faith than Meier would allow.

Meier's project serves as the benchmark for the way historical Jesus research ought to be done—progressing from available sources to historical judgments about the data in those sources, and finally to the verification of a hypothesis about what is moving forward in the history reflected in the data. Meier's project, however, is problematic to the extent that it fails in its formal account of how historical research is to be understood.

Conclusion

Wright has challenged many of those who have undertaken the difficult task of historical Jesus research with his understanding of epistemology and methodology. He has commendably brought these questions to the fore of historical Jesus research. Yet Wright's performance as a historian has left many critics with the impression that

³⁰ *AMJ* II, 241, 252.

³¹ *AMJ* II, 308.

Wright's conclusions, while not simply a repackaging of traditional Christian dogma, nonetheless, are comforting for mainline Christianity. But the continuity between his reconstruction of Jesus and mainline Christianity points to the more pressing issue of his methodology, namely the role of larger hypotheses in the performance of history. John Meier's project, while failing to deal directly with the pressing questions of hermeneutics, and while articulating a problematic understanding of historical knowledge, nonetheless offers a model for the performance of historical Jesus research, moving from a balanced account of the sources, to a determination of a set of facts based on those sources, and finally to determine the intelligibility of those facts. One can only hope that as Meier's work comes to its conclusion in a fourth and final volume in which he will, among other things, offer more reflections on the theological significance of his work, that he will take heed of the hermeneutical and methodological insights offered by Wright, and in this way provide an important corrective to the oversights in both works.

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