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Dikran Y. Hadidian

General Editor

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JESUS *THE* PARABLE OF GOD

What Do We Really Know About Jesus?



EDUARD SCHWEIZER

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*THE* PARABLE  
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## PREFACE

This book was not planned. When Dikran Y. Hadidian of Pickwick Publications asked me in 1993 whether I might be able to pen a small monograph on the historical Jesus, I replied that I would probably have neither the strength nor the time for such a task—and that, anyway, the output of theological books was so enormous today that it would rather be an act of grace not to write one more. Yet here is this book. It owes its existence to a string of lucky events (lucky for me, mind you!—whether also for its readers I do not know).

It started with a friendly invitation by Dr. Allen Churchill to come over for three days in September 1992 to deliver the Dominion-Chambers lectures in Ottawa, Ontario on Life-of-Jesus research. So the theme was given to me already in 1992. This was followed the next year by the invitation to give the James D. Belote Memorial lectures on the same general topic at the Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary in the first days of 1994 (to be published in Chinese). At both places I have been stimulated and inspired by many discussions in a warm and open atmosphere. Between these two events, I lectured for a week in Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, New Jersey. A member of that church spontaneously gave me a copy of J. D. Crossan's book, a gift that made me read it thoroughly and struggle with its challenge before preparing my Hong Kong lectures—a carbon copy of which I sent to Mr. Hadidian without any thought of publication. After returning from Hong Kong, I was asked by Dr. Amberg of the *Theologische Literaturzeitung* to review G. Lüdemann's very critical and much debated monograph on the resurrection of

Jesus, which made it impossible to avoid tackling the hypothesis that the resurrection of Jesus was merely an intrapsychic hallucination of the disciples. So three invitations to lecture and two gifts of challenging books led me to re-think more and more the question as to who Jesus was (and is!).

The decisive event happened on my eighty-first birthday. I found in my mail the proofs of my Hong Kong lectures, sent by Mr. Hadidian. On the one hand, this was certainly a very welcome present; on the other, it forced me to do what I had not wanted to do—to rewrite almost everything and to expand the original lectures considerably, yet still without knowing when and how I could manage the re-typing involved. Then when preaching at the Graduation Service of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüschlikon, Zürich, I met my colleague Keith Dyer, professor of New Testament there, and he offered—again spontaneously—to go through my manuscripts, smoothing my English style. With the help of Ms. Clare Hutt, a student of his on exchange from Aberdeen, it was possible to bring together the various layers of original manuscripts, publisher's proofs and all my corrections and elaborations to form a readable and printable computer script. This was a great help and a final liberation from all my worries.

So I am grateful to God for this challenge and opportunity, and I would also like to express my warm thanks to all who helped me so much. First, to those who invited me to lecture: Dr. Churchill in Ottawa, our good friends Dr. and Mrs. W. Alston and Cindy Jarvis in Princeton (not forgetting Mr. and Mrs. Walker and their gift), and the faculty of the Hong Kong Seminary (including a friend of many years, Dr. John Chow, professor of New Testament there). Then my thanks go to all the academic and non-academic participants who listened graciously to me and who helped by their contributions to many discussions, and to Dr. Dyer and Ms. Hutt for their very kind help. Finally, last but not



least, I express my deep gratitude to Mr. Hadidian, who urged me to work hard and who was ready to publish the result.

Something of the reality of the Christian Church manifests itself in simple experiences of togetherness. First of all, in the togetherness with Elizabeth in all the ups and downs of a married life of 54 years—and with our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren—and then also with many friends like those mentioned above. The older I grow, the more important this becomes.

Zürich, June 1994

Eduard Schweizer



# I

## WHERE ARE WE TODAY IN THE LIFE-OF-JESUS RESEARCH?\*

This question is, of course, a question arising out of the historical-critical approach to exegesis. Is it an improper question for those who believe in the risen Christ? I try to live as such a believer myself. Thus I agree with those who declare that the authority of the words given by the risen Christ to his disciples after Easter is not inferior to the words of the earthly Jesus. Though I am convinced that Jesus in his earthly ministry did not speak in the post-Easter language with which John reports his words—a language totally different from what we read in the first three gospels—I think that John has in some passages understood and formulated what Jesus really meant better than the synoptic authors.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, we find in all the gospels the echo of people who have been conquered by Jesus to become his witnesses too. Their books are no mere historical documents, but rather a testimony of faith. Even the selection of sayings and stories to be included in each gospel is always a personal decision and therefore an expression of faith on the part of the author.

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\* A preliminary draft of this chapter has been published in *Festschrift Günter Wagner*, ed. Faculty of the Baptist Theological Seminary (Rüschlikon near Zürich), Berne: Peter Lang, 1994. 157-167. (Abbreviations used are as in: S. Schwertner, *International Glossary of Abbreviations for Theology and Related Subjects*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter. 1974, reprinted in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, same publisher, 1976, 1ff. 345ff., cf. XV-XVI.)

Nonetheless, it *is* important to differentiate between the words (or stories) of the earthly Jesus (as far as we can recognize them) and the ones that originated after Easter.

This is not, in my view, a question of determining major or minor authority. Rather, it is a way of helping our understanding of the text. For we fully understand a statement (or a happening) only when we see in which situation it was reported. What caused the author to include it in the book and what was his purpose? Why did he or she place it in this context, formulate it in this way or even create it (under the influence of his or her Lord)? Such analytical lines of inquiry as these—which aim at seeing something of the development of the Biblical message and at understanding which questions were answered and what insights and situations they were aimed at—are an important part of reading and interpreting the text.

But we must also be aware of the limits of our research. To be sure, the risen Lord is still speaking, but what he says today always has to be checked over against the very earliest documents that were accepted and handed down by the church. The question must be asked whether any new word received today is in line with the fundamental message that was granted to his first disciples. Otherwise we could never distinguish his words from our own words. This shows that the historical-critical method alone will certainly not lead to faith, but it might help to keep faith from becoming superstition.

Thus it makes sense to ask again where we can find our position in the spectrum of modern “life-of-Jesus-research.” This is a wider formulation than “research of the historical Jesus.” The latter term means, strictly speaking, “the Jesus whom we can ‘recover’ and examine by using the scientific tools of modern historical research.”<sup>2</sup> The “real Jesus” was of course much more than that, just as, for instance, my mother was much more than what could be detected by such tools. Any historian has to “fill out” the facts

of which he or she is sure to make a convincing portrait of a living person. As long as he or she is doing so in "honest objectivity", necessarily personally engaged, but cautioning himself or herself against all presuppositions of sympathy or antipathy to the subject of his or her work, this is a fruitful and unavoidable part of the work. In this sense then, we will try to see what modern research has to say to us.

### 1. *A Living Christ without a life of Jesus?*

As early as 1906 ALBERT SCHWEITZER showed that a life of Jesus, in the usual sense of the word, could no longer be reconstructed. There is almost nothing to learn about his family, his inner and outer development, the teachers, parents and friends that influenced him, and so on. He concluded that the evangelists are not primarily interested in a historically accurate report, but rather in the proclamation of their faith in Jesus.<sup>3</sup> RUDOLF BULTMANN accepted this result without any reserve. If it is the faith of the early church that is proclaimed even in the gospels, then it is this faith, grounded on the Easter event, that we have to start from. Thus, "Jesus has risen into (not: in!) the kerygma."<sup>4</sup> What he means is the fact that we find Jesus after Easter only in the preaching of the church and that it is only this preaching that understands Jesus correctly. This is undoubtedly true for all believers. Bultmann would even admit that there is something like an implicit christology in the ministry of Jesus. This means that Jesus in his words and deeds claimed to be the definitive revelation of God. Yet whether this was so or not, and in what way he may have claimed to be that, is theologically not decisive for Bultmann. Our faith does not depend on the facts of the life of Jesus. To believe does not mean to take this or that fact for granted, it means to be touched in one's innermost self, to see oneself as one is, and to receive justification from God himself, acceptance as God's child, forgiveness of sins and a new life. It means that we no longer find our real lives in our works, in what we perform and accomplish, nor