

The Historical Jesus

Old Questions and New Lines of Inquiry

Abstract

This article traces the principal trajectories of research on the historical Jesus and identifies its most promising developments. Beginning with the systematic distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith introduced by Reimarus, it proceeds through the Bultmannian crisis, the criteria developed by the New Quest, and the Third Quest's relocation of Jesus within first-century Judaism.

Against this background, it examines the limitations of the sources, the reassessment of the criteria of authenticity, the evidential paradigm, the political and eschatological dimensions of the crucifixion, the construction of post-Easter memory, and the encounter between Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman cultural codes.

Several recent interpretative proposals, including that advanced by Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, are subjected to critical scrutiny. The concluding problem is to explain why, among the many failed prophets and visionaries, Jesus in particular became the generative centre of a universal movement.

Keywords: historical Jesus; early Christianity; Second Temple Judaism; crucifixion.

For Sofia, Anna, and Edyta

*Ora che sei venuta,
che con passo di danza sei entrata
nella mia vita,
quasi folata in una stanza chiusa,
a festeggiarti, bene tanto atteso,
le parole mi mancano e la voce
e tacerti vicino già mi basta.*

*Il pigolio così che assorda il bosco
al nascere dell'alba ammutolisce
quando sull'orizzonte balza il sole.*

*Ma te la mia inquietudine cercava
quando ragazzo
nella notte d'estate mi facevo
alla finestra come soffocato:
che non sapevo, m'affannava il cuore.*

*E tutte tue sono le parole
che, come l'acqua all'orlo che trabocca,
alla bocca venivano da sole,
l'ore deserte, quando s'avanzavan
puerilmente le mie labbra d'uomo
da sé, per desiderio di baciare...*

(Camillo Sbarbaro)

1. Introduction: A Question That Remains Open

Ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι;
("But who do you say that I am?")
Matt. 16:15

"But who do you say that I am?" This question, which has traversed centuries of history and theology, echoes behind every reconstruction of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. It is the question implicit in every historical inquiry into the Nazarene: was he an apocalyptic prophet? A revolutionary? A Gnostic teacher? Or, as some have suggested, an invention, a myth pure and simple?

The question inevitably extends beyond the bounds of historical analysis and even today resists emancipation from interpretative and, indeed, ideological distortions. This is, one might observe, a fate shared by more than a few subjects of historiographical debate; here, however, it produces particularly stark and irreconcilable oppositions.

Yehoshua ben Yosef is the (unwitting) founder of one of the world's most widespread religions. Although theological thought has long maintained that historical inquiry can neither add to nor detract from faith, events such as Christ's crucifixion, death, and resurrection remain at once foundational elements of a faith and facts potentially open to historical investigation.

Over the decades, historical research has passed through different phases, shaped by changing methodologies and cultural sensibilities. From the nineteenth-century positivist approach, which sought to separate the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith, through the twentieth century turn of the "New Quest" and the more recent development of the "Third Quest", the analytical tools employed and the range of sources examined have become progressively more refined. Yet, while knowledge of the setting of first-century Judaism has expanded, the proliferation of interpretations has made the complexity of the historical figure of Jesus more evident still.

This study takes that history of research as its point of departure in order to identify several lines of development that appear particularly promising today.

It will ultimately arrive at a question which, in our view, remains largely unresolved. If the historical figure of Jesus can be placed within types known to first-century Judaism and compared with other prophets, visionaries, and millenarian movements, why did his memory in particular become the generative centre of a universal religious phenomenon? It is in this transition—from Jesus to Christianity—that the newer lines of research appear to find their most fertile ground.

2. From the Historicisation of Jesus to the Third Quest

2.1. Late Antique and Jewish Speculations

It is commonly asserted that the quest for the “Jesus of history” began only with the Enlightenment and, more specifically, with the work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768). This view, however, overlooks the much deeper roots of inquiry into Jesus as a historical figure. We shall return to this point below. Before outlining, however briefly, the history of research on Jesus, it is useful to consider the foundations of the problem and first to ask what precisely is meant by the expression “Jesus of history”.

The phrase is intended to emphasise that the inquiry should be conducted independently of confessional presuppositions, treating Jesus like any other historical figure and analysing him by means of the tools of modern scholarship. Yet one immediately encounters one of the principal difficulties of such a study: the historical and archaeological evidence presently available for Jesus is remarkably scant. As a distinguished contemporary biblical scholar, recently deceased, memorably observed,¹ the historical Jesus appears as a marginal figure in a marginal province on the fringes of the Roman Empire. He left no writings, nor is there any direct archaeological evidence attesting to his existence. In the present state of research, every attempt at reconstruction must confront the inescapable recognition that we shall never possess a wholly satisfactory understanding of Jesus’s life and that every fragment of information will always remain open to interpretation. The difficulty is so profound that, as we shall see, some scholars go so far as to argue that Jesus was not a historical figure at all, but merely a mythical construct.

As noted above, although Reimarus’s work marked a turning point, the historiographical questions associated with research on Jesus can in fact be discerned, at differing levels of awareness, in the earliest phases of the Christian tradition. The following pages briefly consider some of the most significant examples,² while acknowledging from the outset that in many cases these discussions were driven more by polemical or doctrinal concerns than by any genuine spirit of historical inquiry. We shall not examine these matters in detail, since they fall outside the aims of this study. Our concern is rather to highlight the gradual emergence of the first shoots of criticism—philological, logical, or historical—which would reach maturity only with the Enlightenment.

Authors such as Marcion (c. 85-c. 160) and Origen (c. 183-c. 253) already display early attempts to challenge the historical reliability of the Gospel texts.³ Marcion, however, reached paradoxical conclusions: in seeking to purge the Gospels of alleged Judaising interpolations, he excluded precisely those elements that modern historical criticism regards as the more plausible. Origen, although defending sacred scripture against the objections of Celsus, to which we shall turn momentarily, acknowledged discrepancies among the Gospels and admitted that certain episodes were not historical. His purpose, however, was theological rather than historical: for Origen, the inconsistencies could be resolved by recognising the dual nature of the Gospel text, at once historical and allegorical.⁴ This distinction would leave a lasting mark on later Christian exegesis.

Alternative interpretations of the Gospel narrative emerge more clearly in the context of late antique philosophy, often for polemical purposes. Around 170 CE, Celsus composed the *True Discourse* (Λόγος Ἀληθής), a work known to us only through Origen’s reply in *Contra Celsum*. The most interesting aspect of his work lies in the method he adopted: Celsus did not confine himself to a straightforward refutation of the Gospel accounts, but subjected them to logical and hermeneutical analysis. In challenging episodes in which the supernatural intrudes into the story of Jesus, for example, he observed that, had Jesus truly

¹ J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus - I. The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, Yale University, New Haven (CT) 1991.

² For a useful and engaging survey, including further thinkers who preceded Reimarus in this field, see M. Pesce, *Per una ricerca su Gesù nei secoli XVI-XVIII: prima di Hermann S. Reimarus*, in *Annali di Storia dell’esegesi* 28 (2011), 433-464.

³ I draw these observations from F. Bermejo-Rubio, *L’invenzione*, 410 ff. The author also discusses references to the work of Papias, whose criticisms were nevertheless confined to extra-canonical material and who does not appear ever to have challenged the Gospel image of Jesus.

⁴ There appears to be a strong implicit cultural reference here to the speculations of Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE-c. 45 CE), who theorised the allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, seeking its most authentic meaning in the spirit rather than merely the letter of the text. See R. Radice, *L’allegoria di Filone di Alessandria*, in *Études platoniciennes* 7 (2010), 93-112.

wished to reveal his divine nature, he would have done so publicly before his adversaries, not only before his followers. Implicitly, Celsus did not deny Jesus's historical existence, but interpreted him as a man deified by his disciples through a process well known in the Greco-Roman world. *In nuce*, this claim contains the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith that would become central to modern debate.

Another important figure is Porphyry of Tyre (c. 233-c. 305), whose intellectual stature was acknowledged even by Augustine. In his fragmentarily preserved *Contra Christianos*, he disputed the purported identification of Jesus with the divine Logos. More than his philosophical polemic, what matters for present purposes is his methodological observation: in Porphyry's view, the narrative inconsistencies in the Gospels demonstrate that the evangelists were "inventors", not "historians".

No such rapid survey would be complete without the Jewish tradition, within which critical reflections on the historicity of Jesus also developed at an early stage. One strand, essentially polemical and derogatory, is represented by the *Toledot Yeshu* ("Generations of Jesus"), irreverent texts offering counter-narratives to the Gospels.⁵ Although the earliest fragments date from the tenth century, their original core may be considerably older, perhaps reaching back as far as the second century. Their principal themes include the denial of the virgin birth, an interpretation of the flight into Egypt as connected with magic, and the justification of Jesus's death sentence at the hands of the Jewish authorities. Despite their openly ironic and sarcastic character, these texts circulated widely and even influenced Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, who regarded them as more reliable than the canonical Gospels.

More pertinent to the present study is the contribution of medieval and modern Jewish thought. One noteworthy work is the *Book of Lights*, written in the tenth century by the Karaite exegete Jacob Qirqisani. The author maintains that the true founders of Christianity were Paul and Constantine, a thesis that would periodically resurface in modern historiography.

In later periods, Jewish thinkers continued to compile collections of inconsistencies in the Gospels, maintaining a critical, if not openly polemical, attitude.⁶ A partial exception is the *Fortification of Faith*, a sixteenth-century work by the Karaite scholar Isaac ben Abraham of Troki. He portrays Jesus as a Jewish teacher who did not seek to abolish the Torah, but merely to reinterpret it.⁷ This view, too, anticipates to some degree modern approaches for which an understanding of the Jewish context is indispensable to any proper interpretation of the historical figure of Jesus.

2.2. Martin Seidel and Leone Modena

Only with Martin Seidel, a sixteenth-century Silesian thinker, do we find a significant advance towards a more mature historical sensibility. Seidel's cultural setting differed radically from that of his predecessors and possessed the kind of eccentricity that often provides fertile ground for a paradigm shift. Sixteenth-century Silesia, in particular, was a fascinating crossroads of religious and intellectual exchange.

Seidel was associated with anti-Trinitarian circles and with Fausto Sozzini, a leading exponent of a movement that rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and advocated a rationalist conception of the Christian faith. This intellectual climate, receptive to critical readings of Scripture and to explanations alternative to established dogma, profoundly influenced his thought. Seidel was a markedly heterodox and independent thinker, and his work reflects a persistent tension between historical inquiry and theological criticism.

⁵ For an introduction to the *Toledot Yeshu*, see M. Ahuvia, *An Introduction to Toledot Yeshu*, in *Ancient Jew Review*, 25 December 2014, URL: <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2014/12/25/a-quick-introduction-to-toledot-yeshu>. See also F. Bermejo-Rubio, *L'invenzione*, 416, n. 38.

⁶ Of particular interest in this regard is Isaac ben Moses ha-Levi, better known as Profiat Duran (c. 1340-1410), a Jewish polymath who in his *Kelimmat ha-Goyim* ("The Shame of the Gentiles") declared his intention to determine, "without preconceived notions", whether Jesus sought the destruction of Mosaic law. Notwithstanding this premise, he ultimately portrayed the Nazarene as a "holy fool", retaining a strongly polemical vein. See C. L. Wilke, *Historicizing Christianity and Profiat Duran's Kelimat ha-Goyim (1397)*, in *Medieval Encounters* 22 (1-3), 2026, 140-164.

⁷ On this author, see M. Benfatto, *Il Gesù ebreo di Isaac ben Abraham Troki (1533-1594)*, in *Studi. Fatti. Ricerche* 166 (2019), 3-4.

The part of his work most relevant to the present inquiry appears in several passages of his *Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae*, written during the final decades of the sixteenth century. Seidel firmly situates Jesus within his historical context, refusing to accord him any privileged treatment and placing him alongside other figures who, in his view, shared similar royal-messianic aspirations. This approach represents a turning point in critical reflection on Jesus: it moves beyond the notion that the Gospel narrative should be read in purely theological terms and places the Nazarene within the historical coordinates and the political and social dynamics of his age.

More specifically, Seidel maintained that Christ's crucifixion should not be interpreted in soteriological terms, but understood in light of the political and social tensions of first-century Palestine. On this account, Jesus was executed for essentially political reasons, because the Roman and Jewish authorities regarded him as a potentially subversive figure.

The role of the wider cultural context in fostering this approach cannot be ignored. This was the height of Humanism, an age in which a return to original texts, philology, and the historical-critical method were beginning to establish themselves as central instruments of intellectual inquiry. The tendency to reread sources without the dogmatic filter of established traditions opened the way to alternative interpretations, and Seidel's attempt to offer a historically plausible account of Jesus fits squarely within this cultural framework.

A further step in the search for forerunners of modern historiography on Jesus is represented by the work of Yehuda Aryeh me-Modena, also known as Leone Modena (1571-1648), a Venetian rabbi and scholar.⁸ A remarkably versatile figure, Modena distinguished himself through his extensive literary output and his ability to move with ease between rabbinic tradition and the cultural milieu of the Italian Renaissance. Like Profiat Duran and Isaac ben Abraham before him, Modena insisted that Jesus belonged fully to the Judaism of his time, rejecting interpretations that cast him as a radical innovator or as a reformer who broke with the Torah. His most original contribution, however, lies in the introduction of an analytical criterion that appears to anticipate methods adopted in modern historical research: the criterion of historical plausibility within a given context.⁹ For Modena, the Gospel text must be evaluated in light of the sociocultural dynamics of first-century Palestine. He therefore considered certain Gospel passages in which Jesus appears to set himself above the authority of Mosaic law and emphasised their anachronistic character. Although acknowledging that the Torah admitted divergent interpretations within Judaism, Modena observed that a rupture as stark and radical as that attributed to Jesus in some Gospel accounts would have been historically inconceivable. Such an attitude would have produced so violent a discontinuity that Jewish society at the time would have found it intolerable, effectively precluding the formation of a movement of followers.

From this perspective, Modena recognised that, within Judaism's characteristic interpretative plurality, Jesus might have proposed a rereading of the Law, but categorically rejected the notion that the Nazarene could have severed himself completely and confrontationally from the Torah. Not only would such a position have been unacceptable to his community; it would also have made the dissemination of his message among his contemporaries impossible.

Modena's insight is therefore of considerable importance to the present inquiry, since it foreshadows one of the principal lines of investigation in modern historiography on Jesus: the need to assess the Gospel narrative not only in terms of its internal coherence, but also according to its compatibility with the relevant historical context. This approach would be taken up in later centuries and become one of the

⁸ On this author and the Jewish polemical tradition, see C. Facchini, *Il Gesù di Leone Modena. Per una storia materiale e urbana del Magen we-herav di Leone Modena*, in *Annali di Storia dell'esegesi* 35 (2018), 161-185; A. Guetta, *Leone Modena's Magen va-Herev as an Anti-Catholic Apologia*, in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 7 (2000), 296-318.

⁹ The principal criteria for interpreting the sources will be considered below. On the subject, see in any event G. Theissen - A. Merz, *Il Gesù storico. Un manuale*, Queriniana, Brescia 2011, 148 ff.

pillars of the “Third Quest”, the modern current of research on the historical Jesus that seeks to restore the Nazarene to his original Jewish setting.¹⁰

2.3. British Deism and French Free Thought

British Deism, despite the difficulty of defining its boundaries, represents a fundamental stage in the development of critical thought on Jesus.¹¹ Emerging in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this movement promoted a rationalist interpretation of religion, founded on the idea of a creator deity who, having brought the universe into being, no longer intervened in human affairs. Within this philosophical framework, tensions arose between speculative concerns and the attempt to conduct genuinely historical inquiry, making it necessary to select with care those contributions most relevant to our purposes.

One of the most significant authors in this context is John Toland (1670-1722), an Irish intellectual and diplomat known for his provocative vein and his willingness to challenge established orthodoxies.¹² Toland was a versatile figure whose writings ranged from theology and political philosophy to the history of religions and biblical hermeneutics. His interest in early Christianity formed part of a broader attempt to redefine religion in light of reason and textual criticism.

Of his many works, the most relevant to the present analysis is *Nazarenus*, published in London in 1718. Toland explicitly presented himself here as a historian and sought to expose the inconsistencies of Christian sources, in which, he argued, history and myth were inextricably intertwined. One of the most innovative aspects of his work is the attention he devoted to the Gospel of Barnabas, an apocryphal text which, in Toland’s view, constituted essential evidence for understanding the original Christology of the Nazarene (or Ebionite) movement.¹³ He assigned this Jewish-Christian current a primary role in understanding Jesus, maintaining that its members’ conception stood closer to the Nazarene’s authentic teaching than the theology later developed by Paul of Tarsus.

From this perspective, Toland maintained that Pauline doctrine was not simply a continuation of Jesus’s message, but rather its radical transformation. The opposition between Paul and the Nazarenes, already present in the New Testament and patristic texts, was thus reread historically: early Christianity was not a homogeneous movement, but was characterised from the outset by profound theological and interpretative divergences. Toland therefore suggested that the transition from the Judaism of Jesus to the universal Christianity of Paul constituted a genuine epistemological rupture, a theme which, as already noted, has ancient roots and modern developments in historical-critical research on Jesus.

Turning to eighteenth-century Enlightenment France, one encounters a proliferation of writings sharply at odds with the traditional image of Jesus. These were largely clandestine and anonymous works, often ironic and sarcastic in tone, which portrayed the Nazarene as an impostor,¹⁴ a fanatic, or merely an instrument of political manipulation by the Church. Although these texts enjoyed a measure of circulation in anticlerical circles, their contribution to historical inquiry in the strict sense was limited, since they were

¹⁰ Modena ultimately maintained that Jesus fully adhered to Pharisaic doctrine and that his disagreement with his opponents was confined to halakhic questions concerning everyday conduct.

¹¹ In his study *Hermann Samuel Reimarus und seine Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, Brockhaus, Leipzig 1862, D. F. Strauss emphasises the influence of English Deism on the work of the German scholar discussed below. See F. Bermejo-Rubio, *L’invenzione*, 428.

¹² For a fuller treatment of the contribution made by the thinkers cited in this section to the context under examination, see M. Pesce, *Per una ricerca*, 446 ff.

¹³ The term “Ebionites” (from the Semitic “*ebhyonīm*”, “the poor”) is used generically to designate representatives of Jewish Christianity, or specific radical currents within it. The name, perhaps carrying socioeconomic as well as political-religious connotations, derives from a tradition extending back to the period of the Maccabean wars. Although Epiphanius distinguished between Ebionites and Nazarenes, the distinction remains disputed among modern scholars. The Ebionites probably emerged from Jewish-Christian circles within the Jerusalem community and were dispersed after 70 CE across Judaea, Samaria, Syria, and Egypt. They were characterised by strict observance of Mosaic law, which they regarded as essential to salvation. They believed Jesus to be an ordinary man, the son of Joseph and Mary, although some groups accepted his miraculous birth (according to Origen). They rejected Paul’s authority and regarded him as an apostate.

¹⁴ A famous example is the anonymous *Traité des trois imposteurs*, which places Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad in the same derogatory category (see G. Minois, *Le Traité des trois imposteurs: Histoire d’un livre blasphématoire qui n’existait pas*, Albin Michel, Paris 2016, containing stimulating reflections on the “legendary” texts that traverse history). Also noteworthy is the curious case of the *Mémoires des pensées et des sentiments de Jean Meslier*, written by a French parish priest and, at his request, published posthumously. As the work’s complete title states, “*l’on voit des démonstrations claires et évidentes de la vanité et de la fausseté de toutes les religions du monde*” (J. Meslier, *Œuvres complètes*, Éditions Anthropos, Paris 1970-1972). The first edition appears to have been published as *Le testament de Jean Meslier: Ouvrage inédit précédé d’une préface, d’une étude biographique etc. par Rudolf Charles*, R. C. Meijer, Amsterdam 1864.

informed more by an uncritical hostility to religion than by any genuine commitment to scholarly investigation.

A partial exception may be found in the *Histoire critique de Jésus Christ ou analyse raisonnée des évangiles*, by Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789). A philosopher and radical materialist, d'Holbach was one of the leading figures of the French Enlightenment and among the foremost proponents of a coherent and systematic atheism. Although he shared the strongly polemical attitude towards religion characteristic of other authors of his time, his work is distinguished by greater intellectual depth and by at least a partial attempt at historical analysis.

In this work, d'Holbach revived, perhaps unwittingly, an idea that had already emerged in earlier centuries:¹⁵ the key to understanding the story of Jesus lay not so much in its theological as in its political dimension. On his interpretation, Jesus was not an impostor in the strict sense, but a sincere visionary who genuinely believed himself destined for a messianic role. In the setting of first-century Palestine, marked by Roman oppression and apocalyptic ferment, his preaching would progressively have acquired the features of a message of liberation, to the point that Jesus himself came to be perceived as a threat by both Jewish and imperial authorities.

D'Holbach thus offered a portrait of Jesus sharply removed from both traditional Christian and merely sceptical images. He saw Jesus neither as a charlatan nor as a genuine religious reformer, but rather as a passionate and naive preacher, a supposed “libérateur de sa nation opprimée”,¹⁶ whose story belongs to, and can be explained by, a broader sociopolitical phenomenon. Although still far from a rigorous historical methodology, this reading revived themes that modern research would develop in greater depth, especially the idea—not entirely new, but certainly rich in important historical and methodological consequences—that Jesus must be analysed within the political and social tensions of his age.

2.4. Reimarus and the Separation of History from Faith

The brief survey in the preceding sections enables us to approach Hermann Samuel Reimarus's work with a twofold awareness. On the one hand, the thinkers considered above had already begun a process of “desacralising” Jesus, sometimes for purely polemical and blasphemous purposes, at other times from a genuine desire for rational inquiry. Even when their work did not amount to historical research in the strict sense, it helped to make Jesus a possible object of study beyond the exclusive domain of theology. On the other hand, it is equally clear that they had moved little beyond identifying textual and logical inconsistencies or advancing personal readings unsupported by firm textual evidence: no rigorous, systematic method yet existed for distinguishing history from myth or for understanding the historical Jesus within his context.

In this setting, Reimarus's work did not constitute an absolute beginning, but it unquestionably marked a decisive turning point. Other thinkers had raised doubts about the historicity of Christian narratives; Reimarus, however, was the first to propose a clear separation between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, thereby opening the way to a critical-rationalist approach that would profoundly shape subsequent scholarship.

Initially circulated anonymously, his writings were published posthumously by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing between 1774 and 1778 under the title *Fragments from an Unnamed Author*, although they formed part of a larger work, the *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (*Apology or Defence for the Rational Worshippers of God*). The last of these fragments, and the most relevant to the present analysis, is *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger* (*On the Aims of Jesus and His Disciples*).¹⁷

¹⁵ The reference is to the thought of M. Seidel, discussed above, with the caveat that the connection between d'Holbach's work and the Silesian thinker is our own.

¹⁶ P.H. Thiry, *Le Christianisme dévoilé, ou Examen des principes et des effets de la religion chrétienne*, London 1766, 18 (published under the pseudonym M. Boulanger).

¹⁷ For the Italian edition, see H.S. Reimarus, *I frammenti dell'Anonimo di Wolfenbüttel, pubblicati da G.E. Lessing*, Bibliopolis, Naples 1977. On the continuing relevance of Reimarus's work, see the very recent contribution by F. Mores, *Sul significato della resurrezione per la ricerca storica*, in H.S.

In this text, Reimarus advanced one of the most audacious and disruptive theses of his age: Christianity originated in a historical deception. According to Reimarus, after Jesus's death his disciples stole his body from the tomb and invented the resurrection narrative, thereby transforming a Jewish preacher into a divine figure. Jesus had never presented himself as the redeemer of humankind, but rather as a Jewish leader with political-messianic aspirations who intended to restore the kingdom of Israel. Only after the failure of his movement and his execution did the disciples recast his figure in theological terms, giving rise to the resurrection narrative and the subsequent Christian interpretation of his mission.

This conclusion was not, however, the distinctive feature of Reimarus's work, since several of the authors discussed in the preceding pages had already arrived at positions not far removed from it.¹⁸ The German Enlightenment thinker is regarded as the first systematically to distinguish the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith, challenging the traditional Christian narrative and inaugurating a critical-rationalist approach to Jesus. This, at least, was Albert Schweitzer's assessment, which exerted a predominant influence over subsequent scholarship and established Reimarus's reputation.¹⁹ Schweitzer himself noted that Reimarus was not motivated by purely historical interests and that his quest for the historical Jesus, born within German rationalism, was directed primarily against ecclesiastical dogmatism. Nevertheless, Reimarus's detailed scrutiny of the Gospels led Schweitzer to conclude that the fundamental aspects of Jesus's story—his death, message, and mission—had been profoundly altered by Christian sources. In other words, the Gospel narrative was not simply historical testimony, but the product of progressive theological reinterpretation.

One of Reimarus's principal achievements was his attempt to identify methodological criteria by which to distinguish plausibly historical elements in the Gospel texts from unreliable ones. This effort led him to adopt analytical tools that would profoundly influence later research on the historical Jesus.

His method, which recalls both the evidential paradigm²⁰ and the criterion of embarrassment,²¹ consisted in identifying traces or "remnants of the old system" that appeared to have resisted later alteration. Since the Gospels present Jesus as a purely spiritual redeemer of humankind, for example, indications that he was instead a political and earthly liberator of Israel²² may be regarded as reliable: they are unlikely to have been invented by a later tradition seeking to distance itself both from Judaism and from a political understanding of Jesus's activity.

Reimarus supplemented these criteria with the principle of *reductio ad absurdum*. Had Jesus truly spoken of his death and resurrection in the soteriological terms characteristic of later Pauline discourse, for example, his disciples would not have reacted to his crucifixion with dismay and disbelief.²³ Their evident unpreparedness demonstrated, in Reimarus's view, that this doctrine developed only at a later stage.

Reimarus's work helped to catalyse renewed interest in Jesus on the philosophical as well as the strictly historical plane, as evidenced by the many "Lives of Jesus" published between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among them, David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet*²⁴ and Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*²⁵ unquestionably deserve mention.

Reimarus, *Sulla storia della resurrezione*, ed. F. Mores, Morcelliana, Brescia 2025, 5-29. It offers an illuminating comparison between the *Historikerstreit* (the well-known historiographical dispute concerning Nazism initiated by E. Nolte in 1986) and the *Fragmentenstreit* (the debate that arose following the publication of Reimarus's fragments).

¹⁸ Reimarus himself acknowledged the importance of his predecessors, from Celsus and ben Abraham to Toland.

¹⁹ In *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1906, A. Schweitzer (1875-1965) traces the genealogy of *Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (research on the life of Jesus), identifying Reimarus as its founder.

²⁰ On the evidential paradigm as a method possessing a "weak scientific status" but suited to the human sciences, see C. Ginzburg, *Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario*, in Id., *Miti emblematici spie. Morfologia e storia*, Einaudi, Turin 1986, 158-209.

²¹ See the section of this article devoted to the criterion of embarrassment.

²² Such is one interpretation of the interrogation before Pilate in Mark (Mark 15:1) and Matthew (Matt. 27:1-2), or of the *titulus crucis* (Matt. 27:37; John 19:19).

²³ See the apostles' own disbelief in the face of the resurrection in Luke 24:1-11; Mark 16:1-11; and Matt. 28:17-20.

²⁴ D.F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet*, Osiander, Tübingen 1835, to which we shall return shortly.

²⁵ E. Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, Michel Lévy Frères, Paris 1863, in which the author advanced the subsequently influential thesis of a Galilean Jesus who, although emerging from Judaism, progressively distanced himself from it, giving rise to a Christianity "purified" of every Jewish influence.

In the same setting of German philosophy, reference must also be made to Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums*,²⁶ which enjoyed extraordinary success and for several years made him the principal intellectual reference point of the Hegelian Left.

A reading of these authors reveals the profound ideological conditioning that would long accompany the quest: rationalists viewed Jesus as a moral teacher, idealists as a spiritual guide, and socialists as a social reformer. In every case, the resulting model was detached from the actual historical context and moulded according to the author's own conceptual schemes.

Reimarus's important contribution and the rationalist debate that followed were retrospectively designated the "Old Quest" for the historical Jesus. This phase, brought to a close by Schweitzer's extensive survey discussed above, did not deny the possibility of historical knowledge of Jesus, provided that the sources were subjected to sustained critical scrutiny.

2.5. Bultmann and the End of the "Old Quest"

Despite its methodological difficulties and fierce controversies, the "Old Quest" appeared to have opened a path which, with time and increasingly refined critical tools, might lead to historically reliable knowledge of Jesus. Confidence in the possibility of reconstructing the profile of the historical Jesus remained a distinctive feature of this phase, notwithstanding the inevitable uncertainties arising from the nature of the sources and the difficulty of separating historical data from each author's theological or philosophical elaboration.

After this period of critical optimism, however, research came to an abrupt halt with the work of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). His approach, known as "demythologisation" (*Entmythologisierung*), denied that the historical Jesus could be recovered with any certainty, arguing that the Gospels were so thoroughly permeated by the preaching of the early Church that the original figure of Jesus was irretrievable.

For Bultmann, historical research on Jesus was not merely futile but positively misleading: what mattered was not the Jesus of history, inaccessible and shrouded in the mists of tradition, but the Christ of faith—the Jesus proclaimed in apostolic preaching and experienced existentially by the believer. Thus, whereas the "Old Quest" had resolutely sought to illuminate the historical traces of Jesus, Bultmann marked a turning point by inviting scholars to turn their gaze away from history and towards faith.

Bultmann's position developed within a trajectory of research that had already produced radical criticisms of the possibility of reconstructing the historical Jesus. Two key figures in this regard were David Friedrich Strauss, mentioned above, and Martin Kähler. Strauss was among the first modern authors to introduce the category of myth into the analysis of the Gospels.²⁷ The audacity of this thesis cost him an academic career. Not only did he deny the supernatural character of Jesus's mission; applying the principles of Hegelian philosophy of religion, he also argued that Christianity, like every religion, expressed in the form of representation or image the same content—truth—that philosophy expressed in the higher form of the concept. From this Hegelian premise, Strauss interpreted Jesus Christ and the miraculous events narrated in the Gospels as myths, fantastic representations of the identity of the finite and the infinite, or the immanence of the divine in the human. He maintained that many Gospel narratives were not historical records, but mythological constructions that had arisen within the earliest Christian communities.

Martin Kähler²⁸ carried this criticism further, arguing that earlier attempts to reconstruct the historical Jesus were inevitably doomed to failure because reliable sources were lacking. For Kähler, the true Jesus

²⁶ L. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Wigand, Leipzig 1841.

²⁷ Thus in his *Das Leben Jesu* and the later *Der Christus des Glaubens und der Jesus der Geschichte. Eine Kritik der Schleiermacher'schen Lebens Jesu*, von Duncker, Berlin 1865.

²⁸ M. Kähler, *Der Sogenannte Historische Jesus und der Geschichtliche, Biblische Christus*, Deichert, Leipzig 1892.

was not the hypothetical figure reconstructed by historians, but the one transmitted through the preaching of the Church.

Bultmann took up and developed these ideas in a forceful and radical synthesis, expressed in one of his most famous statements: “I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary, and other sources about Jesus do not exist.”²⁹ Bultmann insisted that this conclusion need not dismay believers, since salvation depended not on historical knowledge of Jesus but on faith in the *kerygma*, the proclamation of salvation by the early Christian Church.

One of Bultmann’s most influential ideas was, as already noted, the concept of “demythologisation” (*Entmythologisierung*). He believed the mythological language of the New Testament to be inaccessible to modern humanity because it reflected a cosmology superseded by modern science and philosophy. Faith, in Bultmann’s view, cannot be reduced to intellectual assent to a series of miraculous facts, such as the virgin birth or bodily resurrection. He therefore proposed a process of “demythologisation”: an interpretation of the texts that, without denying the value of myth, would make its existential meaning accessible. The aim was not to eliminate myths, but to reinterpret them existentially so that their message could be understood in the language of modernity.

To this end, Bultmann combined the historical-critical method, used to distinguish the historical Jesus from later theological developments, with the principle of existential interpretation inspired by Martin Heidegger. Myth, on this account, is not to be read as an objective description of the world, but as an expression of the human condition and of humanity’s summons to authentic existence.

Another key aspect of Bultmann’s thought concerns the process by which early Christianity became Hellenised. Following a thesis widespread in the history of religions and defended by scholars such as Hans-Joachim Schoeps,³⁰ he argued that Paul of Tarsus played a decisive role in transforming Christianity by translating Jesus’s message into categories characteristic of Hellenistic culture. Paul, in particular, reformulated the meaning of Jesus’s death and resurrection using concepts drawn from the mystery religions and Gnosticism, and presented salvation in more theological and universalistic terms, thereby making it intelligible to a Greco-Roman audience. For Bultmann, this did not mean that Paul had “invented” Jesus as a divine figure, but that he had reinterpreted Jesus’s mission in light of a religious sensibility profoundly different from the Jewish one. The importance of this cultural context to a proper understanding of Christianity’s development would remain a central theme of later scholarship.

Whereas the “Old Quest”, with its liberal approach, had sought to recover the historical Jesus as distinct from the Christ of apostolic preaching, Bultmann moved in the opposite direction, emphasising the latter to the point of denying the very possibility of knowing the former. Although his contribution marked the end of the “Old Quest”, it did not permanently close the debate over the possibility of historical inquiry into Jesus. On the contrary, as we shall see, the radical character of his theses itself provoked reactions that generated new developments, driven by an attempt to move beyond his “extreme” position and recover, at least to some extent, a historical investigation of Jesus.

2.6. The “New Quest” and the “Third Quest”

After the phase of radical scepticism inaugurated by Rudolf Bultmann, whose programme of demythologisation had denied the possibility of attaining certain knowledge of the historical Jesus, research on the Nazarene acquired fresh impetus in the so-called “New Quest”. This new approach took shape in the 1950s within Bultmann’s own school, through scholars such as Ernst Käsemann and Günther

²⁹ R. Bultmann, *Gesù*, Queriniana, Brescia 1972, 9.

³⁰ H-J. Schoeps, *Paul: the Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*, James Clarke, Cambridge 1961.

Bornkamm, who refused to accept so drastic a separation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

For Käsemann³¹ and Bornkamm,³² Bultmann's position represented an excessively rigid and unsatisfactory alternative, both historically and theologically. To assume that the Gospels had been entirely shaped by the theology of the early Church necessarily implied that the Christ of faith was constructed from wholly ahistorical elements, thereby severing Christianity from any connection with the real Jesus. Both scholars therefore sought to formulate criteria of historicity capable of recovering at least the essential features of the historical Jesus.

Particular importance was accordingly assigned to the criterion of dissimilarity (or discontinuity) formulated by Käsemann. Under this principle, a tradition concerning Jesus may be regarded as authentic if it can be derived neither from the Judaism of his time nor from early Christianity. The underlying idea was that the distinctive elements of Jesus's preaching—those explicable neither by Jewish culture nor by later developments in the Church—were more likely to be authentic, since post-Easter Christian communities would scarcely have invented them. The criterion nevertheless proved problematic: rigidly applied, it can produce a paradoxical reconstruction in which Jesus appears more historically plausible the more he is isolated both from his Jewish context and from the later Christian movement, although the latter was inevitably and historically connected to the former.

It was precisely to overcome these limitations that the so-called "Third Quest" developed from the 1980s onwards,³³ seeking to restore Jesus to his authentic historical context: first-century Judaism. This line of research was distinguished by three principal features: a renewed recognition of Jesus's Jewishness, extensive use of ancient sources, and sociological and anthropological analysis, as the following sections illustrate.³⁴

2.7. The Rediscovery of Jesus's Jewishness

The idea that Jesus was Jewish was certainly not new—Leone Modena had already placed him within the Pharisaic tradition in the seventeenth century—but only at this stage of academic research did the insight acquire broader historiographical significance and become the point of departure for a radical reassessment of Jesus. The "Third Quest" moved beyond earlier approaches often marked by Christological prejudice or a sharp separation of Jesus from Judaism, promoting instead a contextualised understanding of his activity within the religious, cultural, and political mosaic of first-century Palestine.

The central task was no longer simply to recognise that Jesus was "ethnically Jewish", but to understand his profound and dynamic participation in a vibrant and plural religious milieu. Second Temple Judaism was far from monolithic; it encompassed diverse currents and sensibilities—Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, apocalyptic movements, wisdom groups, and charismatic circles—each with its own way of interpreting and living the Torah. Within this rich and multifaceted setting, Jesus emerges as a figure fully engaged in the religious debates of his age, with a distinctive but by no means alien voice.

His words and deeds—including his parables, symbolic gestures, and proclamation of the kingdom of God—reflect deep roots in the Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic traditions, as well as a continuous reinterpretation of Scripture. His understanding of the Law was intended not to destroy it but to bring it to fulfilment (πληρῶσαι is the verb used in Matt. 5:17), offering a personal interpretation that emphasised mercy, justice, and inner purification. Jesus thus appears as one among the many authoritative interpreters

³¹ E. Käsemann, *Das Problem des historischen Jesu*, in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 51 (1954), 125-153.

³² G. Bornkamm, *Jesus von Nazareth*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1956.

³³ This latter approach is so designated by S. Neill - N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1986. We agree with Bermejo-Rubio's observation—supported by much more extensive argument, as the following sections show—that this division into successive "quests" is largely artificial, since it seeks to bring under summary categories an immense body of contributions and positions, often very distant from one another, that emerged over many decades. It is nevertheless a widely used periodisation in the dominant literature and is certainly not without practical value for the purposes of this study.

³⁴ G. Pulcinelli, *Primo orientamento bibliografico per lo studio del Gesù storico*, in *Lateranum* 83 (2017), 477-496.

of the Torah, perhaps marginal in the eyes of some contemporaries, but in no sense detached from Judaism; rather, he represented a prophetic and reforming voice within it.

This perspective has also had important theological and interreligious consequences: it has made possible a critical reassessment of the roots of Christian antisemitism and opened new paths for Jewish-Christian dialogue, founded on an awareness of the closer historical and theological continuity between Jesus and his world.

2.8. The Extensive Use of Ancient Sources

One distinctive feature of the “Third Quest” is its systematic and interdisciplinary use of a broad range of ancient sources, intended to place Jesus within a more precise and complex historical, religious, and cultural setting. Unlike earlier scholarship, often confined to the canonical Gospels and to theological readings of Jesus, researchers in this phase also began critically to employ Jewish, Hellenistic, and extra-canonical Christian sources, significantly expanding the available documentary record.

Particular attention was first devoted to intertestamental literature, which provided valuable evidence for understanding contemporary messianic expectations, eschatological tensions, and cultic practices. Rabbinic literature was studied in parallel—with due awareness of its chronological distance from Jesus—to identify points of continuity or discontinuity with the teachings and exegetical methods of certain Jewish teachers.

A crucial role was played by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947-1956), texts attributed to the Essene community at Qumran, which cast new light on the religious ferment of first-century Palestine.

Jewish and Christian apocrypha likewise began to be read not simply as “deviant” or spurious theological testimony, but as sources reflecting alternative theological and narrative conceptions that illuminate the plurality of early Christologies and messianic expectations. Alongside these textual sources, the “Third Quest” also made extensive use of archaeological evidence: discoveries made possible a more concrete reconstruction of daily life in Galilee and Judaea, restoring a fuller, three-dimensional quality to Jesus and his environment. In sum, this methodological and documentary openness made it possible to move beyond an isolated or exclusively theological view of Jesus and instead to reconstruct his historical profile through a sustained dialogue between written and material sources, canonical and non-canonical texts, and Jewish, Christian, and pagan perspectives.

2.9. Sociological and Anthropological Analysis

Scholars of the “Third Quest” also began applying methods derived from sociology and cultural anthropology in order to understand more fully the economic, political, and religious dynamics of Jesus’s age. They studied contemporary demography, family structures, systems of government, religious practices, and patterns of work, thereby locating Jesus not only as a religious figure, but as a man who lived within a specific and highly articulated social reality.

An especially important contribution in this regard came from a current of Jewish scholars who, from the twentieth century onwards and with considerable independence, approached the question of Jesus’s Jewishness with renewed interest. On the one hand, these studies firmly clarified the terms of an issue—Jesus’s Jewish identity, now broadly regarded as a cornerstone of any plausible historical reconstruction of him.³⁵ On the other, they tended towards the conclusion that the Jesus professed by Christians could only be an ideological reworking, probably Hellenistic in character. A thesis of enduring relevance and difficulty thus re-emerged.

³⁵ It has nevertheless been observed that, while the “*Third Quest*” enabled a more firmly grounded and contextualised reconstruction of Jesus, it has at times risked flattening his image too completely into its Jewish dimension, minimising those novel elements that might explain the emergence of Christianity as a distinct movement.

This achievement is not, however, without a potentially reductive effect. While the Third Quest enabled a more firmly grounded and contextualised reconstruction of Jesus, it has at times risked flattening his profile too completely into its Jewish dimension, minimising precisely those novel elements that might help to explain the emergence of Christianity as a distinct movement. The problem is not to recover a Jesus once again severed from Judaism, but to understand how, within that context, a particular combination of preaching, gestures, death, and memory produced uncommon consequences.

The first major contribution is that of Joseph Klausner, who in 1922 published in Jerusalem an extensive study presenting the Nazarene as wholly embedded within his Jewish environment: “Jesus of Nazareth [...] was a product of Palestine alone, a product of Judaism unaffected by any foreign admixture [...]. Without any exception he is wholly explainable by the scriptural and Pharisaic Judaism of his time.”³⁶

Another important author is Shalom Ben-Chorin, who was born in Germany but later emigrated to Israel and whose *Bruder Jesus*, published in 1967,³⁷ received wide attention. Against Bultmannian scepticism, Ben-Chorin sought to recover the possibility of access to the historical Jesus, whom he regarded as an exceptional figure belonging—albeit from a position of polemical engagement—to the Pharisaic current.

David Flusser, a scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, likewise accepted the possibility of historical research and applied the historical-philological method to the Synoptic Gospels, assigning them greater value as historical sources than was commonly acknowledged. He saw Jesus as an eminent representative of Pharisaic Judaism, influenced by Essene positions and apocalyptic visions, and vigorously maintained that knowledge of the Jewish context was indispensable to understanding Jesus’s teaching.³⁸

Finally, mention must be made of the important contribution of Geza Vermes, Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Oxford and one of the foremost scholars of the Qumran texts, which he was the first to translate into English in 1962. In *Jesus the Jew*,³⁹ Vermes emphatically underscored Jesus’s belonging to Judaism, going so far as to regard the Gospels themselves as Jewish literature. In his reading, Jesus appears as a charismatic wonder-working prophet and itinerant teacher whose death was reinterpreted by the earliest Christian community in anticipation of his *parousia*.

³⁶ J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth. His Life, Times and Teaching*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1925, 363.

³⁷ S. Ben-Chorin, *Bruder Jesus. Der Nazarener in jüdischer Sicht*, List, Munich 1967.

³⁸ For the Italian edition, see D. Flusser, *Jesus*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1976.

³⁹ G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, Collins, London 1973.

3. Sources and Criteria of Inquiry

These opening pages suggest that anyone embarking on the quest for the historical Jesus must confront a persistent paradox: the more closely we attempt to approach him with the tools of history, the more his figure seems to dissolve into a multiplicity of interpretations which, in many cases, appear merely to reflect the *Weltanschauung* of their authors and their particular historical and cultural moment. Alongside these reconstructions stands an immense literary output, largely extraneous to the purposes of this article, which continues to generate ever-new portraits of Jesus by combining historical evidence with interpretations of varying freedom. Such narratives often aim less at rigorous critical inquiry than at an original, if not openly sensationalist, perspective capable of provoking debate and controversy.

Before considering the most recent proposals, however, the conceptual framework must be completed by examining the sources and hermeneutical criteria.

3.1. The Canonical Gospels

The analysis of sources is central to every inquiry into the historical Jesus. Here, however, it can be addressed only in its essential features. This vast, multidisciplinary field, which remains the subject of continuous and open debate among scholars, presents a fascinating intellectual challenge: by combining philology, historiography, and textual criticism, it reveals the extraordinary capacity of human reason to reconstruct the past through rational methods.

As Meier aptly observes,⁴⁰ the principal source of our knowledge of the historical Jesus is also its principal problem: the four canonical Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John), which Christians regard as part of the New Testament, cannot properly be considered works of history.⁴¹ They do not purport to offer a complete account of Jesus's life, but focus chiefly on the years of his ministry (only Matthew and Luke preface their narratives with two chapters on Jesus's childhood, the reliability of which is itself disputed). The narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a broadly similar composition: each consists of a succession of small literary units—*logia*, parables, miracles, and controversies—linked together with varying degrees of cohesion. The Fourth Gospel, by contrast, organises its account into extended narrative sequences whose text bears little resemblance to that of the Synoptic Gospels.

The origin of the small literary units found in the Gospels—parables, miracle stories, *logia*, controversies, eschatological sayings, and ethical precepts—was decisively illuminated by the hermeneutical insight developed by form criticism (*Formgeschichte*), an exegetical current established in the twentieth century above all through the work of Martin Dibelius, Rudolf Bultmann, and Karl Ludwig Schmidt. This school proceeded from the conviction that the Gospels are not continuous and coherent chronicles, but redactional collections assembled from pre-existing oral traditions that circulated in the earliest Christian communities as relatively autonomous units. According to form criticism, these units did not arise for documentary purposes—that is, in order faithfully to transmit Jesus's sayings and deeds as historical events—but developed in response to concrete needs within the nascent Christian communities: catechesis, missionary proclamation, liturgy, the construction of communal identity and norms, or polemical engagement with external environments such as the synagogue or pagan culture. On this account, each narrative or discursive unit acquired a specific literary form—readily memorised and orally transmitted—precisely because it was rooted in a particular life-setting (*Sitz im Leben*), that is, in a concrete communal situation. A parable, for example, might arise from the need to explain God's mercy in public preaching, while an eschatological *logion* might reinforce hope in times of crisis.⁴²

⁴⁰ J. P. Meier, *Un ebreo marginale*, 44.

⁴¹ For a fuller discussion of the Gospels' literary genre, see L. de Santis, *Per una riflessione criteriologica in vista della definizione del genere letterario dei vangeli canonici*, in *Angelicum* 63 (1986), 169-186; A. Destro - M. Pesce, *Il racconto e la scrittura. Introduzione alla lettura dei vangeli*, Carocci, Rome 2021.

⁴² Parables, moreover, continue to play a central role in the catechesis of the Catholic Church. On this point, see P. Ricoeur, *Ermeneutica biblica. Linguaggio e simbolo nelle parabole di Gesù*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1978.

Form criticism thus helped to decompose the Gospel text into individual pre-literary forms and to analyse them according to their structure, function, and original context of use. This approach produced a twofold conclusion: first, that the tradition concerning Jesus was not transmitted mechanically but creatively reworked by the communities; and secondly, that notwithstanding its stratification, the Gospel material preserves living evidence of the earliest reactions to and interpretations of Jesus, even before its final redactional arrangement. On this view, the Synoptic Gospels are not simple chronicles of Jesus's life, but composite testimonies that collect and organise a plurality of oral traditions already endowed with forms and functions of their own, reflecting the theological, liturgical, and missionary experience of first-century Christian communities.

Outside the four canonical Gospels, the New Testament offers little direct information about Jesus that can be employed in a rigorous historical inquiry. Apart from a handful of isolated references, the remaining New Testament writings provide neither significant biographical data nor concrete details concerning his public activity, teaching, or social setting. The Pauline corpus has often attracted particular scholarly attention, but its biographical contribution is likewise surprisingly limited. Paul shows no interest in Jesus's earthly life in the sense in which that expression is understood today: his preaching centres almost exclusively on Christ's death and resurrection and on the universal salvific meaning of those events. His letters contain only sporadic references to traditions concerning Jesus, which do not permit a coherent or chronologically ordered reconstruction of his life.

Ultimately, the material useful for a historical reconstruction of Jesus is concentrated almost entirely in the Gospels, particularly the Synoptics. Although indispensable to understanding the emergence of Christian faith and the theology of the earliest communities, the other New Testament texts offer little substantive evidence for historical inquiry in the strict sense; they reflect instead the evolution of Christology and ecclesial consciousness in the decades following Jesus's death.

3.2. Non-Christian Sources

Turning to non-Christian sources, the first and best-known reference is found in Flavius Josephus (37/38-c. 100 CE), the Jewish aristocrat, soldier, and historian who wrote *The Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities*. The latter contains a passage known as the *Testimonium Flavianum*, in which Josephus refers to Jesus as a wise man who performed extraordinary deeds, was crucified under Pontius Pilate following accusations by the leading men of the people, and was proclaimed risen by his disciples. In the form in which it has come down to us, however, the passage contains unmistakably Christian expressions, including εἶγε ἄνδρα αὐτὸν λέγειν χρή (“if indeed one ought to call him a man”) and ὁ χριστὸς οὗτος ἦν (“he was the Christ”), which suggest later interpolation by Christian copyists. Most scholars today believe that, although modified for apologetic purposes during the Christian period, the passage contains an authentic core deriving from Josephus. This circumstance alone, notwithstanding the apparently limited information conveyed, is of considerable significance. From a purely historical and documentary perspective, once the more than probable later interpolations are removed, this brief testimony provides, with a substantial degree of plausibility, the earliest extra-biblical evidence for Jesus's actual existence, of which Josephus must have heard in Jerusalem.

Another important reference to Jesus occurs in a passage by Tacitus (c. 56/57-c. 118 CE), the Roman historian and author of the *Annals*. In this foundational work, Tacitus gives an annalistic account of the Roman Empire from the final years of Augustus's principate to the death of Nero, covering events from 14 to 68 CE. Unfortunately, no surviving manuscript contains the section dealing with the period in which Jesus's trial and death most probably occurred, around 30 CE. There is nevertheless a brief reference when Tacitus discusses the great fire of Rome under Nero and the ensuing persecution of Christians. The passage (*Annals* 15.44) records the existence of a group of Christians “hated for their abominations”, who took their name from Christus, executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. It is precisely the markedly hostile tone of the reference to the Christian community that supports the passage's authenticity and the absence of Christian interpolation.

These limited but important references in Josephus and Tacitus exhaust the earliest independent evidence for Jesus's historical existence. Passages in Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, and Lucian, invariably included in catalogues of the relevant sources,⁴³ refer primarily to the existence of early Christian communities rather than directly to Jesus and are therefore of no use in reconstructing his life.⁴⁴

3.3. Criteria of Historicity

The inquiry into the historical Jesus therefore operates in difficult terrain, where the need for rigorous analytical method encounters the limitations of the surviving sources. As we have seen, the Gospel material remains the principal source of available knowledge. Yet the Gospels were composed decades after the events they narrate and are undeniably permeated by the faith of the early Church. This awareness requires rigorous hermeneutical criteria capable, so far as possible, of discerning the historical core of Gospel traditions, while recognising that no single criterion can guarantee the full historicity of an episode or saying.

From the extensive literature on this subject, the present study draws on the already cited contributions of Meier and of Theissen and Merz.⁴⁵ Meier systematised ten criteria of historicity, distinguishing primary from secondary criteria. We shall consider only the five principal criteria he identified,⁴⁶ alongside the elaboration proposed by Theissen and Merz.

3.4. The Criterion of Embarrassment

The so-called criterion of embarrassment (or contradiction) is one of the methodological tools used in research on the historical Jesus to assess the historical plausibility of a saying or event reported in the Gospels. It rests on the assumption that the early Christian community would not have invented episodes or words capable of causing embarrassment, weakening its theology, or furnishing arguments to its opponents. Passages that appear doctrinally problematic, or difficult to reconcile with post-Easter faith in Jesus as the Son of God, are therefore more likely to be historically authentic, since their preservation is difficult to explain unless they belonged to an already established tradition that could not easily be omitted.

The criterion of embarrassment nevertheless has an evident limitation. What appears problematic to the modern reader was not necessarily perceived as such by a first-century community. Theological categories and doctrinal sensibilities evolved over time, making it difficult to apply the criterion in absolute terms.

3.5. The Criterion of Discontinuity

The criterion of discontinuity—also known as the criterion of difference, dissimilarity, or double irreducibility—holds that teachings, attitudes, or events in Jesus's life are more likely to be authentic when they can be derived neither from the Judaism of his age nor from the early Church. The underlying idea is that material which finds no plausible explanation either in the Jewish cultural and religious setting of the

⁴³ G. Theissen - A. Merz, *Il Gesù storico*, 106 ff.

⁴⁴ For completeness, debate also surrounds the relevance of certain rabbinic references and of the "wise king" of the Jews, unjustly killed, mentioned in a letter written by a pagan philosopher around 73 CE. On these sources and the associated debate, see G. Theissen - A. Merz, *Il Gesù storico*, 101 ff.

⁴⁵ Our selection is supported by E. Manicardi, *Gesù, la cristologia, le Scritture. Saggi esegetici e teologici*, EDB, Bologna 2005, who also recalls the important contribution of V. Fusco, *La ricerca del Gesù storico. Bilancio e prospettive*, in R. Fabris (ed.), *La parola di Dio cresceva (At 12,24). Scritti in onore di C.M. Martini nel suo 70° compleanno*, EDB, Bologna 1998, 487-519.

⁴⁶ Three further criteria cited by Meier as possible, albeit debatable, forms of hermeneutical support are: the criterion of Aramaic traces, under which indications of Aramaic vocabulary, grammar, syntax, rhythm, and rhyme in the Greek versions of Jesus's sayings count as signs of authenticity; the criterion of the Palestinian environment, which holds that sayings reflecting conditions in first-century Palestine have a substantial probability of historicity; and the criterion of narrative vividness, under which the vividness and concrete detail of Gospel accounts indicate eyewitness testimony. Finally, Meier mentions secondary criteria which he frankly regards as of doubtful utility for the historical reconstruction of Jesus's life. The first is the criterion of tendencies in the development of the Synoptic tradition. This is based on the idea that observing the way Gospel accounts develop over time can reveal redactional and interpretative tendencies affecting the transmission of tradition. Such laws might help to reconstruct original events, but the difficulty lies precisely in identifying them accurately. He then mentions the criterion of historical presumption, corresponding to the ancient but scientifically questionable maxim "*in dubio pro traditio*". Meier radically rejects the criterion of necessary explanation, under which the presence in the Gospels of an event or saying attributed to Jesus must have some historically plausible explanation accounting for its preservation in Christian tradition. In his view, the desire for a coherent explanation capable of illuminating every fact concerning Jesus has produced works prejudicially grounded in one-dimensional readings. Thus, according to the outlook of each author, Jesus becomes in turn an apocalyptic fanatic (A. Schweitzer), a rabbi and prophet who called for an existential decision (R. Bultmann), a homosexual magician opposed to the Law (M. Smith), a catalyst of non-violent social revolution (R.A. Horsley), or a charismatic man who founded a movement of spiritual revitalisation (M.J. Borg), to cite only some of the "necessary explanations" that their respective authors claim integrate all the data they regard as historical.

first century or in the theological or liturgical needs of the post-Easter Christian community is more likely to originate with Jesus himself.

This criterion is nevertheless subject to criticism and methodological limitations, as already noted in discussing Käsemann's use of it. First, our knowledge of Second Temple Judaism is incomplete, and what appears "discontinuous" today may have been entirely consistent with currents of Judaism unknown to us. Moreover, the criterion tends to privilege rupture and novelty, risking the isolation of Jesus from his environment and the artificial amplification of his uniqueness, thereby distorting his actual historical location within the Jewish world.

3.6. The Criterion of Multiple Attestation

This criterion rests on the premise that a saying or event attributed to Jesus is more likely to be authentic if attested in several independent sources. If the same content recurs in distinct traditions—that is, traditions not dependent upon one another—it is less likely to represent a later invention or redactional construction and more plausibly originates in Jesus's historical ministry. A significant example is the proclamation of the kingdom of God, found in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 4:26-34; Luke 17:20-24; Matt. 10:7), in the Gospel of John, albeit in different vocabulary (John 3:3-5), and echoed in several Pauline letters (1 Cor. 15:50; Rom. 14:17). The appearance of so central a theme in different literary and theological settings strengthens the hypothesis that it formed a central axis of Jesus's preaching rather than a later elaboration.

Like the other historical criteria, however, this one offers no absolute guarantees: an element may have been disseminated and adopted by several communities for theological, liturgical, or missionary reasons without originating directly with Jesus. The actual independence of the sources must also be assessed. Matthew and Luke, for example, are not regarded as independent of Mark; their common attestation in all three Synoptics does not in itself constitute multiple attestation. The criterion therefore does not prove authenticity, but strengthens historical plausibility, particularly when applied in conjunction with other criteria, such as discontinuity or coherence, within a critical and contextualised reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

3.7. The Criterion of Coherence

The criterion of coherence is used to assess sayings or actions of Jesus which, although they do not independently satisfy other criteria, are consistent with material already judged authentic on the basis of stronger criteria, such as discontinuity, embarrassment, or multiple attestation. In other words, if a saying attributed to Jesus corresponds in content, tone, style, or theological intention with material already regarded as historically plausible, it too may be considered likely to be authentic. The criterion has the advantage of expanding the corpus of words and deeds historically attributable to Jesus, permitting a richer and more coherent reconstruction of his message. If the proclamation of the kingdom of God is considered authentic, for example, parables or *logia* expressing its dynamics or values may also be accepted as consistent with the original core of his preaching.

Coherence is not, however, independently probative and has evident structural limitations. Its validity depends entirely on the solidity of the initial material employed as its foundation: if this "authentic core" is fragile or the product of questionable assumptions, the criterion risks confirming and reinforcing a distorted or ideological image of Jesus in a self-referential vicious circle. Coherence therefore functions as a second-order criterion, useful for confirming or extending what has already been identified, but insufficient by itself to ground a judgement of historicity. Its effectiveness increases when integrated into a multilateral approach capable of combining several criteria critically and contextually.

3.8. The Criterion of Rejection and Execution

Although it does not directly establish the authenticity of individual sayings or episodes, this criterion rests on the premise that Jesus's crucifixion is a historically plausible fact requiring a historical explanation. It therefore invites us to ask which of Jesus's words, gestures, or attitudes might have provoked so hostile a reaction from the Jewish religious authorities and Roman power as to lead to his death sentence. From this perspective, an image of Jesus as meek, purely spiritual, or devoid of social and political significance is insufficient to explain the dramatic outcome of his life. The historicity of the crucifixion implies that Jesus must in some way have represented a threat to the established order: both to Jewish religious leaders, who may have perceived him as a danger to the theological and institutional equilibrium, and to Roman authorities, who probably regarded him as a potential subversive. The derisive title "King of the Jews" under which he is said to have been crucified appears to confirm as much.⁴⁷

This criterion accordingly directs research towards those elements of the Gospel tradition most consistent with a public life marked by tension with the dominant institutions. Jesus's symbolic gestures—such as his messianic entry into Jerusalem or the cleansing of the Temple—may, for example, be read as provocative and destabilising acts capable of generating an escalation that culminated in his arrest and execution. Similarly, the apocalyptic tone of his preaching, the proclamation of an imminent kingdom, and his autonomous authority in reinterpreting the Law may have elicited powerful reactions in a highly sensitive political and religious context.

In sum, the criterion of rejection and execution does not confirm the authenticity of individual traditions. It functions instead as a historical-contextual criterion, reminding us that the historical Jesus must have been a disquieting and divisive figure capable of attracting the hostility that ultimately caused his execution.

3.9. Historical Plausibility

Building on the criteria set out above, Theissen and Merz offer a critical reassessment, particularly of the criterion of discontinuity, which they regard as excessively rigid and reductive. They argue that it may more usefully be replaced by the criterion of historical plausibility, a more flexible principle capable of encompassing both Jesus's position within the Judaism of his time and his historical impact on the emergence of Christianity. This approach rests on the idea that the historical Jesus should be regarded neither as wholly alien to his cultural environment nor as a mere product of the expectations of the post-Easter community. Jesus plausibly emerged from within first-century Judaism and at the same time produced a historical impact sufficient to give rise to a new religious movement. In this sense, a historical figure differs from an invented or idealised one because that figure is conceivable within its historical context and can be recognised through the documentable effects it generated—namely, the sources that preserve its memory. Thus understood, the criterion of historical plausibility has two complementary variants, operating along distinct axes of inquiry: relationship to context and effects produced.

Historical plausibility in relation to context. From this perspective, material in the Jesus tradition is more likely to be authentic when it fits positively and coherently within its contemporary Jewish environment. A saying or gesture of Jesus is historically plausible if it is consistent with the culture, religiosity, practices, and tensions of first-century Judaism, as well as with the social and political dynamics of the age. This does not mean that Jesus could not have come into conflict with his environment; ancient Judaism was thoroughly familiar with charismatic and prophetic figures who advanced radical internal critiques. For such criticism to be historically grounded, however, its full participation in intra-Jewish debate must be demonstrated. Gospel tradition must in this sense be assessed for its contextual plausibility. An emblematic example is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), in which Jesus presents a Samaritan—Samaritans were traditionally despised by observant Jews because their

⁴⁷ On Jesus's crucifixion and death, see A. Destro - M. Pesce, *La morte di Gesù. Indagine su un mistero*, Rizzoli, Milan 2014.

worship was separated from Jerusalem—as a model of compassion, in contrast to the coldness of a priest and a Levite. The choice is historically plausible because hostility between Jews and Samaritans is well documented (see also John 4:9), while the conduct of the two representatives of Jewish worship is intelligible in light of purity rules prohibiting contact with blood or corpses. Although provocative, the parable is not anachronistic; it is consistent with a setting in which internal criticism and the paradoxical use of religious figures were established rhetorical forms.

The historical plausibility of the effects produced by Jesus. This second variant of the criterion considers the historical consequences generated by Jesus. Traditions whose form, content, or symbolic force can be interpreted as a direct result of Jesus's impact on his disciples and the nascent community are accordingly regarded as plausible. The tradition of the cross is again paradigmatic. As already observed in relation to the criterion of embarrassment, crucifixion was a Roman punishment reserved for slaves, rebels, and persons regarded as dangerous to public order. It was considered an ignominious death and therefore constituted an obstacle to the proclamation of the faith. Had Jesus not actually been crucified, his followers—in a context of strong Jewish opposition and pagan distrust—would scarcely have chosen the cross as the central symbol of their faith. This fact, also attested by independent sources, confirms the historicity of the event and shows how a profoundly counter-intuitive tradition could have arisen only as the consequence of a real event, rather than as an *ex post* construction.

So formulated, the criterion of historical plausibility does not entirely replace the traditional criteria, but integrates them within a more dynamic and contextualised perspective capable of holding together belonging and originality, continuity and novelty, context and effect.

4. Historical Knowability and the Reassessment of Method

4.1. Is Historical Inquiry into Jesus Really Possible?

The preliminary question is methodological and concerns the very nature of the historical reconstruction of Jesus. Contemporary scholarship navigates between two demands that are difficult to reconcile: recognising the distinctive character of sources that arose within communities of belief, while preventing that distinctiveness from turning Jesus into an object exempt from the ordinary procedures of historical knowledge. The task is therefore not to devise a “special” methodology, but to apply the discipline’s ordinary tools with particular rigour: source criticism, philological analysis, comparison among traditions, archaeological evidence, and contextual plausibility.

It is at this methodological juncture—the possibility of studying Jesus with the ordinary tools of historical research while accounting for the distinctive nature of the sources—that the recent contribution of the Spanish scholar Fernando Bermejo-Rubio assumes particular significance.⁴⁸ His position, to which we now turn, may be summarised as follows: if Jesus is historically knowable, he must be examined like any other figure from the past. A method reserved specifically for the Nazarene would otherwise risk adopting an emic perspective from the outset, allowing the uniqueness proclaimed by religious tradition to determine the choice of analytical tools even before the sources have been examined.

As explained in the preceding sections, the field of application is exceptionally difficult in this instance. The ancient sources relating to Jesus are so uncertain and fragmentary that they have even nourished the so-called “mythicist” current, according to which Jesus never existed but was wholly invented by the earliest Christian communities in order to legitimise their faith.⁴⁹ Although this position is substantially rejected by the academic community, mythicism retains an indirect utility: it forces scholars to state explicitly which evidence makes the hypothesis of Jesus’s existence the more economical explanation and prevents scholarly consensus from becoming an argument from authority.

Between the wholesale rejection of the evidence and its uncritical acceptance lies the space of historical minimalism: an approach that renounces absolute certainty, distinguishes degrees of probability, and evaluates the sources with full awareness of both their limitations and their potential. The expression denotes a much broader requirement of contemporary scholarship: Jesus’s historicity should neither be postulated nor excluded *a priori*, but argued as the most plausible historical hypothesis.

It is not possible here to examine in detail the merits of the objections advanced against the mythicist thesis. It is enough to observe that, despite the absence of definitive proof of Jesus’s historical existence, the hypothesis that he actually existed remains the most probable. It is conceptually simpler to accept the existence of a historical figure possessing the essential characteristics preserved in the sources than to suppose a complex mythological construction *ex nihilo* capable of producing so structured and enduring a movement. On this view, Occam’s razor favours a hypothesis that does not exclude historicity, without making any absolutist claim.⁵⁰

4.2. Towards a Critical Reassessment of Sources and Hermeneutical Criteria

Once the Nazarene’s historical accessibility is acknowledged, the discussion shifts to the relative value of the evidence. Paul’s letters are early, but provide little information about Jesus’s earthly life; the canonical Gospels are the principal narrative sources, but their theological and apologetic character requires a critical

⁴⁸ F. Bermejo-Rubio, *La invención de Jesús de Nazaret. Historia, ficción, historiografía*, Siglo XXI de España Editores, Madrid 2018, cited here from the Italian edition *L’invenzione di Gesù di Nazareth. Storia e finzione*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2021.

⁴⁹ Among the best-known contemporary representatives of this current, G.A. Wells offers in several works an effective synthesis of the principal mythicist arguments (see his *The Historicity of Jesus*, in R. J. Hoffmann - G. A. Larue (eds.), *Jesus in History and Myth*, Buffalo, New York 1986, pp. 27-45). The central elements of his position coalesce around a single conviction: the irrelevance or unreliability of the available documentation. The Gospels are said to be too late, interdependent, and permeated by legendary elements; the Pauline letters, although early, provide no concrete information about Jesus’s life; and the extra-Christian sources are too late and too heavily influenced by Christian narrative.

⁵⁰ Against the thesis of mythopoeic invention by the earliest Christians, the author aptly observes that it is precisely the fragmentary and contradictory character of the sources that tells against it: an invention would in all probability have produced much more homogeneous material.

reading; finally, the apocryphal texts cannot be rejected *a priori*, although their distance from the events and their literary elaboration often limit their reliability. The point is not to oppose “true” and “false” sources, but to distinguish, within each text, its strata, dependencies, and purposes. The most cautious assessment regards Paul as of limited use for biographical reconstruction and emphasises the theological character of the Gospels without excluding them from the inquiry.

A particularly controversial case is the *Testimonium Flavianum*, the famous passage in Josephus that mentions Jesus and has already been discussed. Bermejo-Rubio regards it as an interpolated text originally hostile to Jesus and emphasises the way in which its later Christian interpretation altered its meaning. The references in Tacitus and Pliny the Younger likewise appear to provide chiefly derivative information. Their value therefore lies not in incontrovertible proof of Jesus’s existence, but in external evidence that, by the first decades of the second century, communities already existed which invoked his name.

This reassessment also extends to the “criteria of authenticity” developed during the second half of the twentieth century. The more recent tendency is to demote them from rules capable of authenticating individual sayings to pieces of evidence that must be assessed cumulatively within an overall, contextually plausible reconstruction. The tension is evident: if the traditional tools produce no certainties, in what sense does Jesus remain historically knowable? One response is to replace atomistic authentication with an “evidential paradigm”, supplemented by the study of patterns of recurrence and by an index of difficulty—reformulations, respectively, of multiple attestation and embarrassment. Bermejo-Rubio has given this proposal a systematic formulation, stressing that these are heuristic devices: they do not authorise judgements of truth, but make it possible to grade the plausibility of competing reconstructions.

Following the publication of *La invención*, Bermejo-Rubio began to adopt a slightly different perspective, preferring to describe “embarrassing” material as “counter-discursive”. The change is plainly more than terminological; it reflects a deeper consideration of the criterion’s intrinsic limitation, namely its assumption that the evangelists could in some sense have felt “embarrassed” by the relevant material. Such a perspective attributes a subjective stance to the authors, yet it is doubtful that the evangelists were genuinely reticent about the accounts they included in their writings. Had they found a particular earlier tradition or account truly disturbing, they could often simply have omitted it. Whether or not the Gospel authors themselves perceived certain material as disturbing, the central point is instead that such material is difficult to reconcile with—and indeed may be objectively antithetical and contradictory to—the principal ideas they advocate. It should therefore be regarded as contrary to the redactional tendency or, in other words, as “counter-discursive”.⁵¹

The hermeneutical difficulty involved in reading the Gospels is further heightened by the presence of what Bermejo-Rubio terms “narrative steroids”:⁵² rhetorical and communicative constructs that the evangelists appear to have injected into their narratives in order to enable Jesus to compete with the mythological heroes of surrounding cultures. Only by pruning the texts of this surreptitious material would it be possible to reach the essence of the limited content that can genuinely be assigned historical plausibility. The crucifixion narratives once again provide an emblematic testing ground: they contain a substantial amount of fictional material, even though the fact that Jesus was actually crucified is one of the few elements of his biography that can be regarded as highly probable.

⁵¹ Thus the author in a paper entitled *Il coinvolgimento di Gesù e del suo gruppo nella resistenza ebraica antiromana. Anatomia e logica di un'ipotesi*, presented at the conference *Quale ebraicità di Gesù dopo J.P. Meier?*, organised by the Pontifical Faculty of Theology of Sicily and held in Palermo on 4 April 2025 (unpublished).

⁵² These narrative steroids may also include literary references in the Gospels to the Hebrew Bible and to other literary models available to the evangelists, including material from Homeric epic. In this context, the author invokes the work of D. R. MacDonald (*Mythologizing Jesus. From Jewish Teacher [cited as “preacher”] through a lapsus calami in the bibliography of Bermejo-Rubio’s work] to Epic Hero*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham-London 2015). See also MacDonald’s later *Synopses of Epic, Tragedy, and the Gospels*, 3 vols., Mimesis Press, Claremont 2022, in which the American scholar explores the textual mimesis of the Gospels in greater depth. In my view, an especially interesting question raised by this research concerns the function these metaliterary insertions were intended to perform for the evangelists. These were references which, we may reasonably assume, many readers of Hellenistic culture would at least have recognised. They therefore could not have served a purely apologetic purpose or simply exalted Jesus, since the literary construction risked being readily perceptible. Far from being mere rhetorical strategies, these allusions may instead have been devices intended to bridge the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds, adapting Jesus for a broader audience able to recognise and appreciate them without necessarily regarding them as artificial. This was the first step in a magnificent intellectual construction which, irrespective of faith, would develop over the following centuries.

5. The Crucifixion and Its Political-Eschatological Dimension

The crucifixion is both one of the most secure data and one of the most demanding problems in the field. A Roman punishment reserved especially for slaves, rebels, and those who threatened public order necessarily raises the question of the political dimension of Jesus's career. This line of inquiry is not new: from Reimarus and Brandon to Horsley and other recent interpreters of Palestinian Judaism, conflict with imperial rule has been regarded as an indispensable element of historical contextualisation.⁵³

Within this current, Bermejo-Rubio offers a particularly systematic formulation. He analyses the Gospel narratives of the crucifixion, identifies their inconsistencies and later reinterpretations, but regards the historical core of the Roman execution as highly probable.

Why, then, did the Roman authorities crucify this unknown Jewish preacher, condemning him to so inhuman and abhorrent a punishment? As emerged in the discussion of one of Meier's criteria, the significance of the sentence is such that it may itself serve as a hermeneutical criterion for examining the sources: Jesus had very probably become the bearer of a message perceived as at least anti-systemic, politically and probably also religiously. Bermejo-Rubio's proposal radicalises this inference: death at Roman hands can be explained only by positing an openly anti-Roman content in Jesus's preaching.⁵⁴

The absence of explicitly anti-Roman material from the Gospels must nevertheless be explained. One recurring explanation invokes the need of the young Christian community to preserve its physical and spiritual survival. In other words, allowing an openly anti-Roman message to be transmitted would have been fatal to the earliest Christian communities: any manifesto or explicit declaration to that effect would have condemned them to immediate extinction. It is precisely this need for historical survival that explains the Gospels' silence⁵⁵ or caution towards Roman imperial power. Nor, in the present author's view, would it suffice to object that this conclusion contradicts the presence of "compromising" elements in the Gospel narrative on which the criterion of embarrassment is based. Restated, the objection might run as follows: if the evangelists already included "uncomfortable" elements, including death on the cross itself, why would they have omitted anti-Roman references? What was at stake here, however, was not merely the transmissibility of a message potentially embarrassing to post-Easter faith, but the very survival of the communities elaborating that message. Openly anti-Roman content would not simply have caused theological embarrassment; it might have attracted immediate and violent repression, making the physical continuity of those communities impossible.⁵⁶

The sociopolitical dimension of Jesus's message thus gives the figure a historical verisimilitude which the content of the Gospels alone could not establish with equal force. What emerges from this current is Jesus as an apocalyptic visionary deeply embedded in the Judaism of his age, the bearer of a royal-messianic claim probably connected with a more or less implicit form of anti-Roman resistance. On this account, he was not simply an ethical reformer or spiritual teacher, but a complex figure whose mission occupied the

⁵³ See S.G.F. Brandon, *Gesù e gli Zeloti. Il cristianesimo sovversivo prima di Paolo*, Pgreco, Rome 2014; R.A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence. Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993; and A. Destro - M. Pesce, *La morte di Gesù. Indagine su un mistero*, Rizzoli, Milan 2014. All these studies are duly cited in Bermejo-Rubio's work.

⁵⁴ The work under examination brings to maturity a cycle of studies Bermejo-Rubio has devoted to Jesus, reflecting in particular on the political content of his teaching, which, as noted in the text, appears to provide the author with the true explanation for the crucifixion. See especially F. Bermejo-Rubio, *The Fiction of the "Three Quests": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historiographical Paradigm*, in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 7 (2009), 211-253; Id., *Jesus and the Anti-Roman Resistance. A Reassessment of the Arguments*, in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12 (2014), 1-105; and Id., *Jesus as a Seditious: The Intertwining of Politics and Religion in His Teaching and Deeds*, in Z. Garber (ed.), *Teaching the Historical Jesus*, Routledge, New York 2014, 242-253. In these earlier contributions, Bermejo-Rubio already presents several principal arguments in support of the hypothesis that Jesus was involved in anti-Roman resistance: the presence of a coherent pattern of evidence within the New Testament; the strong explanatory power of the hypothesis constructed in light of that pattern; the absence of a convincing unifying alternative and the artificial character of the fragmentary approaches proposed instead; and the fact that every objection raised against the hypothesis can be effectively refuted. For further work on the subject published after *La invención*, see F. Bermejo-Rubio, R. Carrier, and F. Tommasi, *Gesù resistente Gesù inesistente. Due visioni a confronto*, Manni, San Cesario di Lecce 2022; F. Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered Under Pontius Pilate: Jewish Anti-Roman Resistance and the Crosses at Golgotha*, Fortress Academic, Lanham 2023. The author recently returned to the subject in the aforementioned paper *Il coinvolgimento di Gesù*.

⁵⁵ Although we accept the thesis, an important weakness should not be overlooked: it seeks to derive meaning not from the presence of something, but from its absence—namely, the absence of anti-Roman literary content.

⁵⁶ This reflection must of course be situated within the broader question of persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, which remains controversial, including as regards the reciprocal attitudes of the earliest Christian communities and the Roman authorities. On this subject, see C. Moss, *The Myth of Persecution. How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, HarperOne, San Francisco 2013.

boundary between eschatological messianism and political-religious opposition to the prevailing imperial order. Taken to its furthest conclusion, this line of interpretation suggests that the preaching of the “Kingdom of God” was not (only) a spiritual proclamation, but a concrete aspiration towards the political transformation of Israel.

The royal-messianic language attributed to Jesus in the Gospels might therefore reflect a political claim rather than a later invention. Gospel episodes including the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the incident in the Temple, and the arrest at Gethsemane are accordingly read as indications that the Roman authorities perceived Jesus as a threat. Particularly incisive from this perspective is the analysis of the famous injunction, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25; Matt. 22:21). Bermejo-Rubio contends that the saying in fact carries a meaning diametrically opposed to the one traditionally assigned to it. It appears to suggest a clear separation between the religious and political spheres and, more specifically, to acknowledge the obligation to pay tribute to the Roman authorities, a crucial issue in the administration of the provinces. Yet in Bermejo-Rubio’s reading, the public character of the declaration itself reveals its dissembling nature: for Jesus, mindful of the profound meaning of the שמע ישראל,⁵⁷ everything belongs to God and nothing to Caesar. The meaning ordinarily attributed to the saying is thus radically overturned.

Methodological caution must again be preserved, however. The proposed interpretation risks being influenced in turn by a prior assumption: starting from the premise that Jesus’s message was intrinsically political, the analysis may overturn the text’s literal meaning in order to bring it into line with the initial hypothesis. The anti-Roman reading is possible and suggestive; that alone does not make it necessary.⁵⁸

A part of contemporary historiography—including scholars who profess openness to a critical and historically grounded reading of Jesus—still tends to neglect, minimise, or entirely disregard textual sources and arguments that might support the hypothesis that the Nazarene espoused an openly nationalist vision. This suppression, conscious or otherwise, is especially significant because recognising such a political-religious orientation would require a radical reassessment of the traditional image of Jesus, so often portrayed as a universal ethical preacher indifferent to the sociopolitical dynamics of his age.

Paradoxically, the crucifixion itself, among the most certain events of Jesus’s biography, is rarely examined in its full historical and political significance. A further, often underestimated element is the collective nature of the execution: Jesus was not put to death alone, but alongside at least two other condemned men. The Gospel tradition identifies them as “robbers” or “bandits” (λησται), terminology which, in light of first-century conditions, may denote not ordinary criminals but anti-Roman rebels; in imperial usage, the term often served as a synonym for armed insurrection. Yet exegetical and theological literature generally ignores this circumstance or reduces it to a secondary detail useful only for reinforcing the redemptive solitude of the crucified Christ. A clear and coherent historical reconstruction therefore suggests that the collective, political, and nationalist dimension of Jesus’s message, with its eschatological and subversive implications, represented the true reason for his death sentence. The event would then be not a spiritual martyrdom in some generic sense, but the violent elimination of a figure perceived as dangerous to Roman order and to local religious equilibria. Recognising this dimension does not deny the concurrent theological significance of Jesus’s message; it instead grounds him historically and restores the theological, political, and symbolic complexity that made him an object of controversy from the time of his earliest interpreters.

As a whole, this reading produces an intelligible configuration of Jesus by anchoring him in first-century Judaism and bringing him into proximity with defined contemporary figures such as John the Baptist, Hillel, and Judas the Galilean. A methodological principle of broader application follows: any study

⁵⁷ “*Shema Yisrael*” (“Hear, O Israel”) is the opening invocation of one of Judaism’s most important prayers. Found in Deut. 6:4-9, it constitutes a foundational profession of faith in the oneness of God and is recited daily by observant Jews.

⁵⁸ We respectfully observe that the author’s interpretation risks being influenced in turn by an underlying assumption. Starting from the premise that Jesus’s message was intrinsically political, the analysis ultimately overturns even the literal meaning of the text under discussion and reinterprets it in light of an initial hypothesis that may not necessarily be true.

which, while acknowledging in Jesus a certain irreducible specificity—one also found in other personalities of the age—seeks to turn him into a radically unique object of inquiry passes beyond the bounds of historical research into mystification. Jesus can be understood only as part of a collective project in which messianic elements converged with political and religious aspirations.

6. From Death to Memory: Psychology, Culture, and Judaism

6.1. The Reinterpretation of Jesus

Any reconstruction of the fundamental features of Jesus's biography leads to a second question: through what processes was his figure reinterpreted in the decades following his death? Here historical research encounters the sociology of religion, studies of collective memory, and—with greater caution—group psychology. The crucifixion might have appeared to mark the failure of the movement's expectations; its survival nevertheless required a process of reinterpretation, selection, and transmission.

Within this wider field of study, Bermejo-Rubio applies several mechanisms proposed by social psychology to Jesus's earliest followers: cognitive dissonance—the attempt to preserve consistency between belief and reality even when confronted by traumatic events such as the teacher's arrest and crucifixion—the collective reworking of grief, and the selection and transformation of communal memory.

Jesus's original message, rooted in an apocalyptic perspective and probably directed towards an imminent political and religious transformation, was thereby transfigured into a salvific narrative that shifted the plane of action from the historical to the eschatological and theological. Historical defeat was interpreted as necessary to the fulfilment of a divine design, and death was invested with a redemptive meaning that, in the disciples' eyes, legitimised and ennobled failure.

Rather than dissolving in the face of defeat and the teacher's crucifixion, the group reinterpreted the event and assigned it a new meaning. Bermejo-Rubio's reconstruction identifies several dynamics: selective forgetting (aspects of Jesus's life and activity were forgotten or suppressed because they were inconvenient or incompatible with the new interpretation); the derashic hermeneutical reinterpretation⁵⁹ of Jewish Scripture (the search for meaning in contemporary events in light of the content of the Book); and the spiritualisation of the mission (the original message, with its political implications, was progressively depoliticised in order to adapt it to a later context). Jesus's memory was thus shaped through processes of collective selection and reinterpretation. The discovery of the empty tomb and the post-Easter appearances fall within this scheme: they were not historical events, but narratives constructed, substantially in good faith, to respond to the crisis and strengthen the community of followers. Bermejo-Rubio does not entirely exclude the possibility of deception (the *Priestertrug*, or priestly fraud denounced by Reimarus), but regards this interpretation as reductive and insufficiently persuasive to offer a plausible explanation for the genesis of a new religious phenomenon of such magnitude.

Methodologically, this entails a refusal to treat post-Easter theological readings as immediately valid keys to reconstructing the historical Jesus. The reinterpretation of Jesus's death as a vicarious, expiatory, and salvific event is considered not an original datum, nor the product of the Nazarene's messianic-divine self-consciousness, but the result of an *ex post* process of resignification developed in response to the dissonance caused by the failure of his earthly mission. Post-Easter theological readings must accordingly be understood also as later constructions—creative and culturally situated responses to a period of crisis⁶⁰—rather than as reliable sources for understanding the preaching and self-understanding of the historical Jesus. Only by suspending such readings, or at least subjecting them to critical relativisation, does a historiographically meaningful reconstruction become possible.

The final outcome of this long process—which included psychosocial mechanisms, phases of dehistoricisation, the reworking of ancient traditions,⁶¹ and bio(theo)graphical strategies—was therefore

⁵⁹ From the Hebrew "*darash*": "to seek", "to examine", "to study", "to analyse".

⁶⁰ A possible reference may be discerned here to G. Vermes's proposal that, as discussed above, the earliest Christian community reworked the trauma of Jesus's death in terms of salvific expectation, through mental processes not greatly dissimilar from those identified by Bermejo-Rubio.

⁶¹ Of particular interest is Bermejo-Rubio's extended discussion of vicarious death in Greco-Roman culture. In a courteous exchange of correspondence with the author, he referred me in particular to his *El concepto de muerte vicaria en el mundo grecorromano y su influencia en la primera reflexión cristiana sobre la muerte de Jesús de Nazaret*, in *Studia Philologica Valentina* 17 (2018), 47-72. The article examines the presence of vicarious death in the Greco-Roman context and its possible influence upon early Christian reflection on Jesus's death. Bermejo-Rubio emphasises that, although the concept also

to transform a defeated apocalyptic visionary into a deity. In my view, this interpretation is certainly suggestive, but suffers from a significant limitation: it is not verifiable. The very interior and psychological data concerning the earliest Christian communities that would enable us to determine whether they actually experienced cognitive dissonance or similar processes are irretrievably inaccessible. The interpretation also assumes that modern insights into the psychology of contemporary human beings are directly applicable to first-century Palestine.

6.2. Recovering the Cultural Horizon

Posthumous reinterpretation did not occur in a vacuum. To make it intelligible, it is necessary to recover the religious and cultural environment of the ancient Mediterranean, in which narrative, scriptural, and ritual models circulated that could confer meaning upon suffering, the death of the righteous, and glorification. This orientation, shared by a range of studies on Christian origins, avoids both apologetic isolation and reductionism.

Jesus's death and subsequent divinisation should not be interpreted as a historical *hapax*—an absolutely isolated or unprecedented event—but as outcomes consistent with religious and cultural conceptions already present and widely shared in the ancient world. The idea that the death of a righteous or exceptional person could possess salvific or expiatory significance is widely attested in Israelite religious tradition. In examining the concept of vicarious death, Bermejo-Rubio invokes symbolic figures and narratives such as the sacrifice of Isaac, Yom Kippur, and the death of the righteous Eleazar in the Books of the Maccabees, all of which express the idea of a death that redeems, purifies, or strengthens the covenant with God.

The comparison is not confined to the Jewish sphere. It extends also to the Greco-Roman world, where numerous cults and mystery religions—from myths of deified heroes to emperor worship—contained similar narrative and symbolic structures: suffering, violent death, and posthumous glorification. Viewed in this light, the exaltation of Jesus is not anomalous, but forms part of a broad and complex symbolic landscape in which the distinction between human and divine was more fluid and permeable than is often supposed.

This context also requires a reassessment of the claim, often repeated in theology, that the divinisation of Jesus constituted a radical rupture with contemporary Jewish monotheism. His posthumous exaltation can instead be understood within a religious and cultural environment in which the distinction between human and divine was neither rigid nor impermeable. Both the Greco-Roman world and Second Temple Judaism admitted, albeit in different forms, the possibility that exceptional human figures—prophets, sovereigns, and persecuted righteous persons—might attain some form of glorification or participation in the divine.

The criticism is therefore directed also at the traditional theological view that projects onto ancient Judaism an absolute and closed monotheism resembling the dogmatic form defined in later centuries. Jewish monotheism in fact coexisted with fluid conceptions of the relationship between God and humanity, in which divine intervention in history could be embodied through heavenly agents, messiahs, personified wisdom, or “semi-divine” figures. On this account, the divinisation of Jesus was not an anomaly, but a possible internal development within a religious system already open to flexible interpretations of the sacred and of divine power.

It should nevertheless be stressed that the framework challenged by this criticism is not uniform. The view that Israelite religion was monolatrous in its earliest phases and that exclusive monotheism emerged only progressively has been authoritatively defended by Mark S. Smith and John Day. Israelite faith did not arise in stark opposition to the Canaanite context, but also through a gradual process of differentiation. The fluidity of the relationship between human and divine is therefore not an external discovery imposed

existed in Judaism, it was far more widespread and conspicuous in the Hellenistic world, thereby increasing the likelihood that it influenced the way Jesus's followers interpreted his death.

on the study of Judaism, but a problem already internal to the historical reconstruction of Israelite religion.⁶²

This picture is further enriched by beliefs widespread throughout the Mediterranean concerning the immortalisation of the body, the posthumous deification of kings, heroes, or religious founders, and continuity between the earthly and celestial worlds. Together, these elements created a cultural horizon within which Jesus's divinisation, far from appearing surprising or inexplicable, becomes fully intelligible.

Understanding the process of Jesus's exaltation and divinisation therefore requires more than analysis of his followers' psychological or sociological conditions. It is indispensable to take account of the cultural codes deeply rooted in Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions. Only by recovering this complex and stratified background can historical coherence be restored to one of the most decisive transitions in the emergence of Christianity.

6.3. Jesus's Jewishness

Within this same context, the question of Jesus's Jewishness assumes profound significance.

Despite the continuing proliferation of both academic and popular works that treat the de-Judaisation of Jesus almost as a self-evident and undisputed premise, serious historical analysis cannot dispense with recognition of his full belonging to the Judaism of his age. The tendency to detach Jesus from his Jewish matrix has deep roots in the post-Easter Christian tradition, where theological elaboration often drove a progressive "Christianisation" of Jesus, transforming him into a figure almost alien to the historical and cultural setting in which he lived and acted. In some cases, this operation amounted to a genuine dispossession of identity, designed radically to distinguish the "Christ of faith" from the historical Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the most extreme and ideologically violent expressions of this tendency occurred under Nazism, when certain sectors of German theology—although Chamberlain's contribution should not be forgotten—promoted, in conformity with the regime's ideology, a project to "Aryanise" Jesus and sever every connection with Judaism. In this setting, Jesus was presented as the anti-Jew *par excellence*, a spiritual precursor of Aryan identity employed to provide religious justification for antisemitism. Besides being historically unfounded, this ideological distortion shows the extent to which the face of Jesus has been—and continues to be—a terrain of symbolic conflict and identity construction.

It is now widely recognised by the most discerning scholars, however, that Jesus's thought, words, and actions can be properly understood only by situating him within the diverse landscape of first-century Judaism, with its various currents, internal tensions, and eschatological expectations. Jesus was Jewish not only ethnically but also, and above all, religiously: his preaching, practices, scriptural references, and the controversies in which he was involved demonstrate an intimate familiarity with Mosaic law, prophetic tradition, and the theological disputes of his day. His language, parables, and conceptions of the Kingdom of God and divine justice find parallels and roots in the religious and cultural heritage of Second Temple Judaism. Any attempt to isolate Jesus from that context—whether by casting him as a precursor of Christianity in an anachronistic sense or even as an opponent of Judaism—is not only historiographically unsound, but also risks fostering theological misunderstandings and, ultimately, ideological distortions. Only by fully reclaiming Jesus's Jewishness can his historical depth and internal coherence be restored against the erasures produced by distorting or decontextualising approaches. In this sense, the historical understanding of Jesus necessarily requires full recognition of his Jewish rootedness, without which his

⁶² Here too, however, it should be stressed that the framework against which the Spanish author argues is not so uniform. The view that Israelite religion in its earliest phases was characterised by a monolatrous cult—in which Yahweh was worshipped as the principal god among many—and that an exclusively monotheistic conception emerged only progressively has been authoritatively defended, among others, by M. S. Smith. In *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2002; first edition 1990), Smith argues that Israelite faith did not arise in sharp opposition to the Canaanite religious setting, but developed at least in part from within it. Far from representing a radical break with surrounding pagan cults, Israelite religion emerged through a gradual process of differentiation intended to construct a separate identity, rather than simply to reject the cults of others. See also J. Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 2002.

figure becomes opaque, unintelligible, or—worse still—moulded according to categories alien to the reality of his age.

All of this must, of course, be acknowledged. Yet precisely because Jesus's Jewishness is now a well-established finding of historical research, it is no longer useful to present it each time as a polemical discovery. If it is still possible to speak of "de-Judaisation", this applies chiefly to popular discourse or narrow confessional settings. Academic reflection must avoid confusing critical debate with identity-based or apologetic polemic. The more promising question is no longer whether Jesus was Jewish, but what concrete form his Jewishness assumed within the pluralism of the first century, and how a progressively distinct movement developed from that matrix.⁶³

⁶³ All this must of course be acknowledged. Yet, as Bermejo-Rubio himself explains in his work, Jesus's Jewishness is now a well-established finding of historical research and perhaps does not warrant such emphatic problematisation. If it is still possible to speak of "de-Judaisation", this occurs chiefly in popular discourse or narrow confessional settings, into which academic historical reflection should perhaps not intervene directly, lest critical debate be confused with identity-based or apologetic polemic.

7. New Lines of Research

The framework reconstructed thus far makes it possible to identify several conceptual nodes with particular heuristic potential: not definitive results, but promising fields of inquiry open to further development. Different approaches converge in this discussion, and are useful precisely because they render visible problems extending beyond the work of individual scholars.⁶⁴

In our view, five thematic areas are especially important.

7.1. The Mythicist Thesis as a Stress Test

The academic marginality of mythicism does not deprive it of methodological value. Treated as a theoretical challenge, it compels reflection on the limitations of the sources, the very definition of “historical evidence”, and the inferences through which the historicity of a figure from the past is established. Bermejo-Rubio rightly emphasises this stress-test function: not in order to rehabilitate mythicism, but to ensure that its rejection does not depend on unstated premises or on a historiographical profession of faith.

7.2. The Collective and Political Dimension of the Execution

The crucifixion is increasingly treated as the central event through which Jesus may be understood retrospectively. The shift in perspective—from “spiritual martyrdom” to “political sentence”—allows his death to be reinterpreted as the concrete consequence of activity perceived as subversive, not only theologically but also sociopolitically. The Roman execution is thus placed within a historical dynamic involving not only Jesus but also his relationships with disciples, opponents, and constituted authorities, suggesting that Golgotha was the outcome of a collective and structural conflict. The idea that the crucifixion is the “keystone” for retrospectively interpreting the Nazarene’s public mission finds echoes in several recent readings and contributes to the resemantisation of Christianity’s foundational moment. Bermejo-Rubio has helped sharpen this line of inquiry by insisting on both the collective character of Golgotha and the historical significance of the two *lēstai* crucified with Jesus.

7.3. Jesus as a Visionary with Anti-Roman Implications

Closely connected to the preceding theme is the comparison of the historical Jesus with first-century prophetic-messianic movements, often animated by eschatological tensions and anti-Roman impulses. Particular weight is assigned to the so-called “Fourth Philosophy”, the group described by Josephus as heir to the thought of Judas the Galilean. These circles were distinguished by radical opposition to Roman occupation, refusal of tribute, and the affirmation of God’s exclusive sovereignty. The comparison does not require identifying Jesus with these movements; it serves rather to test whether, in that context, the kingdom of God he proclaimed could have been perceived as an alternative of radical sovereignty to imperial rule. Bermejo-Rubio stresses ideological proximity without proposing that Jesus belonged directly to the “Fourth Philosophy”. The resulting profile—an eschatological visionary with a potentially subversive charge—gives his preaching firmer historical roots and greater political density.

The particular currency of this issue was confirmed by the conference *Quale ebraicità di Gesù dopo J. P. Meier?* (“What Jewishness for Jesus after J. P. Meier?”), held in Palermo on 4 April 2025. In his paper *L’esperienza di rivelazione in Gesù* (“Jesus’s Experience of Revelation”), Enrico Norelli explored the possibility that Jesus underwent experiences he perceived as visionary or ecstatic and that these formed the basis of his self-understanding as a central figure in the imminent advent of the kingdom of God. This

⁶⁴ See P.C. Díaz, *Bermejo-Rubio, Fernando: La invención de Jesús de Nazaret. Historia, ficción, historiografía*, in *Studia Historica. Historia Antigua* 37 (2019), 350-356; J. Vidal Palomino, *F. Bermejo-Rubio, La invención de Jesús de Nazaret. Historia, ficción, historiografía*, in *Historiae. Grup d’Estudis Historiogràfics* 2019 (16), 127-129; A. Annese, *Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, La invención de Jesús de Nazaret. Historia, ficción, historiografía*, in *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 86 (2020), 405-411; A. Nicolotti, *Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, La invención de Jesús de Nazaret: Historia, ficción, historiografía, Madrid, Siglo XXI, 2018*, in *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 37 (2020), 575-579; H. R. Safa, *F. Bermejo-Rubio, La invención De Jesús De Nazaret. Historia, ficción, historiografía*, in *Revista Bíblica* 83 (2021), 224-231.

perspective confirms the paradigm of Jesus as an eschatological prophet, while shifting attention to the experiential and visionary dimension of his self-representation.⁶⁵

7.4. The Use of Psychological Concepts

Categories derived from cognitive science, social psychology, and memory studies can help to explain both the group's resilience after the crucifixion and the construction of the memory of Jesus. Cognitive dissonance is heuristically fruitful provided it does not become a retrospective diagnosis: without access to the first disciples' inner experience, it remains a comparative model rather than evidence.

7.5. The Cultural Framing of Christianity's Impact

Finally, Jesus's career must be situated within the cultural and religious setting of his age, avoiding both spiritualising tendencies and rationalistic simplifications. Christianity's impact appears as the result of a complex combination of factors: Jewish religious structures, forms of charismatic authority, visionary practices, codes of collective memory, and the possibilities of translation into the Hellenistic-Roman world. The analysis of vicarious death and processes of resignification provides useful material, but the question necessarily remains interdisciplinary and collective.

In our modest view, this field of study offers the greatest prospect of fully understanding a central point in the entire question under consideration. If the historical Jesus, once stripped of ideological superstructures, can be compared with "many other failed visionaries, of whom millenarian movements and the history of religions provide abundant examples",⁶⁶ it remains to be explained why Jesus alone, among all these figures, became the generative centre of a religious movement of universal scope while the others were absorbed into oblivion. In that process, a spark was kindled—a historical and symbolic trigger,⁶⁷ perhaps an anthropological one as well—which demands a broader perspective capable of encompassing the entire cultural horizon within which it arose.

⁶⁵ The contemporary relevance and importance of this theme was recently confirmed by papers presented at the aforementioned conference *Quale ebraicità di Gesù dopo J.P. Meier?* (Palermo, 4 April 2025). In his paper *L'esperienza di rivelazione in Gesù*, Enrico Norelli explored with particular rigour the origin and nature of Jesus's mystical and visionary experience. Norelli regards it as a legitimate possibility that Jesus underwent experiences he perceived as visionary or ecstatic and emphasises that these may have formed the basis of his self-understanding as a central figure in the imminent advent of the kingdom of God. This line confirms the validity of the paradigm of Jesus as an eschatological prophet, while devoting greater attention to the experiential and visionary dimension of his self-representation. It thus contributes to a more complex and nuanced view of Jesus, in a debate well suited to incorporating the innovative insights of Bermejo-Rubio's proposed paradigm.

⁶⁶ F. Bermejo-Rubio, *L'invenzione*, 463.

⁶⁷ As P. Ricoeur reminds us in *Le symbole donne à penser*, in *Esprit* 275 (1959), 60-76.

8. Conclusion: The Transition from Jesus to Christianity

The historiographical trajectory outlined in this article presents a field of inquiry still under construction: a critical laboratory in which Jesus of Nazareth has continually been tested, dismantled, and reassembled according to different tools and sensibilities. An examination of the successive “Quests”—from the first, positivist phase to the third, with its greater attention to the Jewish context—shows that historical research has never ceased to ask who the Nazarene truly was. It also reveals the extent to which the categories used to investigate him are inevitably products of the age that formulates them.

This long and complex process ultimately “sacrificed” the idea of Jesus as a historical *hapax*, an absolutely unique and unrepeatable figure. Some have regarded this as a loss. It is in this sense that we interpret the bitter observation of Marrou, the French historian of ancient Christianity: “Yes, Jesus existed; Jesus of Nazareth lived, acquired a reputation as a wonder-worker, died, and was believed to have risen again; and that is more or less everything. This was the outcome of 150 years of effort; what irony.”⁶⁸

On the other hand, this sustained critical labour has made it possible—or should make it possible—to rescue Jesus from the ideological and dogmatic readings that for centuries crystallised his image, and instead to restore him to the complexity of his age and the plurality of the voices surrounding him. This is not a *vulnus*, therefore, but a gain in historical awareness: recognising Jesus as a living part of a Jewish world traversed by religious, political, and apocalyptic ferment allows his transformative potential to be perceived more clearly. From this perspective, the inquiry does not end in the irony of failure; through fragmentation and uncertainty, it opens the possibility of understanding the extraordinary power of a message capable of enduring across the centuries.

Several decades ago, the theologian and biblical exegete Quinzio, reflecting with anguish on the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:8), asked why the Kingdom of God had still not appeared.⁶⁹ Had Christ not promised that it would come at once, even before his disciples died? If such was the despondency of a contemporary intellectual, we can appreciate how much more anguished must have been the bewilderment of the earliest Christian communities, dismayed by the death of their teacher and the failure of the eschatological promises to find immediate fulfilment. With appropriate reservations, we might therefore lend credence to Bermejo-Rubio’s psychological interpretation, which treats these processes as a possible key to understanding the internal dynamics and theological transformations of those groups as they sought to work through the trauma and give meaning to Jesus’s apparently scandalous end.

The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus was indeed imminent: some of his disciples would see it before they died (Mark 9:1). In light of this promise, we can understand the anguish of the earliest Christian communities which, having placed all their hope in their teacher, suddenly confronted his violent death and the failure of their eschatological expectations to be immediately fulfilled. The apparent falsification of Jesus’s words contained not only a theological crisis but a profound collective trauma, which necessarily initiated a process of reworking and redefining the original promises. Interpretations based on cognitive dissonance thus offer a possible key to the transformation of those groups; they nevertheless remain analogical models that must be integrated with the history of memory, scriptural exegesis, and the analysis of communal practices.

Notwithstanding this apparent failure—or, more accurately, this unresolved tension—Christianity proved to be an intellectual and cultural construction of exceptional power. No single cause can explain it. Eschatological preaching, the possible political significance of the Kingdom, the violence of the Roman sentence, post-Easter experiences, group memory, the rereading of Scripture, and the encounter with Hellenistic-Roman cultural codes must all be brought into dialogue.

⁶⁸ H.-I. Marrou, *La conoscenza storica*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1969, XV.

⁶⁹ S. Quinzio, *La sconfitta di Dio*, Adelphi, Milan 1992.

After centuries of questioning and reinterpretation, Jesus of Nazareth emerges not as a solved enigma but as a point of convergence among memory, faith, and critical inquiry. The task that remains is not only to restore him to his age and cultural frames of reference, but to understand why this particular memory, born in the shadow of a sentence and an apparently disappointed expectation, acquired a historical force capable of traversing the centuries.

Gabriele Capecchi

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