

Class 2a

# WHO WAS JESUS? THE FIRST CRITICAL QUESTIONS

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## Outline

- Reformation & Enlightenment Background
- The First Quest
  - H. S. Reimarus
  - D. F. Strauss
  - 2 dominant trends
  - Collapse of the First Quest
    - W. Wrede
    - A. Schweitzer
    - [Aryan Jesus during Third Reich]
    - R. Bultmann

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# REFORMATION & ENLIGHTENMENT BACKGROUND

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## Origins of the Quest

in the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648)

- Protestant concern to cast off later “tradition” and return to scripture
- Optimism about textual reliability
- An impetus to return to Christian origins for norms of faith

*All of this contributes to a concern to “recover” a “true” Jesus*

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## Origins of the Quest

in the Enlightenment (1650–1800)

- Rules of scientific proof began to replace authoritative tradition or pronouncements as appropriate warrants for truth claims
- Application to scripture: Texts, even religious ones, could no longer simply be accepted at face value. Their truth claims about Jesus would have to be evaluated by the same criteria of proof we use in other venues (science, courts, etc.).

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## Enlightenment Challenges

- A new sense of history
- Impact of religious controversies and wars
- The new astronomy
- Voyages of discovery
- Limits of reliable knowledge

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## THE FIRST QUEST

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### The First Quest

H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768)

*The Wolfenbützel Fragments* (published posthumously by G. E. Lessing)



- Preaching of Jesus is not the apostles' faith
- Jesus' preaching can only be understood within the context of Judaism
- Jesus' message was about politics, but the apostles' message was about salvation; this was a willful deception by Jesus' followers

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### The First Quest

H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768)

*The Wolfenbützel Fragments* (published posthumously by G. E. Lessing)



- The real Jesus was a revolutionary who preached the end of the world.
- He was wrong, and his followers invented the claim that he rose.
- They believed he would return, and he didn't.
- Thus Christianity is based on two failed *eschatons* (end-times).

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## The First Quest

D. F. Strauss (1808–1874)

*Life of Jesus*



- The concept of “myth” (such as in Genesis 1-3) helps us to understand what the gospels are.
- Route in: miracles
  - Neither naïve, supernaturalist credulity nor “sophisticated” scientific explanations appreciate the genre
  - Miracles are myths – poetry with a purpose

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## The First Quest

D. F. Strauss (1808–1874)

*Life of Jesus*



- Miracles are impossible; they must have been added by the gospel authors. The gospels are composites of the authors’ views intended to convince us that Jesus is the Christ. They do not reflect history at all.

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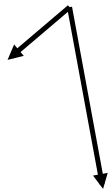
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## The First Quest Continued

Some scholars continued to try to trace the earliest material in the earliest sources (the gospels), and concluded that Mark’s gospel was the earliest and gave us the actions, words, and sequence of events of the life of the historical Jesus.



Other scholars began to write “lives of Jesus,” biographies in novel form that reconstructed what his daily life and thoughts would have been like. The books, like Ernst Renan’s *Vie de Jésus*, were very popular.

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## The First Quest

Heinrich Julius Holtzmann (1832–1910)

- The gospels are not entirely the creations of their authors
- Rather, if we carefully study their relationships and their component forms, we can discern the earliest gospels, as well as the earliest parts of gospels that predate the gospel authors.
- This can get us closer to the historical Jesus.

*Holtzmann was the first to argue that Mark was the earliest gospel.*

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## The Collapse of the First Quest

William Wrede (1859–1906)

*The Messianic Secret*



- There is a general historical framework in the "earliest gospel," Mark
- But to it are added dogmatic threads
  - Jesus is a divine being
  - Disciples cannot understand
  - Jesus' enemies are full of evil

*The Gospel of Mark belongs to the history of dogma, not to the history of Jesus*

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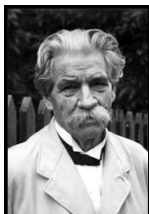
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## The Collapse of the First Quest

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)

*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*



- Jesus was an eschatological prophet, but his zeal was misguided; the end of the world never occurred. He is thus irrelevant to our culture
- The Victorian lives of Jesus that sought its chronology and motives are nothing more than the authors' ideals projected back onto the psyche of Jesus

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## The Aryan Jesus during the Third Reich (1933–1945)



- The “official” story of the historical Jesus quest imagines a gap between Schweitzer (1906) and Bultmann (1941)
- But there was work being done on the historical Jesus during the Third Reich (1933–1945)
  - But among theologians, Jesus’ Jewish identity was erased
  - Jews were made his chief enemies
  - Official Nazi ideology was atheistic

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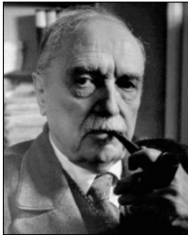
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## The Collapse of the First Quest

Rudolph Bultmann (1884–1976)  
*Neues Testament und Mythologie* (1941)



- We cannot recover the historical Jesus  
*a historical conclusion*
- We need not recover the historical Jesus  
*a theological conclusion*
  - What matters is not what Jesus did, but what God did in Jesus
  - Thus Christians believe in the Christ of faith, not the Jesus of history

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