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Peeling Back the Layers of Jesus

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Abstract

Employing the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, this article peels back the various layers of Jesus to reveal ... nothing.

Keywords

Jesus – New Testament – psychoanalysis – Jacques Lacan – critical theory – onions

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... from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

LUKE 6.29B

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In an extraordinary passage on the nutritional and gastronomical qualities of onions, N.T. Wright writes:

It does not help very much at all to take each saying, each parable, and work through a multiply hypothetical history of traditions as though aiming thereby to peel the historical onion back to its core. That is the way tears and frustration, a new form of scholarly exile, reflected in the wild carob-pods of the prodigal, which, being neither gastronomically nor nutritionally satisfying, may drive the eater to repentance. Such a diet serves

only as a reminder that there is such a thing as serious history, and that this is not the way to do it.¹

Contra Wright, I want to argue that the study of Jesus, if conceptualized in a much broader sense than simply the quest for origins or authentic tradition, functions in precisely this sense: the onion metaphor is indeed a nutritious one. There are various layers that coalesce around the kernel of an inaccessible Real Jesus who ultimately drives our libidinal or instinctual yearnings to ‘quest’ for him. In his first seminar, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan observed that the process of self-discovery is akin to peeling back the layers of an onion: ‘The ego is constructed like an onion, one could peel it, and discover the successive identifications which have constituted it.’² As one removes each layer, scale by scale, it would eventually reveal nothing – a void or empty subject around which the successive identifications of the ego project a fictitious wholeness.

This article draws on Lacan’s onion metaphor to peel back the layers of Jesus. I divide the successive layers of the wholeness of Jesus into three main orders based on Lacan’s trio of intrapsychic realms, namely, the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The *imaginary* order functions as the internalized image of the ideal, whole, self. It provides the outer appearance of coherence rather than fragmentation. By contrast, the *symbolic* order involves the formation of language and discourse through which the subject is organized. Lacan suggests that ‘symbols in fact envelop the life of man [*sic*] in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him.’³ Finally, the *Real* at the core of the onion becomes that which resists representation; what is lost once it becomes symbolized through language. The imaginary and symbolic orders gesture towards the Real but never completely embody it.⁴

The five layers of Jesus delineated below – organized according to Lacan’s tripartite structure of reality – are this inner kernel of the Real Jesus; the successive symbolic inner fleshy and outer membranous scales of the Historical, Proclaimed and Textual Jesuses; and, finally, the imaginary superficial husk of the Cultural Jesus, the realm of surface appearances which envelop the inner

1 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 133.

2 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I, Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954* (ed. J.-A. Miller; trans. J. Forrester; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 171.

3 J. Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (trans. A. Wilden; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), p. 42.

4 For a more substantial introduction to Lacanian theory and its potential use within biblical studies, see The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 196-211.

layers giving them meaning and internal consistency. In his recasting of psychoanalysis in the language of formal logic, Lacan also introduced a new conceptual object, the *objet petit a*. As a dispositional object by which the subject's *jouissance* or enjoyment is constituted, the *objet a* is both a fantastical source of desire and the representational locus for all subsequent operations of the symbolic and imaginary dimensions. The Real Jesus thus functions as our *objet petit a*: the ultimate object of scholarly and theological desire around which all subsequent representations of Jesus – including especially those produced by biblical scholarship itself – are layered. While the various layers of Jesus are in a constant state of intercourse, their delineation should help us to better understand how the broader study of Jesus might be mapped or systematized: that is, as an organic root vegetable. Needless to say, the peeling back of Jesus, like chopping of an onion, will almost undoubtedly end in tears.

The Cultural Jesus

The most visible layer of the onion is its brown or red skin which covers the entire organism giving the external appearance of an internal consistency. According to Lacan, 'There is no form which lacks a surface, a form is defined by the surface'.⁵ This surface layer is the Cultural Jesus – the one we encounter in everyday reality. This Jesus has an instantly recognizable visible form through popular culture, emblazoned in cinematic portrayals by Jeffrey Hunter in *King of Kings* (1961), Jim Caviezel in Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004), or the sumptuous Diogo Morgado in *Son of God* (2014), whose 'excessive attractiveness' sparked the hashtag #hotjesus to trend on social media and prompt questions among 'woke' liberals of whether a sexually attractive Jesus is 'theologically appropriate'. We can also include in this outer layer the frequent depictions of Jesus in Christian art: not only his appearance in the 'high cultured' Western canon, but also more recent attempts to re-contextualize or re-imagine his image within non-Western or non-normative cultural settings. On the other side of the coin are the irreverent and sacrilegious Jesuses, like the recurrent guest star on *South Park* who, in contrast to the sage-like filmic versions, curses and consumes illicit drugs.

The Cultural Jesus extends beyond mere visual depictions, however, and into the realm of arbitrary, everyday cultural associations. The common basilisk lizard found in Central and South American rainforests, for instance, is widely referred to as the *lagarto de Jesus Cristo* (the Jesus Christ lizard) for its ability to run on the surface of water. Moreover, allegorical Christs appear in

5 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I*, p. 170.

abundance through popular culture. From superheroes to generic redeemer figures, Joseph Campbell's quasi-scholarly book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* popularized the idea of a 'monomyth' by claiming that almost all 'hero' stories, including the central messianic myth in Christianity, are built around a similar three-part structure in which a hero is confronted with a task of often supernatural importance and comes to succeed in that task through a number of prescribed steps.⁶

It is important to note that, like the Cultural Bible, the Cultural Jesus is a vestige of cultural and political authority. Emerging during the European Enlightenment, the Cultural Bible, according to Yvonne Sherwood, denotes the Bible's use as a philological and pedagogical resource, a literary classic, a moral guidebook, and a historical archive: 'the Bible-in-general or the Bible-as-icon functions as an overwhelming religious-cultural-political sensation, a sense of colour and form that has little to do with the text'.⁷ Similarly, the Cultural Jesus features through Western popular culture as a cultural sensation: an Other against which we project our own self-understanding of the ideal-type human subject. As Lacan suggests, 'the body in pieces finds its unity in the image of the other ... [or] its own specular image'.⁸ The use and re-use of a relatively homogenous Jesus-image performs a certain stabilizing function, retroactively normalizing and occasionally contesting deeply entrenched social and cultural codes and values.

In recent decades, biblical scholars have begun to pay more attention to the proliferation of Cultural Jesuses. This is a departure from their traditional concern for unearthing the deeper layers of Jesus (in particular the Textual and Historical Jesuses). In 2014, for instance, a group of highly regarded historical Jesus scholars convened at Kings College London for a two-day conference on the satirical Jesus film, Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979).⁹ While the study of the Bible's reception was once dismissed as 'biblical studies on holiday',¹⁰ we should now probably reverse this observation: biblical scholarship which does

6 J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato: New World Library, 3rd edn, 2008). For a more recent treatment of the 'American monomyth' idea in film, see J.S. Lawrence and R. Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

7 Y. Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2.

8 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 2, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*. (ed. J.-A. Miller; trans. J. Forrester; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 54.

9 The proceedings were published as J.E. Taylor (ed.), *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and His Times via Monty Python's Life of Brian* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

10 The original source is unknown but has been relayed by various scholars of biblical reception. See, for example, S. Gillingham, 'Biblical Studies on Holiday? A Personal View of

not, in fact, involve a vigorous engagement with the Bible's outer, imaginary layer is wandering aimlessly around a tourist attraction without a map or guide.

Even so, there is something curious about our recent obsession with amassing Cultural Jesuses, to see how they 'differ' from the Textual Jesus or to categorize them according to broader societal functions or identity categories (e.g., white Western Jesuses, non-white Jesuses, overly Christian Jesuses, very Jewish Jesuses, conformist Jesuses, radically subversive Jesuses, heteronormative Jesuses, LGBT-friendly Jesuses, and so on). Indeed, Wongi Park has noted how 'modern biblical scholarship continues to be "trapped in a racialized discourse" even in the most constructive efforts to move past it'.¹¹ From a psychoanalytic perspective, it should perhaps not surprise us at all that reception history has begun to proliferate at a time when the Bible's once taken-for-granted privileged status has started to fade. The Cultural Jesus is an object that conceals the void. A veil which veils nothing. Hoarding and collecting are themselves reactionary behaviours stemming from traumatic loss; in this case, the loss of symbolic meaning once culturally constituted by the deeper layers of the Historical, Proclaimed, and Textual Jesuses.¹² The façade-function of reception history instils the illusion that something important remains hidden beneath the veil. Jean Baudrillard even suggests collecting 'constitutes a regression to the anal stage, which is characterized by accumulation, orderliness, aggressive retention, and so on'.¹³ Simultaneously underlying this libidinal drive is the capitalistic impulse to accrue: reception history has capital accumulation somewhere in its matrix. What, then, might a flatulent reception history – one which takes full account of popular culture's capitalist base – look like?

A good place to start is with the sociologist and cultural pessimist Theodor Adorno. As Roland Boer suggests, Adorno is 'always useful to have around should the party get too wild'.¹⁴ For Adorno, mass culture is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods. This 'culture industry' is now a constituent part of the capitalist system and is ultimately underwritten by the profit motive. Because of this Adorno suggests there is a banality to mass culture that suffocates individuality, creativity and critical thinking. Cultural

Reception History', in W.J. Lyons and E. England (eds.), *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice* (Scriptural Traces, 6; London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 17.

11 W. Park, 'The Black Jesus, the Mestizo Jesus, and the Historical Jesus', *BibInt* 25.2 (2017), pp. 190-205 (191).

12 I owe this particular insight to Christopher Meredith.

13 J. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 93.

14 R. Boer, *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology V* (Historical Materialism, 52; Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 86.

products themselves are ‘individualized’ to give the illusion to consumers that they are in fact purchasing a product that was specifically designed for them.¹⁵ Think, for instance, of the iPhone or even the range of Zondervan Bibles for every conceivable niche market (whether you’re a mom, dad, teenager, Nascar fan, or extreme sports enthusiast, there’s a mass produced NIV Bible specifically designed to meet your needs).¹⁶

The Jesus industry, by which I simply mean the mass culturization of this outer layer, is similarly overdetermined by the imperatives and libidinal drives of capital accumulation. To consume Jesus is to participate in the capitalist economy. While countless variations of the Cultural Jesus exist, most conform to standardized, mass-produced qualities, especially with respect to his physical appearance (including his race and gendering) but also in the portrayal of his character and demeanour. Jesus’s popular representation rarely deviates from highly ritualized, normative constructs, and when it does (as in the case of a black Jesus, a married Jesus, or a bad-tempered Jesus) this is done in a way that is specifically designed to ‘shock’ consumers, resulting in temporarily increased profits, but also in a way that typically reinforces the standardized construction. While mass culture constrains ways of conceptualizing Jesus on the imaginary plane, these standardized depictions collectively play a role in transforming the wholeness of Jesus into a recognizable figure who can more easily lend his face – thereby adding surplus value – to the ever-expanding host of commodified objects. Indeed, the Cultural Jesus sells in a way that other biblical characters, say Obadiah, do not.¹⁷

The Cultural Jesus, then, is a cultural sensation. This Jesus is concurrently the imaginary container for the wholeness of Jesus, providing the appearance of both content and form. Accordingly, this outer layer shapes and influences assumptions and perceptions about the interior layers of Jesus. Within Lacan’s formulation, the imaginary layer turns into the appearance, concealing a hidden reality. What’s more, the appearance this layer generates is that of appearance itself, specifically, the appearance that there is, in fact, a hidden reality beneath the visible appearance – a Real Jesus waiting to be unearthed. Peeling

15 T. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

16 J.G. Crossley, ‘OH-MY-GOD – It’s So the Teen Bible!’ *SBL Forum* 5.1 (2007); accessible at <<https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=615>>.

17 Mass produced kitsch, from Jesus themed pez dispensers to ‘messiah mints’ and everything in between – including, naturally, a ‘daily bread’ themed toaster that imprints your toast with a silhouette of Christ’s face – sell like nothing else.

back this external husk takes us into the symbolic outer membrane of the Textual Jesus, to which we now turn.

The Textual Jesus

The Textual Jesus refers to the written accounts of Jesus found in the New Testament. Within Lacan's triad of reality, then, this layer neatly fits within the symbolic which is the realm of language. The Textual Jesus is the Jesus proclaimed by the early Christians and written down into what eventually became an authoritative collection of writings that many Christians, especially the Protestant sects, regard as foundational to their faith. In what sense is the Textual Jesus authoritative? We might compare this layer to the function of other foundational documents within a community, such as the Constitution of the United States. Such texts 'norm authentic development of the nation in fidelity to its own identity and ideals'.¹⁸ The underlying role of this layer and its authorizing weight, then, helps to explain the continuing fascination with the outer imaginary layer and also the symbolic power it might possess to implicitly or explicitly chaperone investigations into the deeper layers too.

A major problem with our common-sense definition of the Textual Jesus, however, is that it is hard to pin down precisely which textual Jesus we are talking about. First, there is the problem of translation. While the various writings of the New Testament were originally composed in Koine (common) Greek, they are now predominantly read by virtually all readers in modern translation. The business of translation is historically a contentious one. During the Reformation, William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536) changed the word 'church' into 'congregation' in his English translation of the New Testament. Tyndale was accused by the Catholic church of great distortion, siding with Martin Luther on matters of ecclesial authority. He was eventually burned at the stake for heresy. Secondly, the 'Greek text' upon which modern translations are based is itself a scholarly construction. The original writings are lost to history. And the earliest copies in existence are only partial and fragmentary. They are also significantly different. Textual critics have attempted to reconstruct what the original texts may have said by comparing available manuscripts and fragments, and through scientific methods of dating, to create the 'reliable' illusion of a complete text of the New Testament in Greek. Another visible layer which conceals the void underneath.

18 S.M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), p. xxix.

To further complicate matters, the Textual Jesus, contrary to appearances, does not belong exclusively to Christians. In fact, anybody is free to read the texts of the New Testament and to create meanings with them. It is tempting to extend the Textual Jesus to include all written accounts of Jesus that have had or continue to have authorizing weight. This includes the appearance of Jesus in extra-canonical Gospels, letters, and importantly, the Qur'an. But even if we reductively stick to the 27 books of the New Testament, we find an incredible diversity in their representations of Jesus. It is a common assumption of biblical scholarship that each Gospel author portrays the story of Jesus in a way that makes sense to both the author and the author's community or original audience. Accordingly, it is customary for scholars to refer to each Jesus as a separate entity – a distinct portrayal and literary construction of Jesus (e.g., to refer to Mark's Jesus, or the Jesus as depicted in the Gospel of John). George Aichele goes one step further and refers to these different versions as distinct Jesus *simulacra*. A simulacrum is an image, representation or imitation of someone or something. Characters depicted within a narrative are not simply re-presentations of earlier phenomena but rather the creation of a new concept. According to Aichele, each Jesus in the New Testament presents its own seemingly Real Jesus. He observes that '[t]he New Testament begins with four gospels, each of which tells a different story of Jesus. Or rather, each gospel tells a story of a different Jesus'.¹⁹ Moreover, '[t]o reduce the different Jesus simulacra of the gospels to variant copies of a single historical model or archetypal entity, as many readers (including biblical scholars) do, requires ideological assumptions that are deeply theological, even if sometimes quite unconscious. It fails to take these Jesuses seriously as distinct simulacra'.²⁰

Be that as it may, these textual accounts are thought by many interpreters to be 'closer' to the Real Jesus given their temporal proximity and privileged, canonical status. This is an assumption shared by many scholars. As we will see below, the Historical Jesus is believed to have lived between 4-6 BCE and c.30 CE. The Textual Jesus is not the same as the Historical Jesus although there may be some overlap. The earliest textual accounts are the letters to various communities attributed to Paul. These writings do not so much concern the earthly life of Jesus as they do negotiate matters of faith through the complex realities of everyday life in the multi-religious and socially diverse milieu of the Roman Empire. The canonical Gospels, which provide narrative accounts of the life, death and (except for Mark) the resurrection of Jesus, are typically dated from

19 G. Aichele, *Simulating Jesus: Reality Effects in the Gospels* (BibleWorld; London: Equinox, 2011), p. 25.

20 Aichele, *Simulating Jesus*, p. 33.

around 70 CE to 100 CE. The word ‘Gospel’ (Gk. *euangelion*) literally means ‘good news’. Each Gospel, then, presents an anonymous, theological interpretation of Jesus’s life and death. These texts draw on both oral traditions and written sources to tell their stories. Three of them (Matthew, Mark and Luke) also exhibit an internal literary relationship; the most likely theory that Matthew and Luke used Mark, and perhaps another hypothetical source named Q,²¹ in constructing their narratives. Their immediate historical background concerns the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 CE during the Jewish-Roman war (66 CE – 73 CE), which prompted a crisis of identity for first-century Jews. The apocalyptic vision of a cosmic Jesus in the book of Revelation is different again. God and Christ compete with the Roman emperor in a contest for the allegiance of the faithful.

What, then, is the symbolic function of the Textual Jesus? For Lacan, language is ruled by the de-biologized symbolic father or paternal metaphor. These gendered metaphors are strictly symbolic and by Lacan’s own reckoning should not be confused with actual bodies or sexes.²² The father’s function is precisely that of laying down the law: ‘It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law.’²³ As noted above, the Textual Jesus plays a foundational and normative role within the Christian community. But the presumed authority of this symbolic father, like all fathers, is merely an illusion. Indeed, once pushed to its logical limits, there is an implicit tension between the multiple meanings denoted by the individual texts and the singular meaning imposed by the phallic-instrument of canonical control which attempts to reduce biblical meaning to a cohesive, digestible oneness.²⁴ The layer of the Textual Jesus combines fragmented threads and

21 Q is short for the German word *Quelle*, which means ‘source’. It refers to material shared by Matthew and Luke but is not found in Mark. In recent years, the two-source theory of Mark and Q has come under refreshed scrutiny and there are arguments that explain the literary relationship without the need for a Q document.

22 The gendered nature of Lacan’s system reflects, not uncritically, on the material condition we are born into – namely, patriarchy, in which signifiers and signifying practices associated with male bodies and defined as masculine are accorded economic and political status. While not without problems, terms such as ‘father’, ‘phallus’, and so on speak to a condition that is here questioned, and the use of non-gendered terminology would prematurely mystify that which such a usage seeks to overcome.

23 J. Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (trans. A. Sheridan; New York: Norton, 1977), p. 67.

24 See further G. Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (London: T & T Clark, 2001).

traditions into a synthetic wholeness; this wholeness is a symbolic projection of the Real Jesus who, beneath the façade, is void of content.

The Proclaimed Jesus

The Proclaimed Jesus is the Jesus of faith – the central figure confessed by the Christian Church in its various manifestations. In her critical theological account of how the New Testament material relates to its subject matter, Sandra M. Schneiders suggests this Jesus ‘is *the actual, ontic Jesus who exists today as he is witnessed to by the Church and believed in by Christians*’.²⁵ This inner symbolic layer of Jesus intersects with the surrounding symbolic layers and remains tied to the realm of language and the rule of law.

The early leaders of the Church developed a succession of theological formulas and symbols which, many Christians believe, unfolds the trans-historical, symbolic meaning of Jesus and his work. Two famous early statements of faith are the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creeds. The Apostles’ Creed places Jesus within a Trinitarian structure as Christ the Son of God the Father [*sic*] and partner to the Holy Spirit. While derived from the Textual Jesus, there exists no such clearly defined formula in the New Testament itself. The Nicene creed, originally adopted during the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and amended at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, confesses, among other beliefs, the relationship between Jesus’s divinity and his humanity: specifically, that he is both fully divine and fully human. Political theologians suggest the development of Western thought and philosophy owes much to these underlying theological concepts, and so a careful engagement with theological discourse might be necessary in confronting modern ‘secular’ challenges at the ontological level.

Despite the prohibitive and legislative influence in the ‘name of the [Church] father’ (*nom du père*), the Proclaimed Jesus has in fact changed over the centuries as different beliefs and theological agendas have become more or less prominent. Much like the Textual Jesus, the Proclaimed Jesus is a fluid tapestry of intersecting and contradicting ideas conflated into a singular recognizable figure and grounded in the theological belief of Jesus’s trans-historical consistency. A non-theological example of this diversity is found in the conflicting traditions surrounding Jesus’s attitude to politics. Boer has often suggested that the Christian tradition is caught within a complex ‘dialectical connection between revolution and reaction’ which is inscribed into its

²⁵ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, p. xxviii.

deepest layers.²⁶ On the one hand, for instance, a strong tradition of politically radical Jesuses goes back to at least Thomas Müntzer and the peasants' revolt in the sixteenth century. Friedrich Engels first identified this radical stream in Müntzer's thought in *The Peasant War in Germany*.²⁷ Boer notes that, for Engels, 'Müntzer couldn't help speaking in religious and biblical terms, since it was the only language in which the peasants could voice their grievances, and since it was the dominant way of thinking about the world as such'.²⁸ The radical Jesus was subsequently proclaimed by early Christian socialists and features prominently in Liberation Theology. On the other hand, however, Jesus has also been tied to the maintenance of, or calls for the return to, older forms of feudalistic and imperial power. These reactionary ideologies loiter implicitly within popular theodicies urging believers to accept exploitation or abuse – in identifying with Jesus's own suffering – since they will be rewarded in heaven for their enduring perseverance anyway.

While the Proclaimed Jesus is the subject matter of the New Testament text, the Textual Jesus is not proclamation alone. As enduring fixtures of Christian orthodoxy, however, these confessing proclamations seep into interpretations of the surrounding layers of Jesus. Aspects of the Textual Jesus and Proclaimed Jesus may overlap with the Historical Jesus. The Historical Jesus, while closer to the inner-most kernel of the Real Jesus, is overdetermined by an invisible and/or indistinguishable film of confessional microbes, steering the concerns and interests of Textual and Historical Jesus scholars in particular symbolic directions (see below). Just as the Cultural Jesus is not hermetically sealed off from its internal layers, the Proclaimed Jesus functions as a reciprocal hinge between text and context.²⁹

26 Boer, *In the Vale of Tears*, p. 147.

27 F. Engels, 'The Peasant War in Germany', *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1850; accessible at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/peasant-war-germany/>>.

28 R. Boer, *Rescuing the Bible* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), p. 111.

29 This layer is placed beneath the Textual Jesus only because it is presumed closer to the Real Jesus. There were proclamations before written accounts. Nevertheless, the Proclaimed Jesus, like the Textual and Historical Jesuses, also plays a symbolic role in the constitution of meaning. It is difficult to individually separate out these three layers, because their paths forever intermingle in the minds of interpreters and scholars, even if unintentionally so.

The Historical Jesus

The Historical Jesus gets us close to the centre of the onion but it should not be conflated with its centre. This inner layer refers to the pre-canonical Jesus reconstructed using the critical tools of history. The Historical Jesus is an incomplete representation of the Real Jesus and remains part of the symbolic order, gesturing towards the Real in much the same way as its Proclaimed and Textual counterparts. As Helen K. Bond observes, ‘The New Questers, and still some today, see the historian’s task as stripping back later accretions to uncover a “pure” form of the tradition. The image is often one of an onion, where outer layers are peeled away, or a dirty oil painting, where the grime of the centuries can be removed to reveal the pristine colours of the original.’³⁰ Of course, Bond is quick to point out that this approach to the Historical Jesus is problematic: ‘Not only is it clear that the Gospel material has gone through a process of translation (from Aramaic into Greek), but modern study of memory has shown how unreliable and fragile human recollection can be, and how dependent it is on unconscious inferences and wider assumptions.’³¹ Heralded by the quest for true knowledge during the European Enlightenment, in which scholars sought to free ‘Truth’ from the shackles of ecclesial authority and tradition, this partial picture of Jesus is limited by the confines of evidence, rational argument and the philosophical constraints of historical investigation.

The clichéd distinction between the ‘Jesus of history’ and the ‘Christ of faith’ attempts to drive a firm wedge between the credible but ultimately unknowable historical reconstruction of Jesus of Nazareth – the Jewish man who lived, walked, and breathed in first-century Palestine – and the subsequent layers of tradition that evolved around this figure over the centuries (labelled above as the Proclaimed Jesus). The ‘quest’ for the Historical Jesus is usually thought to have begun in the eighteenth century with Hermann Samuel Reimarus, who depicted Jesus as an ethical teacher belonging entirely to Judaism. Jesus’s messianic status, resurrection, exaltation and salvific mission were regarded by Reimarus as later inventions by his early followers.³² In 1892, Martin Kähler argued contrary to Reimarus and others that the Historical Jesus behind the Textual Jesus was ultimately inaccessible. This is because the Gospels were not historical reports but functioned solely as proclamations.³³

30 H.K. Bond, *The Historical Jesus: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 52.

31 Bond, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 52.

32 C.H. Talbert (ed.), *Reimarus: Fragments* (trans. R.S. Fraser; London: SMC, 1971).

33 M. Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (trans. C.E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

More recently, in his book *The Symbolic Jesus*, William Arnal underscores the modern ideological function of Historical Jesus scholarship by observing the ways this inner symbolic layer of Jesus is itself implicated by the outer cultural layer. He writes that 'scholarship on the historical Jesus uses the figure of Jesus as a screen or symbol on which to project contemporary cultural debates, and to employ the inherent authority of this Jesus-figure to advance one or another particular stance on these debates'.³⁴ Furthermore, 'the *scholarly* debate about this cultural symbol [Jesus] is much less relevant and influential than we would like to think. Scholars, and the people who read their work, are no different than others: they have the same kinds of concerns, beliefs, and assumptions about the world they live in'.³⁵ As with the Textual Jesus, then, we might re-conceptualize the various historical reconstructions of Jesus as distinct simulacra. Scholars have already reduced the trajectories of Jesus research into certain 'types'. In this case, each resulting reconstruction of the historical person of Jesus are in fact additional symbols: Jesus as 'apocalyptic prophet', 'Jewish sage', 'prophet of social change', 'cynic-like', 'Jewish saviour', or even Jesus the 'myth', whose negative historical portrait is erroneously conflated with the non-existence of the Real Jesus himself.

A related trope in historical Jesus research is that reconstructions often serve as a kind of erudite foil, allowing scholars to (unintentionally) recreate Jesus in their own image. The Jesus in the mirror is the one you recognize yourself in. Back in his monumental 1906 study *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer convincingly argued scholars of the previous century had used the Gospels as a mirror to reconstruct a Jesus in their own self-image.³⁶ In contrast to these 'liberal lives of Jesus', Schweitzer presented Jesus as a failed apocalyptic prophet, thereby rendering him an utterly useless foil to the modern age. Within Lacanian theory, the mirror stage describes the formation of the self through the process of identification. The mirror is empty and you fill it in with meaning – you are not seeing yourself but yourself through the eyes of the other. The mirror stage is where a subject becomes alienated from his or herself, and is a constituent part of identity-formation: the making of nothing into a something. For Lacan, the symbolic world becomes 'a presence made of absence'.³⁷

34 W. Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* (London: Equinox, 2005), p. 5.

35 Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus*, p. 7.

36 A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (trans. W. Montgomery; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910).

37 Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, p. 65.

In addition to the Lacanian concept of the mirror, there is a membranous link to be made here between mirrors: that is, between Schweitzer's critique and the ideological elevation of a liberal 'bourgeois' individual. As noted above, historical Jesus research emerged during the age of Enlightenment. Another product of this period was the rise of the bourgeois individual. The modern individual needs mirrors to realize that he or she is an individual subject. Indeed, Jean Baudrillard supposes that '[t]he traditional peasant milieu had no mirrors, perhaps even feared them as eerie The bourgeois interior, by contrast ... has mirrors in profusion, hung on the walls and incorporated into wardrobes, sideboards, cabinets, or panelling'.³⁸ What's more:

[T]he mirror is an opulent object which affords the self-indulgent bourgeois individual the opportunity to exercise his privilege – to reproduce his own image and revel in his possessions. In a more general sense we may say that the mirror is a symbolic object which not only reflects the characteristics of the individual but also echoes in its expansion the historical expansion of individual consciousness.³⁹

The quest for the Historical Jesus needs to be contextualized within this broader rise of the modern, liberal subject as a 'singular' human individual who possesses inalienable rights, a unique personality, emotions and, ultimately, the ability to own private property. In his book *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism*, Halvor Moxnes observes how most historical Jesus books written in the nineteenth century were presented as biographies. According to Moxnes, 'One reason for the popularity of biographies was that the emerging culture of a bourgeois elite required institutional contexts and technological means that could provide expressions of their ideas. The central group that participated in these reform movements was the intellectuals among the bourgeoisie'.⁴⁰

The 'mirror' of historical Jesus research is not simply one of inadvertent 'confessional eisegesis' in which the Proclaimed Jesus is read back into a deeper layer of interpretation. Rather, the Historical Jesus is collectively moulded by the outer imaginary husk of the Cultural Jesus and is premised upon the bourgeois individual subject. This broader super-structural dimension to the production of historical Jesus research underscores its ideological link with the capitalist base. Schweitzer's critique, then, should be extended to encompass not only the reflective dimension to Jesus research, but also its symbolic func-

38 Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, pp. 20-21.

39 Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, p. 21.

40 H. Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism: A New Quest for the Nineteenth-Century Historical Jesus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 26.

tion: the Historical Jesus gives rise to the modern individual figure of Jesus who appears more Real than the Real Jesus himself.

The Real Jesus

The deeper we plunge into Jesus the closer we get to the Real. The Lacanian Real is not to be confused with 'reality'. Whereas reality can be represented through the symbolic and imaginary orders – through language, description and interpretation as we have seen above – the Real cannot. Rather, the Real is that which is, minus its representation. For Lacan, the Real is that 'before which the imaginary falter[s], that over which the symbolic stumbles, that which is refractory, resistant'.⁴¹ The Real Jesus refers to the void, the nothingness, or the empty spot that remains after the successive layers of the wholeness of Jesus are peeled back.

In her theological account of the layers of Jesus, Schneiders refers to the 'actual Jesus' as the one 'who actually existed in the first century in Palestine but no longer exists in this way'.⁴² Even if we assume that the Real Jesus is the actual Jesus who lived and breathed in first-century Palestine, this individual no longer exists and is inaccessible through time and space. His content is empty and void. There is nothing there.⁴³ Be that as it may, attempts have been made to pinpoint this innermost layer of Jesus. In the nineteenth century, for instance, Martin Kähler suggested that his 'historic, biblical Christ' was also the 'real Christ'.⁴⁴ More recently, Luke Timothy Johnson and Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) have independently suggested that the Real Jesus is the Proclaimed Jesus of the Church.⁴⁵ Yet, as Michael Wolter astutely points out, 'it is obvious that Martin Kähler, Luke Johnson and Benedict XVI commit one and

41 Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism*, p. x.

42 Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, p. xxi.

43 As an ontic being or person of Jesus, this is the signified Jesus to whom Christians and others refer when speaking of the figure of Jesus today. Schneiders is quick to clarify this Jesus: 'no longer exists as such any more than my six-year-old self exists as such. That child has been subsumed into my actual self as the adult I am at this moment. I would not be who I am at this moment (indeed I would not be at all!) without this child, but the child no longer exists independently of my actual adult self. Analogously, the actual Jesus alive in the glory of God would not be who he is if he had not been the actual first-century Palestinian Jew, but that actuality has been subsumed into who Jesus is now' (Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, p. xxi).

44 Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, p. 43 n. 2.

45 L.T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996); J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Naza-*

the same mistake: They simply identify a particular image of Jesus that human beings create with the “real Jesus” for whom we are asking.⁴⁶

If we were to encounter the Real Jesus today, it would be a traumatic experience and we would fail to comprehend its full meaning. Paul’s encounter with the ‘risen Jesus’ on the road to Damascus, relayed by Acts 9.1-19, gives us an indication of what such an experience with the Real might be like: Paul is reduced to an infant-like state, struck down (Acts 9:4) by the terrifying experience (one can only imagine him lying on the ground in the foetal position), rendered temporarily blind, and cannot perform basic bodily functions necessary for survival like eating or drinking (Acts 9:9) for three days. In Lacan’s formulation, the various layers of the ego serve as the protective shell around this traumatic kernel of the empty subject. In a similar vein, the successive layers of Jesus mask the terrifying reality that beneath them all remains absolutely nothing, a hole that can never be made whole.

With what do we plug this hole? The various layers of Jesus delineated above perform the phallic function: something in place of nothing. The phallus is not, according to Lacan, a penis.⁴⁷ Rather, associated with the rule of the father, the phallus is a mark of prohibition. It is a signifier of lack and a substitute for desire. Jesus scholars are dependent upon this phallic Jesus; they require the fantasy of the Real to cover up its very absence, to give meaning to their analytical cataloguing, interpretive labouring and historical questing. Like the young follower of Jesus in Mark 14.52, however, once naked and exposed there is nothing left for us to do but flee. If the Real Jesus does not exist, why do we obsess over him? What is the magnetic pull which grounds the surrounding symbolic and imaginary orders? This innermost layer of Jesus is the *objet petit a*, the ultimate object of scholarly and theological desire around which all subsequent representations of Jesus – including especially those simulacra produced by biblical scholarship itself – are clothed.

Jesus wept.

JOHN 11.35

reth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration (trans. A.J. Walker; London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

46 M. Wolter, ‘Which Jesus Is the Real Jesus?’ in Jan van der Watt (ed.), *The Quest for the Real Jesus* (BibInt, 120; Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 13.

47 J. Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, p. 285.