

# The Quest for the Historical Jesus

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- **The Age of Enlightenment (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c.)**
  - **Rationalism:** religious truth must be grounded in universally accessible principles of reason, not in the particularities of historical events.
  - **Empiricism:** only that which is testable and repeatable counts as knowledge (i.e., no miracles).
  - **Romanticism:** emphasis on emotion and individuality; elevation of historical “heroes” who went against the grain of their contemporary societies.
- **First Quest (1778-1906)**
  - **H.S. Reimarus (1694-1768):** German deist; Jesus was not trying to start a new religious movement; Jesus was a failed political revolutionary; the disciples stole Jesus’ body.
  - **D.F. Strauss (1808-1874):** Wrote *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*; considered the gospel miracles to be mythical (departure from earlier rationalist view of miracles as mere misinterpretations of natural events); influential in leading Nietzsche to atheism
  - **William Wrede (1859-1906):** Very skeptical about knowing the real Jesus; **Messianic Secret:** Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah, but later NT authors invented the story that he told his disciples to keep his messianic identity a secret.
  - **Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965):** Ended the First Quest; wrote *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*; Jesus was a failed apocalyptic prophet who mistakenly predicted that the end of the world would come within a generation.
  - Two perceived options after the First Quest:
    - Thoroughgoing skepticism (Wrede)
    - Thoroughgoing eschatology (Schweitzer)
- **No Quest (1906-1953)**
  - **Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976):** Considered the historical Jesus impossible to recover and irrelevant for faith; **demythologization** of the Bible: strip away the “husk” of history to get to the “kernel” of **kerygma** (Greek “proclamation”), which is the summons of the gospel to an authentic existence.
- **Second/“New” Quest (1953-1990s)**
  - **Ernst Käsemann (1906-1998):** Student of Bultmann; developed **criterion of double dissimilarity:** authentic Jesus material must be dissimilar to both Judaism and early Christianity; focused on retrieving the authentic *sayings* of Jesus more than his *actions*.
  - **Jesus Seminar (1980s-1990s):** Robert Funk, John Dominic Crossan, etc.; voted on historicity of gospel passages using color-coded beads; privileged the historical reliability of the gospel “Q” (sayings of Jesus found in both Matthew and Luke) and the Gospel of Thomas; portrayed Jesus as a non-eschatological Cynic philosopher.
- **Third Quest (1970s-present)**
  - **E.P. Sanders (1937-):** Studied Jesus in the context of Second Temple Judaism/Dead Sea Scrolls; saw no opposition between Jesus and the Pharisees; Jesus was a failed apocalyptic prophet (like Schweitzer).
  - **N.T. Wright (1948-):** Best known conservative defender of the historical Jesus today; Jesus was the climax of Israel’s covenant, signaling the end of their spiritual exile.
  - **Bart Ehrman (1955-):** Professor of NT at UNC Chapel Hill; evangelical-turned-agnostic; best known popularizer of the critical view of Jesus today; Jesus was a failed apocalyptic prophet (like Schweitzer and Sanders).
- **Summary of the Quests**
  - First Quest: an anti-dogmatic view of Jesus
  - Second Quest: a non-Jewish view of Jesus
  - Third Quest: a Jewish view of Jesus