



On Looking for Jesus

David Boulton

Who on EARTH was JESUS?

The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History.

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This is not a life of Jesus but the story of how scholars, particularly in the 20th century, have been trying to construct from the extant evidence a reliable picture of the original historical figure.

The story began in the 18th century when Reimarus showed that the Gospels could not be taken as reliable history. Then in 1835 David Strauss, after demonstrating that the Gospels are a blend of history, legend and myth, drew a sharp distinction between the 'Jesus of history' and 'the Christ of faith'. The search for the 'Jesus of history' then began in earnest. In 1906 Albert Schweitzer surveyed that search to date in his *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, concluding that the original figure of Jesus has mostly been lost forever.

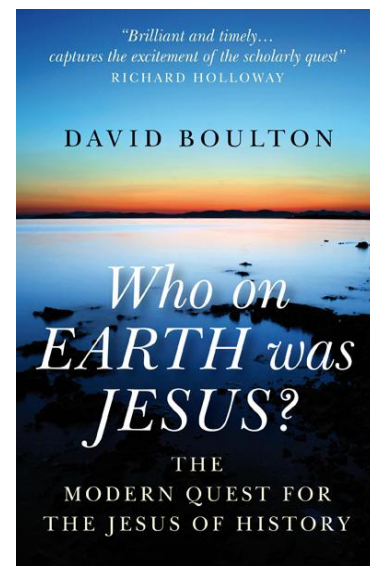
Only slowly did a second search begin in the 20th century. It is this story that David Boulton tells, doing for the 20th century what Schweitzer did for the 19th century. Boulton has a long association with the Sea of Faith, having been the first editor of the Journal of the UK SoF and coming from a Quaker and humanist background. His last book was *The Trouble with God*. He is not a New Testament scholar and describes himself as 'an investigative journalist': in fact he is a skilful and lucid writer who already has a number of books to his credit. This book, written in a conversational style and with some humour, is much more readable than that of Schweitzer and eminently suitable for the general reader.

The 20th century brought a number of important discoveries, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents. The latter led to the acceptance of the Gospel of Thomas as a source to be taken seriously. So the second search has cast its net much wider than the Gospels; it has paid more attention to the world in which Jesus lived and in which Christianity came to birth. In his Part I, therefore, Boulton surveys all of the sources now used by scholars in the search for Jesus.

In Part II (the major section of the book) Boulton sketches the wide spectrum of interpretations of Jesus that are all based on these sources. Just because Boulton makes no pretence to be a scholar and because there is such a variety of views on the subject of Jesus in the academic world, he does not espouse any particular one, but presents them all as clearly as he can, leaving readers to come to their own conclusions.

Not surprisingly the Jesus Seminar and its scholars are deservedly given a good deal of prominence. Even though it claims to have uncovered no more than 'the voice-prints and footprints of Jesus' it concludes that Jesus was a Jewish sage, rather than a divine figure and worker of miracles. But Boulton also presents, and very fairly, the views of many others — conservative scholars like N.T.Wright and the Pope, Jewish scholars such as Geza Vermes and Hyam Maccoby and, at the other extreme, G.A.Wells, who has long contended that Jesus was not a historical figure at all but a fictional invention of the church.

Boulton has been working on this project for over ten years and has performed a great service for the general reader who has neither the time nor the energy to read all the books now available on the topic. It thoroughly deserves the warm commendation of such an able and well-known scholar as Marcus Borg, who described it as 'The best and most thorough account of the breadth and variety of historical Jesus scholarship'.



Lloyd Geering