



The Jesus of History

Who on Earth was Jesus? The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History

by David Boulton,

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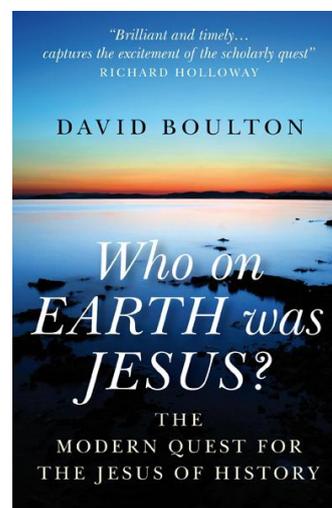
In one of the great theological texts of the 20th century, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, published in 1906, Albert Schweitzer said that scholars who were intent on finding the real Jesus, the Jesus of history, were like people peering into a deep well and seeing their own reflections. It sounds dismissive, and was probably intended to be, but it is worth thinking about, nevertheless. Whether we like it or not, and whether or not we have a religion ourselves, what people see when they look down the well of history can have profound consequences for us all.

One of the most dramatic and disconcerting aspects of recent history has been the return of religion. Those of us brought up on the sociology of the 1960s were preparing — sadly or eagerly — for the final eclipse of religion in the West. The secularisation thesis claimed that history was moving inexorably towards the final collapse of religion. Like many prophecies before and since, the reality has turned out to be very different. **Religion is back, religion with a grudge, religion with something ugly on its**

mind. It reminds me of that bit in *The Shining* when Jack Nicholson finally cracks and takes an axe to the door behind which his wife and child are sheltering, grinning maniacally and shouting: ‘Here’s Johnny!’ Well, if that’s the kind of figure you see looking back at you when you look down the well of history at your religious founder, then we are all in trouble.

David Boulton’s brilliant and timely book is well aware of that dangerous possibility, which is why everyone ought to read it, especially those with no sympathy for religion and its crazier adherents. His book operates on two levels. Boulton is an investigative journalist by trade, and here he sets out to find out what historians have discovered when they have gone searching for the man scholars describe as the Jesus of History before he became the Christ of Faith.

On this level alone the book is an enormous achievement. He tries to maintain a professional objectivity throughout his researches, while wryly acknowledging that that’s not really humanly possible. So what you get is a vivid description of what scholars have said in the past, and what living scholars are saying today, about the figure at the bottom of that 2000 years deep well. Apart from the excitement of the story of the scholarly quest itself, the book





will be a useful resource for people who want a one-volume guide to a multi-volume industry.

It's all here, and it's as up-to-date as you are likely to get in what is a fast-moving business.

But there is a deeper level to this book, a level that brings me back to that reflection gazing back at me from the well of history. If, as Schweitzer hinted, we are never going to get at the absolutely incontrovertibly real Jesus, but only at refined versions of ourselves when we look for him, then what we ourselves believe and long for is going to be important. The theological category that is key to the interpretation of Jesus is his approach to what theologians call 'apocalyptic': that strand of religious tradition that relates to the End Times, the coming of God into history to establish justice and peace. Did Jesus subvert and humanise that turbulent tradition, thereby making it possible for us still to draw on his dream of a righteous human community? Or did he belong to the crazy end of the apocalyptic hope, which eagerly looks forward to the day when God will arrive on earth to exalt his true believers and damn the rest of us to eternal torment?

Does the Jesus you see down the well of history come in peace, or with an axe in his hand? As the passionate conclusion to this fine book demonstrates, this is a question that's important to us all.

Richard Holloway is the former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Lloyd Geering writes of 'Who on Earth was Jesus?': 'A unique treasure... Fair, objective, scholarly, yet lucidly written for non-academic readers. A masterly achievement'.

Best-selling historical Jesus scholar Marcus Borg writes: 'Simply the best and most thorough account of the breadth and variety of historical Jesus scholarship'.