

Refining Our Quest for the Historical Jesus

I had best make this short, blunt and simple, since its aim is to add some focus to the problem I am raising for the Lonergan Gathering of Saturday, June 25, 2016.¹ “The Quest for the Historical Jesus” is altogether familiar as the title of an old movement. The paper I have to hand has that title connected in name and content to the work of Ben Meyer.² It begins with a quotation from Meyer that gives us a decent lead into our brief venture.

After two hundred years of historical-Jesus research, the bulk of which by common consent has proved a failure, it would seem reasonable to ask the writer of yet another book [or presentation] on the topic not to make the old mistakes.³

Bernier’s paper goes on with the following relevant sentence. “Historical Jesus research seems today to be as much at an impasse as it was when Ben F. Meyer wrote these words almost forty years ago.”

It brings to mind for me the conference of those days of Meyer, when we gathered in Concordia, our papers written, to discuss Lonergan’s hermeneutics.⁴ My response to Doran’s paper is there, but I recall vividly fermenting forth, in the dawn-light of the

¹ The entire series raises the problem of functional collaboration but the challenge emerged in the March 2016 posting of *Lonergan Gatherings* 6-11. The message was and is to those meeting on the Saturday ending the Boston Lonergan Workshop to face the 50-year-old challenge of Lonergan as expressed in the final lines of *Method in Theology* 250.

² Jonathan Bernier, “Ben F. Meyer and the Renewed Quest for the Historical Jesus”, a seminar paper delivered in Regis College, Toronto, in the Autumn of 2015.

³ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2002 [1979], 13.

⁴ The conference gave rise to the volume *Lonergan’s Hermeneutics. Its Development and Application*, edited by Sean E. McEvenue and Ben F. Meyer, The Catholic University Press of America, Washington D.C., 1989. I considered the conference and Ben Meyer’s contribution in *Cantower* 9, “Position, Poision, Protopossession,” December, 2002: see pp. 21ff. there. My view of the conference was not favorable. Here I am pushing again, but with considerable more refinement, for the view expressed then in my presentation of W₃.

morning of my presentation, the diagram that eventually became W_3 , a sketch of what I mean now by the title's *refining*.⁵ The diagram, of course, was a blackboard thing that did not appear in the volume published after the meeting. Nor, of course, did my effort make any difference to the almost forty years since.

Might it make a difference in the next forty years? Is it mistaken regarding the Quest? Was Lonergan's article of 1969 a mistake?⁶ The diagram, I would claim, is a decent⁷ sketch of the future Standard Model of questing in all collaborative human questing.

Here, then, is an instance of the basic challenge, and I might well leave it at that, with the hope of a communal venture in essays, starting with LG 14B, to follow later.⁸ But

⁵ What I mean now by *refining* is an open reach for the beginning of a collaboration of some scripture scholars with me in my foundational reach. The beginning has its reach towards such scholars in the manner in which I weave in hints of its need in my recent *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History* (Axial Publishing, 2015: referred to below as *Allure*). That book is primarily a popular appeal to Lonergan students to face the challenge of winding Jesus-studies into a mesh of *Insight* and *Method in Theology*, but within a powerful contemplative kataphatic dynamic. But on the way I tried to expose the failure of N.T. Wright by considering his two periods of writing, technical and popular, separated by his stint as bishop. The hinting was given a creative focus by adding the context of the work of Daniel Boyarin referred to in my book's final note: *The Jewish Gospel. The Story of the Jewish Christ*, The New Press, New York, 2012. I referred earlier (*Allure*, p. 126) to that work in the context my reflection on the documentary *Amy*, of Amy Winehouse's life. Best quote my odd comment. "I think of her years now, quite strangely, as parallel to the centuries of Christianity. In her 21st year, Amy was carrying forward a battered radiance. Is Christianity still radiant in its 21st century? Or is it a talented Jewish girl who is wandering in the bright blights of Rome?"

⁶ Lonergan's article, "Functional Specialization," *Gregorianum* 50 (1969) was not well contextualized as chapter 5 of his later work *Method in Theology*. I have made various efforts to re-contextualize it, e.g. in chapters 10-12 of Pierrot Lambert and Philip McShane, *Bernard Lonergan. His Life and Leading Ideas* (Axial Publishing, 2010). *Allure* is my final book-effort.

⁷ I have left the diagram, over the years, as it first emerged. A key modification to it would be replacing UV in the cycling by SM, which is short for the expression FS + UV + GS. It certainly needs revamping and supplementing to bring it, and its mates, in line with Lonergan's demands regarding such diagramming. "If we want to have a unified grasp of everything in a unified whole, we shall have to construct a diagram in which are symbolically represented all the various elements of the question along with all the connections between them" (CWL 7, 151). Think of the challenge of adding an open heuristic diagramming of the genetic geohistory of views on Jesus.

⁸ This idea of homing in on a topic in a series of essays thus alphabetically ordered is just a suggestion. We must wait and see, collaborate on suggested ways forward. Also there is a

it is as well to mention, in nudging towards that venture, that the “refining” is not at all the same as Jonathan Bernier’s or anyone else’s in the zone of scripture studies.⁹ It is the refining of the turn of page 3 to page 4 of *Method in Theology*.¹⁰ The Faithful Quest for the historical Jesus fits with the reach of Lonergan named in the previous essay. The Quest moves in the cycle of loving searching of W_3 , and so the messings of previous centuries are massively and most fruitfully displaced. The functionally-involved student of scripture is to live on the creative edge of the front of the Standard Model, reaching for new Higgs twists in perhaps much older data.

Does the physics analogue help? Further, please note the lift that all this gives to physics and to the second paragraph of *Method in Theology*? The bolder spirits “select the conspicuously successful science of their time,” but now as, “they study procedure,” their searching is for a structure of ongoing developing understanding

problem regarding the present topic that comes out best when one thinks of *Quest* beyond the more recent interest, the quest that is the drive of contemplation talked of in *Lonergan Gatherings 2*: “A Global Contemplative Reach” and *Lonergan Gatherings 5*: “Being At OM in Transcendental Method”. Are those Quests separable from the one that is the present topic? Does not *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History* live in the molecules of every human cell?

⁹ I have, nevertheless, the hope and suspicion that this great scholarly struggle has lurking in it a sense of its larger historic significance. Note 5 above speaks of that suspicion, and here I may add the coincidence of Bernier’s interest with a direction in which that hope might move. Bernier’s doctorate work, *Aposynagogos and the Historical Jesus in John: Re-thinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Narrative*, Biblical Interpretation Series, Leiden: Brill. Bernier moves in a manner sympathetic to the work of Boyarin. (Bernier: “I essentially agree with Prof. Boyarin,” the topic there being the insignificance of the Birkat ha-Minim for understanding Jewish-Christian relations in the first century of the Jesus movements.” Available online: historicaljesusresearch.blogspot.ca/2014/01.) The entry question would be the worth of functionally recycling Bernier’s work: it would be paradigmatic of a broad move to locate Jesus-research in the swing towards improving the Standard Model and thus, of course, eventually, Jewish and Christian street-talk. What is the Standard Model to be improved? That is a question for later essays.

¹⁰ From “academic disciplines,” the final words of page 3 that refer to the conventions of discussions, papers, books, in what are called humanities, to the “third way, difficult and laborious” (*ibid.*, 4) of the next paragraph, a way that is to lift all disciplines, including “conspicuously successful science” (*ibid.*, 3) into a global collaborative functional unity that is concretely effective in yielding “cumulative and progressive results” (*ibid.*, 4) in schools, hearts, streets.

that will ground “cumulative and progressive results” in global care. They find their way, a “third way, difficult and laborious,” the way sketch in chapter 5 of *Method in Theology*, symbolized by W_3 .

Might some few of those gathered on June 25 find their way to effectively admitting that we missed our way in the search for the meaning of Jesus? Might we pick up a nudge from Lonergan of forty years ago, going altogether deeper than Ben Meyer? “At the very time when we should be making up for three centuries of outstanding mediocrity, we are neglecting fundamentals and becoming much less than mediocre.”¹¹

¹¹ Lonergan, letter to Giovanni Sala, June 11, 1976. I am grateful to Pat Brown for this reference.