A different approach to the search for Jesus

By Glenn C. Altschuler

In the wake of a substantial body of historical and textual studies by scholars of religion pointing to inconsistencies in the Gospel accounts and the paucity of undisputed facts about Christ, theologian Rudolf Bultmann concluded in the 1930s that “we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus.”

Rather than pursue what he regarded as a quixotic quest for the historical Jesus, Bultmann developed “Form Criticism,” an approach that set Gospel accounts in context to understand their meaning. Despite its virtues, Jay Parini claims, Form Criticism “lost something of the mythic resonance of the narrative of Jesus.”

In “Jesus,” Parini, a Middlebury College English professor, tries to reimagine that mythos. When a balance is struck between agreed-upon facts and symbolic meaning, and literal-minded readings are abandoned because they distort more than they illuminate, Parini suggests, “Jesus comes into view as an exemplary life, the human face of God, a mythic figure who lived in real time, transcending time.”

Parini’s brief and ambitious book contains eight chapters, which examine ancient Palestine, Jesus’ birth, his early ministry, his experiences as healer and teacher in Galilee, his entrance into Jerusalem, the journey from Gethsemane to Golgotha (“The Passion”), the Resurrection, and Christ’s afterlife.

In his mid-60s, Parini emphasizes, he is still in search of Jesus, “and this seeking seems more important than the finding.” And so, his book is not only well informed, but deeply personal.

Parini vividly re-creates Jesus’ life. At the Last Supper, he writes, Jesus and his disciples reclined around the table, “which would have been close to the floor, with cushions around them for comfort.” And he doesn’t hesitate to speculate, sometimes a bit irreverently. “Never one for skepticism,” he tells us, God struck Zacharias dumb when the elderly priest doubted that his wife could have become pregnant.

More important, though, are Parini’s readings of religious texts. He sees “no reason” to doubt that Jesus rose from the dead, for example, but warns against the “kind of dour Christanity” that demands adherence to belief in “resuscitation in the most physical way” and aligns himself with Norman O. Brown’s view that the awakening happened to Christ’s “mystical body, which is our bodies; in this flesh.”

Literal-minded Christians — and others — may well argue that Parini’s interpretations are neither more authoritative nor more persuasive than theirs.

And, indeed, Parini is not entirely successful at striking the balance between “facts” and the symbolic contours of the mythos. It does not matter whether aspects of Jesus’s life “can be confirmed (or denied) by historians,” Parini emphasizes, but he repeatedly invokes them, as if confirmation lends authority to his claims.

Nor does Parini always explain the basis of his judgments. “The truth is,” he declares, Jesus “had little interest in damning anyone and he certainly had no concept of hell as a place of perpetual torment.”

And Parini seems to be having it both ways when he characterizes miracles such as walking on water or quelling storms as symbolic acts, adds that “[t]his doesn’t mean they should not be considered true as well.”

To his credit, Parini acknowledges that he — and we — must search for meaning in a “bewildering universe of hints and guesses.” And that, like so many devout Christians (including, it’s worth noting, those who are literal-minded), he has followed St. Anselm, who affirmed that “I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand.”

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BOOK REVIEW

JESUS: The Human Face Of God

By Jay Parini

New Harvest, 170 pp., $20