

LONERGAN, *THE AIMS OF JESUS*, AND SOCIAL MEMORY

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Article abstract

This article seeks to relate two stories from the field of Historical Jesus Research. The first story tells how the thought of Bernard Lonergan was brought by the work of Ben F. Meyer to influence the work of key figures in Historical Jesus Research (notably J.D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright –and less directly E.P. Sanders). The second story is that of the redefinition of Historical Jesus Research that is ongoing today in the work of newer scholars (for example, Chris Keith, Jens Schröter, Anthony LeDonne), seeking to surmount the mechanical, over-sceptical criteriology of post-war scholarship and embracing new studies in personal cognition, religious experience and the collective processes of social memory. I ask whether this second story should become a new moment for Lonergan's thought to exercise a positive influence on New Testament Studies.

LONERGAN, *THE AIMS OF JESUS*, AND SOCIAL MEMORY

IAN H. HENDERSON

In October 2016 Professor Marie-France Dion announced to a meeting of the Montreal Biblical Colloquium that the Department of Theological Studies at Concordia would be hosting a conference on ‘Lonergan, Ethics and the Bible.’¹ I knew at once that there was one connection between Lonergan and the academic study of the Bible which simply had to have its moment in such a conference, namely the influence of Bernard Lonergan’s epistemology and ethics on the transformation of Historical Jesus Research (HJR), an influence mediated essentially by the work of the late Ben F. Meyer, for many years professor at McMaster University and for a couple of formative years my teacher there. Let me say right now that everything I say today is meant as an expression of my gratitude for the cheerful moral and intellectual integrity which Ben Meyer modelled to me and to many others; if, as he always insisted, Meyer was a disciple of Lonergan, then Lonergan must indeed have been a worthy master.

Understanding Jesus better is THE task around which key researchers in biblical studies have acknowledged the significant, albeit mediated, influence of Lonergan’s thought. . . .so, I come before you with great enthusiasm and total confidence in the importance of my subject, but also with some quite specific trepidation. Only a few days after I accepted to address you, I received the first announcement of the publication of Jonathan Bernier’s most recent book, subtitled “Toward a Critical Realist Philosophy of History in Jesus Studies.”² I have benefited greatly from Bernier’s orientation to Lonergan’s philosophy. I have likewise benefited from the comparative approach of Donald L. Denton’s monograph, *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies*.³ Apart from the works of Denton and Bernier, essentially everything that I know or think I know about Lonergan’s ethics and epistemology is derived from the writings of Ben Meyer and from his conversation while he was my teacher. I am interested in Lonergan precisely because Ben Meyer used Lonergan effectively

1. I retain many features of the original, briefer oral presentation.

2. BERNIER 2016a.

3. DENTON 2004.

to mediate to me and to many others a deeper knowledge and understanding of Jesus and a more disciplined awareness of myself as a thinker and believer. And that is, I think, the level of interest – sincere but necessarily superficial and instrumental – at which Lonergan’s philosophy will have to persuade, if it is to have continuing practical impact on one of the central tasks of New Testament studies.

There can be no doubt that Lonergan’s hermeneutics, through Meyer’s work, did exercise a significant catalytic influence on Historical Jesus work by J.D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright – and in a less explicit way Ed P. Sanders. Moreover, Dunn, Wright and Sanders constitute together an immensely important moment in HJR. That they did so under Lonergan’s influence, even indirect or rather distilled, is a fact worthy of historical analysis; even if no one but Sanders, Wright, and Dunn ever read Meyer’s *The Aims of Jesus*, Meyer’s influence would still have been enviable indeed.

In what follows then, I hope to sketch two stories. The first story, I have already indicated, is that of Ben Meyer’s mediation of Lonergan and/or Lonergan-derived insights to several of the most important English-writing Historical Jesus Researchers of the last forty years.

I will tell my second story much more briefly, not least because I do not know how it will end. It is the story of the redefinition of HJR that is ongoing today in the work of scholars mostly younger than myself, though it is anticipated, I would say, especially in Dunn’s studies. Substantively, that second story is the story of an approach to the historical study of Jesus, freed from the obsessive, over-sceptical criteriology of post-war scholarship and oriented positively toward contemporary research, on the one hand, into personal cognition and religious experience and, on the other hand, into the collective processes of social memory. We will return to this story later.

First, my first story: Bernard Lonergan would be unknown to New Testament scholars as a class, except that in 1979 Ben F. Meyer published his *The Aims of Jesus*⁴. I would certainly not be here today if I had not two years later, while preparing for my New Testament degree exams in Scotland, purchased and read a copy of Meyer’s *The Aims of Jesus*, along with E.P. Sanders’ 1977 *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* and realized I had struck a double vein of gold. A year or so later I found myself working as Professor Meyer’s Teaching Assistant at McMaster University in his undergraduate class on HJR and the next year again when Ed Sanders took over the course during Meyer’s illness. Meyer’s health issues made it certain that my own doctoral research would be guided rather by Sanders, around the time that his own *Jesus and Judaism* was appearing, that is in 1985.

4. MEYER 1979/2002.

In *Jesus and Judaism* Sanders devoted only a couple of pages (47-49) to Meyer's earlier book, with many further references relegated to footnotes on specific issues, but in those few paragraphs Sanders picked out some of the most distinctive, interesting and, I think, Lonergan-inspired aspects of Meyer's portrait of Jesus. Sanders' sketch begins with the words, "Meyer's des[crip]tion of *The Aims of Jesus* is the richest and best nuanced one that I know" (47). The summary which follows, though very brief, shows a discerning and appreciative reading of Part Two of Meyer's book, the part which actually describes Jesus' aims. Sanders has almost nothing to say about Part One, on "Hermeneutical Issues" in which Meyer critically reviews the history and philosophical contexts of HJR and reflects on the challenge posed by Jesus to historical knowledge. That is, Sanders wrote almost nothing about the half of Meyer's book which actually discusses Lonergan and explicitly appropriates his epistemology and insights into history and theology.

This was to be expected: Sanders' publications have always eschewed explicit theoretical reflection. For his part Meyer was very clear that his book was about Jesus, not about Lonergan (16). No one reading *The Aims of Jesus* could be unaware of Meyer's debt to Lonergan, but that one book alone would not allow or really require a measurement of that debt. As Donald Denton notes, Meyer followed his *The Aims of Jesus* "over the next 15 years with further explication of the hermeneutical and cognitional basis for his early work."⁵ For Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* was the essential case-study with which to preface his larger project; for Historical Jesus Researchers, *The Aims of Jesus* usually has had to stand alone as a brilliant, but inimitable formulation of Jesus' aims as a central and answerable research question.

What Sanders and Meyer have most in common in their Jesus books is, I think, an intense commitment to clarity of historical question and with it clarity of expression. The common-sense quality of historical knowledge is an aspect of Lonergan's thought about historical research to which Meyer does not draw explicit attention, but which, I agree with Denton, is key to Meyer's Historical Jesus work – and to the compatibility of Meyer's and Sanders' Historical Jesus work. As Denton puts it, Lonergan "distinguished between scientific knowledge and common-sense knowledge"; he "considered history to be an application of common-sense knowledge, inasmuch as history is concerned not with the discovery of universal laws or regularities but with understanding particular and concrete events."⁶ HJR invites the application of expert skills and exactly complex background knowledge, but it finally represents a highly refined, intensified – often obsessively sophisticated – instance of ordinary judgements about trustworthiness and plausibility.

5. DENTON 2004, p. 80.

6. DENTON 2004, pp. 104-105.

In later years, it pains me to note, Meyer and Sanders very publicly fell out over their differing assessments of the hugely influential work of Joachim Jeremias.⁷ For Meyer, I think, Jeremias was the epitome of balancing detailed philology with a holistic approach to Jesus in his environment⁸; for Sanders, Jeremias, precisely because of his erudition, was one of the most influential instances of the distorted and distorting views of Jewishness which Sanders has spent so much of his life overthrowing. The episode is heartbreaking for me, because I generally respect so deeply the judgement of both these men in their choices of which historians to admire. Yet I mention it here because even their sad disagreement reflects the moral and common-sense understanding of historiography which I think Meyer and Sanders share.

More playfully, let me mention here an aspect of Meyer's thought which was closely related to his admiration for Jeremias' work. That is, Meyer's enduring fascination with the presumed Aramaic substratum beneath the Greek Gospels' representation of Jesus' speech habits. Meyer remained deeply, I would say over-committed to the possibility of knowing what Jesus said in Aramaic, a commitment which I think exaggerated the continuity both of language in general and of a particular discourse. It may be that Meyer's confidence in the discipline of Lonerganite cognition, tempted Meyer to over-estimate the Aramaic perspicuity of the Gospel's Greek. I recall particularly Meyer's 1989 Presidential Address to the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, on Jesus' rhetoric in which I think Meyer actually spoke about Jesus' Aramaic poetics. There is at least some connection between Meyer's (excessive) confidence in the possibility of knowing Jesus through his Aramaism and Meyer's Lonerganite commitment to Lonergan's interest in intention in both language and history.

At any rate, there is one feature of the explicitly Lonerganite Part One of Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus* to which Sanders drew his reader's attention. That was Meyer's dictum, that "history is reconstruction through hypothesis and verification."⁹ Both Meyer and Sanders approached Historical Jesus reconstruction with a markedly limited interest in the obsession of post-war criticism with the teaching of Jesus as reconstituted from de-contextualized fragments retrieved using a hierarchy of often brutally reductive "criteria of authenticity." Meyer and Sanders both wrote their Jesus books well before it became fashionable in HJR to regard as discredited the whole project of so-called "criteria of authenticity" and the underlying concept of "authenticity" which they supported.¹⁰ Both Meyer and Sanders continued to argue recogniz-

7. SANDERS 1991; MEYER 1991; WRIGHT 2002, pp. 9f-g.

8. See for instance, MEYER 1979, pp. 52-54.

9. MEYER 1979, p. 19; SANDERS 1985, p. 47.

10. See KEITH and LE DONNE 2012; in defense of criteriology, see CHILTON 1999; PORTER 2000.

ably in terms of the old criteria, but both limited their appeal to those topoi of twentieth-century HJR argumentation.¹¹

Instead of relying on criteria of authenticity to reassemble a shattered Humpty Dumpty of Nazareth, both Meyer and Sanders explicitly appealed to the priority of formulating and then testing a good general hypothesis¹² in order to imagine and understand Jesus historically. Meyer in 1979, directly invoking Lonergan's influence, and Sanders in 1985, acknowledging kinship with Meyer, agreed that a good beginning hypothesis about Jesus is one which expects him to have been, especially, comprehensible within Second Temple Judaism, yet also capable of innovation and decisive influence on subsequent earliest Christianity.

Another characteristic feature of Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus* which Sanders noted with appreciation is precisely Meyer's focus on Jesus' *aims*, his intentions, as the core of what can be known and should be interesting about Jesus across historical and cultural distance. Several pages before discussing Meyer's work, Sanders argued in detail against the claim of Henry J. Cadbury writing in the 1930s that Jesus "had no definite, unified, conscious purpose" beyond "an unreflective vagabondage."¹³ Reaction against Cadbury primed Sanders to appreciate Meyer's historiography. Meyer, of course, took the title of his book, *The Aims of Jesus*, from the famous title, *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*. This was the title under which Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published and epitomized in 1778 the last installment of his extracts from the, until then, unpublished writings of Hermann Samuel Reimarus. Meyer was certainly drawn to Lessing's formulation of Reimarus' insight because "the question about Jesus' aims"¹⁴ elegantly expresses an insight which Meyer would articulate in terms of Lonergan's understanding of cognition, historical knowledge, and agency.

A good hypothesis, that is, a hypothesis worth testing, from which something interesting could possibly be learned, would be a hypothesis which included statements designed to be verifiable or falsifiable, about Jesus' aims. Such a hypothesis would start from an expectation that Jesus was an intentional social agent and communicator, reasonably intelligible and memorable as such to both his friends and enemies. If Jesus had been fundamentally aimless or reactive, indeed, if he was only a teacher or prophetic speaker of "sayings," then he would now be historically unknowable. It is possible, indeed useful, to criticize the Lonerganite emphasis on the intentionalities of historical agents as the focal object of historical enquiry, but HJR with its astonishing narrow focus on the trigger-moment of Christian origins, must be the strong

11. SANDERS 1985, p. 437; MEYER 1979, pp. 86-87; DENTON 2004, pp. 117-121, 139-142.

12. MEYER 1979, p. 19; SANDERS 1985, pp. 16-22.

13. SANDERS 1985, pp. 19-22, quoting CADBURY 1937[1962], pp. 141 and 125.

14. MEYER 1979, p. 19.

case for taking individual personal agency seriously.¹⁵ HJR should start with a presumption that Jesus knew what he was doing.

Sanders thus appreciated rather pragmatically in Meyer's slightly earlier work, three central perceptions: the importance to historical enquiry of a clear, verifiable or falsifiable hypothesis; the importance of Jesus' consciously communicated aims; and the importance – implicitly over against the notorious criterion of double dissimilarity – of a meaningful continuity between Jesus and both his Jewish environment and his early Christian receptions.

If Meyer and through him Lonergan certainly had a catalytic influence on Sanders' Historical Jesus works, Meyer and Lonergan had a deeper and more lavishly acknowledged role in the Historical Jesus thought of Nicholas T. Wright. For Sanders' project it was important not to get bogged down in philosophical and theological background. By contrast, Wright was not only interested in Meyer's actual hypotheses and judgements about what can be known about Jesus; Wright has consistently also shown interest in Meyer's philosophical preoccupations with the whole basis and point of historical enquiry and knowledge, as tested foundationally by the encounter with Jesus. Meyer's book on Jesus' aims begins with a memorable sentence: "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 on the topic not to make the old mistakes."¹⁶ Meyer wrote in the deep conviction that with the help of Lonergan's cognitional theory it was freshly possible to recognize "the old mistake, or better, the root of the old mistakes" and not merely to avoid them, but to transcend them.

To a remarkable extent Wright agrees with Meyer's diagnosis of that "root of the old mistakes." Wright also agrees substantially with Meyer's prescription of how to do better, by paying attention to our underlying presuppositions about historical knowledge itself. According to Meyer, the deep failure of so much HJR over so long a history is not conditioned by the need for some sort of technical progress, an innovative method or a new source through which we will at last 'discover' Jesus – which is exactly how New Testament Studies all too often operates. The failure of HJR is not simply that it has not succeeded yet.

Nor is the failure of HJR essentially derived from a perceived or real, affirmed or denied, "incompatibility between intellectual honesty and traditional Christian belief." Rather, if I understand the aspect of Meyer's work that in some sense converted Wright's thought, "intellectual honesty," "intellectual integrity," is itself "again open to concrete redefinition" as it was during the Enlightenments proceeding from the late seventeenth century.¹⁷

15. See DENTON 2004, pp. 107-113.

16. MEYER 1979, p. 13.

17. MEYER 1979, p. 15.

It follows [Meyer writes] that with a basic breakthrough in the account of knowledge the modern Christian dilemma might be radically resolved, cracked open, and the way cleared for constructive projects irreducible to theological salvage operations. This, in fact, is what is happening in our time, as may be observed in the work of Bernard Lonergan. But no single aspect or trait of Lonergan's work epitomizes this breakthrough.¹⁸

Wright is attracted to Meyer's Lonergan not only, as Sanders was, because of its lucid diagnosis of specific errors endemic in HJR (and, to be fair, of specific achievements). In addition, for Wright, Meyer's deployment of Lonergan's explicit account of knowledge promises to allow the researcher to step away from the old see-saw of Enlightenment polemics and Christian apologetics. In the years after reading Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus* for the first time, Wright formulated his own "critical realism"¹⁹ as

a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical'). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into 'reality', so that our assertions about 'reality' acknowledge their own provisionality.²⁰

The value of such a "critical realism" for Wright is that, in his words, it

offers an account of how we can take full cognizance of the provisionality and partiality of all our perceptions while still affirming – and living our lives on the basis of – the reality of things external to ourselves and our minds. This method involves [Wright characteristically adds], crucially, the telling of stories within the context of communities of discourse.²¹

As a professing Christian with a vocation to read biblical texts both historically and faithfully, even pastorally and publicly, Wright was thus positively and progressively attracted to Meyer's discussion of the relationships between perception and knowledge, history and faith or, perhaps I should say, among history, theology and faith. Reading Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus*, Wright initially assimilated above all the rejection of the epistemic extremes of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, along with the promise of a positive position in which "[k]nowledge, ...although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower."²²

Over a hundred years ago Albert Schweitzer characterized the failed project of older German HJR as "a uniquely great act of sincerity, one of the

18. MEYER 1979, pp. 15-16.

19. WRIGHT 1992, pp. 32-46, esp. 32 n. 3.

20. WRIGHT 1992, p. 35.

21. WRIGHT 1999, pp. 245-246.

22. WRIGHT 1992, p. 35.

most significant events in the whole inner life of humanity” (“eine einzigartig grosse Wahrhaftigkeitstat, eines der bedeutendsten Ereignisse in dem gesamten Geistesleben der Menschheit”²³). Yet for Schweitzer, intellectual sincerity and unrelenting technical ingenuity were not enough to provide a historical Jesus on whom Christian, specifically a Liberal Protestant, faith could base itself. The consequence has often been, to return to Meyer’s terminology, a systematic “dissociation of faith from past particulars,” whether by renouncing faith entirely, or by revising faith away from commitment to selected, embarrassing past particulars or, again, by a sweeping “theological opposition to the critical history of Jesus.”²⁴

In a few of the most carefully composed pages in his *The Aims of Jesus* Meyer contrasts “the modern morality of knowledge with its critically rigorous skepticism” with a “morality of knowledge” in which affirmation is recognized to be cognitively more foundational than suspicion.²⁵ I think Meyer’s point is that the perceived tension between history and faith as ways of claiming to know about Jesus as a figure in our past, is finally neither really a tension between faith and some other mode of experience, nor a tension between theology and history as disciplines of inference from experience. Rather, the acutely felt tension in post-Enlightenment cultures, between faith and other modes of experience and then more institutionally, between theology and history,

resolve[s] back into two orientations and two schools: the orientation to doubt and the orientation to assent, the school of suspicion and the school of affirmation. As we understand them, both are coherent; but they are hardly on a par, for cognitional theory confirms the one and cripples the other.

Meyer goes on to say,

With this resolution of conflicting views into two orientations of the human spirit, we do not imagine we have vindicated the one and discredited the other.²⁶

Nonetheless it is clear that Meyer expects that in any world of meaning, affirmation is cognitively prior over suspicion; skeptical historiography will always be operationally forced to cheat on itself by affirming something after all, and from the very sources it claims to distrust.

Certainly for a conference on ‘Loneragan, Ethics and the Bible,’ the epistemic morality of HJR should be a singularly compelling test-case, and the moral character of thinking about the past, about God, about the Gospel should be central business of our conference. At any rate, I am interested in the epistemic duties of a historian and even more in the commemorative duties

23. SCHWEITZER 1906, pp. 397-398.

24. MEYER 1979, p. 107.

25. MEYER 1979, p. 108.

26. MEYER 1979, p. 109.

of a Christian or a Jew. If I begin to understand Lonergan at all as mediated to me by Meyer, the act of questioning is the moment of ontological privilege in the whole process of cognition: it is questioning rather than just perception that connects “critical realism” to relatively knowable “reals.” As Meyer writes in typical Lonerganite terms,

For the critical realist (...) the issue of the real is posed for the first time by wondering about it – an act of intelligence. The issue, moreover, is resolved only by converting the wonder into a focused question, finding a promising answer, asking how good the answer is, and determining that it is good as gold. The real, that is, is grasped in and through true judgement.²⁷

You may have noticed that I have gradually begun using the label “critical realism.” This is perhaps the moment in my story to note that Wright’s “critical realist” historiography, with its acknowledged antecedents in Meyer and Lonergan, has attracted not only admiring criticism in the form of suggestions for improvement, but also more foundational, potentially destructive, critiques. For the latter I note in particular the 2015 article by Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts along with the subsequent somewhat acerbic exchange between Jonathan Bernier and Porter and Pitts, all in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*. Porter and Pitts seek to locate the epistemology adapted by Wright from Lonergan via Meyer in relation to various approaches also labelled “critical realism” since Roy Wood Sellars’ use of the label in 1916. Porter’s and Pitt’s initial judgement is thus that despite close original affinities, Lonergan-Meyer-Wright critical realism from its beginnings consistently failed to engage with contemporary, non-Lonerganite critical realisms.²⁸

More important, however, than the claim that Lonergan-Meyer-Wright critical realism was always unhelpfully isolated and self-referential is Porter’s and Pitt’s claim that any such position has been fatally undermined by developments in philosophical and scientific epistemology especially since Edmund Gettier’s 1963 article “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”

According to Porter and Pitts a Lonergan-Meyer-Wright historical epistemology is unconvincing because, despite a nod to external reality, it persistently locates the production of knowledge in the internal mental processes of the would-be knower. Thus as we have already heard, Wright says that his approach,

acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence ‘realism’), while also fully [my emphasis] acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence ‘critical’).²⁹

27. MEYER 1994, p. 67.

28. PORTER AND PITTS 2015, pp. 300-301.

29. WRIGHT 1992, p. 35.

Acknowledging reality here seems to take a back seat to “fully” acknowledging cognition, even as Wright wants to stress more than Meyer does, that the cognition involved is a “dialogue between ...the knower and the thing known.” To do justice to the concerns of Porter and Pitt, Meyer’s formulations of Lonergan seem to me to be even less oriented than Wright to the ontology of the alleged reality and even more insistent than Wright on the primacy of cognition.³⁰

Porter’s and Pitt’s Gettier-styled concerns seem to be paralleled in a long note in Alexander J.M. Wedderburn’s 2010 *Jesus and the Historians*. Wedderburn follows James Dunn in quoting a characteristic sentence by Lonergan himself:

The reality known is not just looked at; it is given in experience, organized and extrapolated by understanding, posited by judgement and belief.³¹

Wedderburn finds

this formulation (...) preferable to that followed by Meyer, *Reality*, 1 et passim, again appealing to Lonergan, where he introduces ‘insight’ as a cognitive act preliminary to ‘judgement’, identified respectively with ‘understanding’ and ‘construal’; on pp. 22 and 142 it is clear that these ‘insights’ may be false, on p. 24 that they are ‘entirely hypothetical’, but does one use ‘insight’ – or ‘understanding’, for that matter, when the content of either is in fact mistaken or ‘entirely hypothetical’? Is an untrue ‘insight’ much more than what we might normally call a [mistaken] ‘hunch’?³²

I think with Porter and Pitt and with Wedderburn that someone arguing for a Lonergan-Meyer-Wright epistemology needs to take seriously such worries about the perceived imbalance between the “reality... given in experience” and elaborate, sometimes deluded processes of cognition; at the same time, I think Wright’s critics rather miss the point of the attraction of Lonergan-Meyer-Wright thinking for some very significant historical Jesus researchers. In practice, it is not credible to accuse Meyer or Wright or Dunn of taking for granted or neglecting the constraints of historical data in their reflections toward an understanding of Jesus. In fact, the attraction of Lonerganite thinking for these historians is largely an attempt to do better than fragmentary, mechanistic and reductive handling of evidence – especially of evidence that was perceived as compromised by religious experience or a mythical worldview. Where the “known reality” is a reality known in the distant past, it is only “given in experience” in ways that are already in a long process of being over and over again, “organized and extrapolated by understanding, posited by judgement and belief.” That is, I think I want to defend a sort of Lonerganite epistemic internalism, not necessarily in general, but in the situation of histori-

30. See PORTER and PITT 2015, pp. 290-292.

31. LONERGAN 1972, p. 238; DUNN 2003, p. 110; WEDDERBURN 2010, p. 8 n. 28.

32. WEDDERBURN 2010, p. 8 n. 28, citing MEYER 1994.

ography, of trying to formulate the past, let alone the past of Jesus, as historical knowledge, communicable, debatable, but not dismissible as opinion or fiction.

This brings us at last to that second story which I promised or threatened to tell, the story of the emergence of HJR with a strong focus on issues of the phenomenology of personal and social cognition, of individual and social memory and of religious experience, emotion and communication. These aspects of cognition are clearly not quite what Lonergan describes in his more analytical epistemology, which raises for a theorist of history, or for an ethicist, the question of how to relate analytical epistemology to psycho-social cognition.

A very noticeable aspect of N.T. Wright's "critical realism," an aspect to which Ben Meyer gave relatively little attention, is Wright's insistence on the social-cultural dimensions of narrative and world-view as foundational to the formulation of historical hypotheses about Jesus. Wright has sustained and defended through much criticism his emphasis on story and world-view both in the early Christian accounts of Jesus and in any viable historical hypothesis.³³ Wright's own massive Historical Jesus work is built on Wright's much-debated claim that the narrative of Exile-and-Restoration was thematic for a Second Temple Jewish world-view and for Jesus' whole communicative programme, making Jesus' Aims understandable, to himself, to his hearers – and to an appropriately alerted historian. Wright's particular choice of Exile-and-Restoration as THE master narrative within which to understand Jesus may have failed to persuade (Mason); this in itself dramatizes the usefulness of a narrative hypothesis for clarifying and testing positions in HJR.

The problem for historiography, of course, is that there are all too many ways of representing a basically Israelite master narrative, no one of which will overcome the doubts of late modern historical critics as the best framework for understanding Jesus.³⁴

In a too brief passage of his *Method in Theology* Lonergan suggests an appeal not to narrative specifically, but to the dialogue of tradition, where

tradition includes at least individual and group memories of the past, stories of exploits and legends about heroes, in brief, enough of history for the group to have an identity as a group and for individuals to make their several contributions towards maintaining and promoting the common good of order. But from this rudimentary history, contained in any existential history, any living tradition, we must now attempt to indicate the series of steps by which one may, in thought, move towards the notion of scientific history.³⁵

Wright's HJR has correctly recognized that large-scale, world-view storytelling as well as more anecdotal narratives are vital both to Jesus' ability

33. See, for example, WRIGHT 1999, pp. 244-277.

34. MCKNIGHT 2005, pp. 30, 33; WEDDERBURN 2010, pp. 8-9, 54.

35. LONERGAN 1972, p. 182; WEDDERBURN 2010, p. 8 n. 28.

to communicate with his contemporaries and to any hope we might have of understanding Jesus' influence from our point of view in quite distant and nervous late modern hindsight.

There is, however, an even more basic precondition to any possibility of historical enquiry into the pastness of Jesus, namely that some people intentionally remembered Jesus and then intentionally commemorated him in textual and ritual institutions. I appreciate that there is some circularity between narrative and, especially collective, memory. Preventive salvation-historical or mythic narrative may well have been conducive for Jesus' aims, for contemporary perceptions of Jesus, and for subsequent appropriation of Jesus. Still, it is the activity of remembering Jesus that provided the basis for any possible historical enquiry and knowledge about him. Among Historical Jesus researchers who have explicitly acknowledged Lonergan's influence, as always, mediated by Ben Meyer, the turn toward memory studies has been led by James Dunn, most notably in his evocatively titled 2003 study, *Jesus Remembered*.³⁶ It must be said that Dunn's engagement with Meyer and Lonergan is much less intensive than Wright's; in a couple of pages, Dunn indicates his alignment "with the basic thrust of Lonergan's epistemology and its application to history."³⁷ Later in *Jesus Remembered*, Dunn is quite deeply critical of reliance on grand narratives in HJR and most specifically of Wright's 'exile and restoration' narrative.³⁸

Certainly, Dunn's focus on memory processes is not derived from Meyer or Lonergan, yet I think that Dunn's interest in 'remembering' might respond well to a more Lonerganite cognitional analysis. As Samuel Byrskog notes³⁹, Dunn doesn't actually define what he means by 'memory' or 'remembering', but it is clear that he has in mind an intentional, collective, imaginative and performative yet conservative activity.⁴⁰ 'Remembering' for Dunn seems to be a more actively cognitive way to name what an earlier form-criticism tried to reify as 'tradition'; Dunn's main characterization of early Christian collective remembering is in a chapter entitled "The Tradition."⁴¹ On one hand, Dunn's notion of 'remembering' shows surprisingly little influence from either the sociological or the psychological-neurological studies of memory to which I will refer in a moment. On the other hand, Dunn is seeking to describe the Jesus tradition as a quite self-consciously refined case of the sort of "rudimentary history" we heard Lonergan speak of.

36. See Bernier 2016a, pp. 2-3.

37. DUNN 2003, p. 111.

38. DUNN 2003, pp. 470-477; see WEDDERBURN 2010, pp. 39-45.

39. BYRSKOG 2004, p. 463; WEDDERBURN 2020, p. 190 n. 8.

40. WEDDERBURN 2010, pp. 190-195.

41. DUNN 2003, pp. 173-254, esp. 177-180.

More recent HJR has begun to interact more and more intensively with several streams of memory study and theory. One stream is that of social or collective memory associated with the names of Maurice Halbwachs, Jan and Alyda Assmann. Memory in this sense is not primarily located in the mind of individuals, but rather in the minds and cultural 'framework' of complex aggregates of individuals, their social institutions and material environment, including notably texts and rituals. Social and collective memory studies in the context of HJR are, I think, especially attractive for thinking about the cross-cultural, diasporic, counter-cultural aspects of remembering Jesus in the first few generations of Jesus devotion. Jesus devotees were invited to appropriate collective memory of a crucified, ethnically and regionally marked savior-figure.

A quite different stream of memory studies is oriented to the problems and new opportunities for understanding individual, personal experience, perception, memory formation and retention. This stream is fed by whole industries of empirical neuropsychological study which tend to show that even eye-witness memory is highly pre-scripted, creative, fallible, and suggestible –notwithstanding which each of us remains morally committed to our core memories of ourselves, our families and our worlds.

It is clear that personal and collective memory interact and overlap, specifically in social performance, but they may also behave quite differently. From the point of view of historical-juridical facticity it is also clear that both personal and collective memory are quite capable of being profoundly deluded and that both personal and collective memory are quite capable of being impressively retentive. An absolutely essential function in both personal and collective memory is that of selective, often deliberate, amnesia. It is impossible to recollect anything in particular without forgetting most of what has happened.⁴²

The sheer complexity of memory thus means that neither personal nor collective memory studies are going to validate or invalidate the Gospel traditions as reliable or unreliable warrants for historical knowledge.⁴³ What memory studies do offer to HJR is a greater awareness that perception, memory, remembering and commemoration are all complex constructive activities in which only ever a small selection of available stimuli are organized and assembled. Memory studies have tended to discredit the tradition of analyzing gospel tradition into atomic particles and then evaluating the individual fragments of tradition using criteria of authenticity. The once-routine notion that historical authenticity might lurk in retrievable fragments would now be widely dismissed. (Bernier 40-42; Keith and Le Donne) This coheres, of course, rather well with the Lonergan-Meyer-Wright tendency toward a relatively

42. WEDDERBURN 2010, p. 192 and p. 222 n. 19.

43. KEITH 2015b, pp. 536-541.

holistic historiography, driven by systematic interrogation of a consciously framed hypothesis.

The literature on memory in HJR is already unmanageably vast, in contrast with the elite little group who have seriously read Ben Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus*. One interesting feature of the appropriation of social memory studies by Gospel studies and HJR is the bold claim that social memory theory and its application are enabling a "new historiography." (Keith 2015b: 527-538; Wedderburn 99-109) In 2015 Chris Keith published a double article reviewing ten years of "Social Memory Theory and Gospels Research" to which I would refer anyone interested in fuller genealogy and bibliography of the new historiography in HJR (Keith 2015a and b; see also Williams). Keith counts his decade of social memory studies in Gospels research from the 2005 collection, *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, edited by Kirk, Alan, and Tom Thatcher. Perhaps I can take Anthony Le Donne's lively 2011 book, *Historical Jesus: What can we know and how can we know it?*, as an accessible sample of this type of approach. In it Le Donne draws centrally upon memory studies, but also attends to basic questions of historical epistemology. Le Donne claims to "perceive a new beginning of historical Jesus research, one that does not lament that the ancient past is unknowable." Especially coupled with Le Donne's repeated claim that his approach to the philosophy of history will be "postmodern" (Le Donne 2011: 3-7, 134), we might suspect that he actually is claiming "that the ancient past is unknowable." Chris Keith observes of Le Donne work more generally, that he "is more interested in halting historical enquiries at the earliest recoverable 'mnemonic sphere' and finds discussion of a past reality that is separate from its commemorations unhelpful."

Yet I think that, in fact, Le Donne is not so much making the point that the ancient past –let's say the pastness of Jesus, what Le Donne has called "The Historiographical Jesus" (Le Donne 2009) – cannot be known, but that it cannot be known in separation from its various and changing commemorations. (Keith 2015b: 529) I am struck that Le Donne is actually making the point that all our knowledge of the ancient past in general and of Jesus in particular is mediated, mediated by processes of memory and remembering that began with Jesus' own communicative behavior and continued through the astonishingly complicated dance of subsequent social memory. What we should not 'lament' is the failure of an older, quite pretentiously 'modern' HJR to extract or distil pure historical knowledge from the fermenting mash of tradition. Only a page earlier Le Donne writes about Jesus' words,

we must conclude that the initial force of his words set memory trajectories in motion. We must conclude that the initial perceptions of Jesus by his contemporaries were shaped by what was most memorable about him. Furthermore, there must have been some continuity between his historical impact and how this impact was remembered. (Le Donne 2011: 133 [italics original])

For Le Donne therefore

[t]he historian's job is to tell the stories of memory in a way that most plausibly accounts for the available mnemonic evidence. With this in mind, the historical Jesus is not veiled by the interpretations of him. He is most available for analysis when these interpretations are most pronounced. (134)

While this is quite far from the models of archaeological, stratigraphic HJR dominant fifty years ago, it feels to me epistemologically quite close to a vision of the historical task informed by a Lonergan-Meyer-Wright epistemology. The past is knowable precisely because it is mediated and we can reflect on the mediation; it occurs to me that it is the supposedly immediate present, not the past, that is unknowable.

Jonathan Bernier's recent book, which I mentioned at the outset, explicitly refers in its title (*The Quest for the Historical Jesus after the Demise of Authenticity*) to the volume of studies which Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne co-edited, *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*. Bernier strongly agrees with the new historiography's rebellion against positivist, yet atomistic historicism of older HJR, but Bernier only goes so far with the social memory theorists. In practice, Bernier applies Lonergan-style analysis in terms of "functional specialties" to the "movement [in HJR] begun by Ben Meyer, and furthered by scholars like Dunn, Freyne, and Sanders." (Bernier 2016: 73) For Bernier, "the signal contribution of the social memory approach ...beginning especially with Dunn's *Jesus Remembered*," would seem to be a more positive valuation of the subjectivities of tradents and a greater respect for continuity among Judaism, Jesus and the emerging Church. (161-162) Bernier does not yet seem to be interacting with Keith, Le Donne and the new memory-oriented scholarship in its more sceptical moods, when it emphasizes not only continuity, but also contradiction, amnesia and phantasy in the ferment of collective memory. (Keith 2015b: 533) Bernier has extended a Lonergan-Dunn approach toward dialogue with social memory theory, but the dialogue is so far mainly in the shared critique of older "authenticity"-oriented scholarship.

I also think that Le Donne and other representatives (Keith, Schröter, Kirk, Thatcher, Dale Allison, Sandra Hübenal, R. Zimmerman, Rafael Rodriguez) of the new historiography in HJR are not so much postmodern as post-modernist; as I read them, they are trying to get beyond certain kinds of exaggerated modernist historicism to imagine a historiography "beyond historicism" ("jenseits des Historismus"), to use Jens Schröter's oft-quoted phrase. (Schröter 2007: 9; Keith 2015b: 528) If Jens Schröter rather than Ben Meyer is the muse of the new historiography in Jesus studies, they seem to me to share a diagnosis of the epistemic inadequacy of the modernist project of fragmentation, authentication, and only then reconstruction of a Historical Jesus. Part of Schröter's appeal for a new generation of English-writing Historical

Jesus researchers is, I suspect, that Schröter is not easily placed on an Anglo-American theological-ideological scale of conservative-liberal-radical; Meyer, Wright, Dunn, perhaps Bernier, are for this purpose too easily labelled. Yet for Schröter and for Meyer or Wright the goal of study in history is no longer the modernist retrieval and reconstruction of a stable, unchanging, but temporarily misplaced 'past' – in the case of HJR, 'the real Jesus'; nor is the main obstacle to historical understanding some defect in the available evidence – especially that most of it has been tainted by faith. Rather the insistent task of a renewed historiography is to understand better the complex dynamics of interaction among memories and traditions of commemoration in on-going conversation with the past.

My purpose in evoking in this glancing way the emerging, still quite unsettled, new historiography in HJR is to ask whether there is a future to Lonergan's peculiar impact on Jesus studies. The episode of Lonergan's influence through Ben Meyer especially on N.T. Wright is an important moment in the emergence of HJR from a habit of thought that was at best reductive. I expect that Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus* and his subsequent more and more philosophical works will continue to be discovered and re-discovered, especially by those whose curiosity is whetted by Wright's many testimonials. But if Lonergan's perspective on historical knowledge is to have continuing influence, I think it will have to be in conversation with the emerging new historiography of which the main achievements are still in the future. Perhaps someone here with a background in both philosophy of history and New Testament exegesis, will dare to write a comparison, no longer like Denton's fine, but retrospective comparison of Ben Meyer and J.D. Crossan, but prospectively and programmatically between Ben Meyer and Jens Schröter, Chris Keith and their associates.

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SUMMARY

This article seeks to relate two stories from the field of Historical Jesus Research. The first story tells how the thought of Bernard Lonergan was brought by the work of Ben F. Meyer to influence the work of key figures in Historical Jesus Research (notably J.D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright –and less directly E.P. Sanders). The second story is that of the redefinition of Historical Jesus Research that is ongoing today in the work of newer scholars (for example, Chris Keith, Jens Schröter, Anthony LeDonne), seeking to surmount the mechanical, over-sceptical criteriology of post-war scholarship and embracing new studies in personal cognition, religious experience and the collective processes of social memory. I ask whether this second story should become a new moment for Lonergan's thought to exercise a positive influence on New Testament Studies.

SOMMAIRE

Cet article cherche à mettre en rapport deux histoires issues des recherches portant sur le Jésus de l'histoire. La première raconte comment, par l'intermédiaire de l'œuvre de Ben F. Meyer, la pensée de Bernard Lonergan a influencé des chercheurs-clés dans la quête du Jésus de l'histoire (à savoir J.D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright – et indirectement Ed P. Sanders). Le deuxième récit est celui de la redéfinition de la recherche sur le Jésus Historique par des nouveaux chercheurs (tels que Chris Keith, Jens Schröter, Anthony LeDonne). Cette recherche, toujours en cours, vise à surmonter la critériologie mécanique et trop sceptique des études d'après-guerre, tout en adoptant les travaux scientifiques récents portant sur le cognitif humain, l'expérience religieuse, et les processus collectifs de la mémoire sociale. Se pourrait-il que cette deuxième histoire soit un second moment pour l'influence positive de la pensée de Lonergan sur les études néotestamentaires ? Voilà ma question.