Richard N. Soulen

*Defining Jesus: The Earthly, the Biblical, the Historical, and the Real Jesus, and How Not to Confuse Them*


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Addressing the allegedly prevalent confusion of the “historical’ with the “real” Jesus in popular treatments, scholarly works, and the church, Richard N. Soulen sets out to bring clarity to the content of the name Jesus as it is—and, he believes, ought to be—used in the academy, church, and popular press. Despite the connotations engendered by the label historical, Soulen argues that the historical Jesus is a hypothetical scholarly reconstruction neither to be equated with the first-century individual as he actually was nor to be appropriated as a suitable object for Christian faith. An accurate portrayal of the earthly Jesus can instead be found in the biblical (depictions of) Jesus, who in turn approximates the real Jesus of Christian experience and worthy of worship.

After a brief preface stating the book’s intention(s), “to bring semantic clarity to talk about Jesus by proposing foundational definitions for the terms employed” (x), the introduction presents the key terms that study will deal with: the *earthly*, *biblical*, *historical*, and *real* Jesus. Regarding these, Soulen asserts, there is no agreement as to what they mean or how they relate to one another. Accordingly, he will attempt to explain “what each term should mean in the context of Christian faith … [and] how each term is related to the human being who walked the hills of Palestine and was known as Jesus, a Galilean (Matt 26:69)” (xiv).
In the first chapter, “Jesus as He Actually Was,” Soulen challenges the ideal inspired by von Ranke to portray Jesus wie er eigentlich gewesen. Reconstruction of the life of Jesus is hindered by two factors: the nature of the sources and the nature of human (self-) understanding. If we do not even fully know ourselves, then how can we claim to know another person? From a human perspective, we can thus only know the barest outlines of who Jesus actually was.

These matters are then dealt with in chapter 2, “The Earthly Jesus,” “that complex of historical statements about the person Jesus of Nazareth that the four gospels either share or singularly do not significantly contradict and whose validity contemporary historians of note, both religious and secular, find highly plausible” (9). To this category belong the plausible dates of Jesus’s birth and death, the names of his parents, his primary place of residence (Nazareth), the baptism by John, the gathering of disciples, teaching about the kingdom of God, miracles, the cleansing of the temple, the Last Supper, his crucifixion, and the ensuing experience of his resurrection by others; the category does not include claims about an exalted self-understanding as the Messiah/Son of God/Son of Man nor any particular statements about what Jesus said and did. The core data are by themselves noncontroversial and require neither devotion nor antagonism from anyone. They are facts in need of interpretation.

Chapter 3 turns to “The Biblical Jesus,” the character “one meets when reading the Gospels and writings of the New Testament” (23). This Jesus is neither the Jesus of a single author nor an amalgam of all depictions but the Jesus who emerges from the New Testament texts without mediation, being immediately accessible to the reader independent of his or her faith. Accordingly, Soulen argues, as soon as one attempts to resolve various forms of tension in and between the various biblical portrayals of Jesus, one is no longer dealing with the biblical but rather with the historical Jesus (33).

“The Historical Jesus,” “the primary semantic culprit plaguing the academy, the church, and the public in every conversation about Jesus” (43), is the focus of chapter 4. Soulen defines this Jesus as “a hypothetical creation … [having] fleeting or no reality in the shared memory of the church, being confined in the main to transient scholarly circles and the fickle fans of commercial writers” (43–44). This Jesus must under no circumstances be confused with the non speculative earthly Jesus outlined above, about whom so precious little is known. To illustrate his point, Soulen refers to R. Aslan and J. D. Crossan who, despite their shared reliance on sociological and cultural anthropology research, arrive at sharply differing conclusions. The root of the problem is traced to a lack of an interpretive principle defined beforehand. In order to know what words and deeds do go back to Jesus, one needs an idea of who Jesus was. In the case of the historical
Jesus, this entails constructing as principle of interpretation that is appropriate to the subject, stating it clearly, and applying it consistently.

In the fifth chapter Soulen provides a number of criteria for what he labels “normative portraits of Jesus” (61), that is, portraits that give historical accounting for the biblical Jesus while being relevant for the church. According to Soulen, “it is the historical and theological continuity of the biblical with the earthly Jesus that must be the norm and criterion of any reconstruction of ‘the historical Jesus’ that can speak to the faith of the Christian church” (62). Every reader needs a plausible picture of Jesus that can be used to resolve the conflicts and uncertainties found within, and between, the biblical texts.

A normative portrait of Jesus: (1) stands in continuity with the earthly and the biblical Jesus; (2) coheres in measurable ways with the biblical Jesus while not transgressing rules of contemporary historiography; (3) coheres with insights of contemporary literary criticism; (4) precludes descriptions of what Jesus thought about himself; and (5) depicts a person whose life and teachings correspond to that life deemed its imitation by the New Testament church. Before the chapter closes Soulen provides a short list of characteristics of an earthly Jesus that could give rise to the biblical Jesus, listing elements that have been commonly recognized by the church. According to Soulen, Jesus: (1) proclaimed the kingdom of God; (2) criticized the self-righteous; (3) demanded social justice; (4) embodied lovingkindness toward the sick; (5) called disciples; (6) engaged in table fellowship; (7) spoke of God’s inclusive love; (8) spoke and acted in God’s place; (9) sacrificed personal well-being and life to demonstrate God’s lovingkindness, forgiveness, and grace; and (10) gave, to those with ears to hear, the experience of God’s healing power and presence generating faith, hope’ and love in them.

The sixth and final chapter discusses the relationship between the real Jesus and the Christ of faith. According to Soulen, the real Jesus is the experience of the presence of the living Lord, “that reality first brought into being by the earthly Jesus … now mediated in the present by the biblical Jesus and re-encountered in the multiple form of the church’s tradition” (90). The book then ends with a number of testimonies by different people of how they have experienced the real Jesus.

Soulen’s ambition to bring semantic clarity to an allegedly disarrayed discourse is commendable, and throughout the book he evinces a fruitful combination of familiarity with the history of Jesus research and theological sensitivity as to what might constitute the proper object of Christian faith. The succinct size of the study is suitable for the envisaged lay audience, and a reader will gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the key terms, their interrelationship, and their relevance to the life of the church.
Still, Soulen’s distinctions and definitions do not ultimately convince. Some of them are less clear-cut, while others more distinct than made out to be. If both the earthly and historical Jesuses are the results of historiographical work, then they are essentially the same, and no sharp line can be drawn between them. Similarly, to describe the biblical Jesus as “immediately” available to the reader/hearer of the New Testament (23) ignores the unavoidable element of interpretation (see 24, 58, 63), which clouds the distinction between the biblical Jesus and historical Jesus. For if interpretation is an unavoidable part of reading—and one abandons the biblical Jesus for the historical as soon as one tries to separate historical fact from its interpretation or relate the literary character to the real person behind the text (28, 42), that is, engages in interpretation—then the categories of biblical and historical cannot be sufficiently kept apart either. At the same time, Soulen exaggerates the overlap between Jesus as he actually was, the real, and the biblical Jesus. Neither the New Testament nor ecclesiastical tradition has provided a single portrait of Jesus but rather a rich variety of shifting depictions. Even when combined, these portrayals at most depict a fragment of Jesus as he actually was (see John 21:25) and a diffuse picture of Jesus as he is (see 1 Cor 13:12).