Finding the Historical Christ is the third volume by Paul Barnett in his After Jesus series. While the first and second volumes treat the earliest years of Christianity and Paul’s work, this volume covers the years between A.D. 60 and 80, in which Barnett argues that the Gospels were written. As the title implies, Barnett’s thesis is that the division of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith is fundamentally flawed. He contends, rather, that the Gospels and the Pauline letters reflect Jesus as the Christ because Jesus thought himself to be so. While divulging his faith background, Barnett indicates his aim for a historical rather than theological demonstration of his thesis (7). This professed separation of methodologies is maintained throughout the work. His suggestion that the Gospels were primarily intended for an “insider” audience closely parallels his own intended readership, for his argument often privileges or assumes the thesis he tries to prove, that Jesus was the preressurrection Christ. Thus, while Barnett may provide a more substantial argument for those already inclined to share his views, there is little here to convince those looking for a rigorous historical approach to the historical Jesus.

Reviewers have commented on the accessibility and organization of the previous volumes in this series, and this work is no exception. While his use of headings is generous in some areas, Barnett always provides a clear blueprint for his argument. At times it would be
beneficial to have reference to the Greek, especially when the author is performing textual comparisons, but this lack is never critical to his argument. The few explicit references to the Greek are transliterations. Viewed in concert with a relative absence of jargon and his colloquial tone, Barnett’s work appears designed for a nonacademic readership.

An early dating for the Gospels, which he supports in his second chapter, is critical to Barnett’s project. He argues for the correspondence of the Gospels with four apostolic groups: Mark with Peter, Matthew with James, Luke with Matthew, and John with John (16). Reacting to the traditionally bleak assessment of the postapostolic period, he uses second-century sources such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus to indicate that there was likely a much earlier Gospel tradition (23). This proposed written tradition allows Barnett to dismiss gnostic and apocryphal literature as heretical while supporting an early fourfold Gospel (30). A more nuanced understanding of subjectivity would be helpful here. While admitting in his introduction the inevitability of subjectivity, Barnett does not allow the Gospel writers their own contexts, emphasizing rather their integral preservation of apostolic tradition. It is clear why this is important, for an early developed Christology is easier to trace to Jesus than a later and contentious one, yet Barnett is still hard-pressed to demonstrate causal links between a self-aware preressurrection Christ and the Christology of his followers. Instead, a forceful restatement of his thesis, that the four Gospels were “the benchmark” for second-century writers, is made to bear the weight of evidence (34). The subject is presumably treated in more detail in his first volume.

The third chapter treats what Barnett calls “the hostile sources”: Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny. Barnett succeeds in demonstrating that groups of Christians believed that Jesus was the Christ and that this was evident to their opponents. The title “Christ” is critical for his argument here. For example, because Tacitus refers to “Christians” in describing their persecution in Rome, Barnett proposes that the preressurrection Jesus was known by this title, since groups were named after their founder (58). His reasoning that the Romans executed Jesus for political rather than religious reasons is unproblematic (51). However, he claims that his execution as attempted usurper meant that Jesus “most likely” claimed to be the Christ (63). “In short, because they crucified him as ‘the king of the Jews’ (that is, as ‘the Christ’), we must conclude that the title the Christ did not begin postcrucifixion, but precrucifixion” (59). This conclusion is not directly warranted by the evidence and effaces the possibility of difference between the Roman and Jewish motives for Jesus’ death as well as any distinction between their actions and intentions.

In chapter 4, the brevity of which belies its importance for his subsequent argument, Barnett establishes a common foundation for Gospel writing based upon the Petrine tradition. He compares passages from Paul’s letters and Mark’s Gospel to argue that they worked from a common understanding. This anticipates the argument of the fifth
chapter, “Mark and Memory,” which is perhaps the most critical to Barnett’s thesis. He posits that Mark wrote both as an eyewitness and a scribe of Peter, based upon the commentary of Papias of Hieropolis. Because this text asserts that Mark wrote down Peter’s words, Barnett contends those scholars are wrong who claim several generations passed between Jesus and the first Gospels (79). However, the chain of transmission is by no means simple, as it is uncertain whether Papias’s John is the apostle John and whether this John knew Mark. Barnett also gives short shrift to Mark’s treatment of Peter in his Gospel beyond noting that Peter’s “shortcomings are not glossed over” (91). He concludes rather that, because the text mentions “his disciples and Peter” (Mark 16:7), one should infer that he was to have been reinstated as the carrier of the tradition (86). There are other logical leaps in the chapter as well: where Mark neglects to mention names, Barnett suggests it was because they were obvious (87–89); where Mark supplies unique details such as Jesus resting his head on a pillow in the boat, Barnett argues that it supports the historicity of the event (96). While these arguments have been made by other scholars, Barnett requires that they give support for a Markan Gospel based upon Peter’s remembrance.

The second half of the work has less bearing on Barnett’s primary argument than the first. The sixth chapter uses the opening of Luke to argue that it, too, was a Gospel linked to eyewitnesses (112). More time is actually spent on Mark than Luke in this chapter in an attempt to indicate the compatibility and historicity of both Luke and his sources. A not insignificant detour in this chapter treats the usage of the “Son of Man” in Mark, with Barnett concluding that this was Jesus’ preferred term for “Christ,” one that divorced it from nationalistic associations (129).

Chapter 7, addressing the historicity of John’s Gospel, is a necessary foray for the author because he has given such weight to the early acceptance and viability of the Gospel tradition. Barnett argues that John was written independently of Mark and that this independence adds significant weight to the historical events that coincide in their Gospels (155). This chapter includes many Johannine passages to show their compatibility with the Synoptic Gospels.

The eighth chapter discusses Christ in Paul’s letters, and here Barnett strongly reasserts his contention that the Jesus quests are detrimental to the study of Jesus (178). His argument here depends on acceptance of his previous assertion in chapter 4 that Paul writes from a common Petrine base. Consequently, Barnett assumes that when Paul speaks of Christ he is referring to the historical figure. Thus, for example, he writes that Paul’s claim that the rich Christ became poor so that others might become rich was historical, not theological (187). The life of Jesus is conflated with its theological implications, which is ironically what prompted the quests for the historical Jesus in the first place.
Chapter 9 puts Mark’s Gospel in its Galilean context. Barnett here criticizes most of the criteria of authenticity that historical Jesus scholars often use, arguing that they are primarily self-serving. However, he provides examples of one criterion he considers helpful, that of similarity and dissimilarity, where Jesus gives a familiar Jewish theme a new and subversive meaning (224). The remainder of the chapter demonstrates that the names and places listed in the Markan text are historically viable. A short appendix to this chapter explains its importance for his argument, suggesting that the Gospels bring together the historical and a new element: the “supranatural.” The latter is validated by the former (250). This hierarchical connection provides an effective transition to Barnett’s conclusion, in which he poses his approach to the historical Christ over and against a separation of history and faith in the figure of Jesus.

Barnett’s objection that a postresurrection Christ depreciates Jesus is understandable but not unavoidable. What this division can beneficially indicate is that the sum of the historical circumstances does not and should not create the theological understanding of the Christ figure. On the other hand, Barnett requires the impetus for theology to reside within history, which threatens to trivialize the tradition as merely a natural consequence of historical events. More important, however, his thesis is difficult to demonstrate without begging the question, as Barnett demonstrates throughout Finding the Historical Christ.