In this book Halvor Moxnes analyzes scholarly works on the historical Jesus written in Europe during the nineteenth century. As indicated by the subtitle, Moxnes enters into a dialogue with Albert Schweitzer’s renowned work *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Writing in the beginning of the twentieth century, Schweitzer criticized his predecessors for being caught up in their own modern ideas. Schweitzer’s work has had enormous impact on biblical scholarship. It is often seen as a termination of the first quest of the historical Jesus. At the same time, it set the stage for the twentieth-century Jesus research with historical objectivity as an unquestioned goal.

Moxnes is troubled by the lack of critical discussions about Schweitzer and the status of “received truth” that New Testament scholarship has given his work. He therefore offers a re-reading of Schweitzer that takes his critique in another direction. With a hundred years in hindsight, Moxnes is able to point out that Schweitzer was also a “child of his time” who had philosophical as well as cultural presuppositions. Rather than letting Schweitzer stand as a figurehead of historical-critical objectivity, then, Moxnes draws attention to his moral passion and his desire “for a Jesus who can give meaning to the world” (6). Schweitzer’s suggestion of a hopelessly distant and irretrievable apocalyptic Jesus then becomes a failure by Schweitzer’s own standards. Although generally upheld as the
solution, a historical Jesus so foreign to the present, Moxnes argues, was actually a collapse of Schweitzer’s own ambition.

An unresolved conflict then lies at the heart of Schweitzer’s work: the historical Jesus fails to meet the needs of the present. The most important legacy of Schweitzer, Moxnes argues, is a struggle rather than a solution. Placing himself and his present volume in this struggle, Moxnes sets out to study the nineteenth-century Jesus research from the very perspective that Schweitzer criticized: how the portrayals of Jesus were related to the societies in which the researchers were living, or, to put it more simply, how the historical question of Jesus’ identity was related to the question of our identity.

More specifically, Moxnes focuses on the various national identities that were emerging in Germany, France, and England. These are the most significant contexts, he argues, with which the writings on Jesus interacted. Covering just about the whole century, Moxnes studies four authors: Friedrich Schleiermacher and David Friedrich Strauss, both from Germany, Ernest Renan from France, and George Adam Smith from Britain.

Before approaching these authors, however, Moxnes sets the stage in two preparatory chapters. First he discusses the biography as a new way of writing about Jesus and its significance for the forming of national identities in Europe. With reference to Benedict Anderson’s influential work *Imagined Communities*, Moxnes is able to show how these special forms of writing were crucial for the forming of modern nations.

In the second preparatory chapter, “Holy Land as Homeland,” Moxnes brings his readers to his childhood’s schoolhouse, where there were three maps: one of Norway, one of Palestine, and one world map with large pink-colored areas indicating the magnitude of the British Empire. Although Moxnes was obviously born much later than the period he is investigating, this personal memory of his represents the importance of Palestinian geography, as well as “empire,” for European self-understandings during the nineteenth century. Palestine, of course, belongs to the Orient, which was a crucial region for European colonial expansion. Moxnes here enters into an interesting debate with Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. According to Said, depictions of the Orient contributed to the definition of Europe by being its counterimage, its opposite personality, and its other. As Moxnes argues, however, Said is far too one-sided in his critique. European notions of the Orient, especially of the Holy Land, were far more complex than Said allows. As indicated by the maps in the schoolhouse, Palestine was also part of the “us.” It was the land in which Jesus had lived and was as such warmly familiar. As a telling illustration, the two maps of Norway and Palestine in the schoolhouse had the same size, making the relation between the homeland and the Holy Land almost seamless. Palestine was therefore both familiar and foreign, part of the Orient and of Europe. Palestine, Moxnes thus argues, and
here he sounds almost like Homi Bhabha, occupies that ambiguous space between us and the other (60).

After these two introductory chapters, four chapters follow that investigate the four Jesus scholars. First is Schleiermacher, whose lectures on the life of Jesus were held at a time, shortly after the Napoleonic wars, when visions of a unification of Germany were flourishing. Moxnes relates this context to Schleiermacher’s choice of John’s Gospel as a main source because Jesus moves more freely in the Palestinian territory. Thus Jesus becomes a figure who unifies the Jewish people and, as Moxnes argues, the German people as well. Unlike other portrayals of Jesus, which tend to place him in Galilee, Schleiermacher’s Jesus belongs to the Jewish land as a whole. Here Moxnes finds a parallel between Schleiermacher’s Jesus and Frederick the Great. The image of King Frederick II as an ideal great man who unifies a people was a model for Schleiermacher’s Jesus and contributed to imagining a unified German nation.

The second scholar is Strauss. Since he wrote several works on Jesus, Moxnes is able to detect a development and show how his writings interact in quite different ways with the construction of German national identity. Moxnes here makes a remarkably rich analysis that I render only in part. In his first two works on Jesus, Strauss presented Jesus as a masculine ideal that helped form the developing modern nation. In his last work, Moxnes points out, Jesus switches sides and is associated with “the enthusiasts” (Schwärmer) who are disconnected from reason and development and whose gender reminds of a hysterical woman. Since Luther had offered harsh critique of these groups, Strauss here construes an interesting opposition between Luther and the modern German nation, on the one hand, and Jesus and the irrational noble enthusiasts on the other.

Moxnes now turns to the French scholar Renan. What especially fascinates Moxnes is how Renan brings in a new source for attaining knowledge about the historical Jesus: the land of Palestine. To actually see the places where the events occurred became for Renan “a fifth Gospel.” Moxnes here returns to his previous discussion of Orientalism and of the Holy Land as being at the same time familiar and foreign for Europeans. The double and ambivalent way of seeing the Orient, Moxnes argues, is present in Renan’s distinction between Galilee and Jerusalem.

Here Moxnes also enters into an exciting discussion about race. As argued by Said, Renan construed a rather unsympathetic dichotomy between Semites and Indo-Europeans. Moxnes agrees that this racialized division is present in Renan’s work on Jesus, but, as Moxnes also shows, there is more to it than that. Given this sharp division, one would expect Renan, as did many other scholars, to describe Jesus as Indo-European rather than Semitic. As Moxnes argues, however, Renan rather regarded Jesus as racially undefinable.
Being raised in a racially mixed Galilean setting, Renan argued, Jesus saw his mission as getting rid of racial distinctions. The Galilee/Jerusalem dichotomy, Moxnes argues, here gets an interesting twist. Jerusalem, for Renan, is a Jewish center that represents “the pride of blood” and of race. Whereas Jewish religion was based on blood or race, the religion of Jesus was based on the heart. Race for Renan thus becomes associated with the other. The other, of course, was primarily the Oriental, but also, Moxnes argues—and here comes the twist—the Germans. Whereas the Germans according to Renan emphasized race, the French upheld the idea of humanity as a spiritual principle. As Moxnes points out, a nation based on race was for Renan not only projected to the distant Orient but to the neighboring country Germany.

The fourth scholar taken on by Moxnes is George Adam Smith from Britain. Although he did not write a life of Jesus book, his work nevertheless resembles such writings. Moxnes includes it mainly due to its focus on Palestinian geography that Smith finds crucial in order to reach knowledge about the historical Jesus. Similar to Renan, Smith had been traveling to Galilee, and his portrayal of Jesus is informed by these experiences. Unlike Renan, however, Smith does not establish a contrast between Galilee and Jerusalem. The problems facing Jesus were rather internal to Galilee. Smith’s description of Galilee as a land where Jesus was exposed to various temptations, Moxnes argues, turned his work into a moral geography. The temptations facing Jesus—power, sensuality, and commerce—were also present in Smith’s Britain. Smith’s way of describing Jesus in Galilee thus interconnects with discourses on masculinity in Victorian England. By presenting Jesus as a young man who overcame the temptations of sex and success, Smith offered to his society male qualities that helped form a British nation as well as an empire.

In the concluding chapter, Moxnes affirms the contention by Schweitzer that the Jesus research during the nineteenth century was closely related to its various social locations. Unlike Schweitzer, however, who regarded these portrayals as failures, Moxnes regards them as contributors to major questions of their present day and as responding to the needs of specific situations. This is also the challenge for contemporary writings on the historical Jesus, Moxnes argues—with one crucial difference: to avoid painting Jesus as a national or imperial figure.

More specifically, Moxnes suggests three paths to explore in terms of writing about Jesus in a hermeneutics of political imagination: Jesus and the importance of utopias, Jesus and a global cohesion beyond nationalism, and Jesus and the critique of “family values.” In an inspiring manner, Moxnes here outlines the contours of a kind of scholarly writing on Jesus that could move beyond nation and empire and that writes about him in the context of a global community.
In terms of criticism, I will address three areas. A first point concerns methodology and theory. At some points Moxnes investigates the scholars’ personal letters and personal experiences. This raises a question about theory and method. When the reading strategy is discussed (40–41), Foucault and Said are mentioned, which implies a discourse theoretical approach. As I understand it, this approach would entail a reading in front of the text, so to speak, investigating how the works became part of various European identity constructions. Unpublished personal letters would then not be part of these constructions. On the other hand, if one is interested in understanding the authors and their intentions, such letters are key texts. But this would imply a different methodological approach.

A second point concerns a focus on empire, which seems to be somewhat lacking. Strauss’s famous proposition about myths in the New Testament would be a case in point. On the one hand, I would argue that it threatened one of the pillars of imperial Christianity that defined myths as part of the other, most notably the heathens. In this sense Strauss became an anticolonial troublemaker who created a crisis in the European imperial identity. On the other hand, Strauss’s proposition also rested on a scornful understanding of the early Christians as Orientals. So whereas Strauss deconstructed one imperial dichotomy, it seems, he reproduced another. Although Moxnes includes some discussions of empire in the chapter in Strauss, more could be done in this area.

Third, one can question if Renan’s stereotypical depiction of Palestine can be harmonized with the homeland/Holy Land relation in the way Moxnes does. Renan was primarily an Orientalist, an academic scholar rather than a church theologian. He was also located in a Catholic setting and belonged to a French secular avant-garde whose agenda was to replace the old ecclesial authorities with enlightenment. Renan’s exotic depiction of Galilee is thus part of an Orientalist stereotype. But even if it is a positive stereotype, it remains part of the Orient, part of the other. Palestine, for Renan, can be foreign in a positive or in a negative sense. But it remains foreign. The schoolhouse maps, on the other hand, seem to represent a precritical ecclesial discourse. In Christian circles and in Christian education, I would argue, Jesus continued to be primarily a familiar character. This precritical understanding resisted modern biblical scholarship and continued to do so for a long time.

In conclusion, despite these minor objections, Moxnes has written a work of striking originality. Overall his argument is sound and persuasive. The most significant contribution of the book, I would argue, is seen in relation to the transformation of biblical scholarship that has been taking place during the recent decades. While scholars in Third World locations or with a feminist, postcolonial, or queer perspective write about Jesus in various contextual ways, a major strand in North Atlantic biblical
scholarship tends to regard itself as anticontextual and as practicing scientific objectivity when trying to prove who the historical Jesus actually was. As Moxnes shows, however, contextual readings are not only found in the Third World, among the feminists or the queer; they are also found in the very European stronghold of historical-critical scholarship itself.