

**Reflection Paper on:**  
**"From the Humanity of Christ to the Historical Jesus,"**  
an article by William P. Loewe, published in  
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Scholarly interest and research on the “historical Jesus” started in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, within the context of the Age of Enlightenment. It basically consisted of trying to discern, through various scholarly means, what parts of the Scriptural accounts of the life and ministry and sayings of Jesus could be considered authentic. The initial motivations ranged from a desire to counter the basic premises of the Christian beliefs to attempts to give a more modern, scientific-friendly face to Christianity<sup>1</sup>. The first phase of this quest, commonly referred to as the “old quest,” lasted until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second phase, or the “new quest,” started in 1953 and lasted for over three decades. In 1985, two particular events (the publication of a book and the start of the Jesus Seminar) led, in the opinion of Loewe and other commentators<sup>2</sup>, to the outset of the “third quest.”

The article being commented in this paper deals with issues at the core of what is called a “paradigmatic shift” in Christology, which was accentuated in the early 1970s, when “Christology began to draw upon the results of research on the historical Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Before this shift, the study and the understanding of Jesus’ person were based on the dogmatic statement from the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) that Christ had both a fully divine and a fully human nature, perfectly integrated in a single person. With the paradigm shift, the new Christologies “begin with some consideration of Jesus’ earthly career and destiny” – *the historical Jesus*, “and then proceed to reconstruct and rearticulate his religious significance,” sometimes even arriving “at thoroughly revisionist interpretations of the dogma of the divinity of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> The main argument of Loewe’s article is that there simply does not exist an unequivocal, objective characterization of the “historical Jesus” that can be identified with the “real Jesus,” and consequently this poses a limit to the current paradigm shift in Christology.

In order to make his case, Loewe first revisits a debate that occurred among Catholic theologians as the paradigm shift was underway. More specifically, Loewe identifies the points in common and the differences between the positions of David Tracy and Elizabeth Johnson and uses this analysis as the background for his argument. In the next four paragraphs I will briefly summarize the article’s main points and in the last two paragraphs I will make my own comments about the subject.

According to Loewe<sup>5</sup>, Tracy’s position is that the “real” image of Jesus Christ, as God’s incarnate Son, should be construed in the present through the faith experience of the community of believers, based on the memory that has been carried by the tradition of

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<sup>1</sup> Loewe, “From the Humanity of Christ” 318.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 325-326.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 315.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 315-316.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 319-321.

that community, stemming from the original apostolic witness. Improved, contemporary knowledge of the historical Jesus should *not* be used as the grounding for understanding who he is, but *may* be employed to add on to that image in two main ways: (1) by possibly confirming some assumptions and presuppositions about the Jesus of history inherited from the apostolic witness<sup>6</sup>; and (2), if appropriated through the lens of faith in God's incarnation, the historical Jesus can provide material to update the apostolic witness to the present age.

Johnson's position<sup>7</sup>, on the other hand, is that the real image of Jesus Christ, as God's incarnate Son, can and should be construed in the present primarily from the historical Jesus. This approach would offer *consistency* for today's believers, would "purify the Church's faith-image of Jesus from ideological manipulation or projection", and would "concretize Jesus' humanity, countering the recurrent temptation to docetism that afflicts the Christian tradition."

It is important to note that Loewe did find some points of agreement in the positions of both scholars, the most significant of which was that they both agreed that the image of the historical Jesus should *not* be used to validate faith, or, alternatively, that the historical Jesus should *not* be used "to ground in whole or part the kerygma."

After presenting his remarks on the discussion between Tracy and Johnson, Loewe went on to state that the seminal events of 1985, namely, the publication of E.P. Sanders' book *Jesus and the Judaism*<sup>8</sup> and the start of the Jesus Seminar by R. Funk and J.D. Crossan, rendered many of the points of that discussion moot. More specifically, Loewe argues that these events heralded an era in which it became evident that there is no consensus among scholars about an unequivocal, objective image of the historical Jesus. Instead, there is a "broad array of quite diverse historical portraits of Jesus."<sup>9</sup> According to him, the fragility of the image of the historical Jesus is a direct consequence of the several layers of judgments embedded in the source and form criticism of the Scriptures that underlies the construing of that image. Basically, there are subjective judgments of the involved scholar(s) in deciding first which sources to use, then which sayings and deeds are actually from Jesus and finally which image(s) originate from the accepted sayings and deeds; consequently, "'the historical Jesus' is always someone's 'historical Jesus,' and always in principle subject to revision."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, to employ the historical Jesus as the basis upon which to construct a Christology does seem to be the wrong direction, as Tracy warned. Loewe does not reject the paradigm shift in Christology nor does he repudiate the quest for the historical Jesus. But he advocates that the paradigm shift is limited by the non-consensual nature of the current research on the historical Jesus and that any value that the historical-Jesus constructs may offer can only be realized if "drawn into the horizon of faith and illumined by the light of faith."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Like, for instance, "the relation of Jesus' person to his proclamation, Jesus' understanding of his decisive salvific character, the coexistence of present and future dimensions in Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, the manner of Jesus' approach to death, and the origin of the Church and sacraments." Ibid. 320.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 321-323.

<sup>8</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ" 326.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 329.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 330-331.

First, I must admit that, before reading the article in question, I had no idea that a shift in the Christological paradigm was even taking place, much less that it was connected with the discussion and the evolution of the research on the historical Jesus. Second, I had minimal knowledge of the history, the motivation, and the implications of the project and the studies on the historical Jesus. As I read, and reread the article, I had to look for some supplemental information to cross-reference and clarify some of the terms discussed by Loewe. Putting all together, I do feel now that I can appreciate better the relevance of these issues for the Christian understanding of the person of Jesus Christ.

Personally, I see my faith in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as the unconditional acceptance of a gift from God. I believe in the kerygma, *as mediated by human tradition*, without requiring *further* validation from the realm of human knowledge. I see it as a God-initiated revelation and gift. Once that statement is made, however, I must say that I do appreciate the impact that the progress of human knowledge has had and can have in my understanding both of the person of Jesus and of God's revelation. Therefore, within this context, I am also curious and interested in the results of the studies on the historical Jesus, but all within the boundaries and the scrutiny of my faith in God's incarnation and revelation. Consequently, I identify myself with and find relief in the arguments proposed by Tracy and endorsed by Loewe. I look forward to how improved knowledge of the historical Jesus can help me better understand and appreciate the apostolic tradition handed down to me through the Church communities over the centuries. But I do not think that the image of Jesus as God's incarnate Son can be reconstructed or reformulated from the historical Jesus.