

DISSERTATION SUMMARY

# The Metaphysics of Historical Jesus Research

## An Argument for Increasing the Plurality of Metaphysical Frameworks within Historical Jesus Research<sup>1</sup>

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In this thesis I examine the metaphysical presuppositions that influence modern academic historical Jesus research. I enquire on a fundamental level how one accrues historical knowledge and how historians make judgements regarding the evidence before them. My argument is thus: modern academic historical research operates within a ‘secular’ metaphysical framework, where I define secularism in terms of the decline of the authority of religious perspectives to contribute to public life (chapter 5). It is substantiated by examining the role of worldviews within historiographical decision making in general (chapter 4) and historical Jesus research in particular (chapters 6 and 7).

I do not take issue with secularism itself, or its suitability as an historiographical framework. Instead, I argue secular reasoning is not a metaphysically neutral system of thought, and any discipline displaying a totalising adherence to secular metaphysics at the expense of other frameworks will be constrained by what is possible within a secular metaphysics. More than anything, I seek not to be unduly negative of scholars preceding me. I hope to demonstrate the importance of a lightly held conception of academic acceptability within historical Jesus research; I claim the discipline benefits when other perspectives are added to it, not that

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1. Jonathan Rowlands, ‘The Metaphysics of Historical Jesus Research: An Argument for Increasing the Plurality of Metaphysical Frameworks within Historical Jesus Research’ (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2020). Supervisors: Prof. Roland Deines and Dr Conor Cunningham.

any perspectives ought to be subtracted from it. I advocate for the construction of other metaphysical frameworks within which historical-critical methods may be developed, including (but not limited to) a Christian metaphysical framework that is neither mastered by other frameworks nor seeks to master them.

Following an introduction, wherein I outline the state of the question and my contribution to it, my thesis is divided into two parts. In the first part (chapters 2 to 5) I lay a technical foundation regarding the concept of worldviews and the characteristics of secular scholarship. In section two I apply this to the quest for the historical Jesus (chapters 6 to 7) before offering some concluding remarks in chapter 8.

In chapter 2, 'Defining Metaphysics', I define two terms fundamental to my argument: 'metaphysics' and 'worldview'. I begin with metaphysics, which is defined practically by examining five focal points of metaphysical philosophy and key debates therein. They are: 1) ontology, 2) identity, 3) space and time, 4) causation, and 5) modality. In so doing, I define metaphysics as the study of reality, including all its constituent parts and how they relate. Then, in chapter 3 - 'The Concept of a Worldview' - I trace the term 'worldview' back to Kant and chart the development of the concept in the western philosophical tradition. These two chapters culminate in a definition of a worldview as a set of metaphysical presuppositions taken for granted when apprehending the external world.

In 'Worldview and Historiographical Decision Making', the fourth chapter of my thesis, I examine the nature of historical plausibility and the role of worldviews in assessing historical data. I claim the degree to which one designates historical data plausible is correlated to the degree to which that data coheres with one's historiographical worldview (the worldview adopted to assess historical data, distinct from one's worldview *per se*). To substantiate this, I engage with Bayesian reasoning, a mathematical process for measuring probabilities employed by some New Testament scholars, as a test case for how one might measure historical plausibility. I demonstrate that Bayesian reasoning, too, relies upon one's historiographical worldview, and claim it is not possible to undertake historical analysis without implicitly adopting an historiographical worldview and filtering one's judgements through that worldview.

Chapter 5 is entitled 'Characterising Secular Scholarship'. I discuss the characteristics a work of scholarship must exhibit before one may describe it as secular by engaging with three sociological theories of secularisation. The first account of secularisation posits the phenomenon as the decline in religious faith, the second as the decline of religious authority, and the third as a self-limiting supply-minded economic process. I argue one may describe works of scholarship

as secular if they refuse to allow religious metaphysics the authority to contribute to academic enquiry, even as just one option within pluralistic academic contexts. Thus, we may describe the quest as secular if it evidences a tendency to preclude religious metaphysical presuppositions from contributing to the methods within the discipline.

These four chapters thus comprise a technical foundation upon which I determine the extent to which modern academic historical Jesus research may be described as 'secular', an endeavour taken up in the second part of this study. The sixth chapter assumes a macro approach to the issue, with chapter 7 offering a complementary micro approach. The combination of the broad overview of secular metaphysical trends within the three 'quests' as well as detailed engagement with one of its participants – N. T. Wright – support my claim that modern academic historical Jesus research is a secular discipline. (My reasons for choosing Wright may be found at the start of this chapter.) Through surveying the quest in these terms, I claim it is possible to perceive a secular metaphysical framework within which the entire quest for the historical Jesus has operated.

Following this is a conclusion wherein I discuss how the discipline might move beyond this metaphysical lacuna by operating with a more inclusive conception of academic acceptability. This involves allowing a greater plurality of metaphysical frameworks within historical enquiry rather than prioritising secular frameworks at the expense of others. I stress here from the outset that I reject notions of replacing secular metaphysics with another totalising framework. I do not argue for the priority of one metaphysical framework or historiographical worldview within historical Jesus research. Rather, I call for a plurality of frameworks to operate concurrently. I am not seeking to police the boundaries of academic acceptability within the quest but to appeal to the discipline to expand those borders, to view the historiographical worldview of the other with a greater sense of charity rather than imposing secular standards of acceptability upon it.

This overview leads naturally into the question of how best to categorise such a work. While I do indeed draw heavily upon these other disciplines throughout my thesis, it is not a contribution to any of them per se. Sociologists, philosophers, and theologians will find little 'new' in my work. Rather, what I seek to accomplish is to demonstrate that the work already done in these disciplines has clear and important implications for New Testament studies broadly construed, and historical Jesus research in particular, and to begin to explore these implications in earnest. Thus, whilst my sustained engagement with the insights of the other disciplines is apparent, this engagement is done to advance an argument that is (properly construed) a contribution to New Testament studies and historical Jesus

research, namely that there is always already a philosophical and theological foundation from which any work of biblical scholarship and/or historical Jesus research proceeds. Scholarship on the historical Jesus can either choose to explicate or obfuscate its theological and metaphysical foundation(s), but it cannot remove these foundations altogether. To re-categorise works such as this present study beyond the boundaries of 'mainstream' biblical studies because it is explicitly theological is tacitly to legitimise (and thus uncritically to empower) works that are implicitly theological.