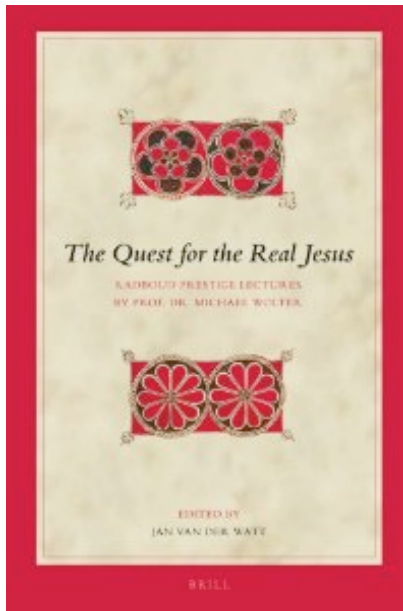


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Jan van der Watt, ed.

The Quest for the Real Jesus: Radboud Prestige Lectures by Prof. Dr. Michael Wolter

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The title of the book under review sounds full of promise; in fact, it expresses the aspirations of Jesus research from the eighteenth century to the Jesus Seminar—all comprehended in the adjective *real*. A bold title, indeed, that requires interpretation and qualification, as we shall see.

The book documents a special type of academic discussion. It is based on a lecture given by a renowned scholar, Professor Michael Wolter, retired professor of New Testament Exegesis at the Faculty of Protestant Theology in the University of Bonn (Germany). His lecture resumes an earlier contribution in German: “Was macht die historische Frage nach Jesus zu einer theologischen Frage?” (in *Erinnerung an Jesus: Kontinuität und Diskontinuität in der Neutestamentlichen Überlieferung*, ed. U. Busse, M. Reichardt, and M. Theobald, BBB 166 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011], 17–33). After Wolter’s lecture/article in this volume, a number of other scholars more or less concerned with Jesus research then comment upon it.

The brief but essential main part of the book is, obviously, Wolter’s lecture: “Which Jesus Is the Real Jesus?” (1–17): It is, basically, a discussion of the question whether the historian’s approach that would be equally possible with other “great people” such as

Alexander the Great, Martin Luther, or Winston Churchill is an adequate (better: sufficient) approach to Jesus. Wolter thus seems to pick up insights by Albert Schweitzer and Martin Kähler in stating that reconstructions of the “historical Jesus,” even though they are produced with academic (scientific) means and ambitions, are nevertheless images, constructions made by the minds of certain researchers—and by no means worthy objects of religious faith.

After a brief survey of research on the historical Jesus, Wolter proposes a structure of images of Jesus with a grid of six ideal types: (1) the “historical Jesus”—the product of modern (i.e., post-Enlightenment) historical research; (2) “Jesus Christ”—the Christ as confessed in Christian faith (and opposed to the historical Jesus, an opposition made clear in the work of, e.g., Martin Kähler and Rudolf Bultmann); (3) the “earthly Christ”—Jesus as presented in the gospels and in subsequent Christian proclamation and theology until the Enlightenment; (4) “Jesus Christ remembered”—Jesus as recognized by the impact he made (this is based on James D. G. Dunn’s concept of Jesus remembered), which points to the (oral) Jesus tradition as passed on by eyewitnesses (ideally) between Easter and the composition of the gospels; (5) “Jesus from Nazareth”—Jesus as his contemporaries (sympathetic or otherwise) experienced him; this ideal type, like the others, includes a great variety of images, since Jesus’s closest followers presumably had a different image of their master than had, for example, Pilate; (6) “Jesus’ self-interpretation,” or, as Wolter puts it: “the image that Jesus had of himself” (12). This last figure is, of course, not accessible to any human observer (disciple, evangelist, or modern scholar). In the end, the question remains whether, in view of these images, one can speak of the real Jesus: “Is there a ‘real Jesus’ as an ontic reality beyond the images that people have been making of him since the time he lived—and also beyond the image he had of himself?” (12)—the key sentence for Wolter’s approach. A positive answer to this question, Wolter asserts, is possible, but only from the perspective of Christian faith in Jesus as risen and vindicated by God in his claims and self-understanding. The real Jesus, hence, is not any (re)constructed historical Jesus but Jesus as seen by God, the Jesus Christians believe in (this last point might make one think of a *Deus ex machina*).

This is an exciting approach to an old question, and it seems to be an excellent idea to offer it the stage of academic discussion and to invite responses—from exegetes as well as systematic theologians. In fact, there is a broad range of respondents from fairly different quarters: Cilliers Breytenbach (19–56), James D. G. Dunn (57–66), R. Alan Culpepper (67–85), Craig A. Evans (87–98), Michael R. Licona (99–127), Christopher M. Hays (129–57), Robert Morgan (159–84), Notger Slenczka (185–203), and Martin Laube (205–22). The book concludes with a brief CV and list of publications by Michael Wolter (223–32) and an index of authors (233–35).

Roughly two-thirds of the respondents actually interact with Wolter's proposal. Breytenbach ("From Mark's Son of God to Jesus of Nazareth—*un cul-de-sac*?") and Dunn ("The Remembered Jesus") put it in relation to their own work. Hays ("Theological Hermeneutics and the Historical Jesus: A Critical Evaluation of Gadamerian Approaches and a New Methodological Proposal") follows Wolter's track in a refined rethinking of historical-critical scholarship and theological reflection of Jesus, with the result that the adequate approach to the real Jesus is a theological one. Robert Morgan ("Historical Jesus Research as New Testament Theology") is the only author in the collection who offers reflection on the meaning of the key adjective *real* before he discusses the theological significance of historical research concerning Jesus.

The last two contributions—by systematic theologians—pronounce some lucid criticism of Wolter's proposal. Notger Slenczka ("In Which Sense Has the Conviction That Jesus Was Resurrected the 'Certainty of Fact'?") questions the cardinal significance Wolter attributes to the Easter appearances as validating the apostles' belief in the resurrection of Jesus: Can experiences that are interpreted as appearances of the risen Jesus really prove the *fact* of Jesus's resurrection (whatever one exactly means by *resurrection*)? Finally, Martin Laube ("Im Glauben zum 'wirklichen Jesus'? Überlegungen zu Michael Wolters Umgang mit der historischen Jesusfrage") offers some serious methodological and hermeneutical criticism of Wolter's proposal. He focuses on the significance of theological reflection and the perspective of faith and states a terminological and (perhaps) conceptual confusion of "religion" and "theology" ("Verschleifung der Unterscheidung von Religion und Theologie," 212): theological reflection is not the same thing as an exegete's personal faith or the shared faith of a believing community.

The responses (which grow increasingly interesting toward the end of the book) show that Wolter's Prestige Lecture on the question of the real Jesus is a timely statement on a pressing issue. However, the responses with their different quality also point to a basic problem. A number of respondents have understood "real Jesus" as referring to Jesus as he walked about in Galilee and Jerusalem—hence the objective of historical research—and thus missed the point of Wolter's approach. Only Robert Morgan's response contains some reflection on the meaning of *real*, but no one addresses the question of what happens when the German adjective *wirklich* (which is at the root of Wolter's title and can carry connotations of "real" but also of "genuine" or "actual") is translated into the English *real*. Beyond this stimulating collection, there is thus a large field for further discussion inspired by Wolter's bold step forward.