Many scholars have sought to demonstrate the continuing relevance of the historical Jesus. Unfortunately, despite their repeated pursuits of this historical figure, they have yet to come to any consensus regarding his relevance. The essays collected in *Jesus Beyond Nationalism: Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity* demonstrate this relevance, albeit somewhat ironically, by suggesting that the historical Jesus is actually less important than the cultural activities involved in reconstructing him.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s opening discussion of the concept of cultural complexity ties the essays together. Eriksen aims to move beyond the truism that modern cultures are undeniably marked by the complexities of globalization. He signals the need to address a series of specific issues when thinking about cultural complexity, such as which particular ethnic and cultural issues are contested; which strategies for cultural inclusion and exclusion are negotiated; and why some cultural forms evince different levels of complexity or flexibility than others.

The following essays are divided into two broad categories: those that examine historical Jesus scholarship in its nineteenth-century context and those that deal with more contemporary manifestations of it. Halvor Moxnes focuses on the infancy of historical Jesus scholarship by probing Schleiermacher’s original project of writing Jesus’ biography and by examining how that enterprise differs from current scholarship. Turning from an academic construction of Jesus to a literary one, Peter Normann Waage scrutinizes the figure of Jesus in Dostoevsky’s writings. In particular, Waage suggests that Dostoevsky’s notions of Russian nationalism and his political persecution are refracted through his conception of Christ.

Essays on nineteenth-century historical Jesus scholarship, however, would not be complete without mention of Albert Schweitzer, and thus Ward Blanton’s essay is ideally situated. Yet Blanton does something fresh with Schweitzer. Instead of simply crediting Schweitzer with the first description of the apocalyptic Jesus, Blanton interprets his
philosophical writings and his apocalyptic Jesus as participating in one and the same discourse, which embodies the profound, existential disillusionment accompanying the end of modernity.

Finally in the first section, Leif E. Vaage resuscitates the hypothesis of the Cynic Jesus, exploring the reasons for its hostile reception in contemporary historical Jesus studies. The Cynic hypothesis, according to Vaage, has constituted a serious problem for many academics, in part because it “scrambles the historical codes responsible for construction of both Jewish and Christian identities” (91). Like Nietzsche’s “holy anarchist,” the Cynic Jesus still represents something unthinkable and distasteful to the majority of biblical scholars, despite its comparative potential.

The last three essays explore how modern reconstructions of Jesus often reflect competing cultural claims. William E. Arnal, who has previously written about biblical scholars’ fixation on Jesus’ Jewishness, continues in that vein here. For Arnal, Jesus’ Judaism serves a number of discursive purposes, not the least of which is to function as a screen upon which to project our preoccupations and anxieties about our own identities in the face of the increasing heterogeneity in the postmodern world.

James G. Crossley, evincing his characteristic polemical style, argues that a shift in the Western attitude toward Israel since 1967 has affected recent constructions of Jesus. Because earlier historical Jesus scholarship contained anti-Semitic aspects, Crossley maintains that the scholarly community, which he characterizes as largely pro-Israel, reacted against this past legacy by overemphasizing and too frequently essentializing Jesus’ Jewish context. For Crossley, this amounts to scholarship that, although no longer marred by anti-Semitism, now embodies a form of orientalism, a term which is not self-evident in this context but is nevertheless left curiously undefined in the essay.

Rounding out the collection, Oddbjørn Leirvik examines Jesus in modern Muslim thought, and in keeping with the theme of the volume, he finds that here, too, Jesus serves as a discursive political tool. One might assume that Muslim authors contest the figure of Jesus solely in dialogues with Christians; however, Leirvik demonstrates that this occurs even among Muslim
authors, evincing intra-Muslim differences and tensions, especially when national identities in post-colonial contexts are at stake.

*Jesus Beyond Nationalism* is a provocative collection, which explores new avenues for historical Jesus scholarship instead of repeating the hackneyed traditional topics. The contributors commendably jettison the once pervasive assumption that historical Jesus scholarship must focus on the actual first-century Jew. They convincingly demonstrate how historical Jesus scholarship is inextricably intertwined with its own historical and cultural context, and as such, tells us more about particular forms of Western culture than it does about the historical Jesus. This volume is recommended for students of cultural studies and biblical studies alike.

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