

Does Historical Jesus research have a future?

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ABSTRACT

Does Historical Jesus research have a future?

The aim of this article is to reflect on the work of historical Jesus scholars who represent the three facets in the research, referred to as the “New Quest”, the “Third Quest”, and the “Renewed New Quest”. This is followed by a description of a plausible profile of Jesus in order to demonstrate the author’s distinctive position. In the concluding section of the article the question is addressed whether the investigation of the historical Jesus is still significant today. The answer ensues from both the debate with scholars and the described Jesus profile. The article ends with the vision that, although the question as to the relationship between the historical Jesus and the faith assertions of Christians will never be adequately and finally answered, the search for Jesus should continue. Both the church and society at large are benefiting from the quest.

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to display the landscape where historical Jesus scholars have trotted. My reflection on this itinerary starts with the work of Albert Schweitzer ([1906] 1913), *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Zweite, neu bearbeitete und vermehrte Auflage des Werkes *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*) and focuses on the three facets of historical Jesus research, namely the “New Quest”, the “Third Quest”, and the “Renewed New Quest”. From the results of the discussion of the work of scholars a plausible profile of Jesus will be described in the second part of the article. This will be followed by a dialogue with some of these scholars to demonstrate my own distinctive position. In the concluding section of the article the question will be addressed whether the investigation of the historical Jesus is still significant today. This question can be approached from a number of angles. The church, for instance, constitutes one such angle and the scholarly community another. My answer to the question will ensue from both the contents of the dialogue with some of the scholars who have travelled on the road, searching for the histo-

ritical Jesus, and the described Jesus profile. The article ends with a vision on the road ahead.

2 AN INTINERARY OF SCHOLARS

The route of scholars searching for the historical Jesus passed two important mileposts. Actually, the beginning of the journey which we are nowadays travelling along was indeed described as a “paradigm shift”. Hitherto, it was almost as if the voyage could not proceed because of Schweitzer’s ([1906] 1968:44-45, 47) alarm against the unsophisticated and uncritical historical approach of scholars, not only in their choices but also in their use of New Testament writings and its sources. Rudolf Bultmann’s students, specifically, have continued the voyage despite all the obstacles.

Labeling historical Jesus research as the “New Quest” in distinction to the “Old Quest,” was triggered by one of Bultmann’s students, James Robinson, in 1959 (reprinted in 1983). Robinson (cited by Borg 1991:2) was the person who referred to the traverse into the newest phase of the itinerary as a “paradigm shift”. Bultmann ([1928] 1969) is often described as a proponent of the “No Quest”. However, the fact that Bultmann’s students embarked on a journey they referred to as the “New Quest” demonstrates my opinion that a denial of the necessity of the search for Jesus could bring about doubt with regard to the quest for God¹. If inquiry is denied at the doorstep, doubt will come through the window.

Many articles, which intend to give an overview of historical Jesus research, have been published². It seems that many reviewers find their point of departure in the pattern of Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (English translation published in 1910 from the German original, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*), originally written in 1906. Three distinctive periods are classified: the precritical phase (150-1778), the first period of the “critical quest” for Jesus (1778-1953), and finally, since 1954, the second phase of the “critical

1 See also Patterson’s book *The God of Jesus: The historical Jesus & the search for meaning*, (1998).

2 See, among others, Tatum ([1982] 1999:91-109); Scott (1994:53-280); Telford (1994:33-74); Breytenbach (1995:226-249); Borg (1988:280-292); Borg (1994a:18-43); Meier (1999:459-487).

quest” for Jesus. The process of harmonization of the Jesus tradition found in the canonical gospels, constitutes the first period. More than forty examples of such a harmonization appeared in the sixteenth century within both Roman Catholic and Protestant circles (see Du Toit [1980] 1985:268). The second period is characterized by its radical historical skepticism and rationalism. The third period was introduced by the students of Rudolf Bultmann (see Käsemann 1954:125-153; Bornkamm [1956] 1975; Fuchs 1960; Robinson [1959] 1983; Conzelmann [1959] 1973; Schmithals 1972).

In South Africa the first consideration of the importance of the quest for the historical Jesus came from Andrie du Toit ([1980] 1985), emeritus professor of New Testament at the University of Pretoria (for a review on historical Jesus research in South Africa, see Van Aarde 1993a, 1993b, Du Toit 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Craffert 2003). Du Toit appraised the representatives of the “New Quest” positively. It appears to be the same within the academic circles in North America. Within the contour of Käsemann’s (1954) reconsideration of Bultmann’s stance, the quest for the “original” Jesus³ was regarded as not only desirable but also essential⁴. The need for the quest rests, according to these scholars, upon what one can call a theological accountability toward intra-ecclesiastical as well as extra-ecclesiastical “truth” claims.

Concerning the first, an “authentic continuity” between the “life and proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth” and the “kerygmatic Christ” proclaimed in the early church is essential, otherwise one can argue

3 Du Toit (1985:272-274) prefers to use Joachim Jeremias’ (1964) notion of the “original Jesus” rather than the “historical Jesus”.

4 Apart from the “Radical Dutch Criticism”, led by the New Testament scholar Wim van Manen in the nineteenth century, Earl Doherty (1999) and Robert Price (2000) recently again challenged the existence of an historical Jesus. Doherty builds his opinion on four arguments: Why are the events of the Gospel story, and its central character Jesus of Nazareth, not found in the New Testament epistles? Why does Paul’s divine Christ seem to have no connection to the Gospel Jesus, but closely resembles the many pagan saviour gods of the time who only lived in myth? Why, given the spread of Christianity across the Roman Empire in the first century, did only one Christian community compose a story of Jesus’ life and death – the Gospel of Mark – while every other Gospel simply copied and reworked the first one? Why is every detail in the Gospel story of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion drawn from passages in the First Testament?

that the “message of the gospel about the Jesus of history” rests on “myths and ideas”⁵. More specifically, it was argued that the shocks Bultmann’s influence caused for many believers in terms of the reliability of the gospel tradition of Jesus should be thwarted. The skeptical historians (influenced by Bultmann and Schweitzer) were challenged to overcome the “scandal of the New Testament”, namely to “accept God’s singular revelation that was granted once and for all” in the Jesus of history (Du Toit 1985:279-280). Furthermore, the “accountability toward extra-ecclesiastical truth claims” also has relevance for the interreligious dialogue and the demonstration of the rational basis of theology and the gospel embedded in the New Testament (Du Toit 1985:282-286).

But the quest for the “original” Jesus is also desirable because it helps the exegete to clarify in a responsible way the process by means of which the New Testament was handed down. We can therefore say that the historical quest for who Jesus was, what his vision was, what he said and did, has an “expository power” in guiding an analysis and an understanding of the varied traditions as vehicles of theological developments within the New Testament and the early church.

Scholarship has demonstrated that the Jesus tradition had been “reduced” not only because of the editing process of the gospel writers themselves, but also because of the shift from orality to literacy, the process of translation from Aramaic into Greek and, especially, by means of the selecting, transforming and remaking of the pre-Easter Jesus tradition in the light of post-Easter beliefs (see Hahn 1974:11-77). This very process of reduction underlines the futility of a quest for an “objective” Jesus without and before any interpretation. Regardless of so much doubt and uneasiness about the perplexity of the search for the historical Jesus, the feeling among

5 For “conservative theologians” the word “myth” has a pejorative connotation, denoting something untrue. Another view is that myth could pertain to “sacred history” and that its existential meaning should be decoded hermeneutically (see Van Aarde 2003a). However, from a rationalist perspective, the concept “myth” could also be considered as being passé and, as far as the modern scientist is concerned (as is for example being advocated by someone like David Bidney 1953:14), should therefore be treated as something pre-modern and primitive (see Honko 1984:42-44 for a discussion of the three different usages of the word “myth”).

historically minded exegetes seems at this stage to yield to the verdict: “historical Jesus research does have a future” (see Keck [1971] 1981).

In the South African context (and seemingly in the North American context), these first attempts to explain the dynamics of historical Jesus research serve as a breakthrough in many ways. For several years, the presence of orthodoxy and the evangelical approach in church and theology inhibited biblical scholars from operating freely within the historical-critical paradigm, sometimes to a greater and sometimes to a lesser extent. However, in all fairness to many colleagues working within the network of evangelical collaboration, it seems they at least explicitly rejected a fundamentalistic and “precritical” presumption that all aspects of the Jesus tradition were to be simply identified with the “very own deeds and words” (*ipssisima facta et verba*) of Jesus’ life (see Wright 1999:15-27).

Hence, in the same vein, the “conservative” New Testament scholar in Germany, Peter Stuhlmacher (1975:14-16), tried to break through the “antimetaphysical” historical research. In accordance with what Ernst Troeltsch called “the principle of analogy in historiography”, the historian sees his or her own modern experience of reality as the norm by which to judge what could be historically authentic in the past and what could not. Stuhlmacher aimed at creating an atmosphere in which scholars, as members of the Christian believing community, would regard aspects of the Jesus tradition in the canonical gospels that do not have other analogies in a historiographical sense as authentic. In particular, he had the resurrection narratives and the miracles of Jesus in mind.

With regard to the miracle stories, we are now aware of the fact that they have indeed become part of the quest for the historical Jesus. However, they have not been studied exactly according to what the conservatives previewed. They are rather investigated along sociological (see Theissen 1974:38-41; cf Funk 1992:15) and cultural-anthropological lines (see Pilch 1995:314-337; Davies 1995; Craffert 1999; Van Aarde 2000a:1-19). The investigation into the resurrection narratives pertains either to the sphere of social-political (see Crossan 2003) or social-psychological (Pilch 2002:690-707) interests.

In 1984, Bernard Brandon Scott (cited by Borg 1988:284) referred to this development as follows: “the historical quest for the historical Jesus has ended; the interdisciplinary quest for the historical Jesus has just begun”. The interdisciplinary aspect in this new development relates to the above-mentioned archaeological, socio-historical, and cultural-anthropological studies. But it does not mean that historical research as such is now dismissed (see Van Aarde 2002a). According to Thomas Wright (1992:13) it only gives a “less artificial, historical flavour to the whole enterprise.” Wright and Neill (1988:379-403) labeled this undertaking the “Third Quest”. In 1992, Wright thought that the period of the “New Quest” was over. Four years later he admitted that a “renewed New Quest” is still alive and well, and represents a survival of “the Bultmannian picture, with variations” (Wright 1996).

Historical-critical decisions are guided by the criterion known as multiple independent attestation. This means that multiple independent written evidence has greater historical probability than either singular evidence or a plurality of interdependent literary evidence (see Borg 1999:3-14). However, this does not mean that a single witness should be regarded as unauthentic, although such a case lacks historical plausibility.

The criterion of multiple independent attestation cannot be applied without supplementary argumentation. For example, the influence of Easter on the handing down of Jesus traditions should be taken into account. From the perspective of the resurrection belief, stories about Jesus’ conception, birth, miracles, and the soteriological significance of his death and ascension to heaven were inspired or amended analogously to sacred narratives of divine figures in the Hellenistic-Semitic and Greco-Roman world.

Another criterion is of redactional nature. Transmitters of the Jesus tradition often revised material to suit their narrative structures and theological intentions with regard to their particular audience. Relevant documents and textual evidence are read against the background of their chronological periods and respective contexts. Material and statements which clearly exhibit the literary preference of a particular writer and the characteristics of a post-Easter life situation of a community for whom the communication was intended, cannot historically be traced back to the oral period of 30-50 CE. Such editorial material can hardly be deemed authentic sayings or deeds of the historical Jesus, but being attributed to Jesus. Some Jesus

groups also designed certain apologetic statements in order to oppose defamatory campaigns by opponents.

This information assists the historian in constructing a particular image of Jesus that can be clearly distinguished from the images of Jesus found in the New Testament⁶ and creedal Christianity. Furthermore, it helps to discern between modern Western and ancient Mediterranean concepts. Historical criticism is therefore complemented by social scientific criticism (see Elliott 1993:7; Van Aarde 2002a). An investigation of causation, according to the well-known categories of Ernst Troeltsch, is a historical-critical inquiry:

The historian's craft combines the art of intuiting the original import of the sources with the discovery of correlative and mutually determinative changes [i.e., causation] ... The scholarly investigation of the Bible has accordingly become involved with the general political, social, and intellectual history of antiquity, and the investigation and evaluation of Christianity has been placed within the framework of the history of religion and culture. (Troeltsch [1898], in Dawes 1999:34)

Social scientific studies, such as cultural anthropology and social psychology, consciously attempt to take seriously the distance between the ancient and the modern, and the consequent cultural differences. Yet, according to Thomas Wright (1996:78-82), the assumption behind this method is that "smaller-scale decisions" with regard to prejudiced sayings in the gospels are selectively fitted into a "large hypothesis" of a particular "demythologized" picture of Jesus. In other words, such a Jesus preaches a message in which "a

6 Thus, for example, Matthew represented Jesus in a way that conformed to the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). In doing so, he made use of messianic themes derived from a shared late first-century Hellenistic-Israelite context. In these writings Israel's Messiah was depicted among other images as the coming Son of Man, a figure who would inaugurate God's perfect kingdom when the despondent believers (seeing this human-like figure come from above) will be justified and rescued. In his representation of Jesus, Luke, in turn, used propaganda motifs that appeared in Greco-Roman stories about deities and in the emperor cult. It was presented in this way in spite of the fact that many of the traditions in the sources of this gospel originated in Israel and Roman Palestine. The Gnostic literature, on the other hand, located Jesus firmly within a heavenly realm entering into the earthly context only apparently human.

vertical eschatology” is re-interpreted as “horizontal” subversiveness, a socially and politically minded Jesus. Within this frame of reference, the crucifixion of Jesus was not a “theological” event prior to the “resurrection”. The latter represents a “coming to faith, some time later, of a particular group of Christians”. Another “early” group of Christians was sapiental/gnostic oriented. They were only interested in the retelling of aphorisms of Jesus but were “uninterested in his life story.” The gospels, in an evolutionary fashion, developed gradually as these sayings of Jesus solidified and “gathered the moss of narrative structure about themselves”, whilst the “initial force of Jesus’ challenge was muted or lost altogether within a fictitious pseudo-historical framework” (Wright 1996:78-82).

For Thomas Wright, the Jesus Seminar (see Funk, Hoover & The Jesus Seminar [1993] 1997; Funk & The Jesus Seminar 1998) and a scholar like Burton Mack (1988, 1993, 1995) are examples par excellence of this “Renewed New Quest”. People like Marcus Borg (1994b; 1997:7-20) and, to some extent and in some sense, John Dominic Crossan (1991a, 1998), Geza Vermes (1993), and Richard Horsley (1989, 2003) are “straddling,” in that they are walking with the legs wide apart, seemingly favouring two opposite sides. The two sides are respectively represented by the “Third Quest” and the “Renewed New Quest”⁷. Wright (1996:80) describes the latter as the *Wredebahn* and the first as the *Schweitzerstraße*, referring to the two opposite roads that the two giants, Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) and William Wrede (1859-1906), working in the beginning of the twentieth century, had taken with regard to the “historical status” of the Gospel of Mark. Wrede considered Mark’s gospel a theological treatise that already presents an apocalyptic interpretation of the his-

7 “Third questers” are according to Robert Funk (1996:62-66) only out of “historical curiosity” interested in the Jesus of history. “The Christian faith was born, for them, with Peter’s confession, or at Easter, or at Pentecost, or at Nicea.... For third questers there can be no picking and choosing among sayings and acts as a way to determine who Jesus was.... The third questers ... take critical scholarship about as far as it can go without impinging on the fundamentals of the creed or challenging the hegemony of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. In their hands, orthodoxy is safe, but critical scholarship is at risk. Faith seems to make them immune to the facts. Third questers are really conducting a search primarily for historical evidence to support claims made on behalf of credal Christianity and the canonical gospels. In other words, the third quest is an apologetic ploy”.

torical Jesus, while Schweitzer's basic position was that the "Jewish eschatology" found in Mark's gospel also represents the context for Jesus. The *Wredebahn* leads to the search for Jesus hidden in the sources behind Mark and in other early documents like the Sayings Gospel Q and the Gospel of Thomas. Wright (1996:80) quotes Schweitzer from his *The quest of the historical Jesus*, saying that there is no third option, "*tertium non datur*", and suggests that the time when the *Wredebahn* was a "helpful fiction" has now "come to an end".

3 TERTIUM DATUR

However, for me there is a third option! It is not a middle-of-the-road stance but a journey where one takes on purpose sometimes the one road and another time the other, knowingly that there are times that the roads merge and that the *Sweitzerstraße* has become the *Wredebahn* (see Van Aarde 2001a:30-31, 46). In practice it means that I am aware that Jesus, being apocalyptically minded as a child of his time, responded to first-century apocalypticism in a non-cataclysmic-apocalyptic way (see Van Aarde 2001b:1158-1178) and that Mark (and Matthew's – see Van Aarde 2002b:118-142) interpreted his response in a traditional apocalyptic fashion as if he had done it himself.

My interest in historical Jesus research is born neither from neo-orthodoxy nor from neoliberalism. For me, it is a matter of urgency, if one would like to travel on the *Schweitzerstraße*, according to the designations of Albert Schweitzer himself, to prioritize and contextualize the sources that could lead to Jesus. Furthermore, it is in the "subversive and dangerous memory of Jesus", as David Tracy (1981:233-247)⁸ called it, that this road should be simultaneously,

8 For Tracy the only adequate norm is the tradition-as-actualized-anew in its constitutive role of "constituting" the Christian community (see discussions by Thompson 1985:106-107; Hill 1991:44-46). According to Tracy a reconstructed historical Jesus, on the tradition's own terms, cannot be our norm. However, Brennan Hill (1991:45), showed that "Tracy does recognize ... that the Jesus of history is a secondary norm that preserves that which is 'subversive' and 'dangerous' in the memory of Jesus ... The development of the traditions needs always to be measured against the historical word and deeds of Jesus".

though paradoxically, also named the *Wredebahn*⁹. However, traveling on either roads, one should not “think that the task of the historian is to reconstruct the past objectively in terms of causes and effects” (Willem Vorster, in Van Aarde 1994:235-251). Vorster puts it as follows:

No historical interpretation can claim to be a reflection of what really happened in the past. Historians make constructions of the past according to their theories and hypotheses. These constructions are guided by the criteria of probability and plausibility. By their very nature historical judgements are not objective descriptions of what really happened. They are socially conditioned constructions of the past ... They are products of the mind, built on a great variety of presuppositions and perceptions.

Ed Sanders’ understanding of what the “reconstruction of history” is all about is therefore important: “In the reconstruction of history, we must always consider *context* and *content*. The better we can correlate the two, the more we shall understand” (Sanders 1993:76). But we have to be careful of “extravagant claims not undergirded by carefully screened evidence”, Robert Funk (1996:59-60) alerts us. He says that our “new constructions will not of course be the real Jesus, now set out for the final time”. Funk emphasizes that it “will be a reconstruction based on the best evidence currently available, submitted to the most rigorous collective and cumulative analyses, and shaped into a relatively consistent whole”. According to Funk, it is “the best we or anyone can do”. He says: “It is all we can do”. In the *reconstruction* of history the emphasis should therefore be on the “con” because of the interpreter’s engagement in the process of his or her correlation of *context* and *content*. Every construction of the historical Jesus is a personal itinerary through the Palestinian landscape on account of painstakingly identified and interpreted data.

My journey with Jesus leads me to travel first from the South to the North. From where the river Jordan flows through the Judean

9 Without a critical attitude of challenging the tradition, in other words treading along the *Wredebahn*, Schweitzer himself would never have been guided by the “pre-Markan Jesus” to walk over from Strassbourg in Europe to Lambarene in Africa. He crossed over when he made the radically ethical decision to become a physician in Africa. There is a third option, *tertium datur!*

Desert into the Dead Sea, the journey goes to the North, through Samaria and the agricultural estates of the Jezreel Valley (farmed by peasants, some of them previously landowners but now landless tenant farmers), then to Nazareth in Galilee (a simple village of peasants which is only a few miles from the Greco-Roman city of Sepphoris, once the capital), and then to the East, to the lake where the river Jordan starts its southern flow, to Herod Antipas' building operations of Tiberias, the new capital of Galilee ("a heavily mixed-race area", a place where Israelites would "cling fiercely to their ancestral traditions, and to maintain as best they could the symbols of their distinctiveness" – Horsley & Silberman 1997:34, 40), to the plains and villages surrounding the lake of Tiberias.

The assumption behind my Jesus profile is the tradition behind the polemical faith assertions made by Paul, Matthew, Luke, John, and others after them. These assertions were about the origins of the peasant boy from Nazareth who probably became a carpenter and then, a radical teacher and compassionate healer. We know that, in all probability, after his baptism in the river Jordan, Jesus went back to the region where he came from, to the "Galilee of the Gentiles", as Matthew described this region in light of Isaiah 8:23-9:1. The historical Jesus went back to his native land to live up to the Baptizer's prophetic message. In other words, apart from a difference with regard to their respective "apocalyptic" views that seems to widen after John's imprisonment, no disagreeing notions on the fundamental distinction between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world emerged. Both John and Jesus repeated the message of the prophets in this regard. The prophetic message was about a light shining for people living in darkness. Isaiah spoke of God's people living among the Gentiles in the northern regions of Israel (cf Jos 16:10; 17:12; 19:10-16; 19:32-39). Over the years, these people (the descendents of, among others, Joseph, Sebulon, and Naftali) became despised by Jerusalemites. Living in the "shadow of death" (cf Mt 4:15-16), they were victimized by Judean and foreign landlords who dispossessed their land and estranged them from their cultic practices. The Baptizer's message exposed the monarchs of Galilee, Judea, and Rome as well as all people who cared nothing about what the prophet (Is 1:16-17) said: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow".

Constructing Jesus' "whole life" within first-century Herodian Palestine, it seems to me that it is not an inflation of historical probabilities to say that the following features of Jesus' life go together:

- records show he was born in a context in which there are indications that "opponents" alleged that he was born out of wedlock;
- a father figure was absent in his life;
- he was an unmarried bachelor;
- he had a tense relationship with his mother and other siblings;
- he was probably forced from farming to carpentry;
- he was stigmatized as a "sinner" that led him to be associated with a revolutionary baptizer;
- he spiritually experienced an altered state of consciousness in which God was present and acted like a Father;
- he abandoned craftsmanship, if he had ever been a woodworker;
- he was "homeless" and led an itinerant lifestyle along the lakeshore;
- his journey seemed to never take him inside the cities Sepphoris and Tiberias, but was restricted to the plains, valleys, and hills of Galilee;
- he assembled a core of close friends;
- he defended fatherless children, patriarchless women, and other outcasts;
- he called them a "family" by resocializing them into God's household by empowering healing as an agent of the Spirit of God;
- he offended village elders by subversive teaching and actions;
- he outraged Pharisees, Herodians, chief priests, and elders in Jerusalem by criticizing the manipulative ploys and misuse of hierarchical power by the temple authorities;
- he was crucified by the Romans after an outburst of emotion at the outer temple square;
- he died under uncertain circumstances while his body was not laid down in a family tomb;
- he was believed to be taken up to the bosom of father Abraham to be among the "living dead" as Scriptures foretold;

- but more than that, he was believed to be God’s beloved child who was already with God before creation and who is now preparing housing that is actually already present for those who still live by his cause.

In my book *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus child of God* (Van Aarde 2001b) I focused on Jesus’ fatherlessness and his interaction with fatherless children and women without husbands in a patriarchal Mediterranean society. However, this does not mean that kinship is the one and only phenomenon which is important in the life of Jesus. The historical Jesus escapes simplifying definitions. He was a child of Galilee. Galilee was a land known for its diversity with regard to both its topography and population. Galilee had a lake with simple farmers who fished for a daily catch on age-old boats and lords who ran fish-salting and pottery industries. There were cities along the lakeshore or a few miles away. In these cities there were temples devoted to deities and emperors, a royal palace, military fortifications, mansions with mosaic floors that depicted Greco-Roman deities around whom aristocrats reclined to enjoy festive meals served by servant-slaves who could be from nearby peasant farming communities that were transformed into estates. Galilee was multi-lingual, inhabited by pagans and Israelites, many of mixed marriage heritages upon whom Judeans looked down. Though not necessarily living in Samaria, Israelite Galileans were sometimes even stereotyped as “Samaritans” because of either their real or alleged mixed parentage or simply because of their living for centuries among the Gentiles in the northern part of the country. Visiting Judean Pharisees came to teach, threaten and enforce the purity laws of the sacred writings. Jerusalem Temple authorities appeared in time to collect the temple taxes (said to be the will of God) from impoverished people who tried to live according to ancestral traditions. In the peasant villages, family courtyards served as places for communal gatherings or sometimes as “synogogical” space for reciting and listening to the Torah. Farmers survived on small pieces of agricultural land. Landless tenant farmers worked for absentee lords in the cities, incurring huge debts. Records of these debts were kept in mansions and in “sacred places” far away – even in the Jerusalem temple. Sons of broken, distorted families sometimes tried to survive elsewhere. Pottery and fishing industries provided labour opportunities. For some peasants who were forced from their lands, carpentry was a profession necessary to survive economically. Bandits, out-

casts, and rebels escaped to the mountains and found shelter in caves. This is “the Galilee of the Gentiles” where people lived in darkness. Somewhere there, Jesus is to be found. He was not with his family and he did not practice his career (if he was a woodworker at all). He was a revolutionary and healer, teacher and helper.

4 A DISCUSSION WITH SCHOLARS

Many features identified by Jesus scholars are not at odds with this profile. However, there are aspects of some scholarly insights that I will not endorse. For example, it is not convincing that the subversive sayings and deeds of a Galilean peasant (Crossan 1991b:1194-1204) would originate in a highly sophisticated Greek philosophical school of cynics (contra Downing 1988; Vaage 1994). Yet, the “revolutionary biography” (cf Crossan 1994) of an itinerant philosopher belonging to such a school can be compared with the life of a “homeless traveler”. Jesus as such a traveler would sometimes find housing in the fishing village Capernaum where the extended family of a fisher-friend lived (see Mk 1:29) and sometimes did not have a “nest” or a “hole”, like creatures of nature (see the Sayings Gospel Q 9:58). Yet we cannot do more than compare. The philosophical sophistication and domestication of “subversive itinerancy” originated after Jesus’ lifetime (contra Crossan 1997:21-53). Subversive itinerancy occurred when some “Christian” faction or other tried to find its own identity among synagogical and philosophical activities. They probably accomplished this by passing on and writing down “the Galilean’s” prophetic wisdom and healing performance. It can be called “revolution historized” or “subversion memorized” or even “historicization of myth”.

Likewise, it is unconvincing that Jesus’ initial “prophetic” association with the Baptizer (Wright 1996) led to a self-consciousness of being a Joshua of old, leading God’s “covenanted people” over the river Jordan into the “new promised” land (contra Crossan 1994). The picture of Jesus as a Joshua figure is Matthew’s portrayal (see Van Aarde 2003b) and does not originate with Jesus himself. It also does not seem that he had a perception of himself as the agent of God who forgave the sins of the people. The allusion by the historian Josephus (Vita 2) to the “baptizer” Bannus (who lived and acted in the desert similarly to John the Baptist) may be interpreted as a reference to someone who acted like John with a political motive in Joshua-style as the “revived” prophet Elijah (Mk 6:15). It therefore

does not come as a surprise, as history indeed teaches us (Jos, *Ant* 17.5.2; Mk 6:17), that John was imprisoned and eliminated by the powers that be. It is also possible that the gospel tradition was correct in saying that these authorities and some others were ignited by Jesus and subsequently regarded him as “the Baptizer resurrected” (see Mk 6:14). This same gospel tradition, however, tried to rectify this image of Jesus that people might have had.

Discerning the respective “prophecies remembered” and “prophecies historicized” (see Crossan 1995:1) in the messages of gospel writers like Mark and Matthew (although not fully in concordance with each other) from the historical facts, we see an altogether different portrait of Jesus emerging than that of a typical prophet (contra Wright 1996). It is a picture of a “sinner”, away from his home village, trapped in a strained relationship with relatives, but experiencing a fantasy homecoming in God’s kingdom. It is probably within such circumstances that an “imaginary reality” (which the Spirit of God created) brought about Jesus’ altered consciousness (see Pilch 1996:133-138) of encountering the care of a Heavenly Father. He both attested to and lived this reality. Through the stories and letters of associates who were likewise empowered, either by Jesus’ personal healing or by the tradition of his “memorized” healing, Jesus became the icon of God’s mercy and love.

5 JESUS MATTERS

The discussion with some of the scholars who have travelled on the road searching for the historical Jesus leads me to the concluding question whether the investigation of the historical Jesus is still significant today. As mentioned in the introduction above this question can be approached from the “ideological” perspective of either the church or the university. As far as the Christian believing community is concerned, my position as a Protestant theologian is clear, namely that the preaching and the dogmas of the church cannot claim to be free from testing. Depending on the current scientific paradigm, criteria for testing may take different forms. Here one should bear in mind that the discourse of the church should under all circumstances be bound to the gospel with regard to Jesus. The church is supposed to be the bearer of the gospel. Therefore, it may be that people today want to test the validity of what the church says on the basis of the concrete effect of the gospel on the church and

society. The church inherently faces the possibility of, and mostly unknowingly, falsifying and obfuscating the gospel, and even of manipulating and exploiting others in the name of that gospel. By doing this, the church alienates itself from Jesus as the essence of the Christian's relationship with God.

That possibility was already present in the earliest Jesus movement, as well as among those who handed down the Jesus tradition orally, those who put it to paper and adapted it editorially, and those who canonized the twenty-seven documents as the New Testament. Generally, we believe that this process of the handing down of tradition and the writing of the Bible took place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, I do not picture or experience the work of the Holy Spirit in a mechanical way. The Holy Spirit did not detract humanity from either the writers of the Bible, or of those who, before them, had handed down the gospel, or of those who, afterwards, interpreted it. What has been included in the canon, after all, has not lost its worldly or human character.

Apart from the scientific merit of the historical Jesus investigation, because it helps us to clarify in a responsible fashion the process by which the New Testament was historically handed down, the church may, with the assistance of this investigation, reach greater clarity with regard to the self-understanding of Christendom. This benefit of Jesus research can be referred to as an inwardly directed desirability.

Yet there is also an outwardly directed desirability. The church also needs the investigation of the historical Jesus for the sake of the interreligious debate. In the world, Christians are confronted with the question: Who is this Jesus you confess and proclaim and whom you invite us to accept as our redeemer? How is it that he, who was a particular Israelite from Galilee, is presented as universally significant? A paper character without "flesh and blood" would, in such a situation, lack credibility! If we do not ask the question as to the historical Jesus, then the kerygma and the values of Christians could become an ideology, that could be manipulated as people wished. When we remind ourselves of the images of Christ presented to people of different religious persuasions during crusades, colonization in the name of missionary work, in gas chambers, and through wars to establish so-called democratic societies then the historical Jesus question assists us in rediscovering the inclusive and anti-hierarchical meaning of the gospel.

Furthermore, secularization has caused that Jesus of Nazareth ceased to be the sole property of the church a long time ago! The sole applicability of the *kerygmatic Christ*, as well as the priority of the “proclaimed Christ” over the “proclaiming Jesus”, is therefore inconceivable. Whether we like it or not, the importance of the Jesus question stretches further than Sunday services in church buildings, further than the normative documents of the official church, further than churches’ programs of evangelism, further than the “God-talk” of Christians in the street. One need only think of non-Christians who use Jesus as a theme in their novellas and films, art and music. Can one regard Christians’ proclamation of the significance of Jesus as the Christ – whether expressed in canonical or creedal writings – as the only assessment to the meaning of Jesus for people? One could barely imagine the implicit lack of service to a diverse community if scholars would be unwilling to undertake basic and fundamental research on the historic origins of Christianity and on the Jesus of history! However, those in a non-Christian, post-Christian, or pluralistic religious community, just as those in the church, could be reminded by historical Jesus research of the possibility of the alienation of the Jesus of history.

From the perspective of the interests of the university as community, historical Jesus research really matters. In the context of the theological faculty it makes at least a significant contribution towards the historical understanding and theological application of the New Testament. Historical-critically seen, the Jesus of history is either the implicit or explicit point of departure for inquiry into the sources behind, the social locations of, and the theological tendencies represented by the New Testament writings. The fact is, in the New Testament a “material relationship” (*sachliche Relation* – Bultmann [1928] 1969:230) does exist between the “proclaimer” and the “proclaimed” (see Van Aarde 2000b:549-571). Theologians should not avoid the exegetical task tracking this plausible relationship (see Theissen & Winter 1997) to show the existence of a core continuum between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith without, however, denying a discontinuity regarding various aspects or claiming that faith, in order to be true faith, must be based on historical facts (see Van Aarde 2002c).

Historical Jesus research is fundamental to the credibility of Christianity, in that Christianity is not a “book-religion”, but represents belief patterns witnessed in the New Testament and is model-

led on the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, experienced and confessed by Christians as child of God (see Van Aarde 2001c:148-171). The quest for the historical Jesus is also important with regard to the interreligious dialogue. In this realm Christianity was often, either unjustly or justly, accused of being exclusive since it was built upon the “Jewishness” of Jesus. But the fact is, Jesus of Nazareth, ethnically an Israelite, had been crossing boundaries all the way without being “un-Jewish”. The kerygma about living through faith alone historically finds its main support in a gender equitable, ethnically unbound, and culturally subversive Jesus.

Therefore, with regard to engaged hermeneutics, the quest for the historical Jesus illuminates what emancipatory living, in memory of the Jesus of history, entails existentially. As the living symbol of God’s unmediated presence, the historical Jesus set people free and, as the risen Christ and *Kyrios* (Lord), still sets people (irrespective of sexual orientation, gender, age, ethnicity, social, and religious affiliation) free from distorted relationships with oneself, with others, and with God. Christian ethics is not an abstract ideology but is based on the humanness and the humaneness of the Jesus of history.

6 “DIE SACHE JESU GEHT WEITER”

The category “kerygmatic Christ” (the faith assertions of the church modelled on the New Testament) seems to increasingly lose its explanatory and heuristic power in the secular and postmodern religious age. I, however, still find myself within the realm of the church and therefore would like to uphold the relationship between the *historical Jesus* and the *kerygmatic Christ*. Yet the twenty-first century could be the time when the relevance of the church as institution and the Christian Bible as its canon became outdated for people on the street. If and when the process of secularization reaches its consummation, another Christian generation will be called both to reconsider the continued importance of the historical Jesus and to reinterpret simultaneously that figure as the “face of God” (see Borg 1997:7-20).

The question as to the relationship between the historical Jesus and the faith assertions that follow, will have to be asked and answered over and over again. Never in history has this question been adequately and finally answered. The challenge is to find a meaningful answer to this question for the immediate present. We cannot do more. To acknowledge our limitations is no weakness.

When times change, the answers will change. This does not mean that we were wrong before. To think that the journey ended in the fourth century (the time when creedal Christianity in the “orthodox” tradition was canonized) or in the sixteenth century (the time when creedal Christianity in the “Reformed” tradition was canonized) or in the twentieth century (the time of neo-orthodoxism and neo-liberalism) is a betrayal of the *Sache Jesu* (see Marxsen 1976:45-62). Or to think that the journey ended with the *Old Quest* or the *New Quest* or the *Third Quest* or even the *Renewed New Quest* is to miss the reason for the search for Jesus. The direction to follow is to engage in the dialectic between Jesus and God in such a way that we today can still acknowledge him as the face of God and also find ourselves as his followers, believing God and living in the presence of God.

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