

Current Trends in Historical Jesus Research

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To look for something implies that we actually know what we are looking for, or at least have some conception of what we are looking for. To look for something actually implies that something has been lost. Whilst this seems obvious in everyday life it is far from obvious when we are dealing with the quest for the historical Jesus.

Historical Jesus Research and the Question of History

It cannot be denied that the central figure of Christian faith, Jesus, continues to move people in an unprecedented way. However, that the questions concerning the factuality of his life are of such importance in many debates, whether in faith communities or in academia at the outset of the 21st century is not as self-evident as it may seem. Since scholars only began to embark on this quest in the late 18th and early 19th century it must be assumed that earlier generations had no interest in such a quest. In addition we need to be aware that this quest emerged in the context of Western societies, and its significance is not shared across Christian communities or academic research. Thus the Chinese-American theologian Kwok Pui-Lan notes that ‘Some African Christians have even said: “We do not need to quest for Jesus, we have never lost him”’.¹ The question thus arises why in the first instance did ‘the historical Jesus’ become an issue. It needs to be acknowledged that what initiated the quest was actually the emergence of the subject discipline of ‘history’ and in conjunction with this the application of ‘rational-critical’ approaches to reading texts, such as the Bible, which had their roots in the past. The initial drive for the quest was rooted in a critical questioning of the dominating church dogmatic Christology and thus in an ideological - and theological-critical endeavour. The quest for the historical Jesus was driven by a quest for truth. Since the concept of history initially assumed that it is possible to objectively reconstruct/represent facts and events of bygone times and thereby get to the ‘real thing’ or truth of the matter the earliest or first quest for the historical Jesus triggered reconstructions of his life, that is, biographies of Jesus the man who lived in Galilee and

¹ ‘On Color-Coding Jesus. An Interview with Kwok Pui-Lan’, in R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press 1997, 177.

Judea at the beginning of the Common Era. The New Testament was considered to be the main accurate source for such a quest. Based on a concept of history as the retrieving of objective facts these biographies claimed to present the 'truth' about Jesus. Thus inherent to the earliest 'quest' was the claim that truth was a matter of objectivity and facts. In his *Geschichte der Leben Jesu-Forschung*² Albert Schweitzer has demonstrated that all of these 'true lives of Jesus' mirrored the respective authors' perceptions or reconstructions of such a life rather than objective facts of a life of the past. Since Schweitzer's magisterial work and recognition of the limitations of historical Jesus research the 'quest' for the historical Jesus has seen numerous revivals over the 20th and into the 21st century. Far from having closed a chapter of research history Schweitzer's book opened up doors and alleyways of new strands of research which each in their own way are evidence that the Jesus of history as much as the Jesus of faith continues to move hearts, souls and minds even in the so-called secularized societies of the West. Despite Schweitzer's insight that attempts to reconstruct the life of Jesus historically, and Rudolf Bultmann's declaration that the historical Jesus was irrelevant from a faith perspective³ the quest continued to be considered relevant particularly in the approach promoted by Ernst Käsemann usually labelled as the 'New' or 'Second' Quest.⁴ Although recognizing with Schweitzer that a life or biography could not be retrieved from the gospels, Käsemann was of the view that the life and message of Jesus prior to his death and resurrection were an inherent part of the message of the gospel and thus the historical quest was seen by him as being of decisive theological relevance.⁵ Hence the focus of Käsemann's approach was not on the 'life' of Jesus but on the message he proclaimed. This Second Quest thus mainly tried to establish 'the earliest or original sayings' of Jesus. The key methodological tool to establish originality was the 'double dissimilarity criterion'. This basically meant that sayings of the four canonical gospels which could be found neither in contemporary Judaism nor in earliest church traditions

² Published in 1906 under the title *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Geschichte der Leben Jesu Forschung*. From the second edition published in 1913 onwards all following editions were published under the title above.

³ Cf. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, Tübingen: 1980, 208

⁴ Cf. James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*. London: SCM 1959

⁵ Käsemann promoted the value of a renewed quest for the Historical Jesus as a theological necessity in his famous lecture 'Das Problem des historischen Jesus' at a conference of the 'Alten Marburger' in 1953 arguing that '...Easter cannot be adequately understood without considering the earthly Jesus.' In *ibid. Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen II*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht 1965, 112(my translation).

were considered to represent the original historical voice of Jesus. The original and thus true message of Jesus was identified in this approach as the one which was most dissociated from its context. Since oral transmission of traditions was considered to have played a decisive role prior to the 'written gospels' short sayings were deemed to represent historically earlier stages of transmission compared to longer sayings. Traditions in the gospel of John were thus seen as representing a later period. These two key characteristics of the Second Quest demonstrate that like the First Quest it was presupposed that historical research could retrieve neutral facts from the past and thereby present an original, that is, 'true' image of how 'it really was'. Inherent to this approach is the equation of historical fact with truth. Thus the so-called 'original' sayings of Jesus identified through the criterion of 'double dissimilarity' were claimed to represent the 'original' and thus 'true' meaning of the message of Jesus. In this sense theological truth claims were created or substantiated via the 'historically objective original sayings of Jesus'. What the Second Quest had in common with the First Quest was its dependency on a perception of history as the discipline which provided the methods to objectively retrieve pure neutral facts from the past and thus present an image of the past 'as it really was'.

Fundamental epistemological changes in the discipline of history since the 1970s began to shatter this concept of history from within the discipline itself.⁶ Without denying that the discipline of history refers to something outside itself, that is, something in the past, the discourse about the past is not an objective re-construction of the past but the construction of a narrative about the past from the perspective of the present. This means that the historian is seen as an interpreter whose hermeneutical presuppositions necessarily shape the re-construction he presents. The selection of topics, their arrangement in sequence, what is emphasized or omitted is the historian's decision which in turn does not take place in a neutral value-free context but is influenced by cultural, socio-economic as well as political factors.⁷ In view of these changes it seemed that the quest for the historical Jesus would necessarily come to an end. If it has to be acknowledged that history cannot open a window into the past but at best present a reconstruction of fragmentary information from the past within a contextual conceptual

⁶ Cf. e.g. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1973.

⁷ Cf. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*. New York: Columbia Press 1988.

framework the claim to gain access to some 'original' and thus 'true' Jesus has to be abandoned. Nevertheless Jesus research continued to flourish and still flourishes. However, the question what the quest for the historical Jesus is actually trying to find has been reformulated within the diversity of approaches which are now subsumed under the heading of the 'Third Quest'.

The Real, the Historical and the Jesus Remembered – Aspects of the Third Quest

The approaches subsumed under the label of the Third Quest are as numerous as they are diverse. The diversity of approaches and themes could be possibly described as one of the key characteristics of the third quest. Although it must be recognized that the subsuming of research strands under one label is not exact science, and no strict boundaries can be drawn between periods of research⁸ there are a number of characteristics within the diversity of the Third Quest which distinguish this period and strand from the previous ones. Thus socio-historical, sociological, cultural anthropological approaches as well as archaeological research play a significant role in addition to the traditional historical-critical and literary approaches. Feminist approaches draw attention to gender related aspects as do postcolonial approaches to issues of domination and power. An intensive debate concerning the relevance of apocryphal sources, such as the Gospel of Thomas, is another aspect which is characteristic for the Third Quest. The constitutive and thus most significant aspect, however, is the consensus concerning Jesus' embeddedness in Judaism; this decisively distinguishes the Third Quest from the previous two periods of Jesus Research. In conjunction with this recognition the long pre-dominating 'double dissimilarity criterion' has been replaced by the 'plausibility criterion' for the evaluation of sources. There are indications of further characteristics emerging such as the replacement of a paradigm of 'religion' in relation to Mediterranean cultures of antiquity with a paradigm of 'collective-ethno-cultural identity' which encompasses all aspects of life rather than singling out the modern and thus anachronistic concept of religion. The implications of such a paradigm change for Jesus research are to be seen in the future.

⁸ D.C.Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters*. New York, London: T&T Clark 2005, 1-26.

Since we find such a diversity of approaches under the label of the 'third quest' it should not come as a surprise that the question of what 'searchers' are actually looking cannot be answered univocally, but range from the 'real' or 'historical' or 'earthly' Jesus, to Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Galilean, to more recently Jesus Remembered⁹ and the Jesus of the Eyewitnesses.

Some of the earlier research of this period still presented attempts to find the real, historical person of the past. The gospels, and increasingly some apocryphal literature were regarded as historical sources which could provide evidence about the historical Jesus and contained 'original' sayings going back to Jesus himself. Similar to the second quest an identification of the 'original' was the aim of these projects. Depending on the evaluation of the historicity of the gospels these are deemed to be more or less reliable historical sources.

Scholars such as E.P.Sanders, and more recently in a different vein, Richard Bauckham consider the gospels to be historically reliable. Thus although Sanders admits that 'our sources leave much to be desired' he nevertheless sets out to discuss 'Jesus the human being, who lived in a particular time and place' and intends to 'search for evidence and propose explanations just as does any historian when writing about a figure in history.'¹⁰ They provide insight about his deeds, what was central to him, his healing practice, etc. With a different nuance Bauckham in his monograph *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*¹¹ considers the gospels to be historically reliable sources. Since the New Testament writers had direct access to the testimony of eyewitnesses through oral transmission these documents are historically very close to the actual events. This direct historical link in the chain of tradition to the 'original' events is for Bauckham indicative for the 'truth' of the gospel traditions. His aim is to demonstrate that there is coherence between the earthly Jesus and Jesus resurrected, thus establishing a bridge between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith via history.

In contrast, other scholars who similarly attempt to reconstruct the 'original' voice of Jesus are more sceptical about the historical reliability of the gospels. The possibly most prominent and controversial attempt of this kind is the 'Jesus Seminar' initiated in 1979 by Robert W.Funk and J. Dominic Crossan. A group of up to 50 scholars met twice year

⁹ This term was launched by James D.G.Dunn in his *Jesus Remembered*. Grand Rapids,MI: Eerdmans 2003.

¹⁰ E.P.Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. London: Penguin 1993, 2.

¹¹ R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids,MI: Eerdmans 2006.

in order to determine through a majority vote which of the sayings and actions of Jesus were authentic. They based their judgement on traditional methods of exegesis, and applied diverse approaches in addition to a number of their own agreed criteria of evaluation. According to their judgement only 18% of the sayings of Jesus are authentic . From among this group of researchers J.D. Crossan and Marcus Borg emerged as prominent and widely read authors with publications such as *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*¹² depicting Jesus as a peasant wisdom teacher, a Jewish cynic who, rather than proclaiming a future kingdom of God, considered it realized in the table-fellowship of the Jesus group with the marginalized in Galilee. Despite the completely different evaluation of the gospels as historical sources these approaches share the aim of historical Jesus research in that they intend to establish the 'original voice' of Jesus through a critical reading of what are declared to be reliable historical sources (which in the case of Crossan include a significant number of non-canonical writings, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of the Hebrews, Q, a so-called Gospel of the Cross reconstructed by Crossan from the gospel of Peter)¹³ which are perceived to be among the earliest sources. The perception of history in these approaches remains untouched by the paradigm change in the discipline of history mentioned earlier in that it is maintained that through finding the 'right', that is, earliest sources the 'real historical' Jesus can be found.

Recent research into oral tradition and memory although not entirely new¹⁴ has led to a new strand of Jesus Research which, conscious of the limitations of the concept of history as a process of retrieving an original past, starts with the insight that "the historical Jesus" is the Jesus constructed by historical research'.¹⁵ Recognizing the significance of oral transmission of tradition in oral cultures and thus the decisive role of memory in such contexts has led to new insights in Jesus Research. The category of

¹² Pb edition, New York: HarperCollins 1992.

¹³ J.D.Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 360ff.

¹⁴ Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission on Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*. Lund: Gleerup 1971 pioneered research in this important area but was not recognized for its invaluable contribution at the time. More recently and before Dunn published his voluminous work Samuel Byrskog revisited Gerhardsson's work and influenced by it developed his own excellent approach to the significance of oral transmission in *Story and History – History as Story: the Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2000.

¹⁵ J.D.G.Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed*. Grand Rapids, MMI: Baker 2005, 28.

remembering emphasizes that historical-critical re-constructions of Jesus are actually also constructions – based on data of the past, that is, there is the element of retracing arguments based on the data provided. At the same time the perception of the interpreter is what shapes the reconstruction – and this process is already present in the earliest data/sources we have since we only have traditions about Jesus after Easter. Dunn maintains that the gospel traditions present an image of Jesus as remembered by his earliest followers not as a neutral remembering of facts but an image, or rather images of Jesus as interpreted from the perspective of faith. Thus the faith perspective is the decisive dimension shaping these earliest traditions. ‘Jesus Remembered’ is Jesus interpreted. The term ‘Jesus remembered’ is to be preferred over against ‘Historical Jesus’ in Dunn’s view because it does not transmit an inherent claim to give access to the ‘real’ Jesus behind the text, but accounts for the fact that any image of Jesus is an image constructed by a scholar based on the most accurate historical, social, sociological, cultural-anthropological, political, etc information available. Dunn’s historical presupposition that the gospel traditions actually do provide access to the memory of the impact Jesus had on his earliest followers may be challenged since it bases the argument for the Jesus Remembered again on assumed historical facts (we cannot verify by means of historical or other scientific research whether the gospels are factually the memory of the impact of the earliest followers of Jesus). However, research into oral cultures and memory research attempt to overcome the methodological problem Albert Schweitzer already had noted, and which Leander Keck has reformulated as ‘The Historical Jesus is the historian’s Jesus, not a Kantian *Ding an sich* (thing in itself).’¹⁶ The methodological paradigm change in the perception of history is thus to some extent taken into account as well as the problems inherent in the quest for the ‘Historical Jesus’.

The recognition of the limitations of historical Jesus research may lead to the conclusion that such research is futile and thus should be abandoned entirely. However, the recognition of these limitations has led to new approaches such as Jesus Remembered and to research into the context in which the Jesus traditions emerged. Such research, rather than trying to depict the image of the Historical Jesus, sheds light on the numerous aspects which shaped peoples’ lives around the Mediterranean in the first century. Research in the areas of archaeology, cultural anthropology, social history,

¹⁶ Leander E. Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus*. Nashville: Abingdon 1971, 20.

sociology, and history et.al. have created a pool of invaluable insights which contribute to an informed interpretation of Jesus traditions. There is a tendency among scholars involved in such research not to use the term 'Quest for the Historical Jesus', but 'Jesus Research'¹⁷, indicating that they are not searching for the Jesus of History, but that in their diverse approaches they seek to reconstruct, as far as the sources and methods allow, as informed as possible a perception of the context of the Jesus tradition. Since even with the most accurate methods information of the past is always already a form of interpretation of source material, and such information is necessarily fragmentary any reconstruction of the past is at best a product of informed imagination. I will return to this aspect in my conclusion.

Jesus the Jew

Despite the diversity in approaches and methodologies used in current Jesus Research there is one aspect which is almost univocally shared by all, that is the recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus. It is not something at which scholarship arrived easily. The issues which prevented such an acknowledgment have less to do with perceptions of history or the evaluation of sources but rather with a theological self-perception of Christianity which required a negative stereotype over against which its key features could be presented in the clearest and most positive light. Christian convictions/doctrines were presented as that which Judaism was not. Jesus was seen as a unique and incomparable personality who stood out against the common traditions of his Jewish context. Such theological perceptions were prevalent in the 19th century but they have not all been overcome by the recent insights of Jesus Research, and New Testament approaches in general. We need to review briefly why this is the most significant aspect of current Jesus Research. Although the previous quests for Jesus partly acknowledged Jesus' embeddedness in Judaism this was never a positive acknowledgement.¹⁸ Jesus was seen as having moved beyond the boundaries of Judaism, or as having been the founder or

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2006, Stefan Alkier, Jürgen Zangenberg, eds. *Zeichen aus Text und Stein. Studien auf dem Weg zu einer Archäologie des Neuen Testaments*. Tübingen: Francke 2003, D.W. Attridge et.al., eds., *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Galilee: A Region in Transition*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2007.

¹⁸ Thus already Julius Wellhausen stated that 'Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew', *Einleitung in die ersten drei Evangelien*, Berlin 1911, 102, (my translation).

paradigmatic representative of Christianity, a new religion over against which Judaism could only function as a negative stereotype. Even when Jesus' Jewishness was recognized, as e.g. in Käsemann's approach, it was at the same time noted that the decisive aspect of this was that Jesus had decisively moved beyond the boundaries of Judaism to the extent that he had overcome Judaism although his disciples did not understand this immediately.¹⁹ Käsemann's assertion must be seen in the context of his debate with his teacher Rudolf Bultmann who also acknowledged Jesus' Jewishness and based on this denied that the earthly Jesus had any significance for Christian Theology²⁰. Over against this position Käsemann claimed crucial significance of the earthly Jesus for Christian theology but precisely because of this maintained that not only Paul but already Jesus himself had overcome Judaism. Although in current Jesus Research hardly any scholar denies Jesus' embeddedness in Judaism what this actually means and in what sense he was embedded is actually the question. James Dunn characterized the First and Second Quest with regard to the Jewishness of Jesus as 'looking for the non-Jewish Jesus', or the 'distinctive and different Jesus', whereas he sees the characteristic of the Third Quest in its contextualizing of Jesus in the Judaism of his time.²¹ Although the acknowledgment of Jesus' Jewishness does not solve all the issues which Christian theology has with a Jewish Jesus, such an acknowledgment is remarkably different from previous anti-Jewish perceptions. E.P. Sanders pointedly stated 'There is no good evidence that Jesus was an anti-Jewish Jew.'²² To the contrary, with the evidence that is available to date there is no reason to doubt that Jesus was Jewish. The current state of play in Jesus Research provides significant insight into the socio-cultural context of Jesus and the movement which emerged around him in the first century in Judea and Galilee which allows us to affirm that Jesus was part of and shared in the collective identity of his Jewish people.²³ Thus the prominent question in current Jesus Research is not

¹⁹ See Käsemann Ernst, 'Die neue Jesus-Frage' in Dupont J. (ed.), *Jésus aux origines de la christologie*. Leuven:Leuven University Press 1975, 47-58

²⁰ Cf. Bultmann Rudolf, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Tübingen:Mohr Siebeck 1965, 1-10.

²¹ Dunn James D.G., *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2005, 63-65.

²² Sanders, E.P., 'Jesus, Ancient Judaism, and Modern Christianity: The Quest Continues', in Fredriksen P., Reinhartz A. (eds.), *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 2002, 31-55, 54.

²³ On the significance of collective identity over against and individualized perception see Stegemann Wolfgang, *Jesus und Seine Zeit*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2010, 180-207.

whether but what it means that Jesus was a Jew and where within the diversity of first century Judaism he is located. It is interesting to note the solutions proposed by the diverse strands of current Jesus Research. Whilst representatives of the Jesus Seminar generally acknowledge Jesus' Jewishness hardly any particular significance is attributed to this. Thus the titles of the publications mention this dimension of Jesus but without any significant reference to any of the contemporary strands of Judaism, whether and how Jesus may have been involved in debates with them or interacted with them.²⁴ Crossan deals with the issue in only four pages in the epilogue of his Historical Jesus book, which gives the impression that rather than being integral to his perception of Jesus, it is some sort of afterthought.²⁵

Other scholars present hypotheses of potential links of Jesus with one of the known groups of Judaism at the time, Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots. Thus e.g. Gerd Theissen locates Jesus in a 'Golden middle ground' between Sadducees and Pharisees, or Pharisees and Essenes, but maintains that he also participated in some form of radicalization of Judaism under Roman domination, moved him towards the margins. He thus describes him as a representative of radical mainstream Judaism.²⁶ John Meier sees him as a 'Marginal Jew' as the title of his four volume work indicates²⁷, whilst David Flusser sees some direct or indirect influence from the Essenes in some of Jesus' teachings, he, like most Jewish interpreters of Jesus, considers that the closest proximity is that to the Pharisaic movement.²⁸ Dunn views Geza Vermes²⁹ and E.P.Sanders³⁰ as the pioneers of those who promoted to close the gap between Jesus and Judaism and who saw him in particular proximity to the Pharisees, although he thinks that they moved too far in that 'Jesus appears to be such a good Jew that his denunciation by the high priest party and execution become something of a puzzle.'³¹ Dunn does not explain why this would be a puzzle but seems to assume that tensions between different groups within

²⁴ Cf. John P.Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol 3: Companions and Competitors*. New York: Doubleday, 2001, 3-10.

²⁵ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 548-553.

²⁶ Gerd Theissen, *Jesus als Historische Gestalt. Beiträge zur Jesusforschung*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht 2003,56

²⁷ *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. 4 Vols. New York: Doubleday 1991-2009.

²⁸ Cf. e.g. Flusser David, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1988.

²⁹ *Jesus the Jew*, London: Collins 1973.

³⁰ *Jesus and Judaism*. London:SCM 1985.

³¹ Dunn, *New Perspective on Jesus*, 64.

Judaism would be inconceivable and would thus present a challenge to the Jewishness of Jesus. Dunn's note indicates that the acknowledgement of Jesus' Jewishness, although a decisive step which distinguishes the Third Quest from the previous ones³², does not settle the debate with regard to the significance of this for the perception of Jesus, the Christ movement and later Christianity. The question of what kind of Jew Jesus was and where he should be located within Judaism indicates that precisely this aspect still presents an unprecedented challenge because of its theological implications. The attempts to specify in what sense or to what degree Jesus was a Jew seem to assume that there is a way in which Judaism can be evaluated in terms of quality, intensity, centre or periphery according to some objective, quantifiable criteria. This in itself is a problematic assumption which ignores that our perception of the past (Jesus and Judaism) are interpretations and reconstructions. To present Jesus as a marginal Jew or as Jewish but of a less committed kind thus gives the impression that an entirely Jewish Jesus presents a problem, not least for a certain kind of Christian theology. It is worth noting that neither Jesus' nor anybody else's Jewishness is questioned or evaluated in a specific way in the gospels; disputes over the appropriate keeping of certain commandments (e.g. Mk 2.23-28; Mt 5.17-20) rather presuppose and affirm the shared collective Jewish identity of all those involved.³³ The key significance of the Jewish identity of Jesus is not its quality but the recognition that this is a decisive part of the world he lives in. It is not significant as the characteristic of him as an individual, and it is not about his religious beliefs, but of Jesus as embedded in the collective identity of his people which encompasses more than a certain belief system. Judaism denotes the social and symbolic universe of the culture and society Jesus lived in. The gospel traditions about Jesus are located in the life world of Galilee and Judea, in the symbolic universe of Jewish culture and society. The God of Israel is not Jupiter and educated Romans would not have debated amongst themselves about the Sabbath.³⁴ Jesus Research does not need to emphasize this in catch phrases or specific headlines but takes this as the decisive and all permeating context of Jesus, as the default setting so to say, consistently into account.

³² As Dunn affirms, see *New Perspective*, 63

³³ I am indebted here to Stegemann W., *Jesus und seine Zeit*, 169-80.

³⁴ Stegemann W., *Jesus und seine Zeit*, 175.

Theological Implications

The fact that Jesus Research attracts attention of a different kind from attention which research into the life of Alexander the Great or of Queen Shlomzion Alexandra would attract has to do with the significance of this man of the past for current Christian faith and theology. This provides some explanation for the contentiousness and intensity with which such debates are conducted and the waves they create beyond academia.

Current Jesus Research is characterized by two major paradigm shifts when compared with the previous periods of this strand of research: the challenge to the notion of history as a discipline and the acknowledgement of the Jewishness of Jesus. These are ground-shaking shifts on a major scale and they cannot but have significant theological implications. Thus a brief glance into some aspects of the potential theological significance of these developments in current Jesus Research shall provide a contribution to a conversation which needs to be continued.

The first paradigm change related to the discipline of history and theoretical underpinnings of course does not present a theological problem per se; nevertheless it has theological implications, and implications in relation to the theological significance of Jesus Research in particular. Ever since Schweitzer's magisterial overview of Historical Jesus Research there is no way back for New Testament research behind the recognition that images of the Historical Jesus are reconstructions and thus scholarly interpretations rather than real life portraits. To merely dismiss historical Jesus Research on the basis of its acknowledged subjectivity and unavoidable diversity as thus irrelevant, or to merely be suspicious of ideological interests on the part of the authors of portraits of the historical Jesus misses the point. Although the diversity of the portraits has something to do with the subjectivity and preferences of the respective scholars and their 'informed imagination' this is not a peculiar problem of historical Jesus Research but has to be attributed to a constituent aspect of the academic discipline of history as such. As noted above, the discipline of history is an interpretive discipline rather than a discipline of mere data gathering. Historical research is inherently subjective in that no data (texts, archaeological artefacts etc.) can be assessed and evaluated without at the same time being interpreted. The interpreter is an inherent part of the interpretive process, in biblical as much as in historical research. Thus diverse interpretations should not be deplored but are that which is to be expected, also

in historical Jesus Research. If it is presupposed that the purpose of the search for meaning is the achievement of one uniform and final answer then something has gone wrong from a hermeneutical perspective. The process of interpretation of data and sources cannot be detached from the interpreters, it cannot be confined nor finally settled, it rather constitutes a process of negotiation of meaning in a community of scholars who in addition to their academic expertise cannot but contribute their interest in the data and sources to this process.³⁵ Thus the key problem which prevents us from finding the 'real', historical Jesus is not faith but has to do with the limitations of the discipline of history itself. There is no means by which 'the real Jesus' could be 'excavated' and an objective and final portrait of 'Jesus as he really was' be arrived at. Jesus Research can only present scholars' constructions of Jesus informed by the best available contextual information interpreted in a responsible way which is sensitive to the data. The diversity of interpretations in Historical Jesus Research, rather than being evidence for its failure, is evidence that it uses the methods of the discipline appropriately and at the same time adheres to its very limitations. This diversity also does not present a challenge to faith nor cannot it be used in defence of faith. Results from Historical Jesus Research cannot serve as theological foundations. There is a fundamental category difference between the historical quest for Jesus and faith in Jesus Christ as religious belief. The two categories should neither be confused nor mixed. If history is expected to support or give reassurance to faith then its role is misunderstood, and so is faith. History can neither legitimize nor replace faith and trust. This is not to deny that Historical Jesus Research has some theological significance and as such is important for Theology and Christian Faith. It originated as a theology-or ideology-critical quest which challenged unquestioned doctrinal assertions. This critical questioning may well still be its, relative and humble, but necessary contribution today. The search for the earthly Jesus, and reconstructions of the life world of the movement which emerged around him prevents us from separating the Jesus of this world, the Christ *kata sarka*, from of the heavenly Christ. The widely shared recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus in current Jesus Research thus raises wide ranging theological questions which are only beginning to be recognized and explored. This recognition is

³⁵ Cf. my Reading Romans 'in the Face of the Other' : Levinas, the Jewish Philosopher meets Paul, the Jewish Apostle, in *Reading Romans with Contemporary Philosophers and Theologians* vol 7 of the *Romans Through History and Cultures* series, ed. by David Odell Scott, London, New York: T&T Clark 2007 , pp.115-54.

paired by a parallel development in Pauline Studies which recognizes the embeddedness of Paul in Judaism.³⁶ If Jesus and his earliest followers were firmly embedded in the life world and symbolic universe of Judaism, this life world and symbolic universe must have decisive theological significance for the movement which eventually became Christianity. At the heart and inherent to this movement then is not the overcoming of an inferior religion by a superior one, there cannot be an inherent theological triumphalism inbuilt in Christian identity, but an indebtedness to a heritage shared with others. Whether the challenging potential of current Jesus Research is recognized and will be translated into changes in theology and the relationship between communities of faith, Jewish, Christian and others, remains to be seen.

³⁶ Cf. e.g. William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity*. London, New York: T&T Clark 2008, pb edition;