

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES IN HISTORICAL JESUS RESEARCH?

Some critical reflections on paradigms and images of Jesus in current North American scholarship

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Abstract

There is a sharp interest in the historical Jesus in recent decades among (mainly) North American New Testament scholars. Many of them claim that a veritable 'renaissance' or 'third quest' is underway in Jesus studies that shifts beyond the boundaries of both the 'old' and 'new' quests of former years. New methods, increasingly more interdisciplinary in nature, are believed to produce better and more reliable images of Jesus of Nazareth and more accurate reconstructions of the social world he inhabited. Yet there are also those scholars who dispute, and often sharply, this confidence. They maintain that much of the current historical Jesus research remains methodologically and ideologically questionable. The present article explores these two opposing sides of the Jesus debate in North America by focusing on the recent works of two important scholars, John Dominic Crossan and Luke Timothy Johnson. The discussion is not limited merely to the question of how different methods produce different historical Jesus reconstructions, or even to how innovative recent interdisciplinary methods may in fact be in many such reconstructions. Rather, the inquiry goes beyond these concerns by suggesting that social location and (explicit or implicit) ideological/theological assumptions of a modern and/or postmodern nature are the essential - if often overlooked - factors that impact directly on all reconstructions of the historical Jesus in contemporary Jesus work. In this one sense alone, current historical Jesus studies, for all their celebrated advances, may represent a less significant 'shifting of the boundaries' once they are compared more carefully with similar scholarship of the past. Even the best in recent Jesus scholarship may not completely escape the Schweitzian judgment levelled against the 'first' quest. For we all invariably find 'our own thoughts in Jesus.' But the question is also raised as to the possible significance or implications of North American Jesus debates for scholarship in South Africa today. While this issue is not of direct concern here, South African scholars are challenged to discover, identify, and reexamine, with the help of insights gained from the North American Jesus debates, how the various 'fundamental assumptions' we all have, do and always will impinge upon and give shape to all our theological and biblical scholarship in our own diverse contexts as well.

1. Introduction

'It is an exciting time to be a Jesus scholar. The discipline is flourishing with new life.' These are the words of Marcus Borg (1994c:8), an important voice among the many other voices raised in enthusiastic support of the current 'renaissance' in historical Jesus studies on the North American continent. With the notable exception of European scholarship, still largely locked into a prevailing mood of Bultmannian scepticism on the subject (Bultmann 1935:14; cf. Kähler 1964:46; Keck 1971:9), Jesus research has received new impetus also in Great Britain (e.g. Wright 1986:189-135, 1992a:792-802, 1992b; Riches 1993:89-124; Freyne

1988; 1994:75-121), and increasingly in South Africa (e.g. Vorster 1991a:121-135, 1991b:526-542, 1994:619-633; Van Aarde 1993a:397-423, 1993b:942-962, 1994:235-251, 1995:1-31; Draper 1994:29-42; Botha & Craffert 1994:1-25; Scheffler 1995:299-312; Wanamaker 1996:3-17).

That there has been this 'renaissance' in historical Jesus research in recent decades is undeniable. A proliferation of literature in the field has ended the comparative dearth of the preceding years. During the 1980s alone, forty-two scholarly books on Jesus appeared, beside the many more expressions on the subject in a variety of academic reviews - too numerous to mention (Borg 1994a:5; cf. Charlesworth 1986:221-230; Telford 1994:35-37,38-42). Popular media interest in Jesus has also intensified. Magazines such as *Life* (e.g. December, 1995) and *Time* (e.g. August, 1988; September, 1992; April 1996) have provided front-cover focus on Jesus as well as a variety of perspectives on topical issues that have once again come up for debate. Major film productions such as Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Denis Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1988) have provoked world-wide curiosity (Telford 1994:44-47). Early 1996 the historical Jesus found its way onto the Internet in the form of seven weekly debates sponsored by Harper-Collins publications. The participants were three leading North American scholars: John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Luke Timothy Johnson. The first two are significant contributors to the subject of Jesus, and the latter is a recent critical respondent to the Jesus debate. The Internet debate was conducted under the catchy title *Jesus 2000* - a deliberate choice it seems since 1996 marked the year that many Christians around the world were celebrating as 'what was believed to have been, the two-thousandth anniversary of Jesus' birth.

Before addressing in more detail the opposing methods and Jesus images of Crossan and Johnson in contemporary Jesus debates, I would first like to focus on the mixed perceptions of the current debate among North American scholars themselves. For better or worse, the debate, essentially harnessed and spearheaded in North America is focusing renewed attention on 'context', 'culture', and 'tradition' as some of the persistent issues in the ongoing battle around the meaning and identity of Christian faith in contemporary society. The central figure of Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth, is once again located firmly at the heart of the battle. Johnson clearly does not share the spirit of celebration and confidence of many historical Jesus scholars in North America. In fact, his response is more typical of the academic scepticism which has greeted this kind of scholarship. He speaks of 'the character of the present debate over the historical Jesus as a moment in a culture war in which the institutions of academy, church, and media are drawn into confused conflict and collusion' (Johnson 1996:1). He is convinced that the North American Jesus project represents 'the battle over identity boundaries within Christianity itself' (Johnson 1996:v). He criticises the methods which have been used and the reconstructions and images of Jesus which have been popularised in current research because he believes their overall thrust represents a capitulation and captivity to the modern and postmodern culture of Western society.

Placing aside any judgement on the merits or demerits of Johnson's comments for the moment, they do allow us to see something of the sharp boundary lines which have emerged and are increasingly dividing protagonists and opponents of current Jesus scholarship in North America and elsewhere. Avid proponents of Jesus research strangely agree with Johnson's statement that 'the battle over identity boundaries within Christianity itself' is central to the agenda of much Jesus research in North America today, but they do so for radically different reasons. For example, Borg (cf. *Jesus 2000*, Week 7) insists that it is precisely the need to reject the widespread image of Jesus in Western churches and culture, based largely on the canonical Gospels, that necessitates new reconstructions and images of Jesus, and new

understandings of Christianity itself. 'Because historical Jesus scholarship about Jesus affects our image of Jesus and thus our image of the Christian life, it matters' (Borg 1994a:195). Crossan (1991:426) is even more bold: 'one cannot dismiss [a scholarly reconstruction of the historical Jesus] or the search for the historical Jesus as *mere* reconstruction, as if reconstruction invalidated somehow the entire project. Because there is *only* reconstruction...If you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in.' Paul Hollenbach (1989:20), is perhaps the most explicit and radical about what he believes should be the overriding agenda of historical Jesus research: 'We must do quest for the historical Jesus studies in order to overthrow, not simply correct the 'mistake called Christianity', by which he means that kind of Christianity in North America that has afforded 'blatant ideological justification of political economic forces of imperialism, torture, and murder...'

But we in South Africa may well pause and ask about the possible significance of this (largely Western) debate for our own contexts of academy, church, and society. Certainly, responses to this question will be as varied and complex as they have been in North America. For many, the recognition that '*Historical Jesus research* is becoming something of a scholarly bad joke' may be the first and last word on the subject (cf. Crossan 1991:xxvii, his emphasis). Yet such an 'opting out' of the debate will not undo the fact that the historical figure of Jesus will remain at the centre of persistent controversy and tension in biblical studies and theology: 'the topic is too important to be neglected - and too elusive to be definitively settled' (Carlson 1994:8). But another reason, I believe, should prompt curiosity and (at least a measure) of active engagement in the ongoing Jesus debate by theologians and biblical scholars. Here I speak of two nagging questions which the current Jesus debate in North America inevitably raises for us in our own contexts in South Africa. *Firstly*, does the current Jesus project in the West represent anything like the 'boundary-crossing program' (Carlson 1994:4) that demands our informed and critical engagement in South Africa? Ardent proponents of Jesus research argue that a significant 'paradigm shift' has taken place in the discipline. The language of 'third quest' has become more and more common to distinguish this new wave of Jesus studies from those of the 'first/old quest' of the 18th-19th centuries, and the 'second/new quest' of the 1950s-1960s, both of which originated in Germany. Are these claims justified, or is the current preoccupation with the historical Jesus in North America, as many of its antagonists suggest, the story of earlier 'quests', only dressed up in a new garb? Answering these questions is the primary concern of this paper. *Secondly*, and perhaps more profoundly, what may be the challenges and implications of the current Jesus research in the West for questions of Christian faith and identity, and even inter-faith dialogue in our own diverse contexts in Africa and South Africa? This contribution does not take up the second issue directly but some implications are hinted at in this regard.

2. Exploring the Jesus Debate in North America

In an attempt to explore some answers to the above questions, this paper will focus on two leading scholars on either side of the 'battleground' on which the Jesus debate in North America is currently being waged.

On the one side, there is John Dominic Crossan whose book *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991) has been praised as ground-breaking in the field - a pioneering project of immense importance that explodes the boundaries of traditional Christianity and shifts the historical Jesus debate to the arena of interdisciplinary and (potentially) even inter-faith dialogue. Crossan himself (1994a:151) appears under no illusion about the grandeur of his own programme in *The Historical Jesus*:

I wanted to start all over again with Albert Schweitzer at the end of the First ('old') Quest and try to write a book that might be the Schweitzer for the twenty-first century as he was for the twentieth . . . I was attempting a new Schweitzer.

On the other side, there is Luke Timothy Johnson whose recent book *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (1996) unabashedly champions the cause of 'traditional' Christianity, or what he defines as 'Christianity in its classic form' (1996:134). Johnson's deliberate choice of the term 'the real Jesus' reflects his deep suspicion of Crossan's 'the historical Jesus' as well as the entire project of other Jesus scholars within the academic tradition of Crossan. However, his preference for 'the real Jesus' rather than 'the historical Jesus' also illustrates that the ongoing battle in current Jesus studies is being waged, at least in part, at the level of language itself. For it is right here that different scholars immediately set different boundaries to structure and control the parameters of the debate (cf. Meier 1991:21-40; Johnson 1996:141-166; Jesus 2000, Weeks 1-7). For example, Johnson's choice of 'the real Jesus' leads him to reassert (against Crossan, Borg, Funk and others) the centrality of the canonical Gospel narratives in providing us with this Jesus who he believes is fundamental to Christian faith and identity. His understanding of the 'real Jesus' gives us a clue to his own understanding of 'traditional' Christian faith and identity:

The 'real Jesus' of Christian faith is the resurrected Jesus, he 'whom God has made Lord and Christ' (Acts 2:36) . . . not simply a figure of the past but very much and above all a figure of the present, a figure, indeed, who defines believers' present by his presence . . . [he] is first of all the powerful, resurrected Lord whose transforming Spirit is active in the community . . . the one who through the Spirit replicates in the lives of the believers faithful obedience to God and loving service to others (Johnson 1996:142,166).

Johnson's stress on 'the resurrected Jesus' has led Crossan (Jesus 2000, Week 1) to connect him with 'Docetic or Gnostic or Spiritual Christianity' rather than that of 'Catholic or Universal or Incarnational Christianity.' In response, Johnson (Jesus Debate, Week 1) rejects this characterization, viewing his stress on the resurrection as 'by no means a denial of what Crossan calls Catholic Christianity, but its opposite, its grounding.' For him, 'the strong view of the resurrection...is a way of affirming the value of the body and the world, rather than seeking salvation in mystic or epistemic flight.' Against 'Gnostic Christianity' and 'Gnostic Gospels', he reaffirms the perspective of the resurrection in the context of the canonical Gospels which hold the vision of power [resurrection] in tension with the reality of Jesus' suffering and death [cross]. 'Everywhere in these [NT] writings the image of Jesus involves the tension-filled paradox of death and resurrection, suffering and glory' (Johnson 1996:166).

Given the opposing frameworks for historical Jesus research proposed by Crossan and Johnson, we must ask ourselves whether any significant shifts have occurred in current Jesus debates, more so when these debates are located alongside the larger debates of the last 200 years. Is Schweitzer's judgement (1968:4) not as legitimate and pertinent as ever?

Each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way it could make Him alive. But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's [*sic*] true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.

Later we shall return to examine more directly the issue of 'shifting boundaries' in relation

to current historical Jesus research.¹ Right now, we take a closer look at the work of Crossan and Johnson in terms of the polarized paradigms they represent in the ongoing Jesus debate in North America.

3. Polarized paradigms

Barring for the moment the general ambiguity, confusion, and even controversy surrounding the term 'paradigm' in science or theology (cf. Kuhn 1970; Küng 1988; Bosch 1990), we may accept its (loose) synonymy with 'the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by members of a given community' (Kuhn 1970:175) or 'models of interpretation, explanation, or understanding' (Küng 1988:132; cf. Bosch 1990:185). By this definition, Crossan and Johnson represent *polarized paradigms* in Jesus research in North America. Each scholar is located within a very specific tradition and community of critical scholarship, both methodologically and ideologically. Each one, in turn, has produced sharply divided images of Jesus, and each one has divergent conceptions about that seemingly intractable and controversial subject in current Jesus research, namely the connection between history and faith. These are some of the divisive elements which undergird the brief reflections which now follow.

3.1 Different methods and different images of Jesus

In the first place, the polarization which marks the debate around the historical Jesus in North America today has to do substantially with the *different methods* which different scholars employ in their historical Jesus reconstructions. For John Dominic Crossan (1991:xxviii), 'the problem of multiple and discordant conclusions [about Jesus] forces us back to the questions of theory and method.' For him, proper method consistently followed and applied should provide the basis of a solid and trustworthy portrait of Jesus. His Prologue (1991:xxviii-xxix) captures the main ingredients of his methodology which provides the driving force of his historical Jesus reconstruction in *The Historical Jesus*:

My methodology for Jesus research has a triple triadic process : . . . The first triad involves the reciprocal interplay of a macrocosmic level using cross-cultural and cross-temporal social *anthropology*, a mesocosmic level using Hellenistic or Greco-Roman *history*, and a microcosmic level using the *literature* of specific sayings and doings, stories and anecdotes, confessions and interpretations concerning Jesus. All three levels, anthropological, historical, and literary, must cooperate fully and equally for an effective synthesis . . . My method, then, demands an equal sophistication on all three levels at the same time.

Borg's (1994a:33-34) helpful summary of Crossan's method lauds it as 'a model' in the field which has 'sufficiently changed the discipline' and where 'a simply 'historical' quest of the historical Jesus will no longer do.' With Crossan 'we see the most comprehensive use yet of the multi-disciplinary approach that is characteristic of the present renaissance in Jesus scholarship.' Telford (1994:59-60, his emphasis) lists '*interdisciplinary openness, and especially their use of or 'conversation' with the social sciences*' as one of seven distinctive features of 'third quest' historical Jesus research. The social and cultural world of Judaism, not merely its religious or philosophical world continues to be intensely explored by recent Jesus scholars.² Models and insights from sociology and cultural anthropology have been vigorously

1 See Section 4 below.

2 Highly influential has been the increased interest and work of scholars on the Jewish Pseudepigrapha, the

used to recover the hidden and neglected dimensions of socio-political life in 1st century Palestine which are believed to have shaped the ministry of Jesus and the kind of person he was within this world. This kind of approach to Jesus research has been perceived to be so boundary-breaking that Bernard Brandon Scott confidently declared as early as 1984: 'the historical quest of the historical Jesus has ended; the interdisciplinary quest of the historical Jesus has just begun' (in Borg 1994a:7).

Crossan's method, then, is typical of 'third' quest historical Jesus reconstructions which purport to shift beyond the boundaries of 'diachronic' methods of the past to intentional 'synchronic' methods and reconstructions of Jesus.³ In his appraisal of Crossan's methodology in *The Historical Jesus*, Scott (1994:22-30) identifies its synchronic thrust as one of its most innovative and ground-breaking features. By intentionally bringing the quest into conversation with the new (social) sciences, Crossan has exemplified a shift away from the Darwinian (diachronic) understanding of the sciences, and embraced the model of Ferdinand de Saussure who laid emphasis on the place and function of the particular within the broader system or context.⁴

Before we leave Crossan's method, we must say something about what for some is perhaps its most innovative contribution in the field of contemporary Jesus studies, namely the novel way in which Crossan (1991:xxxix-xxxiv) has secured a reliable literary database upon which to base his historical reconstruction of Jesus. The 'microcosmic level' of Crossan's triple triadic methodological process insists that both intracanonical and extracanonical sources, in their entirety, must be thoroughly analysed to recover the most authentic (i.e. most historically reliable or trustworthy) sayings of Jesus that may provide the basis of his historical reconstruction. Here, Crossan's method links him directly with the project of the Jesus Seminar of which he remains an active member. Established in 1985, the Jesus Seminar undertook as its primary task the search for the authentic sayings of Jesus. Together with its founding figure, Robert Funk,⁵ the Jesus Seminar has continued to remain at the centre of growing controversy in the circles of the academy, the church, and the public media. The eye-catching advertising

Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Nag Hammadi Codices, as well as findings at recent archaeological excavations in Palestine, especially in Capernaum and Jerusalem. The impact of the last mentioned is well illustrated, for example, by several papers delivered at the SBL/AAR annual meeting in Chicago in 1994. Here scholars illustrated the significance of archaeological work in Galilee for current historical Jesus research (cf. Strange 1994:81-90; Horsley 1994:91-135; Reed 1994:203-219; Oakman 1994:220-251).

- 3 'Diachronic' methods focus mainly on the historical development of particular ideas. For example, in New Testament criticism, the examination of the various layers of texts and early Christianity has received greater attention among scholars who have largely employed the more traditional methods of historical criticism. 'Synchronic' methods lay stronger stress on the function of historical ideas within the larger systems of which they form an integral part. In historical Jesus studies, then, 'synchronic' approaches tend to emphasize the function of New Testament ideas about Jesus within the larger context of the ancient social systems in which these ideas found meaning. An increasing number of proponents of synchronic methods in Jesus studies today employ the social sciences as tools of inquiry and analysis of the New Testament writings and the social world of Jesus.
- 4 Crossan (1994b:146), in turn, accepts Scott's insight as 'extremely helpful', but stresses that 'the major characteristic of my work has been ... a refusal to allow either diachrony or synchrony to dominate and an attempt, always to place them in juxtaposition.'
- 5 Funk heads up the Westar Institute in Sonoma, California which has been the official sponsor of the Jesus Seminar. He and John Dominic Crossan, mentioned earlier, have been co-chairs of the Jesus Seminar since its inception. Although membership of the Jesus Seminar was believed at one stage to number about 200 scholars, in 1993 it appears to have had an official roster of only about 74 members. This roster includes the names of mainly North American scholars, a few Canadians, and one South African. Some of these scholars have made significant contributions in the field of New Testament scholarship (cf. Funk & Hoover 1993:533-537).

campaigns of the Jesus Seminar have only served to intensify such controversy, more so since 1993 with the appearance of its new multi-coloured edition of the gospels: *The Five Gospels: the Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. The book represents the outcome of an extensive project officially begun by the Jesus Seminar at its inception. Funk expressed the aim of the project as the quest of the *voice* of Jesus insofar as his voice could be distinguished from the many other voices also preserved in the tradition (in Borg 1994:161). Most striking from a North American public- and media-interest point of view was the decision of its members to vote on the authentic Jesus sayings at the various meetings, and also how they voted.⁶ The rule that guided all voting was: 'canonical boundaries are irrelevant in critical assessments of the various sources of information about Jesus'. This rule, they believed, was justified by 'the canons of historical inquiry' (Funk 1993:35). For a recent critical analysis of the Jesus Seminar, see Pearson (1995:317-338).]

After identifying the available sources or texts which constitute this comprehensive literary *inventory*, Crossan positions each unit in one of four periods, each period defined by a specific chronology of appearance. This step of *stratification* organizes the literary inventory into four historical periods or strata: 30 to 60 C.E., 60 to 80 C.E., 80 to 120 C.E., and 120 to 150 C.E. (cf. Crossan 1991:427-450). Finally, on the basis of the criterion of a *multiplicity of independent attestation*, Crossan offers what he believes is the earliest and most trustworthy database from which to reconstruct his image of Jesus.⁷

Out of a total inventory for all four strata consisting of 522 separate items of tradition, Crossan locates a collection of 76 literary complexes within the first stratum. He believes these complexes, in their core form, go back to the historical Jesus himself. They provide the *primary* literary foundation for his historical Jesus reconstruction. Perhaps the most controversial issue of Crossan's method at this point is his privileging of extracanonical texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Sayings Gospel Q* (both of which he locates in the first strata) and his side-lining of the canonical Gospels to subsequent strata (Mark to the second stratum, Matthew Luke, and a first edition of John to the third stratum, and a second edition of John to the fourth stratum (1991:427-434). On this basis, for example, Crossan's method leads him to classify the literary complex 'kingdom and children' as 1/4, meaning that this particular teaching on the kingdom by Jesus is found in the first stratum (30 to 60 C.E.), and has four independent attestations (Gospel of Thomas 22:1-2; Mark 10:13-16 = Matthew 19:13-15 = Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 18:3; and John 3:1-10). The general rule is that the lower the number left of the stroke, and the higher the number to the right of the stroke in his classification system, the greater its claim to have come from Jesus (Crossan's 1991:xxxiii).

In the end, Crossan's interdisciplinary method produces his very particular reconstruction and image of Jesus, that of 'a peasant Jewish Cynic' (1991:421). In his own words (1991:421-422):

6 Beads in four different colours (red, pink, grey, and black) were used at each meeting of the Seminar to decide on the authenticity of each of Jesus saying in the canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), as well as the extracanonical Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus (cf. Funk & Hoover 1993:15,471-532; Miller ed. 1994:301-322; Borg 1994a:160-181). A red vote meant 'Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it'; pink meant 'Jesus probably said something like this'; grey meant 'Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own'; and black meant 'Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition' (Funk 1993:36). One member suggested an unofficial, but more colloquial interpretation of the colours: red meant 'That's Jesus!' pink: 'Sure sounds like Jesus,' grey: 'Well maybe,' and black: 'There's been some mistake.' (Funk 1993:36-37).

7 Crossan's methodology, especially the way he has derived the database upon which his entire historical Jesus reconstruction is grounded, can only be dealt with in a most cursory fashion here. Seven *Appendices in The Historical Jesus* provide more detailed information in this regard (1991:427-466).

The historical Jesus was, then, a *peasant Jewish Cynic*. His peasant village was close enough to a Greco-Roman city like Sepphoris that sight and knowledge of Cynicism are neither inexplicable nor unlikely. But his work was among the farms and villages of Lower Galilee. His strategy, implicitly for himself and explicitly for his followers, was the combination of *free healing and common eating*, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power...He was neither broker nor mediator but, somewhat paradoxically, the announcer that neither should exist between humanity and divinity or between humanity and itself. Miracle and parable, healing and eating were calculated to force individuals into unmediated physical and spiritual contact with God and unmediated physical and spiritual contact with one another. He announced, in other words, the brokerless kingdom of God.⁸

Despite the international acclaim Crossan's methodology has received by scholars both inside and outside the discipline, Johnson (1996a:101-120) views it as symptomatic of a 'madness'. While he acknowledges the similarity between his and Crossan's methodology in so far as both of them use the 'criterion of multiple attestation' in their work on Jesus, Johnson is very critical of what he still sees as Crossan's obsession with the historical method. He comments (1996:50):

For all their self-conscious methodology and social-scientific sophistication, Crossan's efforts reveal themselves as an only slightly camouflaged exercise in theological revisionism rather than genuine historiography...The criteria that matter for determining authenticity are those that make up the predetermined portrait that Crossan wishes to emerge. His use of cross-cultural patterns reduces Jesus to a stereotypical cultural category, that of a member of 'peasant culture'. Into this *historical cipher* Crossan can pour his own vision of what 'Christianity' ought to be: not a church with leaders and cult and creeds, but a loose association of Cynic philosophers who broker their own access to the kingdom of self-esteem and mutual acceptance.

In sharp contrast to the method of Crossan, Johnson (1996:124-125) insists that the *narrative pattern of the canonical Gospels* is essential for a historical reconstruction of Jesus' ministry. He is confident that this narrative pattern when combined with other 'outsider evidence' (1996:112-117) and 'non-narrative New Testament evidence' (1996:117-122) allows for a historical reconstruction of Jesus which enjoys 'a very high level of probability' even though complete historical certainty in this regard still remains beyond the scope of historical inquiry (cf. Johnson 1996: 81-104). At best, the language of 'more or less probable' must be used, and not all historical assertions about Jesus enjoy equal 'historical probability'.

8 The possible implications of Crossan's image of Jesus for the South African situation will have to be explored more critically. South African scholar, Jonathan Draper (1994:29-42), for example, finds historically suspect Crossan's image of a Jesus who is a wandering Cynic who initiated an itinerant movement of vaggabond beggars practicing healing, exorcism and open commensality. Sharing the insights of Horsley (1987:209-284; 1989:105-129) instead, Draper finds the *historical* meaning of Jesus' programme of action in Jesus' renewal of settled local communities in Galilee. More positive towards Crossan's image of Jesus is Ludwig (1994:58-59) who focuses on its capacity to break the power of the 'dysfunctional' [Roman] Catholic Church as 'Broker of Grace and Salvation.' Crossan is himself a member of the Roman Catholic church, and a former priest who is now more directly located within the academy. Crossan's Jesus signifies the possibility that 'the church's self-understanding is shifting from within -from hierarchical and juridical brokerage to 'pilgrim people' who bear the memory of Jesus and celebrate their own existence in communion with his; searching for personal and corporate transcendence within the context of lived existence and historical transformation.' The suggestive 'ideological' link between Crossan's 'peasant Jewish Cynic' Jesus and his location as critic of the dominant structures of the Roman Catholic church is worth more investigation.

Some rate very high, others less so.⁹ Yet Johnson (1996:121-23), on the basis of his Christian faith, accepts as 'certain' particular assertions about Jesus which are made in the Gospel narratives and which are supported by outsider and non-narrative New Testament evidence. Clearly, Johnson's method also relies heavily on the 'criterion of multiple attestation' which Crossan also uses, but with an important difference. Johnson demonstrates a greater trust in the narrative pattern of the four canonical Gospels to provide an image of Jesus as one who is radically obedient to God and who demonstrates selfless love toward other people (1996:157-158). Moreover, this pattern of the canonical Gospels, fundamentally a 'story pattern' according to Johnson (1996:158-165), clearly frames other New Testament writings, including those of Paul, and provides a consistent picture of 'the character of Jesus the Messiah'.

3.2 In summation

Against Crossan's *hermeneutics of suspicion*, Johnson suggests a *hermeneutics of trust vis-à-vis* the New Testament sources, in particular the Gospels and the Pauline writings. Where for Crossan, the canonical Gospels are largely rejected as reliable *primary* sources of our knowledge and reconstruction of Jesus, for Johnson it is precisely the canonical Gospels which frame and constitute the pattern upon which any knowledge reaches us, and through which we come to meet 'the real Jesus'. Where Crossan's method pushes him to deconstruct radically the Gospel narrative pattern, Johnson insists on this very pattern as *the* essential framework or grid for any portrait of Jesus. Crossan's method suggests greater confidence and trust in the extracanonical sources for his historical Jesus reconstruction, while Johnson's method ranges from guarded confidence in their ability to support the canonical Gospel assertions to outright scepticism about their reliability in any reconstruction of either the historical Jesus or the Christian movement. In short, the methodologies of Crossan and Johnson illustrate the polarized paradigms endemic to the historical Jesus debate among North American scholars, and indeed to scholars of Jesus worldwide. *This* remains one significant reason for the polarized images of Jesus as well. Different methods, even the very best ones it seems, will continue to produce very different reconstructions and images of Jesus. *All* methods of critical inquiry, Crossan's and Johnson's included, appear limited in their ability to provide anything like a full-proof reconstruction or portrait of Jesus.

4. Shifting Boundaries?

We have seen that the different methods of Crossan and Johnson, for all their many and sharp dissimilarities, share at least two significant features. Both scholars propose methods which tend to fix, even *reify* certain criteria and sources for their own reconstruction and imaging of Jesus. Both scholars appear to claim a kind of universal significance or 'normativity' for their own work. This should alert us to the fact that while polarized methods for Jesus reconstructions do result in polarized images of Jesus, *more* than differences in method seem to be at stake. In this regard, Batdorf (1984:187-215) provides a cautionary reminder. His study of a variety of historical Jesus scholars, methods, and portraits of Jesus

9 For example, that 'Jesus worked wonders' or 'the outsider perception of Jesus as a teacher or sage' enjoy high historical probability because they are attested to in broad cross-section of canonical and extracanonical material. Where a scholar such as E.P. Sanders (1985:11, 61-76) accepts Jesus' activity in the Temple as 'certain fact' and 'the surest starting point' for his historical reconstruction of Jesus, Johnson (1996:124) views the Temple incident as 'quite conceivable and perhaps even likely', while 'the timing and the meaning of that incident, however, are harder to state with the same degree of probability'. Other events such as 'the transfiguration and the stilling of the storm' escape the historian's ability altogether.

from Bultmann to the early 1980s suggests that in the majority of cases there are in fact no *necessary* link between a particular image of Jesus and a specific method which a scholar has employed to select and interpret the available data. While in some cases, different methods produce different images of Jesus, all too often *similar images* of Jesus have emerged among scholars who used *different methods*.

Batdorf's analysis more than hints at our need 'to read between the lines' when we evaluate the varying paradigms for historical Jesus reconstruction and the kaleidoscope of images of Jesus which are emerging in contemporary Jesus research, especially in North America. He (1984:205) suggests that there always remains an 'unacknowledged tension between a preconceived personal image of Jesus and consciously adopted method'. Most leading scholars involved in contemporary Jesus research (Crossan and Johnson included) acknowledge, to some degree at least, the impact of their respective social locations and ideological / theological commitments on their choice of particular methods and their resultant images of Jesus. In most cases, however, we discern this impact only by 'reading between the lines'. Once we begin to do this, we recognise that even scholars who make explicit admissions in this regard still appear insufficiently *critically* aware of how both social location and ideological / theological biases impinge directly on and even control the arena of ongoing christological discourse in the West, of which historical Jesus studies form but one integral part.¹⁰

At this juncture, the critique of contemporary historical Jesus studies by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her recent book *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (cf. 1994:3-31,82-88) is worth mentioning. She suggests that while the 'newest' [her preferred term for 'third'] questers want to situate Jesus in his own socio-cultural and political context rather than the decontextualised world of ideas, they are nevertheless reluctant, even refusing, to situate their *own* scholarship in a socio-cultural and political context, preferring instead the disembodied and decontextualised world of critically assured results. While Schüssler Fiorenza's criticism must surely be tested against a more careful and detailed analysis of the work of particular Jesus scholars such as Crossan and Borg, her challenge is significant for discerning a *dominant ideological feature* of most christological discourses in the West, despite other more obvious dissimilarities which continue to divide various scholars in this context. For her, this dominance is discerned most strongly in the 'kyriarchical embeddedness of christological discourse' in the West (cf. 1994:5), and 'an intellectual framework and cultural ideology that legitimates and is legitimated by kyriarchal social structures and systems of domination' (1994:14).¹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza's critique helps to alert biblical and theological scholars in South Africa to discern more carefully the ideological rootedness of historical Jesus research in the West and the implications of this for

10 For example, in his otherwise positive appraisal of Crossan's reconstruction of Jesus, especially for what he terms the 'dysfunctional [Roman Catholic] Church', Ludwig (1994:61) recognizes that:

Crossan never spells out explicitly where he is coming from *theologically*, and he seems less aware than he might be about how his own religious/spiritual situation cannot help but shape and influence both how he investigates the truth about Jesus of Nazareth and what his reconstructed portrait actually looks like.

The hermeneutical laws seem to apply - even when one is doing 'history.' Our self-understanding and our own 'geography' (the contexts in which we find ourselves) in the present will always determine and shape what we find in texts from the past, whether canonical or not.

11 Schüssler Fiorenza (1994:14) explains that her choice of 'kyriarchy' is first made in her earlier *But She Said* (1992) where it is a 'neologism... meaning the rule of the emperor /master /lord /father /husband over his subordinates.' This new terminology on her part arises from 'challenges by women of the so-called two thirds world and utilizing the insights of biblical scholarship'. 'Kyriarchy' now provides her with 'a redefinition of the concept of patriarchy to mean not simply the rule of men over women but rather a complex social pyramid of graduated dominations and subordinations' (1994:13-14).

our own contexts.

Schüssler Fiorenza's own perspective (1994:4) is explicitly located within the domains of 'a critical feminist theology of liberation', and this has a direct influence on her own reflections on the entire debate around the historical Jesus and christology in the West. But she has highlighted, more clearly than most, what remains a dominant ideological framework that gives shape to and continues to exert a hegemonic control over such discourses in the West. Her critique makes us aware that even after we have recognised the many boundaries of method that separate Jesus scholars and have appreciated the diversity of images of Jesus that these different methods have produced, our task is not yet over. For not only must we *still* confront the issue of just how the overall boundaries of current Jesus research and debate continue to be prescribed very much by the problems, questions, and agendas of Western culture, we must also understand how this research is being fed by what she calls 'the growing service economy and consumer culture of the late twentieth century' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:5). In this regard, the words of Albert Schweitzer (1968:311) are once again as hauntingly relevant for historical Jesus work in the West today as they were for the 'first' quest in Germany during the 18th and 19th centuries:

...modern historical theology has more and more adapted itself to the needs of the man [*sic*] in the street. More and more, even in the best class of works, it makes use of attractive head-lines as a means of presenting its results in a lively form to the masses. Intoxicated with its own ingenuity in inventing these, it becomes more and more confident in its cause, and has come to believe that the world's salvation depends in no small measure upon the spreading of its own 'assured results' broad-cast among the people. It is time that it should begin to doubt itself, to doubt its 'historical' Jesus, to doubt the confidence with which it has looked to its own construction for the moral and religious regeneration of our time. Its Jesus is not alive, however Germanic they may make Him.

So we are compelled to ask again: Do current historical Jesus debates *really* demonstrate anything like a 'shifting of the boundaries' when they are compared with debates of the past?

Many supporters of the 'third' quest would be emphatic about the break with past questions, methods, and agendas (e.g. Borg 1994a:3-17; Wright 1992:12). Indeed, the interdisciplinary character of much current Jesus research which also seeks to take seriously the questions of both Christians *and* non-Christians in the West is a welcome innovation. Too often, Jesus has been domesticated by narrow and fundamentalist Christian dogma and doctrine, and 'the dangerous and subversive memory of Jesus' has been lost (Metz 1980:88f.). The fresh attempts to locate and re-examine Jesus more fully within his *Jewish* context, and the provision of challenging hypotheses about Jesus' whole life and work (his sayings and deeds) suggests a significant opening up of the boundaries which proved so restrictive and oppressive in so much of previous scholarship (cf. Wright 1992:13).

Yet many scholars, after acknowledging the tremendous methodological innovations and the illuminating insights of much of the 'third' quest research in North America and Great Britain today, would still remain critical, even sceptical of many of its methods, agendas and motivations. For example, they would want to know whether recent Jesus scholars have *really* escaped the ideological captivity to the liberal relativism and historical positivism so typical of earlier quests. Dieter Georgi (1992:51-83) locates the fundamental hermeneutical paradigm of the whole quest for the historical Jesus within, what he terms, 'the evolution of the bourgeois consciousness' which he traces back to the Middle Ages,¹² and which, according to Koester

12 Georgi's suggestion here forms part of a larger concluding paragraph in his provocative essay, 'The Interest in

1994:539), remains the dominant 'cultural paradigm' within the Western world.¹³ Johnson's (1996) rigorous polemic against the current work of historical Jesus scholars in North America, and the general tenor of the *Jesus 2000* debate continue to raise the age-old questions about the relationship among the phenomena of history, tradition, and faith.

So we must ask again: 'How successful has 'third' quest research been in escaping its links with the same kinds of questions raised by both the 'old' and 'new' quests of the past?' Koester (1992:3-15), for example, observes many parallels between the 'old' and 'third' quests. Despite the insistence of scholars such as Crossan (1994:151) that they have radically replaced the agenda and concerns of the 'new' quest, many lines of connection exist even here.¹⁴ 'Third' quest scholars, we have also seen, are more and more preoccupied with (essentially Western) social, cultural, political, economic, philosophical and religious agendas of postmodern society. Here they typify the agenda of 'old' and 'new' questers who, for their part, were preoccupied with the challenges of the Enlightenment era. This kind of preoccupation is, of course, necessary and inevitable, and a recognition that all good scholarship *must* discern and engage the diverse contexts in which it emerges. But before talk of 'shifting boundaries' or a 'third' quest in historical Jesus research is celebrated too hastily as 'fact', there is the need to re-examine the nature of its strong continuity and discontinuity with the past, especially in terms of its (often) *implicit assumptions*.

5. Concluding Remarks

As we in South Africa (and elsewhere) strive to make sense of the historical Jesus debates in North America, and more especially the possible significance and implications of these debates for our own contexts, we do well to remember that there are few issues in history that have so accentuated the 'fundamental assumptions' of scholars as their endeavour to express the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth for their respective epochs (Pelikan 1985:2-3). Irrespective, then, of our own position on the historical Jesus debate which rages (mainly) on the North American continent, one possible challenge confronts all of us. Through a deeper understanding of and (even) a more engaged participation in these ongoing Jesus debates, we too may be helped to identify and confront the very 'fundamental assumptions' that we ourselves (explicitly or implicitly) bring to the task of theology and biblical studies in our different contexts.

Life of Jesus Theology as a Paradigm for the Social History of Biblical Criticism':

...I observe the main cause in the continuous social and historical situation of the whole quest for the historical Jesus, that is, its location within the evolution of the bourgeois consciousness, not just as an ideal but as an expression of a socioeconomic and political momentum. The contemporaneity of the New Quest with the end of the New Deal and the restoration of the bourgeoisie in the United States and Germany after World War II and within the confines of a burgeoning market-centred Atlantic community is not accidental (1992:83).

- 13 Koester (1994:540) suggests that this 'cultural paradigm' will continue to exert a kind of hegemonic control over the entire project of historical Jesus research in the West, despite 'each interpreter's tacit or explicit hermeneutics' and their diverse reconstructions. Later, Koester (1994:545) raises the possibility of 'a new paradigm that defines the perimeters of a new world that is not exploitative and that also includes the voices of people outside of the Western world [and] which may eventually liberate us from the quest for the historical Jesus.' As suggestive as Koester may appear to be at this stage, especially for ongoing reflections on the historical Jesus in South Africa, his own comments must be understood within his own obvious aversity to the historical Jesus project.
- 14 'Both ['new questers' and 'third questers'] agree that the historical Jesus can be reached to a greater extent than was thought in the Bultmannian period. Both agree that he can be reached by an historical-critical method operating on received traditions about him and through background supplied by other sources. The new studies are inviting us to widen our source-base to provide the wider context and to multiply our tools in the execution of the task. Calls were increasingly being issued for this at the beginning of the eighties in line with the New Quest' (Telford 1994:60).

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