

The Historical Approach to Jesus versus the Quest for the Historical Jesus¹

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In the post-Bultmann era something has come into vogue, something that once seemed to be impossible among critical theologians: to know quite a lot about the Jesus of history. Like the master of the house in Matthew 13:52 who brings from his storeroom both the old and the new, the modern householders of the “New Quest,” the “Third Quest,” and “mystic” postmodernism keep on lavishly spreading out their knowledge about the man from Nazareth for all the world to see. Where Bultmann contented himself with a small booklet of some 80 pages to present his fragmentary knowledge about the historical Jesus, about whom he said “we can know almost nothing any more,”² recent works often have swollen up to epic dimensions of 500 or even more pages³.

I’m not referring to the Pope’s Jesus book. One of the reasons is that obviously this book does not fall in the category of historical Jesus books but should rather be considered a collection of edifying meditations for use in homilies. Though it is unsophisticated in respect of history, the book is theologically solid, charged with good old tradition and exquisite Christian ideas and is among the best of what Catholic theology can offer today. The pope has recognized what some agitated critics obviously still have to learn: that it doesn’t make any sense whatsoever to postulate still another Jesus *behind* the Jesus of the Gospels. The quest for a man behind the God-man as depicted by the evangelists is doomed to failure since the authors of the Gospels never even thought of such a person. The whole ineradicable liberal quest for a putative “historical Jesus” will – since from the outset it is asking the wrong question – necessarily always produce incorrect results.

Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi. Klaus Berger, too, has written a Jesus book. This is different from the Pope’s especially in two respects: its lack of theological feeling and the already mentioned constant and annoying spouting of historical knowledge. Even in the author’s own terms the book cannot be said to be a work of historical criticism since Berger discards the historical-critical method. To dismiss the historical criterion of analogy, Berger uses vague categories of postmodernism and constructivism and declares the whole thing to be

¹ = *Nach dem historischen Jesus fragen - oder historisch nach Jesus fragen?* Berlin 2007; translated by Frans-Joris Fabri.

² R. Bultmann, Tübingen 1926, *Jesus*, p. 11: „Denn freilich bin ich der Meinung, daß wir vom Leben und von der Persönlichkeit Jesu so gut wie nichts mehr wissen können, da die christlichen Quellen sich dafür nicht interessiert haben, außerdem sehr fragmentarisch und von der Legende überwuchert sind, und da andere Quellen über Jesus nicht existieren.“

³ The following list presents only a small portion of the Jesus literature published in recent years:

J. Becker, *Jesus von Nazaret*, Berlin 1996; K. Berger, *Jesus*, München 2004. Ders., *Wer war Jesus wirklich?*, Stuttgart 1995; D. J. Crossan, *Jesus. Ein revolutionäres Leben*, München 1996, Ders., *The Historical Jesus. The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, HarperCollins Paperback, 1992; E. Drewermann, *Jesus von Nazareth: Befreiung zum Frieden* (Glauben in Freiheit, Bd. 2), Zürich 1996; J. Hopkins, *Feministische Christologie. Wie Frauen heute von Jesus reden können*, Mainz 1996; R. Hoppe, *Jesus. Von der Krippe an den Galgen*, Stuttgart 1996; N. Müller, *Welchen Jesus hätten Sie gern? Mosaik einer Biographie*, München 1996; E. P. Sanders, *Der Sohn Gottes. Eine historische Biographie Jesu*, 1996 = *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, Penguin Press 1993; E. Schweizer, *Jesus, das Gleichnis Gottes. Was wissen wir wirklich vom Leben Jesu* (KVR 1572), Göttingen 1995; G. Theissen, A. Merz, *Der historische Jesus. Ein Lehrbuch*, Göttingen 1996 = Transl. John Bowden: *The Historical Jesus, A Comprehensive Guide*, Minneapolis 1998

“Mysticism.” Mysticism, he says, is the definition of the universe including the existence of God and the assumption of the possibility of interaction with all “persons” and powers of the invisible world.⁴ Therefore in Berger’s “mystic” world view everything can be exactly the way the evangelists report it: The world is populated with angels and demons, Jesus still bears the traces of his origination by the Holy Spirit,⁵ his body was transfigured on the mountain,⁶ he actually walked on the waves⁷ and rose bodily from the dead.⁸ The blind can see, the lame walk and the dead arise— and woe betide those exegetes of little faith that abrogate such miracles and declare them to be mere symbols and by so doing put the fundamental contents of the Christian faith at risk! Finally for Berger,⁹ even the descent into hell turns out to be an historical event.

One of the few positive things that can be said about the book from the historical-critical point of view is that Berger opposes the usual anachronistic Jesus interpretation. Unlike other authors, Berger does not present his Jesus as the spearhead of modern peace- or ecological movements or of feminism, or as a humanistic “do-gooder”¹⁰ but highlights the strange, authoritative-demanding features of the Jesus character which are in no way compatible with our times.¹¹ On closer inspection, however, one will soon discover that the “strangeness” with which Berger diagnoses Jesus is not really that strange at all. It’s nothing but the *Roman Catholic*, to which Berger, for decades a New Testament professor at the (Protestant) theological department of Heidelberg University, has felt himself attracted for rather a long time already, and to which he recently announced his allegiance.

Berger discovered new terms (post-modernism, constructivism) in order to sell musty and moribund ecclesiastical articles in modern wrappings and to practice a kind of exegesis not worth the name. Particularly irksome is the amateurish use of the concept of mysticism. Berger designates everything as “mystic” whenever there appears to be something odd with it or if it cannot be scientifically explained. All this has nothing in common with true mysticism. Berger seems to confuse the mystic with the *mythical* world view.

In the meantime, the gap between the advocates of a “hermeneutics of belief” – whom one might dub the “creationists” of the Life of Jesus research— and the other New Testament scholars has steadily become narrower in recent years. And this is so, not because conservatives have come closer to the position of the New Testament mainstream – up to then considered to be liberal – but rather because the latter, particularly under the influence of

⁴ K. Berger, *Jesus*, p. 68. „Mystik ist die Definition der Welt unter Einschluss der Existenz Gottes und der Annahme der Möglichkeit von Interaktion mit allen ‚Personen‘ und Mächten der unsichtbaren Welt“

⁵ K. Berger, *Jesus*, p. 83. ... trägt „die Spuren der Entstehung durch den Heiligen Geist noch an sich

⁶ K. Berger, *Jesus*, p. 68ff.

⁷ K. Berger, *Jesus*, p. 81ff „Und so brach – mystisch betrachtet – aus Jesu Leib auch zeit seines Erdenlebens immer wieder einmal die göttliche, das heißt: verwandelte Leibhaftigkeit hervor, so auch beim Gehen auf dem Meer“, p. 69.

⁸ K. Berger, *Jesus*, p. 692ff.

⁹ K. Berger, *Jesus*, p. 624.

¹⁰ „Jesus war sicherlich kein großer Humanist, kein Sozialrevolutionär, kein Ökofan. Er war nicht der erste Mann, der das Weibliche vollständig in sich integriert hatte. All das sind modische Jesusbilder...“ Berger in einem Interview mit der *Münchener Kirchenzeitung*, September 2006.

¹¹ K. Berger, *Jesus*, p. 375ff.

American theologians, has shifted more and more towards apologetics and evangelicalism. Hence the Leipzig theologian Jens Schröter can assert: „In der neueren Forschung ist eine deutliche Tendenz erkennbar, diesen [den Evangelien] den Status historischer Quellen zuzuerkennen, ihre Jesuserzählungen also – über die in ihnen zweifellos zum Ausdruck kommenden Glaubensüberzeugungen hinaus – auch in historischer Hinsicht für relevant zu erachten.“¹² There you go! To support his statement, Schröter refers to his American colleagues Evans, Charlesworth, and Ellis, who he obviously holds in high esteem ¹³

But even more critical authors than those just mentioned, when dealing with the Jesus of history, more and more often blurt it out. In Crossan's *The Historical Jesus*¹⁴ the hero enters the proscenium in bright floodlight even before a basic historical and scientific reconstruction is presented. We see him entering “as yet unknown into a hamlet of Lower Galilee,” and how “He is watched by the cold, hard eyes of peasants.” And Crossan even knows what he looks like: “like a beggar.” However, “His eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle.”¹⁵ Pointless to ask for the source of Crossan's detailed knowledge about his Jesus. Here at least, he is not writing as an historian, but rather as an all knowing novelist. And when eventually he has his Jesus refuse the villagers' hospitality and stay the night at Mary Magdalene's he makes it blatantly obvious that in reconstructing his picture of Jesus there is now and then more romanticizing fancy and imagination than historical-critical analysis at work.

To be fair, one has to admit that further on Crossan painstakingly lays out the criteria for his separation of genuine from inauthentic Jesus traditions. His Jesus, unlike Berger's, is not a postmodern or an apologetic product of fantasy, but on the whole the result of a methodically well thought-out historical-critical reconstruction. The core of the “reconstructed Jesus“ is to be found in the “Inventory,” where Crossan gives a survey of the Jesus traditions available to him and in each case neatly marks with a plus or a minus sign what he thinks is authentic or inauthentic .

But unfortunately, the premises of the method used by Crossan and others to discriminate between “authentic” and “inauthentic” Jesus traditions are never fundamentally questioned. Though it cannot be denied that Crossan and his colleagues of the Jesus Seminar always argue in a methodically stringent way when they declare this or that tradition to be the more original, there is no proof that in each case what is more original is genuine as well, and may accordingly be qualified as an *authentic* Jesus saying. Such identification would first of all require objective evidence for the fact that indeed those original sayings had come from the mouth of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. For it cannot be ruled out that these are the words of an anonymous charismatic or prophet speaking in the name of a pneumatic Jesus or Christ. Crossan, too, just like Bultmann and other previous exegetes, knows a set of Jesus sayings

¹² Jens Schröter, „Von der Historizität der Evangelien,“ in; *Der historische Jesus: Tendenzen und Perspektiven der gegenwärtigen Forschung*, 2003, pp. 163 ff.

¹³ Craig Evans, *Jesus and his Contemporaries. Comparative Studies*, 1995, AGJU 25, Leiden-New York-Köln 1995., James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archeological Discoveries*, New York 1988, E. Ellis, *The Synoptic Gospels and History, in Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTTS 28; Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 51-53.

¹⁴ D. J. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus. The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, First HarperCollins Paperback edition, 1992.

¹⁵ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. xi..

that might be assigned to such Jesus-prophets and charismatics and which he labels as belonging to the layers “of development” and “of creation”¹⁶ – for these, German theologians of the Bultmann school would use the term “post-Easter.” What is it that guarantees Crossan’s discrimination between what belongs to the “layer of creation” (i.e., “post-Easter” items) and the “layer of retention” (i.e., “pre-Easter” tradition)?

In Theißen we read that Jesus was born shortly before the end of the reign of Herod I. (37-4 BCE) in Nazareth as the son of the craftsman Joseph and his wife Mary. He speculates that Jesus, “As he was a τέκτων, a craftsman (like his father) possibly took part in the construction of Sepphoris”¹⁷. That sounds as if Theißen were expecting in the near future the archeological discovery of the remains of a dwelling built by the “craftsman” from Nazareth in person, just like, in Theißen’s opinion, in Capernaum the archeological discoveries suggest “that the house of Peter was located here as early as the first century – possible on the basis of an accurate local tradition,” and he adds: “So have we found Peter’s house?”¹⁸ The modern quest for the historical Jesus and the old longing for sacred relics often seem to be driven by an almost identical motive.

There is a lot of “humanizing” in the Jesus books of those “historical-critical” scholars. Again, Theißen proves himself a master in picturing the truly modern and truly human Jesus. One of his favorite and repeatedly used ideas is that Jesus, speaking about himself, “put forward a human Christology” by using the title “Son of Man.” According to Theißen, already Daniel 7 shows “that it was Israel’s destination to replace the bestial kingdoms of the world by a humane kingdom.” In his opinion this makes clear that “In a world of mythological symbols a kind of ‘humanism’ is expressed with such images.”¹⁹

In spite of an assertion to the contrary, this is a blatant anachronism and has nothing in common with a stringent historical interpretation of the cumbersome appellation “Son of Man.” No sources, neither the Old Testament and the Apocrypha nor the New Testament texts allow for the transfiguration of Jesus, the “Son of Man,” into “a new form of the human.”²⁰ Passages such as Matthew 13: 41–42, where Jesus appears as the apocalyptic Son of Man and Judge and sends his angels to throw humanity, that apostatizing sinful scum, into the white-hot furnace (“where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth”) will hardly be compatible with our modern concepts of the “new form of the human.”

It doesn’t come as a surprise then that with all this the faith of the exegete plays an important role. This is a priori so with the Pope’s and Berger’s Jesus books since they are mere professions of faith. But Theißen’s book, too, in which the author “in Jesus etwas wahrnimmt, das quer zu jeder Zeit steht und sich chronologisch nicht verrechnen läßt,” again and again bears the features of his commitment to faith.²¹ One would like to know what this

¹⁶ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. xxxi.

¹⁷ G. Theißen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, transl. John Bowden, Fortress Press Minneapolis 1998, p. 165f.

¹⁸ G. Theißen, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 167.

¹⁹ G. Theißen, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 561.

²⁰ G. Theißen, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 563: “As Son of Man Jesus is a new form of the human, and belief in him is participation in the incomplete project of God in this world: the human being whose history and development is not yet finished.”

²¹ G. Theißen, *The Historical Jesus*, S. 155.

“something” is, how the historian can perceive it, and what special organ of apperception is needed.

Not only Berger and Thiede, but also – at a higher level of criticism– Theißen, Crossan, and other modern authors of Jesus books confirm Albert Schweitzer’s statement that “There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.”²² All of them show that even 100 years after Schweitzer’s book was first published nothing much has changed. There is only more attention to the evaluation of method today. And in reconstructing their Jesus authors no longer ingenuously put their own favorite theological and ideological concepts into the mouth of their construct. Modern authors have a keen eye for spotting anachronisms, pseudo-modernizing and updatings of the Jesus figure -- at least when detecting these in the works of others. And they don’t fail to point out in the introduction of their books that the greatest threat to their project consists in fabricating a Jesus according to their own needs and requirements;²³ – but a few pages further on they not seldom will do just that. Sure enough, they feel entitled to do so because of their method. But the methods they develop very often seem to be tailored to the particular Jesus concepts the authors prefer. Theißen rejects the *criterion of dissimilarity* –favored by the representatives of the “New Quest“– and declares it to be “dogmatics disguised.”²⁴ To me, however, “the historical criterion of plausibility,” which Theißen prefers, seems no less susceptible of being “dogmatics disguised.” The premiss briskly phrased by Theißen, according to which everything that “is plausible in the Jewish context and makes the rise of Christianity understandable,” has to be historical,²⁵ inevitably leads to the discovery of the Jew Jesus. Admittedly, that character is in greater demand today, especially in ecumenical study groups.

Schweitzer’s book has often been designated as the “Swan song“ of the investigation of the life of Jesus. That, however, was an illusion. *Leben-Jesu-Forschung* doesn’t look like a dying swan but rather like a wayfarer roaming in the desert without a compass, getting lost and again and again arriving at the point he set out from. One could widen the period confined by Schweitzer “from Reimarus to Wrede“ to “from Reimarus to Theißen.” The criticism brought forward already by Schweitzer against the greater part of the investigators can easily be applied to modern representatives of the investigation of the life of Jesus. Since the historical investigation of the life of Jesus at that time did *not* take its rise from a purely historical interest, nor does it today, again and again it gets entangled in identical problems and aporias. At first the goal of the Protestants was to dissociate themselves from Church dogma in their conflict with the Roman Catholic Church. Today, it has embraced the function of an ancillary science for a theology in service of the Church, which is always looking for new content to fill the void caused by the loss of her dogmata. The authority of Jesus, the ideal man, has to manage what the authority of dogma or Church and Pope can’t do any longer. The investigator’s work mainly consists of pointing out the lasting up-to-dateness and relevance of the man Jesus for the believer. To this task, there is no alternative option for the theologian.

²² A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Translation W. Montgomery, First English Edition, A. & C. Black, 1910, p. 4

²³ G. Theißen, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 11: “The multiplicity of pictures of Jesus is reason to suspect that they are in reality self-portraits of their authors.” D.J. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. xxviii: “It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography.”

²⁴ G. Theißen, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 115.

²⁵ G. Theißen, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 11.

Should he discover a Jesus who didn't fit into our modern times, whose ethical and social values were hopelessly outdated and insignificant to us, he could then safely let him sink into oblivion, since in theology and in Church there is no demand for a Jesus of that kind.

And so the floodgates are opened to arbitrariness, and the historical Jesus becomes a basin that is constantly filled up with the newest content *en vogue*. Schweitzer's verdict on the investigation of the Life of Jesus of his own time is still to the point today: "it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character."²⁶ The differing pictures of Jesus that are on the market today are just as surely the projections of their (theological) authors and of their time. That's true for both Crossan's revolutionary peasant and Theißen's humanistic goody-two-sandals with a feminist touch as it is for the "authoritative decider" who appeals to Berger, the Pope's admirer. With their books, modern theologians often just want to satisfy the "Zeitgeist." And like this, they are subject to the always changing fashion and prevailing tastes. In the meantime, even the "reputable" Jesus research of the post-Bultmann era has so much turned into producing novels and works for edification that it is often hardly possible to keep science, homily, and belletristic literature apart.

With all that, it now seems to me to be time for a change of the way the problem has hitherto been stated. In future, instead of searching as usual for a "Life of Jesus" or a historical Jesus, our endeavor should be to *search for Jesus historically*.

Thusly stated, the problem implies two important points of view:

1. Its wording is intentionally different from that which is primarily *theologically* geared and was disastrous for the investigation of the life of Jesus in bygone times. It resulted time and again in new divergent Jesus pictures corresponding to the respective prevailing ecclesiastical or theological interests.

But the problem is that quite a number of exegetes with a theological agenda do not overtly admit that they have one. Often they let their historical concern precede the (real) theological one in order to make the results of their investigation seemingly as objective as possible. We have seen this already in Theißen, and we can observe it in Crossan as well. After averring repeatedly that his Jesus is the result of a reconstruction he closes his book saying, "If you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in."²⁷ Apart from the fact that we would only reluctantly be confined to so narrow a set of alternatives, this quote shows that for Crossan, too, it ultimately is a matter of *faith* which, in his opinion, is maintained or collapses together with his reconstructed Jesus.²⁸ If Crossan *exclusively* argued as an historian, there would hardly be any need for worries of that kind.

One of those who candidly admit not to be interested in history is Eugen Drewermann. Unequivocally he says: „Nicht wer der historische Jesus vor 2000 Jahren war, sondern ob das, was er sagte und was von ihm gesagt wurde, eine Lösung auf die uns dringlichen Fragen

²⁶ A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 4.

²⁷ J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 476.

²⁸ At the same time it becomes clear that Crossan argues from the typical point of view of a neo-liberal investigator of the life of Jesus. The theologians of the Bultmann needed no reconstructed model-Jesus – by the way, Eckehart's Christian mysticism didn't either.

enthält, darum geht es.“²⁹ So Drewermann’s standpoint is the reverse of the position here defended. Those who *historically search for Jesus* do not expect to find answers to urgent questions of the present, and least of all do they read them into their texts. As scholars in the field of history, they are neither in need of human consolation and spiritual strengthening, of guidance in everyday life or of admonition in political and ethical matters. To them, the reconstructed Jesus is not a new article of faith or an ethical authority, but rather the result of an historical investigation that was in all conscience performed to the best of their knowledge. They are not interested in whether what Jesus said or what was said about him might hold a solution for the urgent problems we are preoccupied with today, but merely in the question what the Jesus figure –*as a historical phenomenon*– is like, even at the risk of getting results that are not edifying and have become irrelevant to modern people.

2. Furthermore the *historian’s quest for Jesus* separates itself from a way of putting the question that a priori is determined to find the *historical Jesus*, as if inevitably at the end of the investigation a portrait of a person of history has to be displayed. Those who search for Jesus *historically*, instead of searching for an *historical person*, search for the source of an *historical phenomenon*. In other words: those who search for Jesus *historically* stick to a methodical doubt which also comprises the radical skepticism about the very existence of the historical character of Jesus of Nazareth. Today the axiom once decreed by Bultmann (without any substantiation) that one must presuppose a formal “*that*” of the coming³⁰ can historically no longer be accepted as beyond any doubt .

Three reasons in particular, to be explained in greater detail below, have induced me to link together the historical quest of Jesus and the radical-skeptic way of tackling the problem. Those individual reasons are narrowly interlocked, and it is only in the interactive combination of all three that the argument makes its full impact:

a) *our enlarged knowledge of the plethora and the diversity of early Christian Jesus traditions;*

b) *the increasing questionableness of the hitherto prevailing dating of early Christian writings, the synoptic gospels included;*

c) *the increasing questionableness of the hitherto prevailing view on the relation between orthodoxy and heresy.*

a) The discovery of more and more new sources in the past decades has made us more than ever before of the abundance, diversity, and divergence of Jesus traditions. And the great number of important finds from the field of Christian Gnosis, (Oxyrhynchos, Nag Hammadi, Gospel of Judas, etc.), has more and more highlighted the *Gnostic* picture of Jesus. A survey of the various early Christian Jesus traditions can make it clear that –if only from the multitude and the range of the sources– the Gnostic picture of Jesus is the prevailing one, and that the picture of the Synoptics represents but a relatively *small sector* within the broad spectrum of the early Christian tradition.

²⁹ E. Drewermann, *Jesus von Nazareth: Befreiung zum Frieden (Glauben in Freiheit, Bd. 2)*, Zürich 1996; S. 37, Anm. 1. “Not who the historical Jesus was 2000 years ago, but whether what he said and what was said about him has a solution for our most pressing problems, that’s what it is all about.”

³⁰ To the formula compare e.g. R. Bultmann, ‘Zu Schniewinds Thesen’, in: Bartsch, Hans-Werner (Ed.): *Kerygma und Mythos, Vol. I: Ein theologisches Gespräch*, Hamburg, 1948, p. 134.

Consequentially, it was just a question of time for some scholars to call for a rethinking and for more non-synoptic texts to be included and evaluated. Already in 1988, Charles Hedrick in his widely noted essay “The Historical Jesus and the Rejected Gospels,” wanted New Testament exegesis to put an end to the “Tyranny of the Synoptic Jesus.”³¹ Crossan and the fellows of the Jesus-Seminary were among the first to use non-synoptic texts on a large scale to reconstruct their picture of Jesus.

Although this opening up of the New Testament exegesis is in itself highly to be welcomed, to me the methods applied today to integrate non-synoptic texts into a “historical” picture of Jesus seem problematic. Crossan and other investigators often simply incorporate sayings from the Gospel of Thomas – without any basic methodological reflection – into a “synoptic” biography of Jesus. They take it for granted and use it from the outset as a guideline, simply projecting it into diverse texts.

Whether such proceedings be justifiable, however, is very much to be doubted. I already mentioned the differences between the Gospel of Thomas and the Synoptics, particularly the fact that the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are ignorant both of the cross and of the resurrection of Jesus. So it remains doubtful whether the “living Jesus” of the Gospel of Thomas was indeed –in the mind of the original author– thought of as being a person of history.

Thus, before one uncritically adopts sayings from apocryphal sources in his reconstruction of a Jesus picture that is geared to that of the Synoptics, and books them as words of a “historical” Jesus, these words must first of all be grasped in their particular overall contexts, their respective characters must be clarified, and, above all, the fundamental differences between them and the synoptic Jesus tradition must be taken into consideration.

The way the problem has hitherto been approached as a search for the *historical Jesus* has produced obfuscation rather than clarity. The majority of those who started and still start to search for the historical Jesus, regularly – no surprise – discovered him and could not but discover him since there already was a *petitio principii* in the approach. The *historian's quest for Jesus*, on the contrary, does not search for a *historical character* but rather for the origin of a *historical phenomenon* that we come across in manifold sources in dazzling multicolored variegation und heterogeneity: as God and “Mediator of Creation,”³² as Christus

³¹ C.W. Hedrick, “The Tyranny of the Synoptic Jesus”, introduction to id. (ed.), “The Historical Jesus and the Rejected Gospels,” *Semeia* vol. 44/1988, pp. 1–8. Comp. G. Theißen, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 97ff..

³² Comp. e.g. 2 Petr 1,1; Tit 2,13; Phil 2,6ff; Col 1,15f; 2,9; Joh 1,1ff; Ign Eph18,2; Ign Pol 8,3; Ign Rom introd.; Ign Trall 7,1; that we „should think of Jesus Christ as of God“ is said also 2 Cl 1,1; Plinius 10,96. O Sal 41,15 (though here the Savior is called “Christus“, not “Jesus“); in a papyrus of spells of late antiquity: “I conjure thee by Jesus, the God of the Hebrews” (PGM 4,3019f).

polymorphus,³³ as “Redeemed Redeemer,”³⁴ as Phantasma,³⁵ as Old Testament typos,³⁶ as Pneuma, or Son, or Logos, living in the community and identical with it,³⁷ as enunciator of wisdom or apocalyptic sayings,³⁸ as gnostic Teacher,³⁹ as leading or supporting character in gnostic salvation drama,⁴⁰ as eschatological mythic entity,⁴¹ as magical name for the exorcism of demons,⁴² and –in a relatively small sector of the tradition- also as a divine-human, quasi-historical character.⁴³ The *historian's quest for Jesus* first wants to recognize those various pictures of Jesus and accepts each of them in its own peculiarity trying to understand them in their interconnections. Instead of imposing on them a binding hermeneutic pattern (“historical Jesus”) from the outset, the historian insists on having the decisive problem clarified: the origin and provenance of the various pictures of Jesus.

b) Here the question of *dating* the synoptic Gospels and the non-synoptic Jesus traditions comes into play.

Up to the present day, researchers often lower the importance of the apocryphal Jesus traditions by pointing at their alleged later date of origin when compared with the familiar Gospels. They often bring forward the argument that the majority of apocryphal texts originated in 2nd century CE and that their pictures of Jesus already are enhancements and partly fanciful proliferations of the ecclesiastical synoptic picture of Jesus from the 1st century.

³³ Comp. e.g., the role of *Simon of Cyrene* in Basilides, Irenaeus *Haer* 1,24,4; Hipp *Ref* 5.9.4; 5.7.20 (Jesus as a child); Judas-Gospel 3 (Jesus as a child), Act Joh 88f (Jesus as a boy, as a bald-headed man, and as a youth); Act Thom 143 (as a youth with a lamp); Origenes *Cels* 2,64; 4,16; Apocryphon of John 2,1 3ff; s. also Mt 25,35; Joh 20,15; Lk 24,29 – Comp. R. M. Price, *Docetic Epiphanies: A Structural Analysis of the Apocryphal Acts*, JHC 5/2 (Fall 1998). E. Pagels, *Versuchung durch Erkenntnis. Die gnostischen Evangelien*, 1987, 123. [= *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York, 1979]

³⁴ Comp. e.g. the Song of the Pearl in the Acts of Thomas; Act Joh 94f; O Sal 7,6; 17, 31, 42 a.s.o.; Gospel of Philip 1, 26; 2. *Logos of the Great Seth* 58.5 “For if they see me, they are seen, or they see themselves”).

³⁵ Comp. e.g., Marcion in Irenäus *Haer* 4,33,2.5; but see also Lk 4,30.

³⁶ The Jesus of the Naasseni in Hipp *Ref* 5.1 Obviously, here the reference is not to the Synoptic Gospels, but the OT is explained typologically; therefore Jesus is no other than the O.T *Joshua*, Jos 3. – Comp. also the same state of things in the *Testimonium Veritatis*, NHC IX,3, 30.15ff. – and comp. the excellent essay *Was there a „Messiah-Joshua“ Tradition at the turn of the Era?* by Robert A. Kraft [originally 1961/62, Manchester England], long version, IOUDAIOS, June 1992, short version, 09 July 1992.

³⁷ Pastor Hermae Sim 9.1.1 “I wish to explain to you what the Holy Spirit that spake with you in the form of the Church showed you, for that Spirit is the Son of God.” 12.3 a.s.o. 2 Cl 9, 5 (Christus becomes flesh in the community); 14,2: “I think not that ye are ignorant that the living church is the body of Christ.” Comp. also Mt 18, 20.

³⁸ Comp. Gospel of Thomas; Sayings source Q.

³⁹ Comp. so called Dialogue Gospels like *The Gospel of Mary* or the *Dialogue of the Savior* (though in these not *Jesus*, but the *Savior* or the *Lord* is spoken about) and the *Pistis Sophia*.

⁴⁰ Comp. e. g. the *Apocryphon of John*, NHC IX,3, or the *Concept of our Great Power*, NHC VI,4; a Savior myth is indicated, too, in Ign Rom 19,2 and in 1 Cor 2,8.

⁴¹ Comp. e. g. the Son of Man of the Apocalypse of John (Apc 1,13; 14,14).

⁴²In a papyrus of spells of late antiquity : “I conjure thee by Jesus, the God of the Hebrews” (PGM 4,3019f).

⁴³ In as far as one is at all willing to see as such the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels or of the Gospel of Peter (just think of the vision of the cross GospPetr 10).

Thus, for example, conservative theologians tried to minimize the importance of the recently discovered *Gospel of Judas* by pointing at its relatively late date in comparison with the allegedly much older Synoptic Gospels from the 1st century. They felt quite safe about this and therefore considered it a good move to play off the alleged historical facts of the canonical Gospels against the Gnosis of the Gospel of Judas. Dr. R. Roukema from the Department of Theology at Kampen University makes it clear: „Die ältesten und zuverlässigsten Quellen sind immer noch in den Schriften zu finden, welche die Kirche in den Kanon des Neuen Testaments aufgenommen hat.“⁴⁴

I, for one, must disagree with Roukemas. That the Synoptic Gospels be “die ältesten und zuverlässigsten Quellen“ seems to me to be an antiquated standpoint today, and one that hardly can disclaim its ecclesiastical origin. Nowhere is it more obvious that modern New Testament scholarship is still in the grip of traditional ecclesiastical conceptions than where it deals with the dating of the Synoptic Gospels. As is well known, those works were ascribed by Church tradition to apostles or direct disciples of apostles. From Irenaeus⁴⁵ and from a Papias fragment quoted by Eusebius⁴⁶ it follows that Mark composed his Gospel as a disciple and interpreter of Peter, that the apostle Matthew compiled a collection of the Lord’s sayings in the Hebrew language, and that Luke wrote his Gospel as a companion of Paul.

This account agreed with the demand for an apostolic origin of the Gospels and could consequently be used by the Church Fathers as “evidence for an ancient origin” which they particularly needed in their conflict with the Gnosis. Using it, the Church could refer to the genuine apostolic tradition her writings were based upon⁴⁷.

Today we know that, although the position taken by the Church against the Gnostics was a quite efficient tactical maneuver, it is, however, historically speaking, utterly worthless. Hardly any New Testament scholars accept the assumption that the Synoptic Gospels or the Gospel of John had an apostolic origin, i.e., were penned by those apostles or disciples of apostles who gave them their names. But it is still generally assumed that they were produced in the 1st century by anonymous Christian authors, and that in the 2nd century, when the Church argued with the Gnostics, they were ascribed an apostolic origin.

It’s a remarkable observation that most of the New Testament scholars, though they freed themselves from the stranglehold of Church tradition insofar as they recognize the thesis of an apostolic origin of the Gospels as belonging to an ecclesiastical apologetic agenda, nevertheless abide by the more ancient origin of the Synoptic Gospels. Even critically minded theologians like Bultmann and his pupils were not able to elude the maelstrom of the ancient tradition. Crossan’s Inventory dates all of the Synoptic Gospels to the 1st century C.E.⁴⁸ And even G. A. Wells, a radically skeptical historian, turns out to be astoundingly conservative when dating the Gospels and assumes them to be written about the year 100 C.E.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ In the Dutch periodical *Trouw* of 12.04. 2006.

⁴⁵ Irenaeus *Haer* III 1,1 on Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

⁴⁶ Eusebius *Hist* III,39,15f on Mark; Eusebius *Hist* III 39,16 on Matthew.

⁴⁷ Typically: Tertullian, *Praescr* 37.

⁴⁸ J.D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 430. Even the origination of the Gospel of Luke occurs for Crossan “as early as the nineties”.

⁴⁹ G.A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* London 1975, S. 84f.

But why?

If the apostolic authorship of the Synoptic Gospels has proved to be a *biased thesis* of the Church, there is no need to keep on insisting on an origin for them in the first or second half of the 1st century, unless one has compelling arguments that indeed these writings cannot adequately be understood but in the framework of the 1st century. But such arguments do not exist. Dealing with the question of when the Synoptic Gospels originated, one soon notices that he has indeed come across a weak point in New Testament scholarship. Whereas these scholars offer a lavish display of admirable knowledge of historical details when dealing with individual problems of exegesis, they are remarkably tight-lipped when they come to the decisive question of dating their sources, the Synoptic Gospels. But in view of the scanty and vague criteria they use for dating, that should hardly surprise anyone. In their explanations about the dates of origin of the Synoptic Gospels they just repeat the invariably identical statements. On the one hand, it is rightly said that the Church tradition about dating as well as about authorship are largely worthless. On the other hand, to establish a chronological clue from external sources, they refer, e.g. to the piece of evidence given by Papias, which, however, because of its uncertain dating and its vagueness, is worthless.⁵⁰ No more compelling are those arguments presented over and over again from the field of paleography because of the relative inaccuracy of the method.⁵¹ Finally, the only remaining pieces of exterior evidence are the Ignatian Epistles and 1 Clement. The beam of those two lighthouses, however, by means of which scholars hoped to safely steer the precious cargo of the Gospels into the 1st century harbor, turns out to be delusive. This is so, on the one hand, because the authenticity of both Church Fathers itself has for a long time been disputed and, in the case of Ignatius, was recently questioned again with impressive arguments by the Munich Church historian Hübner.⁵² And because, on the other hand, the clues –which in the opinion of many an exegete those two “witnesses“ offer– for a dating of the Gospels, are much too poor to allow a reliable answer to a question of such decisive importance as that of dating the Synoptic Gospels.⁵³

⁵⁰ W. Schmithals, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, Berlin, New York, 1985, 34. H. Koester, *Einführung in das Neue Testament*, Berlin, New York 1980, 603: „Der Wert dieser Papias-Überlieferung darf nicht überschätzt werden.“ [*Introduction to the New Testament: History & Literature of Early Christianity*]

⁵¹ For P52 comp. A. Schmidt, *Zwei Anmerkungen zu P.Ryl.III 457*, APF 35, 1989. - B. Nongbri, *The Use and Abuse of P52: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel* (Harvard Theological Review 98 [2005]).

⁵² R. M. Hübner, *Thesen zur Echtheit und Datierung der sieben Briefe des Ignatius*: ZAC 1 (1997) S. 44-72. – and comp.: Chr. Eggenberger, *Die Quellen der politischen Ethik des I. Klemensbriefes*, 1951. – H. Delafosse, *Les Lettres d’Ignace d’Antioche*, Paris, 1927. - R. Joly, *Le dossier d’Ignace d’Antioche*, Bruxelles 1979. – J. Rius-Camps, J., *The Four Authentic Letters of Ignatius*, 1979, Weijenborg, R.: *Les Lettres d’Ignace d’Antioche. Etude de critique littéraire et de théologie*, 1969. - Id. *Is Euagrius Ponticus the Author of the longer Recension of the Ignatian Letters?*, Anton. 44, 1969, 339-347.

⁵³ That Ign Sm 1,1 be a redactional phrase from Mt 3,15, as e.g. Theißen, p. 30, and many others assume, is among other reasons improbable because an influence of the Gospel of Matthew on Ignatius can nowhere else safely be proved. Therefore, the reverse is much more probable, i.e. we should take into account the possibility that the author or the redactor later inserted the phrase Ign Sm 1,1 into his Gospel Evangelium – or, what seems to me to be the most plausible possibility, that Sm 1,1 is a Catholic interpolation of the (originally stemming from Marcionite circles) Ignatiana (so H. Delafosse, too, in his *Les Lettres d’Ignace d’Antioche*, Paris, 1927). Putative quotes from the Gospels in 1 Cl often just stem from common Christian community traditions. That the author of 1 Cl didn’t use any of our Synoptic Gospels can be said „mit ziemlicher Sicherheit“ after compelling evidence was provided by Koester (H. Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern*, p. 23).

In short, the few passages from the Church Fathers quoted as evidence for their knowledge of the Gospels do in fact not prove anything. Rather than grasping at them as if at straws, exegetes should rather worry about the *altum silentium* which as late as in the first half of the 2nd century still envelope the Synoptic Gospels.

One of the few New Testament scholars who did and who saw the implications⁵⁴ is Walter Schmithals. In this context he refers to a *synoptic shortcoming*. What does this mean?

According to the prevalent view of form criticism, the Gospels are not considered to be literary texts all of a piece but rather seen as compositions consisting of different traditions. Bultmann wrote a *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, in which he distinguished those different traditions and examined their origins.⁵⁵ One should now expect these traditions to have circulated *before* the Gospels were written and, as a collection, to have been worked on and enlarged by their authors. But surprisingly, no traces whatsoever of the Mark materials from *before* that Gospel's existence in literary form can be found, or, to put it in other words: there is absolutely no evidence for the existence of Synoptic traditions before Mark's time (or for that matter that of the other Synoptic authors).⁵⁶ And Paul cannot be said to convey any such traditions, either.⁵⁷

The importance of this circumstance, to which sufficient attention has never been paid, increases by the fact that the Apostolic Fathers of the 1st half of the 2nd century⁵⁸ and the apologists of the 2nd century (except for Justin) seem to know synoptic material only in the form of solitary "micro-elements." With the Apostolic Fathers the *synoptic narrative tradition* is found in one passage only.⁵⁹ But the Lord's sayings, too, are but seldom quoted – just *twice*

⁵⁴ Schmithals's consequential criticism of form history cannot be dealt with in greater detail here.

⁵⁵ R. Bultmann, *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (FRLANT 29), Göttingen², 1931 (= ¹⁰1995) [= *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Harper San Francisco, 1976].

⁵⁶ W. Schmithals, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, p. 121: „Die synoptische Tradition ist lange Zeit eine ausgesprochen ‚apokryphe Tradition‘ gewesen. Abgesehen von den Synoptikern selbst begegnet sie in beachtlichem Maß erst bei Justin und danach deutlich bei Irenäus.“ – Likewise H.M. Teeple, "The Oral Tradition that Never Existed," *JBL* 89, 1970, p. 70: "The NT and the Apostolic Fathers show that the synoptic gospels did not become standard in the churches before the middle of the second century."

⁵⁷ W. Schmithals, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, p. 103: „Die synoptische Tradition ist Paulus im wesentlichen unbekannt bzw. Unvertraut.“ (p. 106): „Es muß also auch im Blick auf die scheinbaren Anspielungen dabei bleiben, daß Paulus als Zeuge für die synoptische Tradition im wesentlichen ausfällt.“

⁵⁸ Also 1. Clement, 2. Clement, the 7 Ignatian Letters, Barnabas, and Pastor Hermae and Didache. Diognetus' Letter does not belong, it stems from later times: comp. H. Koester, *Einführung in das Neue Testament*, p. 441: „... erst um 200nChr entstanden“.

⁵⁹ H. Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den Apostolischen Vätern*, Berlin 1957, S. 266: „Eine Geschichte des synoptischen Erzählstoffes bei den AVV (=Apostolischen Vätern) gibt es nicht, sieht man von dem ganz isoliert dastehenden Auferstehungsbericht Ign. Sm. 3,2f. ab.“ – But, as already H. Delafosse (*Les Lettres d'Ignace d'Antioche*, p. 139, Annot. 1) noticed, this definitely is an interpolation.

in the whole of 1 Clement, which has 65 chapters, those quotes rather stemming from a common tradition with that of the Gospels.⁶⁰

Justin in the mid 2nd century has quite a lot of passages from synoptic narrative and sayings traditions – but Justin neither knows the four Gospels nor the names of their authors; when mentioning the collection of synoptic traditions he has at hand he refers to the *Memorabilia of the Apostles* or *of Peter*.^{61, 62} Not before Irenaeus, almost at the end of 2nd century, are the four Gospels mentioned.⁶³ Long-windedly the doctor of the Catholic Church explains why there have to be exactly *four* Gospels⁶⁴ – and he thus unintentionally makes clear that obviously at his time the adoption of four Gospels was an innovation.

That's quite an astounding fact indeed, and it arouses one's curiosity as to what conclusions New Testament scholars have drawn from it. In as far as they do not completely disregard the "synoptic shortcoming" they do not answer the question as to why approximately half a century after the alleged origination of the Synoptic Gospels the Apostolic Fathers and Apologists do not refer to them more clearly. Although Koester in his study finds out that the traditions he deals with are in part very much *older* than those of the Gospel writers, he has within his paradigm no plausible explanation for this really strange state of affairs⁶⁵.

⁶⁰ H. Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den Apostolischen Vätern*, S. 23: „Die beiden Herrenworte, die 1. Clem. 13,2 und 46,8 zitiert, stammen nicht aus den synoptischen Evangelien“. –But Koester thinks that some of the quoted sayings of Jesus in 2 Cl and in the Didache might stem from Mt (or Lk). However, since 2 Cl knows of only *one* Gospel (8,5; comp. 2,4) and „Berührungen mit dem synoptischen Erzählungsstoff“ are completely lacking (H. Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den Apostolischen Vätern*, p. 110); the existence of a complete Gospel of Matthew, or of Luke at that time already must not be postulated. The existence, on the other hand, of various collections of sayings designated as "Gospel" is probable (comp. Gospel of Thomas and Q). Here and there, individual sayings may already have had the same wording as later on in the Gospels of Matthew or Luke. This may be so in respect of the Didache, too, which has no narratives either, but only sayings.

⁶¹ Justin *Dial* 106,3

⁶² Justin *Apol* I, 66f; *Dial* 100,4; 101,3; 102,5; 103,8; 104,1; 105,1, 5f; 106,1, 3f; 107,1; so still Tatian, *Or Graec* 21,4.

⁶³ When Tatian's *Diatessaron* was produced we cannot say with any confidence; comp. W. Schmithals, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, 1985, S. 5. „Indessen wissen wir weder, wann Tatian im Verlauf der zweiten Hälfte des 2. Jh. seine Evangelien-Harmonie geschrieben hat, noch wo er schrieb (Rom?), noch in welcher Sprache er schrieb (griechisch?syrisch?). Auch ist uns der Text Tatians nur so bruchstückhaft erhalten geblieben, daß wir anhand der erhaltenen sekundären und tertiären Quellen nicht einmal sicher entscheiden können, ob Tatian alle vier kanonischen Evangelien und ob er nur sie benutzt hat.“ – Remarkably, in the Apology, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 21,1 ascribed to Tatian, the author, when referring to fables of the gentiles, speaks of „your own memorabilities“ ἄπομνημονεύματα. This might mean that he, too, –like his teacher Justin– knew his own Gospel traditions by this name. – Furthermore it should be mentioned that the martyrs of the *Passio Sanctorum Scilitanorum* (about 180) seem to know no Gospels, but Pauline Epistles only. Answering the question of the Proconsul Saturninus, what writings there were in the *capsa* of the martyrs, they say: *Libri et epistulae Pauli viri iusti*.- In respect of the dating of the *Canon Muratorian*, I want to refer to the excellent study by G.M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford, 1992). Hahnemann therein cogently proves that the consensus dating of the text to the end of the 2nd century can no longer be maintained. Comparison with other canon lists shows that the Muratorian fragment must be considerably younger (last third/3rd century).

⁶⁴ Irenäus *Haer* III 11.8.

⁶⁵ H. Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den Apostolischen Vätern*, S. 266, about the synoptic narratives in the Apostolic Fathers: „Andere Überlieferungen ... weisen uns in die Zeit *vor* (my emphasis) unseren synoptischen Evangelien ... Es handelt sich um kerygmatische Formeln, die kurze Aussagen über Geburt, Taufe, Leiden, Sterben und Auferstehen des Herrn enthalten.“

So the most simple principles of the historical genesis of literary works and of logic are turned upside down. According to those principles, the more ancient item came first into being and the younger one followed up; the simple small items must have been the beginning and the big literary compositions the end of the development. And this can in fact only mean that the Gospels as completely worked out literary compositions cannot possibly have been at the *beginning* of the development direction, but that, to the contrary, those traditions that only began to develop with the Apostolic Fathers must have *antedated* them. Individual and small collections of the Lord's sayings, Old Testament exegesis by scribes in Alexandrian style, terse kerygmatic statements about birth, death, and resurrection are obviously at the basis of the complex Gospel accounts which are built upon and evolve from them. *Here* it is that we get to know the seedlings of the substance which was later (in historicised form) spun out in the Gospels and worked out into great "epic poetry".

So in most cases what remains as the only seemingly reliable indication for a dating of the Synoptic Gospels to the 1st century is the mere fact that the Synoptics look back on the destruction of Jerusalem and consequently must have been written *after 70*. There is nothing to be said against that, if the valid statement that the Synoptic Gospels originated after the year 70 were not, by sleight of hand, immediately turned into the assertion that they must have been composed between 70 and 100. Since theoretically a Gospel that was written after 70 might just as well have originated as late as the 2nd century, a dating to between 70 and 100 is hardly compelling – the more so, since further evidence vindicating a dating to about the year 70 is hardly ever brought forward.

In favor of dating of the Gospel of Mark to ca. 70, scholars often appeal to the *Synoptic Apocalypse* (Mk 13par). According to common opinion, it refers either to the Jewish War of 66-70 or even, according to Theißen, to the so-called Caligula Crisis (37-41).⁶⁶ Elsewhere I have tried to demonstrate⁶⁷ that such an early dating is impossible. Instead, many indications

⁶⁶ G. Theißen, „Die große Endzeitrede und die Bedrohung des Jerusalemer Tempels im Jahr 40 nach Chr.“, p. 133-211, in: *Lokalkolorit und Zeitgeschichte in den Evangelien. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, Freiburg/Schweiz 2. Aufl. 1992.

⁶⁷ In: H. Detering: "The Synoptic Apocalypse (Mark 13 par): a document from the time of Bar Kochba". *JHC* 7/2 (Fall 2000), pp. 161-210.

quite clearly point to later times, namely those of the Bar Kochba rebellion (132-135), as its date of origin.⁶⁸

According to Schmithals, the *expulsion from the Synagogues*, the Aposynagogos, is a further piece of evidence for determining the age of the Synoptic Gospels.⁶⁹ The addition to the twelfth blessing in the daily prayer of the eighteen blessings, the Amidah, by Gamaliel II⁷⁰ allowed the expulsion of Christians from the association of the Synagogues; consequently,

⁶⁸ That the Little Apocalypse does not refer to the Jewish War or to the Caligula Crisis but to the Bar-Kochba war is supported by these considerations:

Mk talks of *many* seducers (13,6 par). Though Josephus mentions pseudo-prophets, these do not appear before 40, and consequently cannot possibly have been on the scene during the Caligula Crisis. By contrast, about 130 one could look back at a notable series of messiahs. From the time of the first Jewish War, we have to mention the grandson/son? of Judas, Menahem (Josephus *Bell* 2,444; 2,17,8), and Simon ben Giora (Josephus *Bell* 7,26ff). Christian and Jewish prophets included, we have, apart from Simon Magus, Theudas (Josephus, *Ant* 20,97-99) and also the Egyptian prophet on the Mount of Olives (Josephus, *Bell* 2,261-263) at the time of Felix, 52-60. During the Jewish rebellions 115-117 under Trajan in the Cyreneica a Jewish "King," named Lukus is said to have appeared. Cassius Dio mentions one Andreas as leader of the Cyreneian Jewish population. In Cyprus the Jews seem to have imitated the example of their Cyreneian fellow believers under one Artemio (or "Artunion"). But above all, the Jewish messiah Simon Bar Kochba must be mentioned. The statement of the false messiahs, conveyed in Matthew 24:5, "I am the Christ," has verbatim parallels in rabbinic literature. San 93b reads: „Bar Koziba reigned two and a half years. He said to the rabbis: 'I am the Messiah.'“

About 40 there was *one* war (the Nabataean) in the Palestinian region, but not wars (Mk 13:7 par). The Nabataean war was in no way a "world war" or an "international war" threatening the existence of the Jewish people ("Nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom") but was a limited, localized, military skirmish of little importance. By contrast, ca. 115 the general world-historic situation under Trajan became critical again to finally result in a conflict between Rome and Jewry.

For *famines* between 37-41 (Mk 13:7 par), there is, as Theissen must admit, "no direct evidence." If we assign to the Apocalypse a date approximately one hundred years later, there is no problem. The author probably has in mind the famines that occurred during the Bar Kochba war. They were provoked by the typical Roman tactics of encirclement and starving out of the rebels. See Cassius Dio, who –apart from the half a million Jews said to have died in battle– mentions the great number of those that perished by hunger and epidemics. (*Historiae Romanae* 69.13f).

The evidence for more severe *earthquakes* after 37 relates to the time before or after the first Jewish War. In 115 a severe earthquake occurred (Mk 13:8 par) that destroyed Antioch and many towns and villages across Syria and Asia Minor (mentioned among others by Cassius Dio, *Historiae Romanae* 68.24f).

Systematic *persecutions* that extended beyond the local region, as presupposed by Mk (Mt 24: 9, "You will be hated by all peoples for my name's sake;" Mk 13: 9-10) are not known ca. 40, and they seem not to have occurred before Trajan. Persecutions of Christians in the 1st century were of another kind. Christians were not persecuted for the name's sake, but because of their alleged crime (malicious arson) under Nero or because of their Davidic lineage (Eusebius *Hist* III, 19-20) under Domitian.

Mk 13:10 par assumes the preaching of the Gospel *to all nations*, something that hardly fits in the beginnings of Christianity, but quite well in the times of Trajan and Hadrian.

Seduction through signs and miracles by the false Christ seems to relate to Bar Kochba; in the related Apocalypse of Peter there are distinct allusions to him.

The erection of the *abomination of desolation*, i.e. the setting up of the statue of the Emperor in the Temple, although –as we know from Josephus and Philo– planned by Caligula, was never realized. And there is also no evidence whatsoever in our sources for an expected imminent setting up of a statue of the Emperor "in the Holy Place" by Vespasian. Mark 13:14 shows that the announced event is a *vaticinium ex eventu* to which the author of the Apocalypse refers in retrospect. The abomination of desolation must be related to the setting up of the equestrian statue in the Temple (so, too, in some Jewish writings).

⁶⁹ W. Schmithals, *Theologieggeschichte des Urchristentums. Eine problemgeschichtliche Darstellung*. Stuttgart 1994.

⁷⁰ „For the apostates may there be no hope unless they return to your Torah. As for the Nozerim and the minim, may they perish immediately. Speedily may they be erased from the Book of Life and may they not be registered among the righteous. Blessed are you O Lord who subdues the wicked.“

Christians were put to persecution by the state. (The excommunicated „Nozerim“ are thought to have been Christians.) Schmithals discovers in the Gospels quite a lot of indications that they were authored during circumstances that prevailed after the expulsion and refer to it. But when was the curse against the Nozerim and the Minim added to the Amidah? Schmithals assumes that it happened before the year 100. Thusly, he succeeds in safeguarding the conventional date of origin of the Synoptic Gospels. But one of the earliest witnesses to the Aposynagogos is Justin in the mid 2nd century⁷¹. Should we for that reason not draw the conclusion that the corresponding passages in the Gospels refer to occurrences of *that period*?

At the end, the supporters of the thesis that with the Gospels we are dealing with “the most ancient and most reliable sources” often don’t give us more than a dim impression of the alleged fact that the Gospels seem to be in some way more “realistic” – and therefore come across as more historical as well – when compared with corresponding gnostic works of the 2nd century. But here again a *petitio principii* comes on stage. Why then should “more realistic” be identical with “historical”? That would presuppose a scenario for the Synoptic Gospels with – in spite of all their legendary coating – an historic basis at their origin, which then, in the course of the 2nd century, was reinterpreted and mythically painted over, particularly by the Gnostics. This is indeed the concept used as an explanation by most New Testament scholars up to the present day.⁷²

But, in contrast to the prevalent opinion that the Christian myth evolved out of a historic kernel, there is the radical-critical standpoint that the reverse process is equally conceivable. It considers the realistic depiction of the Jesus character to be the result of an all-embracing process of historicizing, initialized by the Church. In the course of its development, the Alexandrian Logos, the in the community-immanent “Son,” the gnostic Soter, the apocalyptic-gnostic “Son of Man,” the Mediator of the creation, etc., they all finally mutate into the *human* Jesus of Nazareth, as he stands before us particularly in the Synoptics (the Jesus of the Gospel of John has not yet completely peeled off his gnostic eggshell).

The argument, that the Synoptic Gospels outrival the Gnostic ones by their greater affinity to realistic everyday life, cannot be accepted as long as the assumed direction of development itself is disputable.

c) The points of view mentioned so far result in a new definition of the relation between orthodoxy and heresy. And this revision of the established view –that has already been prepared by some scholars but in respect of all its consequences has not yet been tackled in a well thought-through manner– must be taken into consideration in the historian’s quest for Jesus.

In theology, for a long time “orthodoxy” was identical with what was said to be original, ancient, genuine, while “heresy” denoted what was derived, what had been added, and was wrong. According to the perception of the Church that was established by the author of the *Acts of the Apostles*, the pure doctrine was revealed to the Twelve Apostles by their Lord, in part before his death, and in part after his resurrection. Then the Apostles apportioned the world between them and promulgated the true unadulterated Gospel in all ecumenical realms. Only then, under the influence of Satan, did the heretics enter the scene to promulgate their

⁷¹ Justin 1 *Apol* 1,31; *Dial* 16,4; 47,5; 93,4; 95,4; 96,2; 108,3; 133,6.

⁷² According to Adolf Harnack, the Gnosis –as is well-known– is “the acute hellenizing of Christendom”.

pernicious heresy among the peoples. But the apostles recognized the danger and repelled the heretical false doctrine, so that ultimately the true Catholic faith emerged victorious⁷³.

Symptomatic for this concept, as already mentioned, is the identification of genuine, original, and most ancient faith. According to Origen, “All heretics first come to true faith; later they deviate from the rule of faith.”⁷⁴

This schema, which through the centuries dominated historians’ treatment of early Christianity, namely that the doctrine of the Church was the primary one, the heresies on the other hand modifications of that genuine doctrine, was impressively challenged by Walter Bauer.⁷⁵ By means of detailed geographic investigations Bauer provided evidence that in many regions the direction of development was the other way round: orthodoxy did not precede heresy but was the result of a long and bitter struggle with “heretics” who had preceded them in region after region.. He also made it clear that the very conception of orthodoxy and heresy was of utmost importance in the mid 2nd century for the emerging Great (Catholic) Church in its struggle with the other Christian groups. To present herself as the custodian of the true faith, she had to identify herself as the legitimate historical heir of the original Jerusalem community. She needed this conception to prove herself to be the original, i.e., the true Church, and her faith to be the original, i.e., true and correct faith, from which all other churches, sects, and heresies had directly or indirectly derived.

Walter Bauer’s insights have been widely accepted and have presently reached a consensus status, at least among critically minded scholars.⁷⁶ In my opinion, however, they must be further developed and enhanced. Undoubtedly, Bauer and others have proved the priority of heresy in *some subzones of the territory*. But against the background of the above indicated revision of the dating of the canonical Gospels, even much more radical perspectives might appear that have hitherto never seriously been considered. They could possibly lead to a fundamental reevaluation of the relation between orthodoxy and heresy – and consequently, of our hitherto prevailing Jesus picture as well.

This is so, because, if indeed the above mentioned revision of the canonical Gospels were correct, there wouldn’t be any historical reasons left for preferring the “orthodox” synoptic Jesus picture as the more original in comparison with the others, the “heretical” ones. Then, theoretically, the heretical Jesus picture could –just as well as the synoptic one– be authentic and original. For our quest for Jesus in history this would mean that the Jesus we have been searching for cannot be historical in our modern sense, and that the synoptic Jesus, who was

⁷³ Vgl. Walter Bauer: *Rechtgläubigkeit und Häresie*. Tübingen 1934, p. 3f. [= *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*]

⁷⁴ Comm. II in Cantic. vol. XIV, p. 10 Lomm. Comp. Sel. in Prov. t. XIII, p. 228. Similarly Tertullian, *Praescr* 36.

⁷⁵ Walter Bauer: *Rechtgläubigkeit und Häresie*. Tübingen 1934, mit einem Nachwort von Georg Strecker. BHT 10. Tübingen 1964. Unfortunately it is often ignored that before Bauer this case was made much more fundamentally by the representatives of Dutch Radical Criticism (e.g. by G.J.P.J. Bolland or by G.A. van den Bergh van Eysinga † 1957). But hardly anybody was aware of them, neither in the Netherlands nor in Germany; see my dissertation: “Die Paulusbriefe in der Holländischen Radikalkritik” (Kontexte. Neue Beiträge zur Historischen und Systematischen Theologie, Bd. 10), 1992.

⁷⁶ According to Bart Ehrman, Bauer’s book “was arguably the most important book on the history of early Christianity to appear in the twentieth century.” He, too, emphasizes the fact that “In some regions of ancient Christendom, what later became to be labeled heresy was in fact the earliest and principal form of Christianity.” (B. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford 2003, 173).

derived from the former, is not a historical character, but rather a *historicized* character. Hence, the historical Jesus would not at any time in any way have been a historically existing factum but at all times nothing more than a *dogma* of the Orthodox⁷⁷.

After all that has been said, I believe I have shown that the old *Quest for the historical Jesus* must now be replaced by a *Historical Quest for Jesus – by means of scientific research*. I could now do no more than give a hint at what this quest, so described, must include. But perhaps it has become clear that, to everybody with an open mind for it, the promise of an opulent and prolific field of activity awaits us with bounteous treasures of knowledge yet to be unearthed by unbiased investigators.

⁷⁷ E. Pagels, *The gnostic Gospels*. New York 1979, on page 125: „...Yet orthodox Christians insist that Jesus was a human being, and that all ‚Straight-thinking‘ Christians must take the crucifixion as a historical and literal event. To ensure this they place in the creed, as an element of faith, that "Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.“ – But the struggle against Gnosticism is reflected not only in the Credo but in the texts of the canonical Gospels aswell: in the consistent historicizing of the Gospels for antidocetic reasons.