

Jesus in new contexts

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Abstract

The aim of this review article is to participate in the current “Jesus studies” debate. “Jesus in New Contexts” is a collection of essays read at an international symposium held in June 1999 in Tutzing, Germany. The symposium endeavoured to provide an answer to the question: What can be known about the historical Jesus with the help of social-scientific models that is not known through other approaches? With this collection of essays a group of prominent international scholars provides wide range answers, depicting a world foreign to twenty first century readers, yet home to the historical Jesus. Characteristic of this edition is the inclusion of an essay that reflects critically on the methods and models employed by social scientists in reading a biblical text.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jesus in new contexts is a literal translation of the German title, *Jesus in neuen Kontexten*. The book is published by W Kohlhammer (Stuttgart) in 2002, with Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J Malina, and Gerd Theißen as fellow editors (Stegemann, Malina & Theißen 2002b). The golden thread that runs through the collection of twenty one essays, covering a variety of topics, can be traced back to the joint interest in the social and cultural “contexts” of Jesus and his followers, hence the title of the book.

The essays are the product of an international symposium, held from 25-27 June 1999 in the Evangelical Academy of Tutzing, Germany. The symposium was attended by members of the “Social-historical Study Group” (*Sozialgeschichtlicher Arbeitskreis*), consisting of German exegetes (including individual representatives of the Feminist Theology and the Christian-Jewish Dialogue), who at regular intervals engage in dialogue at the *Augustana-Hochschule* in Neuendettelsau and members of the international “Context

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Group” who meet regularly at various venues throughout the world. The methodological approach of the Context Group is characterised by its use of social-scientific models, which are used as “lenses” in reading biblical text. The use of a different lens provides researchers with an alternative exploratory tool and a new set of investigative questions.

The overarching question of the symposium in Tutzing was: What can one through the help of social-scientific models know about the “historical Jesus” that cannot be known by other approaches?

Essays read at the symposium have also been published by Fortress Press (Minneapolis) in English under the title *The social setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Stegemann, Malina & Theißen 2002b). The English edition is characterised by an effort to group essays with similar themes under common headings: Introductory perspectives, Social-psychological perspectives, Social-boundary concerns, Politics and political religion, Politics and political economy, and an overview of the task, with a dedication to John H Elliott by Bruce Malina. The German edition (under review in this particular article by the writer hereof) is marked by the inclusion of three additional essays. The first one reflects critically on the use of social-scientific models in interpreting biblical passages (Schüssler Fiorenza, pp 23-32), the other two are additional contributions to the Judaic context of the historical Jesus (Ekkehard W Stegemann, pp 230-236, and Wengst, pp 246-254). The preface is provided by Wolfgang Stegemann.

Although not widely used within the German scientific community as yet, Wolfgang Stegemann (p 8) welcomes the use of social-scientific models as a vital expansion of biblical exegesis. That a critical stance is also taken towards this approach counts in favour of the book’s quality. Attention is drawn to the fact that although authors in certain cases research similar or comparable themes, often divergent or even contradicting conclusions are drawn. This is attributed to both the presuppositions with which authors approach a text and the “interpretation community” to which they belong. Awareness of the above forms a basic part of contemporary exegesis and a critical realist epistemology (see *inter alia* Van Huysteen 1989:3-10; Wright 1989:32-35).

Suffice to say that obviously this review essay cannot provide a critical overview of all twenty-one essays. Based on the abovementioned characteristics of the German edition, my focus will be on the use of social-scientific methods in providing insight into the “historical Jesus”, in particular the essay by Bruce Malina and the responding critical paper by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, with a selection of the other essays (in published sequence so as to avoid making a random choice) as further example cases

of the use and value of applying social-scientific models in researching the historical Jesus. This will be followed by a conclusion.

2. SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC METHODS AND HISTORICAL JESUS RESEARCH

Malina's essay, *Sozialwissenschaftliche Methodik in der historischen Jesusforschung* (Social-scientific methods in historical Jesus research) (pp 11-22), sets the tone of the book and paves the way for the ensuing essays. Its purpose is to highlight what social-scientific research in New Testament studies offers the various quests for the historical Jesus.

In recent years the "quests" have been firmly rooted within Judaism. This is highlighted by Ekkehard Stegemann's essay *Jesu Stellung im Judentum seiner Zeit* (The position of Jesus in the Judaism of his time) (pp 237-245). Whereas Jesus was explored in contrast or even in opposition to Judaism during the periods of the so-called "first" and "second quests" (early and mid twentieth century), this is no longer the case. The basis for contemporary analysis is the position of Jesus *within* the Judaisms of his time. One of the assumptions of the "renewed" or "third quest" is that Jesus was not a Christian uniquely different from his contemporaries, but a first-century Israelite from Galilee (cf Van Aarde 2002:427). As such, the same methods of study applied to other ancient texts are also applied to biblical texts. It is at this point that social scientific methods and the use of models in interpreting ancient texts are seen to provide valuable contributions to historical Jesus research.

Social-scientific interpretation of New Testament documents is described by Malina (p 11) as reading some New Testament writings by first selecting a suitable model accepted in the social-scientific community and by then using the model to form adequate scenarios for reading the document in question. The scenarios are the "new contexts" within which the life of Jesus is explored. They are formed by retrojecting an appropriate model to the first century eastern Mediterranean culture area, and thereby constructing a "world" (and/or a worldview) from within which such documents are read. The models serve as filters to keep out anachronism and ethnocentrism, of which Rohrbauch's essay, *Ethnozentrismus und geschichtliche Fragen – Die Frage nach dem missianischen Bewußtsein* (Ethnocentrism and Historical Questions about Jesus) (pp 212-223) provides a critical case study.

Malina (p 31) is all too aware that the "world(s)" constructed by the social-scientists is not the "real" but the "ideal" first century eastern Mediterranean world(s) (see also Van Aarde 2002:421). The information

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gathered is, therefore, too abstract to provide an adequate biography of Jesus on its own (as it had been done by historical Jesus researchers in the past), but it does provide the “boundaries” that will alert the reader as to when a historian’s biography is erroneous.

Malina’s essay can be categorised in four parts. In part one Malina (p 12) outlines the basic presuppositions of socialisation and enculturation. From these he draws in part two (pp 13-14) the conclusion (termed “basic certainties”) that as all human beings are socialised and enculturated in a specific social system, so too was Jesus:

- socialised in a specific first-century, eastern Mediterranean set of social institutions,
- enculturated in a set of value orientations and values specific to the social system in question,
- behaved according to the general norms of modal personality operative in that social system.

Awareness of the above is essential in order for scholars not to make ill-considered and overt judgements about Jesus (and his counterparts), as far as for example, chauvinism and anti-Semitism (both of which are modern coinages) are concerned. The society into which Jesus was enculturated was both patriarchal, with females being embedded in related males, and ethnocentric, with people and groups being assessed in terms of in-group and out-group boundaries.

Part three consists of a short summary of four “historical certainties”: (1) Jesus proclaimed theocracy, (2) Jesus formed a political faction, (3) Jesus was concerned with Israel alone, and (4) Jesus spoke of the God of Israel. These historical certainties, in particular the truism that Jesus formed a political faction, provide the impetus for Malina’s broad outline of the “The Life of Jesus” in part four, termed “A collectivistic life, from group formation to adjourning” (pp 15-19).

In outlining Jesus’ life, Malina draws on cross-cultural studies of small group development, which have produced the following model of their stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. These stages provide Malina with the lens with which to read the gospel accounts on Jesus’ life. At the forming stage a group is put together with the goal of accomplishing a task. In Jesus’ case this goal is the proclamation of the forthcoming theocracy

to Israel and to urge the Israelites to get their affairs in order. At the storming stage, persons invited to join the group jockey for position, as is epitomised by Jesus' disciples in their repeated disputes about who is greatest and in their attempts to persuade Jesus to change his goal in order to fit in with the concern of the individual disciples. During the performing stage, the program for which the group was assembled, is carried out. Jesus' disciples are sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God, healing those in need, thereby recruiting more people for the same task. During the adjourning stage, the group gradually disengages. In Jesus' case this is precipitated by his crucifixion (a status degrading ritual), with the post-crucifixion stories sketching preparations for the group's adjournment, quashed by the appearance of the risen Jesus, which in turn led to a renewed process of group development, that of the "Jesus Messiah group".

As was noted before, for Malina the above outline of Jesus' life is not to be seen as a photo replica of Jesus' real life. It instead provides the broad boundaries within which historians can draw a more adequate biography of Jesus. It is patently clear that social-scientific methods and the use of cultural models do not substitute, but complement past and present historical Jesus research (cf Elliott 1993:7; see also Van Aarde 2002:419-439). By engaging interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches new insight is provided, not least of all by the process of filtering and organising the raw mass of material available. It also serves as a reminder to both the casual reader and the historian that there is no such thing as immaculate perception. The historical Jesus is not discovered by "just reading" the sources. The sources are embedded in a social and cultural framework.

3. CHALLENGES FROM A FEMINIST VANTAGE POINT

In his introduction Wolfgang Stegemann (p 8) welcomes the inclusion of the critical challenges posed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her essay entitled *Der wirkliche Jesus?* (The real Jesus?) (pp 23-32). Fiorenza's essay is, however, not a direct response to Malina's essay, but rather a response to the social-scientific method of Bible interpretation in general based on past publications.

That the critique comes from the vantage point of feminist Jesus research is consciously highlighted. As both social-scientific and feminist scholarships have ancient cultures and societies as their common area of research, close collaboration was to be expected. The fact that this to a large extent is not the case can be attributed to opposing "hermeneutic approaches". Whereas the social-scientific sciences advocate a socio-rational approach to Jesus research, Schüssler Fiorenza (pp 23-24) advances feminist

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research not as a purely rational, but as a “critical” social theory. It does not only explore ancient worlds and cultures, but by applying a hermeneutic of suspicion, it exercises “ideological criticism” (*Ideologiekritiek*). This criticism is not confined to the authors of ancient texts and the world into which they had been socialised, but also to the present day social-scientific researchers, who by means of their research methodology and choice of social-scientific models in reading text, may, either consciously or subconsciously and by their lack of ideological criticism, confirm and (re)establish structures of authority that foster continued acts of suppression.

Contrasting hermeneutic approaches also lead to contrasting research “goals”. The critical question raised by Schüssler Fiorenza (p 24) is: What does the researcher want to achieve through his or her research? It is of paramount importance that researchers are aware of the goals they pursue. With reference to Jürgen Habermas, Schüssler Fiorenza (p 24) distinguishes between three different research goals. Within the social sciences research is done and knowledge is sought in order to:

- control social relationships and realities (empirical-analytical knowledge),
- understand, interpret and evaluate these realities (hermeneutic-historical knowledge),
- change our individual and collective awareness of these realities (critical-emancipatory knowledge).

Feminist research identifies with the third form of knowledge. Its goal is to raise awareness and to challenge oppressive realities in society. From this vantage point, the critical question is raised: What knowledge is being pursued by social-scientific Bible research?

The above introductory remarks pave the way for a nexus of critical reflections, the first of which focuses on the “subjects” of social-scientific Jesus research. Past critical analysis of the dominant Jesus researchers have led Schüssler Fiorenza (p 25) to the conclusion that the majority of social-scientific Jesus researchers are educated European and American *men*, who do not only pursue certain goals but are also led along by a number of presuppositions and often rash assumptions from within their own (male-dominated) world. The centrality given to “Jesus, the Lord” is but one such example. With reference to P Bourdieu (1989:12), Schüssler Fiorenza (p 25) makes the critical observation that many of those whose task it is to depict the

social world objectively, fail to “objectify” themselves. As a result their evidently “objective” description of the ancient world is but a reflection on *their relationship* to that world. Social scientists are in need of a “Sociology of Sociology” in order to gain awareness of their own social status, interests and dependencies. This includes awareness of the uncritical use of certain literary pre-constructions and terminologies.

Lack of critical self-reflection on the part of some social scientists has led to what Schüssler Fiorenza (p 25) terms *Methodenpositivismus*. Underlying this methodology is the positivistic assumption that the use of certain scientific methods, in this case the use of historically informed social-scientific models, to create a scenario of the reality under investigation, per se already provides a clear window on that reality. Research results are subsequently presented as “realities”, or “objective truths” of history without reflecting critically on the evidently selective process on the part of the researcher in choosing models and gathering and evaluating research data. For Schüssler Fiorenza (pp 25-26) this mirrors not only positivism, but at times corresponds with a (male-orientated) political *conservatism*, which (subconsciously) serves to promote past suppressive systems and maintains gender inequality. If social-scientific research fails to exercise ideological criticism, the historical Jesus unveiled by the social-scientific research will not only correspond to the historians’ personal image (as already noted by Albert Schweizer in 1906), but will also serve to further their own social and political interests.

Schüssler Fiorenza (pp 27-29) further advocates that the social sciences also need to reflect critically on their own understanding of *language*. Some social scientists continue to see language in a positivistic way as a clear window on reality, capable of providing the one and only true meaning of a text, unveiling objective historical facts, if and when researched by means of scientific, verifiable methods. Schüssler Fiorenza raises awareness that language is not only descriptive in the sense that it describes certain realities, but also prescriptive and political, that is, it creates and enforces the reality it describes (active-performative). If researchers, therefore, continue to use male-orientated (*androzentrische*) and kyrio-orientated (*kyriozentrische*) language, the sketches they draw are not merely an informative neutral description of a past reality, but that past reality is recreated for the present readers and their societies. Language both creates and *forms* the symbolic universe it pretends to describe. Awareness of this is necessary for social-scientific researchers in order to describe and understand as objectively as possible their sources *and the realities* behind them.

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The same critique applies to the use of social-scientific *models*. No model or method of investigation provides access to “objective” reality *per se*. Likewise, there is not one, true (or conclusively valid) model to investigate a particular phenomenon. Each model reveals only an aspect of the world it describes. Accordingly a “patriarchal model” may reveal more aspects of a kyrio-orientated society than the widely used dual pair of “honour and shame”. Furthermore scientists need to be aware of the fact that the choice of theoretical models (as noted with language above) do not only describe the realities of the ancient world in the first century, but also create them. For this reason, the description of the realities at times leads to contradictory results and often contrasting constructions of the historical Jesus, as is *inter alia* also pointed out by Wolfgang Stegemann (p 9). According to Schüssler Fiorenza (p 30) the entire model verification process is thereby questioned. Once a model has been formed, it needs to be tested on the basis of experiences in the real world. As text does, however, not reflect objective experiences of reality, the experiences of the researcher in his or her own world are invariably engaged in the verification process, and, instead of the model being adapted, the danger of the text being used to prove the model, lurks.

Despite the barriers and obstacles involved in doing historical Jesus research from a social-scientific approach, Schüssler Fiorenza (p 31, *contra* Craffert) does not perceive the chasm separating the worlds of the ancient people and their counterparts today to be so wide as to prevent historical access. There is continuity between the two worlds. And indeed, access to the ancient world and its people is gained only by means of today’s language, intellectual approaches, theories and analogies. Models have always been a creation of the present. However, social scientists, as historical researchers, need to be aware of not only the limits and boundaries of their sciences, but of the danger that, by describing the ancient world without exercising ideology criticism, they are in fact recreating forms of oppression and suppressions of the past for the present generation.

In the light of Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical methodological comments on social-scientific Jesus research, the reader is encouraged to explore the “new contexts” of Jesus, excited about new prospects in historical Jesus research, but also cautious, given its limits and boundaries.

4. THE NEW CONTEXTS

The “new contexts” in which the historical Jesus is researched are the theoretical constructs or scenarios of the social and cultural world of the first century Mediterranean world. These constructs or scenarios are the result of applying models accepted within the social sciences in the reading of ancient

text. For the purposes of this review our attention is focused on a few of these scenarios (the limited scope of this review article does not allow for a discussion of all the scenarios) that will illustrate both the methodology used by the social-scientific scientists and the new insights they provide with regard to the historical Jesus. The essays, for which short summaries are provided, follow in the sequence in which they have been published.

John J Pilch (pp 33-42), *Ereignisse eines veränderten Bewusstseinszustandes bei den Synoptikern* (Altered state of consciousness in the Synoptics), investigates biblical reports on trances and visions by reading them within the conceptual and experiential framework of panhuman experiences known as “altered states of consciousness” (ASC). Based on an estimate that up to 80% of the societies in the Mediterranean world had such experiences, Pilch (pp 33-34) argues that ASC provides a plausible Mediterranean scenario for understanding visions in the Synoptic Gospels and elsewhere in the Bible. Whereas historical-critical Jesus studies generally had failed to observe anything useful in this regard for reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus, application of this “model” indicates on a high level of plausibility that Jesus had been gifted with the ASC experiences as other “holy men” or “shamans” of his time had been. Indeed, an investigation of a selection of ASC events relative to Jesus (baptism, the testing of Jesus in the desert, walking on the sea, the transfiguration, the resurrection) indicates a high range of similarity with the key characteristics of other ancient shamans. As such, these visions reflect historical reality. Western and Indo-European cultures do, of course, show strong cultural resistance to ASC experiences, whilst regarding their own mode of consciousness as normal and ordinary. With reference to Tart (1980:245), Pilch (p 35), however, notes that “our ordinary state of consciousness is [in itself] a construction ... in many ways quite arbitrary.” It can therefore hardly be used as a basis to determine historical realities.

Richard E DeMaris (pp 43-54) in an essay entitled *Die Taufe Jesu in Kontext the Ritualtheorie* (The baptism of Jesus: A ritual-critical approach) also uses ASC to explore the baptism of Jesus and the events following immediately thereafter. Although historical critical analysis has generally concluded the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist to be historical, the events following immediately thereafter (the dove descending on Jesus, and the voice of God confirming Jesus’ sonship) have largely been rejected as historical events. Interestingly though DeMaris (pp 46-49) advocates a contrasting scenario of historical probabilities. His research indicates that in many ancient cultures possession trance was widely experienced in an ASC and that, at times, the trance was preceded or triggered by ritual activity. In

first-century Palestine where, among other, the possession trance (as an ASC experience) had been institutionalised, the events similar to those following Jesus' baptism could have been induced, that is, the person encountered what he or she had been socialised to expect after such a ritual activity. But as there are examples of possession trance "without ritual prompting", the thought is entertained as historically plausible that not the events following Jesus baptism, but rather the baptism itself could have been added to the possession experiences. A social-scientific approach therefore reaches the conclusion that while Jesus' visionary experiences are historically plausible, the associated baptismal rite is less so.

Christian Strecker (pp 53-63), *Jesus und die Besessenen: – Zum Umgang mit Alterität im Neuen Testament am Beispiel der Exorzismen Jesu* (Jesus and the demoniacs), explores the phenomenon of spirit possession and exorcism in the New Testament tradition of Jesus by applying a "performance" model. Strecker (pp 54-55) advocates that most Westerners apply their own modern sense of self (egocentrism), their enlightened rationality (logocentrism), and their alleged cultural superiority (ethnocentrism) as mechanism of reduction to question the historicity of, among other, the reality of spirit possession and exorcism. Subsequently, possession is regarded as "subjective" and purely "internal" occurrences, best explained by means of current psychological theories. The inevitable result is that reports on demoniacs receive modern labels, such as cases of hysteria, mania, or epilepsy. Although ASC has been employed to explain the phenomenon of spirit possession, Strecker (p 57) questions the validity of this model (as it remains fundamentally rooted in the egocentric paradigm of modern psychology), and proposes instead an interpretation of possession as "performance" (with reference to what Vinzent Crapanzao [1987:14] called the "possession idiom"). The possessed person activates dramatically in public (performance) the role that society regards as indicating possession. The performance, however, *creates* its own reality, thereby blurring the distinguishing line between reality and role-play. It creates a "demonic reality", physically putting into action the possession idiom of a society, which itself is constituted and formed by performance. Exorcism, in turn, is defined by Strecker (pp 59-63) as "transformance", that is, a performance on the part of the exorcist (Jesus), again in public, that brings real "transformation" within the possessed persons and their environment. The advantage of the "performance model" is that it attempts to articulate phenomena alien to us in modern discourse, yet without dominating them or reducing them to historical insignificance.

Steckers' essay is both complemented and contrasted by Santiago Guijarro's (pp 64-74) essay entitled *Die politische Wirkung der Exorzismen Jesu* (The politics of exorcism). It is an example of how the application of different social-scientific models, in this case that of "deviant behaviour", reveal different aspects of the phenomenon being researched. The historicity of the "accusation" of demon possession levelled against Jesus has hardly been in doubt. But historical critical research failed to provide the tools with which to explain why the exorcisms of Jesus were of such importance and so dangerous as far as his accusers were concerned. With reference to Hollenbach (1981:573), Guijarro (pp 68-69) draws attention to anthropological studies that show a relationship between demon possession and social tension. In such tense and volatile situations demon possession becomes, on the one hand, a socially accepted way to cope with tension, allowing those oppressed in society to stage an oblique protest against the elites (expressing what they could not say as sane people), while on the other hand, accusations of demon possession become a means of control used by the elites to marginalise those who fuel social unrest. Accusations of demon possession levelled against Jesus in the cluster of sayings known as the "Beelzebul Controversy" (Mt 12:22-30 par) fit the latter. Deviant labelling with the intent to discredit Jesus is practised because the exorcisms of Jesus are perceived as a threat to the governing elites and their retainers. Jesus' responses in turn are likewise characterised by a number of political overtones. He does not only clarify what kind of an exorcist he is, but highlights the cosmic and political implications of his exorcisms: they are a sign of the coming of God's reign and the restoration to society of those at the margins.

The above brief summaries provide some insight into the "new contexts" of Jesus. The remaining essays, the majority of which adhere to the general theme of providing insight into what can be known through the application of social-scientific models about the historical Jesus that other approaches cannot provide, give rich testimony of the scope and value of this endeavour (English titles, provided in brackets, are either the official titles of these essays as published in *The social setting of Jesus and the Gospels* [2002b] or my own direct translations):

- Annette Weisenrieder: *Die Plage der Unreinheit? – Das antike Krankheitskonstrukt "Blutfluss" in Lk 8, 43-48* (The plague of uncleanness? The ancient illness construct "Issue of Blood" in Luke 8:43-48).

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- *Stuart L Love: Der Heiler der blutflüssigen Frau im Matthäusevangelium - eine sozialwissenschaftliche Untersuchung* (Jesus heals the hemorrhaging woman).
- *Andries van Aarde: Jesus als vaterloses Kind – Eine kulturübergreifende und sozial psychologische Perspektive* (Jesus as fatherless child),
- *Gerd Theißen: Die politische Dimension des Wirkens Jesu* (The political dimension of Jesus' actions).
- *K C Hanson: Jesus und die "Freibeuter" – Eine sozial wissenschaftliche Studie* (Jesus and the social bandits).
- *Dennis C Dulling: Die Jesusbewegung und die Netzwerkanalyse* (The Jesus movement and network analysis).
- *Douglass E Oakman: Die Rolle des Geldes im moralischen Universum des Neuen Testaments* (Money in the moral universe of the New Testament).
- *Wolfgang Stegemann: Kontingenz und Kontextualität der moralischen Aussagen Jesu – Plädoyer für eine Neubesinnung auf die sogenannte Ethik Jesu* (The contextual ethics of Jesus).
- *Gary Stansell: Gabe und Reziprozität. Zur Dynamik von Gaben in den synoptischen Evangelien* (Gifts, tributes, and offerings).
- *Philip F Esler: Jesus und die Reduzierung von Gruppenkonflikten: Das Gleichnis vom barmherzigen Samariter im Rahmen der Theorie der sozialen Identität* (Jesus and the reduction of intergroup conflict).
- *Richard Rohrbauch: Ethnozentrismus und geschichtliche Fragen – die Fragen nach dem missianischen Jesu* (Ethnocentrism and Historical Questions about Jesus).
- *S Scott Bartchy: Der historische Jesu und die Umkehr der Ehre am Tisch* (The historical Jesus and honour reversal at the table).
- *Albert Verdoodt: Jesus und Paulus – Was wir von sozialwissenschaftlichen Modellen lernen können* (The Gospels in

comparison with the Pauline Letters: What we can learn from social-scientific models).

- Ekkehard W Stegemann: *Jesu Stellung im Judentum seiner Zeit* (The position of Jesus in the Judaism of his time).
- Klaus Wengst: *Der Jesus der Evangelien und die Chassidim in der rabbinischen Literatur* (The Jesus of the Gospels and the Chassidim in Rabbinic literature).

5. CONCLUSION

“Jesus was a first century Israelite from Galilee.” Ever since the acceptance of this assumption amongst the fraternity of historical Jesus scholars, it has resulted in a number of complementary assumptions, which have paved the way for a “renewed” look at the historical Jesus. Van Aarde (2002:426) summarises some of these complementary assumptions as follows:

- Historical research entails more than the application of the traditional historical critical methods to the Jesus tradition. It also implies the study of the social world with the help of social scientific methods and models.
- The context of Jesus has to be studied from the perspective of a social system, not only from the individualistic perspective of ideas, persons, and events.
- The social world of Jesus is not studied for the sake of supplying background material, but in order to supply contexts for the interpretation of texts of a different nature.

Jesus in neuen Kontexten offers wide-ranging examples of how the use of social-scientific methods and models can provide the interpreter with the contexts needed to interpret text relating to Jesus of Nazareth. Social-scientific criticism has indeed prompted historical Jesus scholars to ask new questions and has provided answers that have rekindled new interest in the quest for the historical Jesus. It has also provided necessary corrections to ethnocentric and anachronistic understandings of Jesus, which are the inevitable result of research questions which are themselves rooted in ethnocentric bias.

Social-scientific scientists should, however, be constantly aware of some of the dangers that all too often accompany the euphoria of newly discovered research methods and their accompanying results. Schüssler Fiorenza has highlighted some of these dangers. Her critique is, of course, not restricted to the proponents of a social-scientific interpretation of the biblical

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texts, but apply in general. Scientists need to guard against a *Methodenpositivismus*, whereby their particular research methodology is regarded as conclusive and sufficient to provide answers to the phenomena being researched. Postmodernism is characterised by both an interdisciplinary and a multidisciplinary approach to text, with disciplines being developed to focus attention on various aspects of the research process. This is also highlighted by John Elliott (1993:7), one of the first proponents of the social-scientific analysis of text:

... social-scientific criticism is a *sub-discipline of exegesis* and is inseparably related to other operations of the exegetical enterprise: textual criticism, literary criticism, narrative criticism, historical criticism, tradition criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism, and theological criticism. Social-scientific criticism complements these other modes of critical analysis, all of which are designed to analyze specific features of the biblical text.

Jesus in neuen Kontexten shows in what way the use of social-scientific methods and models “complement” other modes of research with regard to the historical Jesus.

The word “complements” reflects a critical-realist epistemology in contrast to a positivistic epistemology (cf Wright 1992:32-27). Critical realist epistemology assumes that the observer (scientist) can observe something that is real, but that which is observed, is not reality in its totality. Another observer with a different background, observing from a different vantage point, using either the same or different scientific methods and models, may see something else or similar which may also be real. Scientific “objectivity”, also with regard to the historical Jesus, is not the result of the one scientific method being perfected, but the result of critical engagement and participation with others, leading to more and more pieces of the puzzle falling into place.

A final comment needs to be made with regard to the use of models. Models are not a real, literal, or complete depiction of the world. It is a theoretical construct, a conceptual tool for ordering experiences and interpreting the world (cf Malina 1993:21). As such they do not provide the researcher with information that can lead to “historical certainties”. They do, however, create scenarios that help the scientist to draw informed conclusions on a linear scale of ascending probability, or increased plausibility. The use of models has indeed become indispensable, also in the quest for the historical Jesus. Thomas Carney (1975:5) notes: “.... we do not have the choice of whether we will use models or not. Our choice, rather, lies in deciding whether to use them consciously or unconsciously”.

Jesus in neuen Kontexten is a conscious use of social-scientific methods and models to explore contexts of Jesus. Its value lies not only in the wide-ranging description of these new contexts, but also in the extensive bibliography on past publications by each of the authors.

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