The Historical Jesus Today

A Reconsideration of the Foundation of Christology

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Introduction

The Biblical foundation of Jesus as the Christ poses one of the most crucial but also one of the most problematic theological questions for contemporary Christian theology. At stake is the relation between the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Christ, the object of Christian faith.

Martin Kähler writing almost 100 years ago declared, “I regard the entire Life-of-Jesus movement as a blind alley” (1964:46). He was of course speaking of the eighteenth and nineteenth century attempts to reconstruct the life of the historical Jesus in biographical form from the material available in the canonical Gospels. For Kähler the quest for the historical Jesus was not only irrelevant for the Christian faith but was inimical to it because it sought to replace faith in the Biblical Christ, the only Jesus we have direct access to, according to Kähler, with the creations and reconstructions of historical enquiry. He believed that to allow the historian to tell Christians who Jesus had been ran the real danger of imposing an alien and human authority as the arbiter of the Christian faith.

Kähler’s views had a profound impact on the most influential German New Testament scholar of the next generation, Rudolf Bultmann. He, like other dialectic theologians of his generation such as Barth, Brunner, and Tillich, accepted Kähler’s views on the problematic character of historical reconstructions of Jesus and therefore “refused to establish faith in Christ by historical inquiry or to look for historical legitimation of the apostolic kerygma” (Braaten in Kähler 1964:36). This led Bultmann to his famous declaration that all that was necessary for the historical foundation of the Christian faith was the “Dass” or fact of Jesus’ existence and of his death.¹ It also allowed him to be profoundly sceptical about deriving any significant knowledge regarding the historical Jesus from the Gospels. Effectively Bultmann’s scepticism, partly an outgrowth of his application of Form Criticism to the texts of the Gospels, ended the first quest for the historical Jesus.²

¹ See Perrin (1979 63-64) on the significance of the Dass of Jesus’ life and death for Bultmann’s understanding of the Christian kerygma
² The rise of form criticism in the period immediately after the First World War ended the possibility of writing a chronological life of Jesus, the goal of the original quest for the historical Jesus about which Kähler had complained. The pioneering form critical work of Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Bultmann demonstrated that the Synoptic Gospels consisted of isolated units that had been edited into a narrative form by the evangelists. For this reason no chronologically accurate life of Jesus was possible.
The danger of Bultmann's position which dominated, at least in German theological circles, for three decades was pronounced by one of his own students, Ernst Käsemann. In his famous address-cum-essay "The Problem of the Historical Jesus" he warned of the danger of a modern form of docetism if the "Man of Nazareth" was severed from the "exalted Lord" (Käsemann 1964:25). His own reading of the New Testament convinced him that the Gospel writers themselves had established the norm in this matter. As Käsemann (1964:34-35) argues, the Gospel writers differ over a variety of issues but they are agreed "that the life history of Jesus was constitutive for faith, because the earthly and exalted Lord are identical." Thus while Easter faith was foundational for the proclamation of the early Church, its proclaimers recognized that God had acted in the life of the earthly Jesus as well. Therefore primitive Christianity "testified to this fact by encapsulating the earthly history of Jesus in its proclamation" (Käsemann 1964:34).

Käsemann's position was a clear repudiation of his teacher's indifference to the crucial significance of the historical Jesus for the emergence of faith in the exalted Lord. His criticism fell on receptive ears and gave rise to what came to be known as the "new quest for the historical Jesus" as scholars once again took seriously the need to reconstruct the details of Jesus' public life and his message of the kingdom or dominion of God in an effort to show the connection between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

The issues raised by Kähler, Bultmann, and Käsemann are still of vital concern to the Christian faith. At stake is the question of the appropriate relationship between contemporary reconstructions of the historical Jesus by Biblical scholars and the christological reflection of theologians, as well as the christological beliefs and confessions of non-theologically trained Christians. In recent years the problem has become more pressing because an altogether new understanding of the historical Jesus has begun to emerge. While the Second Quest, begun by Käsemann, sought to provide a basis for connecting the teaching and activity of the historical Jesus to the figure of Christ as believed in the earliest Christian community, a number of recent studies have focused on the rediscovery of Jesus as a human figure within the social, economic, and political world of first century colonial Palestine. This has tended to emphasize the distance between the historical Jesus and the early Church's christological beliefs about him. It has also undermined the numerous historical reconstructions of Jesus that arose out of the Second Quest and its assumptions as I will show.

In this paper I propose to look at two methodological paradigm shifts which have taken place in the study of the historical Jesus over the last two decades. Taken together they constitute the basis of a Third Quest for the historical Jesus and promise a more reliable historical reconstruction of Jesus than has ever before been possible. I will then turn to the problem of what significance the...
recent developments in historical Jesus studies may have for the task of christological construction in contemporary Christianity.

The Shift to a Social Science Oriented Method
During the 1970's a fundamental shift took place in New Testament Studies. Taking up the interests of a much earlier period (see Holmberg 1990:1-2), scholars began to take seriously the need for a more holistic approach to the study of early Christianity, and in the process the dominance of what Holmberg (1978) describes as the “fallacy of idealism” was challenged. According to Holmberg (1990:2) up until the 1970s much of Biblical scholarship had been based on the mistaken assumption that all historical processes are driven by ideas. Most Biblical scholars treated ideas in complete isolation from the social situations in which they arose and were transmitted.5 Scroggs (1980) described the then dominant form of historical studies into early Christianity as a form of “methodological docetism” because it emphasized “inner spiritual” and “objective-cognitive” processes to the exclusion of social dynamics. In doing so it distorted the true relation between theological ideas and the social processes in which they arose.

The nature and significance of this fundamental shift in the study of early Christianity has been documented on a number of occasions and need not detain us further.6 What concerns me in this paper is the importance of this paradigm shift in New Testament studies for the question of the historical Jesus.

The problem expressed by both Holmberg and Scroggs of the one-sidedness of studies not using social science approaches applies particularly to the study of the historical Jesus. It traditionally has had the consequence that most scholars interested in the historical Jesus have focused their attention on the teachings of Jesus to the near exclusion of interest in Jesus' actions (Hollenbach 1983:66), though Sanders (1985) is a recent exception to this. In addition the focus has been on the origins and transmission of ideas, symbols, and texts all of which have led to the disembodiment of Jesus from first century Jewish colonial society. A good example of this social disembodiment can be seen in the way in which messiahship has usually been treated. Until the work of Horsley (1984) and Horsley and Hanson (1985) no one discussing the idea of Jesus as a messianic figure had even bothered to consider the popular messianic figures discussed by Josephus, the first century Jewish historiographer, as an alternative or supplement to the idealized figures of the literate class,7 who after all were the retainers of the ruling elite in the society. The popular messianic figures, so abhorred by ruling class figures like Josephus, were the ones whom Jesus' peasant followers would have known about and compared him to not the idealized figures of the retainer class.

In the work of scholars like Hollenbach (1981, 1982), Oakman (1986), and Horsley (1987) we meet a genuinely new methodological approach to the problem.

5. A good example of this is to be found in the way in which writers such as Bornkamm (1960), Meyer (1979), and Sanders (1985) base their discussions of Jesus as messiah on concepts derived from the literate classes of antiquity rather than looking at the actual messianic figures of first century Palestine who attempted to institute political change and failed. For a discussion of these historical figures see Hanson and Horsley (1985).


7. E.g. the messianic figures of Psalms of Solomon 17 and 18, Testamentum Levi 17 and 18, 4QTestimonia, and 4QFlonlegium. See Schillebeeckx (1979: 450-459) for a typical discussion of this material.
of the historical Jesus. These scholars introduced social science methods and models as well as a social historical perspective into the study of the historical Jesus in order to help reconstruct a more holistic and therefore more adequate interpretation of Jesus within the world of first century Roman Palestine. Their methodological innovations have helped make possible the emergence of a Third Quest for the historical Jesus, and therefore it is necessary to look at their work and its impact on reconstructions of the historical Jesus.

**Paul Hollembach and the Cross-Cultural Study of Jesus' Exorcisms**

Paul Hollembach offered several of the earliest attempts to reconstruct aspects of the life of the historical Jesus using the resources of the social sciences. In two essays written around the same time, Hollembach explored the issue of Jesus' exorcisms from a social science perspective.

In the more theoretical of the two essays, Hollembach (1981) begins with the problem of Jesus' exorcisms and their relation to his career, posing the problem of why the public authorities of Jesus' day expressed such hostility towards him as a result of his exorcisms. He attempts to demonstrate that the social sciences can help explain this phenomenon which is deeply embedded in the Gospel narratives. His procedure is typical of those applying the social sciences to questions regarding the historical Jesus. He begins by looking at the available evidence from the story of Jesus with the help of five categories derived from cross-cultural studies of possession and exorcism. He shows how these categories correlate closely with the details available from the Gospels.

Having established a correspondence, he then goes on to consider explanatory theories drawn from social-psychology to interpret the phenomena he has isolated in the Gospels. The results are illuminating. Cross-cultural evidence exists to suggest that "the colonial situation of domination and revolution nourishes mental illness in extraordinary numbers of population" (Hollenbach 1981, 575). Furthermore, he is able to provide considerable evidence to indicate that mental illness/possession provides a "socially acceptable form of oblique protest against, or escape from, oppressions" (1981, 575) while "accusations of madness and witchcraft can be used by socially dominant classes as a means of social control" (1981, 577). When these findings are applied to the Gospels, a much clearer understanding begins to emerge of the possible significance of demon possession and exorcisms within the activity of Jesus. Demon possession would have probably been a fairly common phenomenon in the socially oppressive situation of first century Palestine. People both used and were encouraged to use demon possession as a defensive strategy against the oppression of the Roman colonial situation. In such a situation, Jesus as active exorcist threatened one of the social control mechanisms that protected the social stability so highly favoured by governing elites. This explains the official antagonism towards Jesus for his exorcisms.

When Hollembach's views are compared with those of Sanders (1985, 157-173) regarding Jesus' miracles, it becomes clear that a fundamental shift in methodolo-

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*The five categories are: 1) criteria for identifying demoniacs 2) causes of demon possession 3) demoniacs' living conditions 4) their treatment and 5) the consequences of their healing among interested persons (Hollenbach 1981, 570).*
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...gy has taken place. Sanders makes no reference to Hollenbach's works even though he should have known about it by the time he wrote his own book. The thrust of Sanders' argument is that Jesus' miracles, including his exorcisms, testified to his being a true messenger from or agent of God whose activity was challenging to the authorities because of his capacity to draw crowds, not because the miracles themselves posed any intrinsic threat. Outsiders probably viewed him as a charlatan while the truth is that his miracles were compatible with the possibility that "he was an eschatological prophet" (1985:173). Effectively the whole force of Sanders' discussion is to portray Jesus in terms of traditional theological categories, like eschatology, agent of God, and eschatological prophet,9 thus locating his discussion within the idealist paradigm which focuses on understanding Jesus in terms of first century ideas not in terms of genuine social types and processes.

Without arguing for the correctness of Hollenbach's position in every detail, the above makes pellucid the very striking possibilities for interpreting the demon possessions and exorcisms as social phenomena that crucially shaped the activity of Jesus. At the same time, it moves the study of the historical Jesus away from the hegemony of ideas to an engagement with known social types that illuminate the ministry of Jesus in a potentially powerful way.

DOUGLAS OAKMAN AND THE ECONOMIC ISSUES CONFRONTED BY JESUS

Another outstanding example of the potential of social-scientific investigations for the understanding of the historical Jesus is to be found in the work of Douglas Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Issues of his Day* (1986). Oakman approaches the study of the economic world of first century Palestine and its bearing on our understanding of the historical Jesus from the perspective of sociology and anthropology. These disciplines provide comparative tools for making sense out of the otherwise remote world of Jesus (1986:3).

In Part One of the book Oakman employs economic anthropology along with a range of data available from historical sources to explore the issues of production and distribution within the peasant based agrarian economy of first century Palestine. His findings detail just how economically oppressed the peasantry was in a system in which redistribution of wealth occurred in favour of the social elite through the central institutions of temple and state as well as urban landowners. The peasantry of Palestine in Jesus' day probably had a maximum of 20% of their total production available for consumption in the best of times and potentially considerably less. This analysis is confirmed by the fact that historical sources from the period show a steady movement towards larger estates owned by the elite of the society with increasing numbers of dispossessed peasants. Thus Oakman is able to provide us with a remarkably detailed analysis of the harsh economic realities experienced by Jesus' peasant hearers and followers.

He then proceeds to study the economic issues raised in our historical sources regarding Jesus and comes to the startling conclusion that "the ministry of Jesus was, then, a bid for social power ... the reign of God was, so to speak, a total social program" (Oakman 1986:207). This is indeed a startling conclusion when one

9. Horsley (1987 196) has noted, the very concept of an eschatological prophet, which plays a key role in Sanders' imaging of Jesus, is a "synthetic concept" devised by modern scholars
compares it with more traditional studies of Jesus like those of Meyer (1979) and Sanders (1985) both of whom portray Jesus as concerned with eschatological restoration of the people of God without offering any sense of what this might mean in social and political terms.

After careful and critical study of the range of information available on the economic matters within the Gospel reports regarding Jesus, Oakman plausibly argues that there were three components to Jesus' economic agenda. In the first place he called for the destruction of central institutions, not the least of which was the temple, because of their powerful role in exploiting the peasant masses. Second Jesus' parables reveal a concern for people like estate stewards who were part of the retainer class of the society. Their intermediary role in society between the exploited peasants and the exploiting elite provided a focus for changing the economic relations within the society. Finally, according to Oakman, Jesus' message of the kingdom of God advocated an exchange system based on "general reciprocity," that is, giving to others without any expectation of a return (Oakman 1986:214-215). In a patronal society such as first century Palestine where patrons and clients alike gave nothing away without expecting something in return, this was indeed a revolutionary ethic.

Once again we need not agree with every detail of Oakman's analysis to appreciate how his use of social-scientific studies has provided a plausible socio-economic scenario in which to view Jesus' message on economic matters. There is nothing prior to Oakman that remotely resembles the clarity he brings to the economic background to Jesus' activity or the economic implications of Jesus' activity. Moreover, Oakman's interpretation of Jesus in social-scientific terms has considerable importance for contemporary Christians. It opens up the possibility of Jesus and his message having significance for Christians living in economically exploitative and oppressive circumstances in the contemporary world.

RICHARD HORSELY AND THE SPIRAL OF VIOLENCE

Richard Horsley's *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (1987) is far less methodologically explicit than the work of either Hollenbach or Oakman. Nevertheless, he clearly demarcates his area of interest as the complex social world inhabited by Jesus. His primary intention is to demonstrate the inadequacy and in reality the ideological bias of much previous biblical and theological scholarship on the historical Jesus. He argues that such scholarship portrayed Jesus "as a sober prophet of a pacific love of one's enemy" in order to contrast him with what Horsley cogently argues is a modern reconstruction of the violent Zealot movement. In the first four chapters of the book Horsley repeatedly refers to sociological and anthropological literature in a cross-cultural and cross-temporal manner to help reconstruct an adequate presentation of the complex socio-political environment of Jesus of Nazareth. He argues forcefully that structural-functionalist social theory with its emphasis upon stable social system and minor adjustments fails to do justice to the colonial situation of first century Palestine. Jesus' world was one of extreme tensions and strongly conflictual interaction. Thus by implication Horsley views conflict theory as a more useful social science tool for analyzing the social

10. Horsley (1989) has subsequently written a book in which he explores the use of sociological method in examining the social movement begun by Jesus
situation in which Jesus found himself than structural-functionalist theory (1987:19).

One of the most important features of Horsley's book, and the one from which it derives its title, is his attempt to develop a social model for the progressive stages of violence in colonial and neo-colonial situations of injustice and structural violence. Looking at a wide variety of responses to injustice and structural violence he argues that a spiral of violence often emerges in such situations: injustice leads to forms of protest and resistance; protest and resistance in turn leads to repression by those in power; finally people are driven to revolt against the ruling classes who are the perpetrators of the original violence. Horsley notes that the revolt may not be violent itself. Having developed the model he applies it to Jesus' world to show how the spiral of violence was part of a cyclic pattern in colonial Palestine under Roman rule with major revolts emerging in 4 BCE and then again in 66 CE.

Horsley argues that within this social situation of spiraling violence Jesus himself sought to precipitate a nonviolent social revolution to overcome the endemic violence of his society. The message of the kingdom of God was about God's saving action in society to end real political, economic, and social oppression. At the same time Jesus' revolutionary strategy required the transformation and renewal of local communities and their social arrangements to reflect the nature of the rule of God. The restructuring of local communities was accompanied by an attack on "the ruling institutions of Jewish Palestine" (1987:285). In the end, according to Horsley, the evidence suggests that it was no mistake that Jesus was put to death as a political threat. His message and his actions were a threat to the governing class of first century Palestine because they implied a revolutionary transformation of the existing socio-political order.

By paying attention to the socio-political context of Jesus' world a fundamentally different image of the message and practice of Jesus emerges. Even if one does not completely accept the application of Horsley's model of the spiral of social violence within first century colonial Palestine and his view of Jesus as a nonviolent revolutionary, his portrayal of Jesus has far greater depth and coherence than more traditional presentations such as those of Schillebeeckx (1980), Meyer (1979), and Sanders (1985) that rely on evidence derived largely from the literate classes to create their construction of Jesus in isolation from the real social world which he inhabited.

Crossan and the Third Quest
The most comprehensive study of the historical Jesus to date employing the social sciences as an analytical tool is John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: the life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. This work may well come to be viewed as the most significant study of the historical Jesus to appear in the twentieth century not only because of its ground-breaking methodology but also because of the reconstruction of the historical Jesus which emerges from Crossan's application of his multifaceted methodology. The perceived importance of this work is demonstrated by the fact that Carlson and Ludwig (1994) have already edited a volume containing a collection of academic responses to Crossan's work.

In the confines of this essay it is impossible to do adequate justice to Crossan's complex work. Nevertheless, it should be possible to give some indication of the
distinctive contribution made by Crossan that has allowed him to designate his own work as a Third Quest for the historical Jesus (Crossan 1994:159).

Crossan acknowledges that every attempt to recover the historical Jesus is in the end a reconstruction. There is no other access to Jesus since even the Gospel writers, both canonical and extracanonical, engaged in their own process of reconstruction. What is crucial, but lacking from Crossan’s point of view, is an adequate methodology applied in a rigorous and consistent manner. In an attempt to overcome this problem Crossan proposes a sophisticated methodology which he designates as “a triple triadic process” (1991:xxviii). The first triad involves the interaction between “cross-cultural and cross-temporal social anthropology,” “Greco-Roman history,” and “the literature of specific sayings and doings, stories and anecdotes, confessions and interpretations concerning Jesus” (1991:xxviii). In order to place Jesus within his own socio-historical world Crossan, following in the footsteps of Hollenbach, Oakman, and Horsley as well as others, applies such anthropological models and typologies as honour-shame culture, social stratification of agrarian societies, social banditry, and patronage society to a relevant selection of the historical information available regarding Greco-Roman society in general and colonial Palestine of the first century in particular. The reconstruction which emerges of the social and political world in which Jesus lived and died is a stunning achievement in its own right.

The second and third triad of Crossan’s methodology revolve around the problem of securing a defensible literary database for reconstructing the historical Jesus. Crossan argues that all of the available literary sources, both canonical and extracanonical, must be analysed to find the material which has the highest probability of originating with Jesus or has a strong claim to being typical of Jesus. In order to overcome the subjectivity of almost all previous attempts to create an inventory of material going back to Jesus, Crossan proposes a completely novel way of delimiting a database for his reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Having determined the total inventory of material from all available sources he places each unit of material into one of four periods in terms of the chronology of its original appearance. These four periods or strata as Crossan calls them are 30 to 60 C.E., 60 to 90 C.E., 90 to 120 C.E., and 120 to 150 C.E. Operating on the assumption that the earlier the material appears the stronger the likelihood that it may have originated during the lifetime of Jesus, Crossan (1991:xxxii) maintains that any attempt to reconstruct the historical Jesus must begin with the material from the first stratum and work forward.

Crossan then proposes a second criteria. He argues that the more independent attestations for any literary unit, especially those from the first stratum, the greater is the likelihood of the tradition going back to the historical Jesus. He bases his argument on the fact that the presence of two or more independent sources indicates that no one existing source could have created the tradition. In the case of

11. One searches in vain in the works of people like Schillebeeckx (1979), Meyer (1979), and Sanders (1985) for any use of the extra-canonical literature including the extra-canonical Gospels in their attempts to reconstruct the historical Jesus thus ignoring a potentially important data base. Neither are these sources used by Hollenbach (1981), Oakman (1986), or Horsley (1987) in any meaningful way.

12. Crossan acknowledges that in principle units deriving from the period 120 to 150 C.E. may be more original than those from the period 30 to 60 C.E., but proper methodology does not allow one to begin anywhere but in the first stratum.
material in the first stratum this moves it as close to the historical Jesus as we can come. In practice Crossan assumes that any complex from the first stratum with multiple independent attestations originated in the life of Jesus until proven to be the creation of the post-crucifixion followers of Jesus.

His total inventory for all four strata consists of 522 separate items of tradition, 180 of which have two or more independent attestations. In the case of the crucial first stratum there are 186 items, 131 of which have two or more independent attestations. After careful tradition historical analysis he has come up with a database of seventy-six first stratum complexes which in their core form, he believes, go back to Jesus with a high degree of certainty. In addition he suggests thirteen complexes embody “dramatic historicization of something that took place over a much longer period of time” than a normal historical event implies but go back to the historical figure of Jesus (Crossan 1991:434).

Almost exclusively from his inventory of first stratum, multiple and independently attested complexes that do not show the creative activity of the later church and therefore can plausibly be attributed to the historical Jesus, Crossan develops his reconstruction of Jesus. According to Crossan (1991:304) the central thrust of Jesus’ programme of the dominion of God involved “magic and meal or miracle and table.” Avoiding debates about the ontology of Jesus’ miracles Crossan understands Jesus’ exorcisms and healing from the perspective of cross-cultural anthropology. On the basis of his sifting of the literary evidence of the first stratum Crossan believes that it is certain that in terms of cross-cultural anthropology Jesus was an exorcist and a healer. As with Hollenbach (1981), Crossan understands Jesus’ exorcisms in the context of the colonial situation of Palestine in which demon possession was a form of social deviance in response to Roman domination and oppression. Inevitably Jesus’ exorcisms were political acts in such a situation. Crossan describes them as a form of “individuated symbolic revolution” (1991:318).

Similarly Jesus’ healings and those of his followers must be interpreted from the perspective of medical anthropology. According to Crossan medical anthropologists frequently distinguish between disease and illness. Following Young (1982), Crossan (1991:337) adds a third distinction, sickness. This triad reflects the process in which primary biological maladies are understood as disease, and are brought into the consciousness of the individual and his/her social network as illness, and then given social meaning as sickness. Crossan (1991:337) suggests the term “unhealth” for this process and then argues that “the success of the earliest Jesus movement’s healing activity” must be understood against Jesus and his followers’ ability to deal with “the personal, familial, local, and psychosocial nature of unhealth.” In other words Jesus did not offer biological cures. He healed people’s illness, that is their personal experience and reaction to disease, and he dealt with the problem of sickness, the socially determined meaning of disease and illness.

The clearest indication of this last point is seen in the correlation between healing and forgiveness. Crossan (1991:324) points out that when Jesus healed people through his magical touch he “implicitly declared their sins forgiven or nonexistent.” Thus Jesus resolved the commonly understood social cause for disease in his healings. But this was highly subversive in religio-political terms as Crossan (1991:324) also notes because it called in question the role of the Jerusalem
Temple in healing sin induced sickness

Crossan (1991 332-344) argues forcefully that exorcisms and healings did not occur in isolation but were part of a mission strategy of Jesus in which his followers were enjoined to heal and actualize the kingdom of God in people's lives in return for food and shelter. This simple form of sharing through healing and commensality was part of Jesus' strategy for building egalitarian peasant communities. The goal, according to Crossan (1991 344), was to undercut the prevailing social value of honour and shame, and the dominant social institution of patronage and clientage, both of which worked against the peasant masses. He bases his argument on a careful analysis of a first stratum, multiple attested tradition which he terms "Mission and Message," the core of which can be found in Gospel of Thomas 14 2, in the Sayings Gospel Q contained in Luke 10 (1), 4-11 = Matthew 10 7, 10b, 12-14, and in Mark 6 7-13. Just as healing and exorcisms must be understood in terms of cultural anthropology, so must food and shared meals since eating customs are used to symbolize social relations and to define group boundaries. Thus if Crossan is correct about the centrality of commensality it means that Jesus focused on the core element determining social relations and group identity within peasant society.

The richness of Crossan's reconstruction of Jesus as a socially embodied individual stands in stark contrast to the idealistic reconstructions of Jesus that have dominated Jesus studies until recently. There will undoubtedly be challenges to Crossan's method for obtaining authentic Jesus material and even more for various details of his interpretation. For example, his description of Jesus as a peasant Jewish cynic is not altogether convincing for the role Jesus played in his society. Nevertheless, a corner has been turned in the study of the historical Jesus. No longer can historical studies of Jesus afford to ignore reconstructing the political, economic, and social world inhabited by Jesus in favour of idealist reconstructions based on images, themes, and ideas drawn from the literate classes who were by and large the retainers of the ruling elite.

In my judgment Crossan is correct to argue that he has begun a Third Quest for the historical Jesus. His triple triadic methodological innovation must be taken into account in any serious attempt to reconstruct the historical Jesus just as his own reconstruction of the historical Jesus marks a decisive step forward in our understanding of Jesus. Jesus, in the work of Crossan, has become what he was, a Galilean Jewish peasant of the first century who sought to change peasant society from the grassroots up. In doing so he profoundly influenced a number of his contemporaries but also laid the grounds for his own destruction by an easily threatened elite who controlled by naked power and fear.

The question which remains for us to ask is how this socially embodied reconstruction of Jesus should affect our understanding of Christology.

**Implications for Christology**

The recent social science oriented studies of the historical Jesus raise an important question for contemporary christological reflection: what status should such studies have? Put differently, should these studies be taken into account in the contemporary formulation of Christology? This is not an easy question to answer.

The most radical solution, of which I am aware, has been proposed by Paul Hollenbach (1989). In posing the question "why do historical Jesus studies
at all" he adopts a startling position. He asserts that the real goal of historical Jesus studies should be to "overthrow (not just to avoid or to correct) the 'mistake called Christianity'" [this latter formulation comes from Miranda] (1989:19). In his view the mistake was "the divinization of Jesus as Son of David, Christ, Son of God, Second Person in the Trinity" through the myth-making process in which early Christianity engaged. This radical proposal appears to arise from two factors. First Hollenbach believes that a real "discontinuity" exists between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Christian myths. Perhaps more importantly, Hollenbach recognizes that the Christ myth has been an ideological tool in the hands of the "theological guardians of religious institutions" who have more often than not supported the status quo in exploitative and oppressive situations (1989:19-20; cf. Hollenbach 1983:73). Thus he calls for the quest for the historical Jesus to be a genuinely "prophetic activity" in order to overturn the enormous ills caused by the Christ myth makers and propagators.

The apparent underlying assumption of Hollenbach's views is that the historical Jesus should be the norm or standard for determining the character not simply of christological reflection but of the Christian tradition itself. Tracy (1981:238) rejects this possibility on the grounds that the "apostolic witness to Jesus – the actual Jesus remembered by the community and proclaimed as the Christ" provides the norm of the tradition based on the internal criteria of the tradition itself. As I will suggest in a moment this claim is not without problems.

David Tracy (1981), who is closely followed in this matter by William Thompson (1985), proposes an alternative understanding of the connection of the historical Jesus, as reconstructed by historical-critical scholars, to the theological and christological task of the Church. He maintains that the search for the "historical Jesus" offers "a contemporary theological way to keep alive and reformulate the 'dangerous' or 'subversive' memory of Jesus for the present community in fidelity to the original Jesus-kerygma and Christ-kerygma of the scriptural communities" (1981:239). But later he indicates his reluctance to allow the historical Jesus of scholarly reconstruction a significant role in theology when he asserts that the "relevant Jesus" for the theological enterprise is the Jesus "remembered by the tradition." In Tracy's terms that is the Jesus of the "early apostolic witness" as found in the writings of the New Testament. For Tracy this is the normative Jesus.

But this immediately poses a problem of major proportions that every New Testament scholar knows, even if a theologian like Tracy does not. There is not one Jesus in the "apostolic witness;" there are a plurality of "Jesuses," some of whom are mutually contradictory. For example, the remembered Jesus of Mark's Gospel stands in fundamental contradiction to the remembered Jesus of John's Gospel. As Hollenbach (1989:19) has observed, the Gospel of Mark is a profound attack "on the divinized Jesus as a figure of power." When we turn to the Gospel of John, the memory of Jesus has been so distorted that Jesus is fully divinized to the extent that his humanity is in question. Neyrey (1988) has put forward a convincing argument that the divinizing of Jesus in the Gospel of John occurred towards the end of a long process in a community that found itself in revolt against its world and other Christian groups. It therefore withdrew from both. In the process the figure of Jesus was "withdrawn" from the world in its own ideological construction which we know as the Gospel of John. Jesus became an otherworldly divine figure whose humanity was little more than a shell.
If the apostolic witness is so diverse and even distorted as in the case of the Gospel of John, can we afford to make this normative for our contemporary christological reflection? This is an issue which Tracy has not faced squarely since his approach seems to preclude a serious criticism of the New Testament witnesses as though all their various kerygmatic formulations were equally satisfactory expressions of the tradition. The fact is they were not.

Crossan suggests another approach to the significance of historical Jesus studies for contemporary Christologies which has more merit. He observes that at the centre of any Christianity (he would argue that there are different “Christianities,” just as there are different “Jesuses”) is “a dialectic between a historically read Jesus and a theologically read Christ” (1991 423) According to Crossan, the documents of the New Testament constitute a spectrum of theological interpretations of Jesus, so much so that we might speak of them reflecting “different historical Jesuses” to the extent that they focus on differing details of the historical Jesus or clusters of details. Because of this they inevitably project divergent “Christs” that are built on the multiform “Jesuses” which they presuppose. This leads Crossan to assert that the dialectical structure of any particular Christianity is always “this is how we see Jesus-then as Christ-now” (1991 423, his italics).

If Crossan is correct, then the question of the norm of Christian theology in general and Christology in particular is not a specific content. Tracy and Thompson, who stand in the tradition of Kahler and Bultmann, are misguided to argue that the results of the earliest process of christological reflection should be normative for contemporary Christology. What the apostolic witness provides is a guide to the normative process whereby Christology was formulated in connection with particular understandings of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth (cf Neyrey 1985 276). The question which must be asked by theological thinkers is what Jesus should be used for the process of christological reflection? Do we use one of the New Testament Gospel reconstructions of Jesus or a composite view derived from all four Gospels simply because the second and third century Church chose to make them canonical?

Should we accept that the answer to this question is yes, then it follows that the figure of the historical Jesus must remain a remote and implausible figure for Christians living in a scientific and post-Enlightenment world. A Jesus who stills storms, turns water into wine, predicts the imminent end of the age, and raises the dead is simply not creditable in the modern world as Reimarus long ago recognized. 13 Neither is a Jesus who is a divine being in human garb as John 1 proposes.

The alternative is for us to use our own reconstructions of the historical Jesus in our christological reflection. Three considerations support this approach.

In the first place, as Crossan (1991 422-426) has shown, this is precisely what the canonical Gospel writers themselves did. They engaged in reconstructing Jesus in terms of their own understandings, as well as the interests and needs of their respective communities/audiences. Their reconstructions then became the basis for their respective Christologies. Carlton (1994 42) maintains that the same process can be shown to have taken place in Christianity over the centuries. The reason for this uniformity in approach arises from the fact that the mainstream of

13 In tracing the quest for the historical Jesus, Albert Schweitzer began with the eighteenth century scholar Samuel Reimarus who was the first person to attempt a rationalist explanation of Jesus.
Christianity has always insisted on a connection being made between the human figure of Jesus, who can only be recovered through some form of reconstruction, and the Christ of faith. The recognition of this is what led Käsemann to call for a renewed quest for the historical Jesus in the wake of Bultmann's almost complete disjunction between the historical figure of Jesus and the Christ of faith.

In the second place since every attempt at telling the story of the historical Jesus is a reconstruction, for historically oriented Christians the Jesus to use for christological purposes must be the most plausible historical figure that we can recover. Unfortunately, the canonical portrayals of Jesus are highly problematic as historical reconstructions. The Gospel presentations of the human Jesus stem from a pre-scientific and mythical worldview where the supernatural world was thought to have a direct influence on the natural world. This caused the Gospel writers to divinize not only the risen Christ, but also the historical person of Jesus to such an extent that at least two of them, Matthew and John, blur the distinction between the human and the divine in their presentations of Jesus. At the same time the authors of the Gospels tended to read their own post-resurrection christological understandings of Jesus back into the human history of Jesus thereby fundamentally distorting their portrayals of Jesus.

In the third place, the application of social-scientific methods in the quest for the historical Jesus along with the literary methodological innovations of Crossan have created the possibility of a more credible and convincing understanding of the historical figure of Jesus than ever before. The social-scientific tools of analysis have enabled us to reconstruct the social, political, economic, and religious world of Jesus in a way never before possible. There has been a concomitant appreciation for the importance of locating the human figure of Jesus within his social world. Along with this advance a second factor needs to be underscored. We would appear to have much the same information base regarding the historical Jesus as the second and third generation writers of the New Testament. Unlike them, however, we also have tools for assessing the probable origin of material in the Jesus tradition and its modification over time. This puts us in a position to reconstruct a plausible and compelling account of Jesus' message, actions, and strategy within his own social world. As Robert Ludwig (1994:60-61) has expressed the matter in relation to Crossan's work, "The humanity of Jesus is fully restored, and his followers' experience of the Sacred in his person, message, program, and performance becomes credible and accessible to contemporary persons." Ludwig goes on to add of Crossan's version of Jesus, "I don't find this portrait to be reductionist, but, in christological language, Jesus' divinity is clearly anchored in his humanity- and in the dynamics of historically credible circumstances and events. Faith in Jesus is not denigrated but enhanced."

Conclusion

Naturally our contemporary reconstructions reflect the interests of our own age and our own social world, as well as the social locations of those who undertake the reconstructions. This is unavoidable. But then our Christologies inevitably do as well. By using the approaches pioneered by Hollenbach, Oakman, Horsley, and now Crossan, we have moved closer to the historical Jesus, and this can only be welcomed by those who would seek to interpret the meaning of Jesus for contemporary Christianity. In the final analysis Crossan (1991:423) is correct, the
structure of any particular Christianity has always been "this is how we see Jesus-then as Christ-now." But so is Tracy. Such a Jesus is indeed a dangerous memory, especially for many first world Christians who have so spiritualized Jesus that he is unable to challenge their socio-political commitments to oppressive societies, the very kind of society that killed Jesus rather than listen to his message of renewal and transformation.

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