

Caretakers, Critics, and Comparativists: A Meta-Analysis of Historical Jesus Research

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Abstract

Historical Jesus research is in a crisis that mostly goes unnoticed. It can be seen in the proliferation of scholarly Jesus portrayals that does not seem to near its end. Without realising it, historical Jesus research is trapped in a historiographical framework that it seems incapable of escaping from. In this article it will be argued that historical Jesus research is deceptively diverse in its conclusions but remarkably unified in its historiographical approach and self-understanding. Both the diversity and uniformity are the result of the way in which historical Jesus research is conducted. The analytical distinction between caretaker and critical modes of inquiry in the study of religion is replaced in this article by a spectrum that includes caretakers, critics, and comparativists in order to comprehensively analyse historical Jesus research. Caretakers and critics limit the scope of investigation to the parameters provided by religions, whereas comparativists take their clues from cross-cultural and interdisciplinary analytical tools. In a meta-analytical reflection of historical Jesus research these categories are used to analyse the features of a scholarly debate extending over more than two hundred years. The proposal of this article is for a truly interdisciplinary mode of historiography in order to overcome the crisis.

Introduction

More than two decades ago John Dominic Crossan complained that historical Jesus research is “a scholarly bad joke” and the diversity an “academic embarrassment” (Crossan 1991: xxvii, xxviii). Recently Amy-Jill Levine (2011: 99) pointed out that the historical-critical tools “in different hands obtain different results. After more than half a century of their application, we have a proliferation of Jesuses, not a consensus.” For Robert Webb and Darrell Bock the diversity in the range of Jesus portraits is only “somewhat disturbing” (2009: 3). Webb, however, admits that as a discipline historical Jesus research has a suspect pedigree. In his words: “historical Jesus research as a discipline has been in many respects a subset of biblical studies or theology rather than history” because it “was pursued out of theological interest and was intended to lead to theological conclusions” (2009: 10). But luckily that is no longer the case because recently, he suggests, there was an explicit historical focus in this area of research: “the larger disciplines of history and philosophy of history are having a greater impact, the cognate disciplines such as cultural anthropology and sociology are being drawn upon, and theologically-driven agendas are viewed as inappropriate to the explicitly historical enterprise of historical Jesus research” (2009: 10).

Historical Jesus scholars see themselves as historians and are confident that historical Jesus research really is historical. To suggest otherwise might come as a surprise. For example, E. P. Sanders (1993: 2) explicitly distances his work from theology while claiming to be a historian. Almost two decades later Maurice Casey calls himself an “independent historian” (2010: 2) with no affiliation to any religious group while religiously adhering to the canons of historical criticism and coming up with an “accurate” picture of Jesus (2010: 508). Although Mike Licona, a conservative scholar, in his monumental work on Jesus’ resurrection bemoans the fact that few biblical scholars have any training in history or consult the work of professional historians outside of the guild of biblical scholars (2010: 19, 566 n. 354), he claims to offer a historical hypothesis based on sound historical research. In a debate on one of the central issues in Jesus research, namely, whether Jesus was apocalyptic, Stephen Patterson explicitly says: “historical questions can be answered only by historical-critical analysis” (2001: 82).

Ironically, despite developments in historical interpretation the proliferation of Jesus pictures rather increased. This is nowhere more apparent than in the recent publication by James Beilby and Paul Eddy (2009) featuring five prominent scholars who debate their views on the historical Jesus. The spectrum varies from Robert Price who argues that it is quite likely that there never was any historical Jesus to Darrell Bock who represents an *evangelical* view on Jesus and maintains that most of the material ascribed

to Jesus in the canonical gospels actually reflects a trustworthy historical picture. In between are the views of John Dominic Crossan, James D. G. Dunn and Luke Timothy Johnson who all apply the historical-critical method and accept smaller or larger kernels of the material as authentic or historical. Thus, based on the same data set, their above views vary from whether Jesus actually existed to the position that accepts most of the canonical material as historically reliable testimony about the actual figure. While some might see this side-by-side existence of contrasting views as a sign of vibrancy in the discipline, the question remains whether the scholars advocating these views are indeed talking about the same figure, and if so, in what sense. In fact, the question should be asked whether these are historical pictures at all, and if so, what kind of historiography allows such diversity. In short, is historical Jesus research really historical and if so, what kind of historiography is produced?

While the diversity in historical Jesus pictures remains alarming, there is a singularity in historical Jesus research that goes unnoticed. The diversity of Jesus pictures produced by historical-critical methods is remarkably uniform because these Jesus images are exponents of what I call *caretaker historiography*. It represents a kind of historiography dominated by “what the texts say” (the historical credibility of the texts) and not “what analyses tell us” (the historical understanding of the texts). This will be illustrated by means of a meta-analysis of current historical Jesus research. But the first step will be to explain what is meant by *caretaker historiography*.

Caretakers, Critical Caretakers and Comparativists

Russel McCutcheon points out that at the base of all human sciences lies the distinction between “theoretically based scholarship on assorted aspects of human behavior and those very behaviors themselves” (2001: 17). A distinction can, therefore, be made between scholars as “ideological managers” or “caretakers” who speak *for* religions and traditions and “critics” who speak *about* them (2001: 17, 142). Caretakers “limit the scope of scholarship to the parameters of the religions themselves” (2001: 151) and in this mode, the insiders’ or informants’ terms, concepts and testimonies have preference. Anne Taves points out that some caretakers add the step of attempting to establish the truth of what subjects or informants claim (2009: 89). I will classify such caretakers as *critical caretakers*. Critical caretakers test, evaluate and reject the truth of the claims or descriptions made by religions and in this way share with caretakers the strategy of limiting the discussion to the parameters of the claims. Caretakers and critical caretakers disagree only when it comes to deciding whether the claims and concepts of religions

should be supported or rejected; whether the reports are credible or not and consequently whether the events are historical or not. But they should not be confused with “critics,” or as I prefer, “comparativists” who speak *about* religions. Since the term *critic* is widely used both in and outside of historical Jesus research, the term *comparativist* instead of *critic* will be reserved for this third category of historical Jesus scholars — a category that forms an antithesis to the first two, namely, caretakers and critical caretakers.

The comparative mode of analysis is qualitatively different from the mode of caretaker in that the claims and parameters provided by religions themselves function as the data to be analysed and explained by means of a variety of interdisciplinary tools. The differences are clearly pointed out by the anthropologist, Fitz J. P. Poole with regard to the study of religion in general:

Any descriptive, interpretive, or explanatory endeavor involves relating phenomena to one another within a framework of categories extrinsic to the phenomena themselves. A general theory of religion is therefore necessary to guide the analysis of particular religious phenomena. To encapsulate an analysis within a single religious system — and thus within the semantic networks of the religion’s own terms, categories, and understandings — entangles the analysis with the very discourse it seeks to interpret and explain. Since analysis entails going beyond the empirical facts and implicates a theory that organizes, reconstructs, and redescribes them as data, all scholars of religion must concern themselves with a range of theoretical perspectives, including those of the social sciences. Theory and data are always bound up together. (1986: 413-414)

Thus, the comparative mode of analysis examines the information provided by adherents of a religious tradition in order to perform interpretations and conduct analyses about them, not necessarily by means of their terms, still by taking them seriously for what they are up to. This is the difference between taking their terms and concepts seriously and adopting them. As Taves, referring to the study of religious experiences points out, it is possible to distinguish between “taking the subjects’ description of their experience seriously in our efforts to explain it, and adopting it, defending it, or attempting to provide scientific support for it” (2009: 89). Therefore, the comparative mode of inquiry is not only sensitive in respect of ethnocentrism, but is also theory-infused (see McCutcheon 2001: 73ff; Saler 2010 for a discussion). It does not succumb to the tyranny of local testimonies and theologies but place them in a comparative perspective. A comparativist mode of inquiry

goes beyond the testimony or information that is locally distributed by a culture, religion or era, while realising that the concepts and assumptions of the informants are as theory laden and culture specific as those of the academic observer (see Poole 1986: 432; McCutcheon 2001: 73).

The modes of inquiry in the study of religion have developed from caretaker through critical caretaker to a comparativist stance. What insiders claim is neither taken as necessarily true and supported (caretaker) nor questioned and purified from false claims (critical caretakers) but subjected to comparative analyses and placed within larger theoretical frameworks (comparativists). What the locals say is indeed taken seriously but with a view to interpret, analyse, explain and compare and not merely to establish its credibility. Therefore, the comparative study of religion has evolved beyond the dichotomy of an “objective” study of religion (critical caretakers) versus indoctrination (caretakers). Today “new critical, constructive, intercultural methods of inquiry” characterise the study of religion (Fredericks 2010: 167).

To sum up, instead of caretaker versus critic which is somehow a prevalent, if not fundamental, distinction in the study of religion,¹ I am proposing a threefold distinction for historical Jesus research, namely, caretakers, critical caretakers and comparativists. In contrast to comparativists who speak about religions, caretakers speak for religions, even if some do so with a critical voice.

Caretaking and Comparativism as two modes of Inquiry in the Human and Social Sciences

The difference between caretakers and comparativists is one that can in various ways be found in other human and social sciences. A classic example is a response by the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard on the relationship between anthropology and history as academic disciplines. Already in 1961 he pointed out that few professional historians in his time would have been able to write a history of India (not the history of British rule in India) or of China (not just the Boxer wars) or of the peoples of Africa or some part of Africa (not the history of colonial conquest and administration). His reasoning was that the historian, like the anthropologist, cannot be satisfied with what is said or written but wants to find out what people think and what their writings mean. Writing these histories, he suggests, is not a matter of listing and evaluating events testified about in sources, but first and foremost knowing what the sources are about. He concluded that article on the relationship between anthropology and history with the following words: “Maitland has said that anthropology must choose between being history and being nothing. In the sense I have outlined, and in which also I believe he wrote, I accept

the dictum, though only if it can also be reversed — history must choose between being social anthropology or being nothing” (1961: 20). Writing the history of and being a historian of foreign events are more complicated than, and fundamentally different from, either listing events from the past or adopting their testimonies while testing for and establishing authenticity or historicity. Whether something is historical depends as much on what the “it” that is investigated is taken to be than on applying proper historical methods. In fact, the *proper historical methods* should include the tools of the anthropologist. Just as being or consulting an anthropologist is no guarantee that ethnocentrism has been avoided, applying the historical-critical method or consulting the work of a professional historian does not guarantee that proper and appropriate historical research has been conducted — especially when the data originates from an alien territory.

It is not surprising that in various ways anthropologists also struggle with the differences between caretakers and comparativists in the cross-cultural study of human cultures, because they operate at the coal face of meaning and cultural realities. It can be seen in anthropological debates about ethnocentrism,² the nature of anthropological research,³ the challenge of coming to terms with *local knowledge* and indigenous knowledge systems,⁴ and the debate about “going native,”⁵ to mention the most obvious. Within anthropology there is not only an awareness but also an active debate about these modes of inquiry.

Historians struggle with these issues too. Historians, Rüsen points out, take seriously the cultural realities which are offered as expressions of the human spirit in its wide variety of forms. “The dark, contrasting, strange, even exotic events, manners and forms of life are drawn into the attention of history” (1993: 210), but can no longer be treated “from the perspective of a quasi-natural faculty of reason” (1993: 227). Similarly Georg Iggers (1997: 16) points out that the postmodern critique of traditional historiography “has offered important correctives to historical thought and practice. It has not destroyed the historian’s commitment to recapturing reality or his or her belief in a logic of inquiry, *but it has demonstrated the complexity of both*” (emphasis my own). For this reason, he says, historians are no longer concerned “with explanation but with ‘explication,’ the attempt to reconstruct the significance of the social expressions that serve as its texts” (1997: 14). Historians, like anthropologists, have to face the music of meaning and consensual reality when being confronted with data from distant and alien pasts.

Evans-Pritchard makes another point that resonates with the comparative mode of inquiry (see 1961: 11). There is a sense in which an analyst (either historian or anthropologist) knows the past or “the other” better (or at least differently) than anyone taking part in events. What is happening at a time

and the plain facts about events are not necessarily known by participants. In fact, few people have any insight into the dynamics that drive their own social or cultural lives. The implication is that anthropologists and historians alike use explanatory models to make sense of their data that go beyond the claims in the data. They are not satisfied with what the sources claim (their *testimonies*; see Craffert 2008: 5-6, 16) but make what they claim the object of investigation and critical analysis. It is “a bit ethnocentric” McCutcheon (2001: 80) points out, to assume that the scholarly aim of critical and comparative activities is also that of everyone else.

Adopting the testimonies of the sources (by caretakers) or adopting those testimonies that have been cleared by means of the tools of historical criticism (by critical caretakers) are rather different from asking what the data are testimonies for. A comparative mode of historiography, that can be called *anthropological historiography*, does not start with *did it happen*, or *what is the best hypothesis for the facts*? But with *what are the data about*, or *what are the data evidence for*? In short, what are the facts? Put differently, confronted with past events or experiences, the cultural historian asks “what actually/really happened?” instead of “did it actually/really happen?” Studies on the latter question are not totally without assumptions about what actually happened because the “it” in the question already contains notions about the potential content of what could have happened. And that content is simply provided by the cultural setting of the historian/interpreter.

Since data and theory are bound up together, anthropological historiography is not merely about establishing whether testimonies and data are authentic or credible but first and foremost *what they are about*. As suggested by Evans-Pritchard with regard to the history of India, China and Africa, this applies even more so when the object of study and the focus of historiography is culturally distinct. Knowing what the data are about — what the “facts” are — is not a straight forward process of listening to the testimonies, but is itself subject to a complex analytical process. In other words, making sense of the data in the process of taking it seriously, is rather different from adopting it or attempting to establish the truth of the claims presented (even if these claims are eventually rejected).

This theoretical framework can be used to analyse current historical Jesus research. While the aim is to analyse what is going on in historical Jesus research, it is important to also keep in mind what is *not* there.

Analyzing Historical Jesus Historiography

When looking at historical Jesus research through the above analytical lenses it becomes apparent that this academic field is trapped in a caretaker

mode of historiography. This can be illustrated by means of four aspects: the history of historical Jesus research, methodological expositions of historical criticism, scholarly presentations of historical Jesus research, and the role of ontological assumptions in historical Jesus research. The analysis will be concluded by showing what is missing from historical Jesus research. Finally the question will be asked whether apologetics really is scholarship.

Historical Jesus Research Emerged from a Caretaker Framework

The caretaker mode of historical Jesus research is nowhere more apparent than in its past maps of research from which it never seems to have escaped. In order to follow this argument, it is necessary to start with the situation when historical-critical Jesus research emerged on the scene.

For centuries the Church had a perfectly clear picture of Jesus because the “gospels were taken to be trustworthy historical accounts” (Levine 2006: 4). This picture originated in a time when the inerrancy of the Bible was taken for granted while “various harmonizing devices, to comprehend every statement of Jesus in all four Gospels and every other part of the Bible thought to refer to him” were employed to maintain this picture (Nineham 2000: x). This is confirmed by the fact that for more than 1600 years the idea of asking questions about the historical Jesus never arose (Dawes 1999: 1). The claims made in and by the sources were taken for granted. People were grilled (literally) for many reasons but not because they claimed a literal bodily resurrection or virgin birth for Jesus or that He is the son of God. In accordance with the New Testament texts, those were just part of the reality claims of Christianity. For centuries the truth of these Christian claims was affirmed while it was taken for granted that they reflected the claims of the Christian Bible.

Even though orthodox Christianity claims that this picture of Jesus is an ontological reality, it should be noted that this is neither a critical nor a historical but a traditional picture of Jesus in which the claims of faith and history are harmonised. This picture is not based on historical or scientific proof, but like all other cultural beliefs, depends on belief in belief. And since it is not based on historical or scientific proof or evidence, no scientific or historical argument can confirm or disconfirm it. The beliefs that find their expression in the creeds and dogmas do not depend on historical evidence or reasoning but claim to present a historical reality. As a belief system and set of convictions, it is like any other decent cosmology or world-view about which Jeppe Sinding Jensen (2011: 37) says that it “comes with the in-built opinion that it is right, whether the rightness be descriptive or normative, so in that (quite trivial) sense they all privilege themselves as cosmologies (no cosmology has ever pronounced itself wrong, as far as I know).” Orthodox

Christianity (by which I simply mean traditional *Christianities* as expressed in the confessions and doctrines) is like any other traditional cultural system in that it contains the symbolic universe within which people find and experience their consensual reality as truthful. It comes with the “reality” label.

Within this context critical Jesus research started more than two and a half centuries ago as a rejection of the orthodox or creedal portrayal of Jesus. This position is probably best formulated in the words of Albert Schweitzer (2000: 5) more than a hundred years ago: “The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma.” Or, in the words of Amy-Jill Levine: “The ‘Quest’ itself formally began with the Enlightenment’s questioning of both theological dogma and religious authority” (2006: 5). But in doing so that quest did not depart from the parameters set by traditional belief but only critically examined and for the most part rejected them. By its own admission critical Jesus research started under the assumption that the credibility claims in the texts are to be evaluated and tested, if not rejected. Historical Jesus researchers emerged as critical caretakers within the traditions they wished to purify (see further below). As caretakers they limited the scope of the debate to the claims supported by orthodox Christianity in general and the New Testament texts in particular.

Today the picture in historical Jesus research is a little more complex because conservative, confessional or “evangelical” historical Jesus scholarship started as a reaction to critical scholarship.⁶ Scholarly caretakers (supporters of the orthodox position) emerged to fight the critical caretakers who questioned the truth claims of orthodox Christianity. Therefore, historical Jesus research is currently characterised by a duality between critical and evangelical scholarship, those rejecting (critical caretakers) and those supporting (caretakers) the claims about Jesus in the Gospels.⁷ This separation between caretakers (evangelical scholars or scholars with explicit faith convictions) and critical caretakers (scholars who bracket or reject a faith position) continues to dominate the debate.⁸ This argument can be substantiated by looking at the scholarly aims and claims about what Jesus “said and did.”

For some caretakers, in fact, for the great majority of them, historical Jesus research confirms the reliability of the gospel traditions and consequently the traditional understanding by the church. For example, for Craig Evans one of the true benefits of the so-called third quest is that it shows that “the Gospels as essentially reliable, especially when properly understood, and to view the historical Jesus in terms much closer to Christianity’s traditional understanding” (Evans 2006a: 54).⁹ By affirming traditional Christian

understanding, orthodox (caretaker) historical Jesus research, therefore, offers historical (if not, scientific) support for (if not proof of) the historicity and historical factuality of Jesus' life (words and deeds).

Others consciously consider themselves critical caretakers and their aim is to purify Christianity, if not to protect Jesus, from biblicist abuse (the "falsifying and obfuscating" of the gospel, as Andries van Aarde (2001: 202) calls it).¹⁰ This is nowhere more crudely stated than in the work of Robert Funk who wants to set Jesus free from dogmatic captivity.¹¹

The recent debate about whether faith commitments preclude participation in the historical Jesus project is a perfect instance of the caretaker — critical caretaker continuum. Both proponents (caretakers) and opponents (critical caretakers) of a faith commitment share one single presupposition, namely, that what is testified about Jesus of Nazareth (what is reported that he said or did) is to be dis/authenticated because the Jesus of history is different from the Christ of faith presented already in the Gospels. Whether it is formulated with Darrell Bock as establishing what is "most likely about Jesus" (2011: 4), with Craig Keener as what is "historically *probable*" (2011: 29-30), with Robert Webb as the search for the "historicity of an event" (2011: 75) or with Robert Miller as the task to "distinguish historical fact from historical fiction" (2011: 87), the one constant element is that there were "events" and words that belonged to the life of Jesus that need to be authenticated. Critical caretakers and caretakers (apologists) alike take it for granted that those claims can be treated rationally — evaluated, rejected, adjusted or defended. But do we really know what the textual claims are evidence for?

It should be emphasised that my point is not to defend the truth value of orthodox Christianity or of the biblical texts, but their reality value. By taking their claims literally, critical historical Jesus scholarship developed as a rejection of such claims while orthodox scholars defend such claims. Clearly both are caretaker moves that adopted the data as testimonies instead of just taking them seriously as data to be analysed.

Methodological Discussions Cultivate a Caretaker mode of Historiography

When, secondly, looking analytically at methodological discussions in historical Jesus research and not just relying on mere claims to be real historians, a remarkable picture emerges. Both the formal expositions of the historical-critical method as well as its implicit assumptions (or, verified conclusions for some) support the verdict that historical Jesus research is trapped in a caretaker mode of historiography.

The aim of historical-critical Jesus research is to establish what Jesus of Nazareth has said and done and the main tools remain the criteria of authenticity for securing the historical material. In the words of Webb: "the

purpose of the critical methods and criteria are to ascertain the probability of whether or not — and to what extent — something stated in the written Gospels stage can be traced back to the events stage” (2009: 56). The prime objective of this method is to arrive at the authentic kernels of what Jesus has said and done.

But the historical-critical method, with the criteria of authenticity as its major tool, is based on three sets of nested assumptions that comprise it. While practitioners object to the notion of assumptions, because they see them as the result of more than two hundred years of research (see Casey 2010: 30 for an example), they nevertheless function as research presuppositions constituting the framework within which historical criticism takes place.¹² These are assumptions (or research conclusions if you like) that can, in the words of Sanders (2002: 32), be formulated in the following way:

New Testament scholars believe that not all the evidence is equally good, and thus they agree that there is a distinction between ‘the historical Jesus’ and ‘Jesus as described in the Gospels’. [Consequently], the Jesus of history became — or was turned into — the Christ of faith, the second person of the Trinity; as the result of theological development, but that an unadorned Jesus may be found behind or beneath early Christian literature.¹³

There are three sets of interconnected or nested assumptions — none can exist without the others.

The first set of assumptions is about the Jesus traditions. It is assumed that the traditions about Jesus from the very beginning evolved from authentic or historical kernels to elaborated and expanded theological pronouncements. One of the primary assumptions here is that the Gospels developed over time. Based on differences between the Gospels, historical inaccuracies in them and “improbable” claims made by them, common wisdom asserts that the distorting of the historical figure started already in the New Testament.¹⁴

The second set of assumptions regards Jesus as historical figure: a historical figure could not have been like the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels. According to Miller (1999: 32) the problem at the heart of the search for the historical Jesus is this:

the gospels were written from the perspective of the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead. Those Christians who passed on the material that would go into the gospels, the evangelists themselves, and the Christians for whom they wrote all believed that Jesus was living in heavenly glory and was

actively involved in their lives. When these Christians read or talked about the words and deeds of Jesus, they were talking not about a historical figure from their past, but rather about the supernatural Lord living in their present.

The main component of this assumption is that the Jesus of history is different from the Christ of faith as presented in the Gospels and all later creeds and confessions. In the words of Webb:

As historical Jesus research has evolved over the past two and half centuries, one of its basic defining characteristics has been to distinguish the 'Christ of faith' from the 'Jesus of history'. While simplistic, this truism nevertheless aids in clarifying what marks out historical Jesus research from that which preceded it. (2009: 9)

Third, any proper methodology should contain tools to recover the historical kernels and consequently be able to discriminate between in/authentic parts of the texts or tradition. That is, be able to distinguish between the historical figure and the Christ of faith presented in the texts. It is therefore not surprising that methodological discussions in historical Jesus research centers on the criteria of authenticity and ways to implement them. At a time when the so-called criteria of authenticity are fundamentally being questioned, in the words of Levine, as "fatally flawed" (2011: 99; and see Allison 1998: 1-7; Willitts 2005; Rodrigues 2009), these criteria remain the main tools of historical criticism as seen in two recent methodological expositions — one by a moderate evangelical (Webb 2009: 54-75) and the other by a more critical scholar (Casey 2010: 101-141). In fact, in most instances these are methodologically speaking the only tools discussed for doing historical Jesus historiography.

If this is a fair presentation of the historical-critical method my point is that it is a perfect recipe for only one kind of historiography, namely, caretaker historiography that limits the investigation to the parameters set by the sources. It was designed in and originated from a setting that sought to establish whether what has been reported about Jesus was actually said and done by him. It can only be used for caretaker historiography aimed at establishing whether the claims are true or false and not what such claims could be evidence for.

Unity in the Diversity of an Object-Dependent Discipline

There seems to be a paradox in historical Jesus research, as described by Dale Allison:

Although there is indeed a contemporary quest for Jesus, it is not manifest that there is really much new or distinctive about it. Certainly the current search is not a thing easily fenced off from its predecessors....It may well be that, beyond their being produced in the same period, contemporary books on Jesus belong together not because they share common assumptions, methods, or conclusions but because, paradoxically, they do not. (2000: 143, 145)

If historical Jesus research sits comfortably in the framework of caretaker historiography, why the diversity in Jesus portrayals? Why the concern about the diversity if, in the words of Casey (2010: 30), “basic historical research” is being conducted? Amidst the diversity there is a remarkable uniformity that needs some explanation.

The psychologist of religion, Lee Kirkpatrick, suggests that disciplines in the Human and Social Sciences can be distinguished on the basis of whether they are defined by shared theories, “its conceptual and methodological approach” (such as in psychology) or by their “object of study” like in disciplines such as religious studies and political sciences (2010: 303). This is said in the context of a discussion on what religion is, a central issue in the study of religion (see Saler 2008 for an example) but an issue Kirkpatrick claims does not feature prominently in, for example, psychology. The study of religion in general, he maintains, is determined by its object of study. I want to suggest that this is also the case with New Testament studies in general and historical Jesus research as a sub discipline in particular.¹⁵ In fact, both are by definition determined by their object of study; what makes it *historical Jesus research* is that it is about *the historical Jesus*.

The impact of an object-dependent discipline is visible in the way in which the history of the discipline is described by its practitioners. It is noteworthy that historical Jesus research is almost always presented in a chronological, linear way (“the history of the ‘Quest’”). There is an endless list of “research” articles or introductory chapters summarising either the history or the current state of historical Jesus research and the dominant feature is presentations of one scholar after the other writing about the historical Jesus. The overview article in the above mentioned publication is a case in point in which different portrayals of Jesus follow one another as if just different perspectives on the same topic (see Eddy and Beilby 2009) — not with different expiry but different production dates. The implicit agreement seems to be that participating in research about the historical figure qualifies as historical Jesus research. Given this diversity, some distinctions need to be introduced.

While Allison attributes the diversity to the proliferation of PhD's in an era where giants no longer dominate disciplines, I want to suggest that caretaker historiography in Jesus research is closely connected to its disciplinary identity as an object-dependent discipline. One of the features of object-dependent disciplines is that a variety of methods and approaches can be applied to the object of study. Such disciplines can easily borrow, pouch or steal methods and theories from almost anywhere and thus carry the aura of interdisciplinarity while maintaining its disciplinary features as an object-dependent discipline. This is nowhere more visible than in the above-mentioned publication where five scholars with diametrically opposing, if not contradicting, portrayals of Jesus participated in the same publication and responded to each others' portrayals. It is remarkable that no one asked the critical question why it is that, based on the very same data base, scholars can arrive at such contradicting conclusions about what the data are about. Elsewhere Allison (see 2001: 83) expresses the hope that historical Jesus scholars can start to clarify some of the issues. It is not a moment too soon to start with historiographical issues. This picture will immediately change if Jesus as historical figure is studied critically and comparatively with other similar figures and by means of the interdisciplinary tools of, for example, anthropology and the neurosciences.

The Challenge of Ontological Assumptions in Historical Jesus Research

Debates about ontological and more specifically theological assumptions function to conceal a confrontation with ontological pluralism – the real challenge in historical Jesus research. It is in the first place not what the sources say or which sources are taken as authentic but the historian's position on a theistic god that determines his/her view of the historical Jesus. Views on a theistic god, Webb suggests, are determinative of portrayals of the historical Jesus. He therefore very perceptively pins the spectrum of historical Jesus approaches onto ontological assumptions which he illustrates with the example of Jesus' resurrection.¹⁶ In his words:

there is the event itself that is being described by the biblical author, and there is this author's interpretive explanation of divine causation for that event. Discussion of the possible historicity of an event itself is a distinct matter from discussing the causal explanation provided in the ancient text (i.e., two distinct questions: Did the event happen? What explains why it happened?). (Webb 2011: 74-75)

Distinct world-views or ontological assumptions about the supernatural separate a *naturalistic* (Lüdemann) from a *theistic* (Wright) and a *hybrid* (my

term) approach. Naturalistic historians reject a theistic explanation and offer cause and effect explanations; critical theistic historians will not accept all claims of divine intervention (therefore it is *critical*) but with sufficient testimonies will be open to such claims. Methodological naturalistic history is a *via media* with regard to ontological claims and the type of causation that can be allowed. Jesus' resurrection is such an "event" testified by ancient sources and explained as caused by divine intervention. Since dead people do not rise from the dead in this space-time universe, for the naturalistic historian the stories are unhistorical. Theistic historians and methodological naturalists could find the evidence sufficient and convincing and conclude that it actually happened or could have happened (see Webb 2009: 48-54).

With the separation of "the event" from the local (theistic) explanation for the cause of "the event," Webb suggests that historical Jesus scholars can with academic integrity act as historians. Underneath these remarks is the issue of what we take to be "reality" or "real." If a theistic god is real for you, sufficient data claiming a virgin birth or resurrection performed by such a god will be historically plausible. But this is still to assume that "the event" as presented in the texts is transparent in itself — an assumption cultivated within the caretaker framework. Theological assumptions merely function as a distraction from dealing with the question of what the data are about. Even from a theistic point of view the challenge of an analytical and comparative point of view remains, for example what the data really are evidence for.

What is Missing from Current Historical Jesus Research?

It is also from what is missing from current historical Jesus methodological discussions that its nature as merely caretaker historiography is apparent. It is remarkable that New Testament scholarship in general and historical Jesus research in particular has not engaged in similar self-reflexive exercises as found in religious studies, anthropology and history. Equally remarkable is the absence of any meaningful reflection in historical Jesus research on what it would take to think historically about cultural events from distant worlds.

When the historian discovers — as Evans-Pritchard indicates with regard to the historical study of India, China or Africa — that *the events concerned* are themselves in need of analysis prior to establishing their historicity or credibility, a different mode of historiography is called for. This is something different from employing (poaching) disciplines in order to function within the historiographical framework of yesteryear. The challenge of how to deal with the claims and content of reports and sources (data) that originated from, say, a polyphasic cultural system is not even considered in the latter.¹⁷ What can and cannot be done by means of the criteria of authenticity stands out starkly against the lack of reflection of what is needed to deal historically with data

from such a distant cultural system which are presented as real for and by the participants but do not necessarily have an objective or external existence.

Once familiar with the pattern of polyphasic cultures — that is, cultures where more states of consciousness than the ordinary waking state are allowed and cultivated in the construction of consensual reality — it does not take much imagination to see that many of the reports about Jesus of Nazareth probably originated in such a setting (see Craffert 2008: 174-180). A large portion of the data about Jesus of Nazareth displays the features of a polyphasic culture and a distinct consensual reality. It is no secret that from beginning to end (the virgin birth, baptism and the resurrection) and everything in between (the healings, exorcisms and miracles, spirit possession and the like) in the available sources about Jesus as historical figure consist of data that largely come across to a modern historian as exceptional, if not outright incredible. That means, the very data to be used in historical analyses and constructions are not necessarily referring to objective events out there, but to culturally conceived and approved events — many of which originated in states of consciousness (such as visionary experiences) that are culturally peculiar. In other words, the *events* that are to be analysed by the historian belong to the category of cultural events or what William James calls “the reality of the unseen” (1994 [1902]: 61-89). Therefore anthropological historiography, as this alternative mode of historiography can be referred to, also consists of sets of nested assumptions.

The first set of assumptions regards the historian’s view of the world containing a variety of world-views or consensual realities, and that in such a world of multiple cultural realities people live in diverse realities (see Craffert 2011: 5-7). Therefore, all people, historians included, live in world-views that they take for real and accurate (nobody lives in a world-view that they consider wrong). Unless the historian, like the anthropologist, expands his/her reality register and options of consensual realities to include that of subjects living in different world-views or consensual realities (in India, China, Africa and the first-century Mediterranean world), the result will inevitably be misunderstanding.

Hand-in-hand with the set of ontological assumptions goes a set of epistemological assumptions. If the events concerned are of the (polyphasic) nature suggested above, the Western historian, like the anthropologist, has no direct access to them and cannot merely entertain the credibility of sources. On the contrary, it would in most cases be necessary to master a new consensual reality or to develop a comparative model that can account for the nature of the events.

My own work on Jesus as shamanic figure (see Craffert 2008) is informed by anthropological and cross-cultural examples that provide alternative

pictures of reality, or a wider spectrum of the reality register in order to deal with the events concerned. The study of shamanism, Alan Segal points out, remains an important analytical tool because it contains two essential elements: “a mental state that is part of our human physiology” and a “complicated cultural tradition that seeks to explain and also to produce these extraordinary experiences” (2006: 37). Therefore, the shamanic complex is in the first instance not used as an alternative social type to describe Jesus but is an analytical tool for figuring out what the data are about. It provides a framework for situating Jesus’ life, the stories and texts that his life generated and a way of comparative analysis of what was said and claimed about him into a plausible world-view or consensus reality. There is not a single text suggesting that Jesus was a shamanic figure but the shamanic complex, it is argued, provides the best model to make sense of the available data regarding his life and words.¹⁸ Within this framework the proposal is that the three foundational assumptions of historical criticism be replaced by three new nested assumptions — assumptions rooted in the cultural dynamics of a social personage in the first-century Mediterranean world. Instead of a linear development of the tradition from authentic kernels it is suggested that we start with the notion that right from the start there were diverse reports about a social personage that could have been like the figure portrayed in the Gospels. Thus, the second assumption above that distinguishes between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith be replaced by hypotheses about the kind of figures that were credited with similar kind of reports as those about Jesus of Nazareth. The underlying logic is that cultural figures the world over can and could indeed be like the portrayal of Jesus in the sources. Thirdly, as a starting point, historical criticism with its method of criteria of authenticity be replaced by an interdisciplinary interpretive process investigating what the data that we have about this social personage are about.

That many of the traditional tools of historical criticism could be used once a different starting point has been explored goes without saying. For example, it is likely that there was development of the tradition and possibly even use of sources, oral and written. But these can be introduced, I am arguing, once the question has been changed from “which kernel is authentic” to “what kind of social personage were this data probably about?”. In my view this constitutes a different historiographical framework as starting point for historical Jesus research.

Is Historical Jesus Research Really Scholarship, or just a Storm in the Orthodox Jesus Teacup?

If there is truth in my analysis of historical Jesus research, it has to be asked whether and to what extent apologetics (like caretaking) are acceptable forms

of scholarship. There are no objective criteria and guidelines for defining what scholarship is, but there are things like accountability and appropriateness in scholarship. Accountability can be seen as what we consider knowledge creation and new knowledge. The production of knowledge does not take place in a vacuum and for that reason I have invoked discussions and debates from the broader fields of religious studies and anthropology in order to say that whatever we consider new knowledge should somehow be able to stand firm in a wider academic arena. Avoidance of, or at least, a critical reflection about the caretaker mode of interpretation and the rejection of ethnocentrism in all its versions are central to these areas of research. Going about historical Jesus research as if these are not central issues can hardly continue if accountability is taken seriously.

But there is also the question of appropriateness or ethics, if you like. What kind of scholarship aims at merely maintaining or destroying traditional world-views? Asked differently, in the face of what arguably boils down to conflicting world-views, do we not need a different kind of discursive practice? Is there still justification for a mode of scholarship that either defends or rejects what is taken as orthodox Christianity's world-view or cosmology? But more pertinent, if the Gospels originated from a polyphasic culture, what defence is left for the continuous search of the credibility of "the events concerned" if such "events" are misunderstood in an ethnocentric way?

From a comparative analytical point of view neither the claims in the New Testament documents nor the affirmations of orthodox Christianity need to be dis/confirmed but can be treated as the data to be analysed and interpreted. Without limiting the scope of the investigation to the truth of what they claim, comparative analyses treat all of that as the data to be investigated. Therefore, from this perspective the portrayal of Jesus in the sources can be taken as residues of a real historical figure in first-century Galilee. Anthropological and neuroscientific research (such as the shamanic complex) help us to realise that the biography and real life of many historical figures in the world are made up of reports and beliefs that firmly belong within their world-view, such as special births, an afterlife existence, extraordinary and charismatic societal influences and unexplained healings. It is the cultural dynamics of such figures that help us to understand how such reports can be historical without trying to defend their literal claims. As part of their consensual reality such claims constitute the data that can be taken seriously and need to be analysed comparatively without succumbing to the truth of their claims or trying to establish their literal credibility.

There is a deep irony in the caretaker position in that both supporters and critics mean well for the religious tradition at stake but without realising

the consequences of their condescending position. It represents a form and style of scholarship that is almost self-serving to its own point of departure. Anthropologists, for example, have for the most part moved beyond the Enlightenment's rejection or destruction of such alien cultural systems. The reality of such world-views, cosmologies or belief systems is beyond the reach of such critical reasoning if the aim is credibility in terms of the contemporary scholars' world-view. Is it not time that historical Jesus research likewise finds a new way of talking about the reality of such beliefs?

Conclusion

The interconnectedness of vested interest in Orthodox claims about Jesus, the seriousness of establishing the historical credibility of the sources' claims about Jesus, and the caretaker mode of historiography are firmly established in current historical Jesus research. As an object-dependent discipline since its inception, historical Jesus research is concerned with the historicity of Jesus' words and deeds as well as the historical credibility of the sources. Within the conjunction of a caretaker historiographical framework and an object-dependent conception of the discipline, innumerable configurations of portrayals of Jesus are still possible — depending on which texts are identified as authentic or historical. Exposure to similar problems in related disciplines, however, raises an awareness that historical Jesus research might be operating with blinkers that prevent us from seeing what is going on around us. From this point of view, the crisis in historical Jesus research is not really about the diversity of pictures but rather a lack of self-critical reflection about what is going on in the discipline.

If my analysis is correct, current historical Jesus research is still trapped in a caretaker mode of historiography in which the main objective is to establish the credibility of the sources and the historicity of the reported words and deeds of Jesus. However, as developments in other disciplines show, there is a brave new world of comparative analyses that awaits historical Jesus scholarship. The comparativist approach is not concerned with either rejecting or supporting the reality claims of both the New Testament documents and orthodox Christianity but to see them as expressions of human attempts to make sense of their experiences of and in the world. Understanding and explaining the human mind is more productive than simply trying to justify or critically reject home grown truths. One thing is certain, asking what the data about Jesus of Nazareth are about, is totally different from arguing whether or not “it” really happened.

Notes

- 1 According to Sarah Fredericks this debate, “sometimes framed as one between theology and the social scientific study of religion, has been the most contentious element of the development of religious studies” (2010: 165) while for Armin Geertz (2009: 319) this corresponds to a “confessional” as opposed to a comparative approach to the study of religion. Or as Jeppe Sinding Jensen remarks: “One should think that the division of labour be reasonably clear: let religions and traditions speak for themselves and let the study of them speak *about* them. It is only as long as we are under the impression (or spell?) that it is the obligation of the study of something to propagate the self-image of that something and be responsible for its survival that we seem to have a problem” (2011: 33).
- 2 The debate about *ethnocentrism*, the “bugbear for many anthropologists” (Saler 1993: 8) is an indication of the struggle of coming to terms with our situatedness in historical and cultural contexts and the difficulty of building transcultural bridges. Ethnocentrism takes two forms in anthropology (see Wax and Wax 1962: 180 for example): privileging the interpreter’s viewpoint or its counterpart, xenocentrism which maintains that the informants have access to the truth, at least in their home setting (Hahn 1995: 3). Both so-called emic anthropology (ethnocentrism as xenocentrism) accepting the “‘official’ indigenous stance” and “etic” anthropology (ethnocentrism as *mothering outsiders*) are hotly debated issues in anthropology and seriously challenged (see Saler 1993; Halperin 1996: 32).
- 3 The study of anthropology, Morton Klass points out, can be seen as a development from interest in culture to the cross-cultural comparison of cultures (2003: 17-36). See also, for example, the recent discussion on the nature of anthropology as belonging to the Sciences or Humanities (Kuper and Marks 2011: 166).
- 4 Advocates for local and indigenous knowledge, see for example, Okere, Njoku and Devisch (2005).
- 5 This is not unlike the challenge faced by ethnologists and anthropologists of either “going native” or remaining loyal to the science of studying others (see Spickard 2010: 313).
- 6 *Evangelical* is the term used by Powell (2011) and Bock (2011: 4).
- 7 Robert Funk (1996: 64) refers to the conservative group as the “pretend questers” in distinction to the “reNewed questers.” About the former he says: “The point of their quest — to the extent that it can be called a quest at all — is to demonstrate that the canonical gospels are completely or essentially reliable while denying that the non-canonical texts tell us anything significant about Jesus...these questers in fact make the historical Jesus subservient to the creedal Christ. Third questers are really conducting a search primarily for historical evidence to support claims made on behalf of creedal Christianity and the canonical gospels. In other words, the third quest is an apologetic ploy” (1996: 65). Historical Jesus scholars finding *historical* support for the orthodox or creedal position today probably far outnumber critical scholars
- 8 Recently a whole volume of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (2011) was dedicated to this debate inquiring from various angles whether faith commitments preclude one from participating in historical Jesus research.
- 9 Elsewhere Evans claims that the Gospels “have fairly and accurately reported the essential elements of Jesus” teaching, life, death and resurrection” (2006b: 234).

- 10 Van Aarde explicitly sets himself up as a caretaker when he argues that some historical Jesus researchers “are also pastors working in the context of a Christian faith community” (2008: 790). As a critical caretaker Van Aarde can only minister to his flock if the “evolutionary historical development of the Jesus tradition” is taken into account. He says: “Without such a historical sensitivity it would be impossible to minister to my faith community, which is supposed to be the continuation of the values embedded in the Jesus tradition” (2008: 785). By this he means that the historical-critical distinction between the *historical* Jesus and the *kerygmatic* Christ should be upheld (see Van Aarde 2001: 204). It is only the *historical* Jesus purified from the kerygmatic elements that will be able to speak in a secular world. He states it as a historical-critical fact that the Jesus presented in the data could not have been the historical figure but only represents the faith interpretations (distortions?) of that figure. In his explanation: “If such theologians wish to communicate in a scientifically responsible way, they cannot but discern at least two broad strata in the biblical texts, namely that of the *historical* Jesus tradition and that of the interpretation of this tradition by the later faith communities” (Van Aarde 2008: 784).
- 11 As seen above, the very structure of critical historical Jesus research affirms that the Gospels and creedal Christianity are to be purified from theological, mythological or legendary contamination. At the very least, the truth claims of orthodox or dogmatic Christianity are to be rejected or undermined by critical research. To present one more critical voice: “It is also a good thing that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the Christ of Christian orthodoxy, the Christ of the creeds ... The aim of the quest of the historical Jesus is to set Jesus free, to liberate him from prevailing captivities” (Funk 1996: 20-21).
- 12 Current historical Jesus research shares with the previous quest(s) “most of its basic critical presuppositions” as David du Toit (2001: 99) correctly points out.
- 13 Van Aarde (2001: 203) explains this as one of the reasons why historical Jesus research matters: “The Jesus of history is either the implicit or the explicit point of departure for inquiry into the sources behind, the social location of, and the theological tendencies represented by the New Testament writings.” There is a strong and a weak version of the assumption in historical Jesus research that Jesus, the man from Nazareth, is different from the Jesus, the Christ of faith (see Craffert 2008: 39-40, 43-44, 54-55 for detail).
- 14 Vermes (2000: 207) claims that it was Paul and John and not so much the synoptics that turned Jesus of Nazareth into “an other-worldly figure.” However, the process started in the synoptics themselves with the miraculous birth recorded by Matthew and Luke. Vermes also maintains that one should be looking for Jesus “hidden beneath the Gospels” (2000: 209).
- 15 The term *discipline* is used here in a rather neutral way as defined by Saler (2010: 333): “A discipline or intellectual movement is usually identified by three things: the kinds of questions that it raises; the typical answers given to those questions; and the methodologies adopted to crystallize and support the answers.” This is similar to the description of Fredericks (20120: 161): “In an academic discipline, a group of scholars uses particular methods to answer a set of questions to enhance a shared body of knowledge. Scholars in a discipline tend to share terms and epistemological and ontological assumptions, though these elements may be an implicit rather than explicit part of the discipline.” For the sake of the argument, historical Jesus research will be treated as a discipline in the sense of shared

- questions and answers as well as epistemological and ontological assumptions.
- 16 Earlier this point was made by Allison in his discussion of Jesus' resurrection when he said: "Probability is in the eye of the beholder. It depends upon one's worldview, into which the resurrection fits or, alternatively, does not fit...When we look, our eyes are somewhere. It is our worldview that interprets the textual data, not the textual data that determines our worldview" (2005: 340, 342).
 - 17 Laughlin, McManus and d'Aquili have identified what they call *monophasic* and *polyphasic* patterns. A pattern of monophasic consciousness refers to the enculturation of people in Western cultures which give dominance to ego-consciousness. Within such a culture "the only 'real world' experienced is that unfolding in the sensorium during the 'normal' waking phase...and is thus the only phase appropriate to the accrual of information about self and world" (1990: 155). However, most people, diversely situated, accept and experience what is called polyphasic consciousness: for example many more states of consciousness, such as dreams or visions, taken as real and often experienced.
 - 18 Therefore, Maurice Casey's unsympathetic and undiplomatic rejection of my study as an instance of the worst possible example of historical research, only serves to prove my point about caretaker historiography. He maintains it contains a "bizarre discussion" (2010: 33) of the historical Jesus and does not conform to "basic historical research" (2010: 30) which includes primarily the application of the criteria of authenticity (see 2010: 101-141) in order to "establish historically valid conclusions" (2010: 2) about what can be known about Jesus. Unfortunately, he did not pick up that anthropological historiography is not concerned with "did it actually/really happen?" but with the question "what is the best historical explanation (model) for what actually/really happened?"

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