The origins of resurrection faith: the challenge of a social scientific approach

Pieter F Craffert

ABSTRACT
An historical study of the origins of resurrection faith by means of the social sciences - as opposed to a traditional approach - does not accept that only an "eschatological event" can account for its origins; neither does it uncritically accept that the sources can be trusted as faithful historical records. This article, focusing on the origins of resurrection faith, points out some of the epistemological challenges which a social scientific approach poses for traditional New Testament scholarship.

1 INTRODUCTION
According to Gottwald (1979:606) there is a "failure of sociological nerve" in the sense that certain areas are excluded from social scientific analysis, for reasons of faith (cf Domeris 1988:387). Without much fear of contradiction, it can be speculated that the topic of this paper falls into that category. As Domeris clearly indicates, Gottwald's challenge has serious implications for Bible scholars who "are also Christian believers" (1988:387). He closes his article with the remark: "In a much more radical way than any previous critical methodology, modern social scientific analysis marks a new era in the study of religion and the Bible" (Domeris 1988:390). It cannot be doubted that the use of social scientific methods to interpret the New Testament has important implications, both ontological and epistemological (cf Vorster 1987:388).

The title of this article connects the problem of the origins of belief in the resurrection of Jesus with a historical study of the New Testament, using the social sciences. This will be done by comparing the social scientific approach to a historical study, by means of a traditional approach. I will argue that the real challenge to New Testament scholarship starts by taking seriously the epistemological implications of a historical study of the New Testament by means of the social sciences. The social sciences have brought to the study of the Bible a new awareness of what is meant by historical study, and an urgency to the debate on epistemological questions related to it. In the words of Stowers: "If the new movement to use the perspectives of the social sciences in the study of early Christianity is to become fully self-critical it must enter into the debate that has been carried on in the philosophies of science and history" (1985:151).
Such a debate will inevitably have an influence not only on the way New Testament scholars deal with historical questions but also on theology as a science (cf Schnell 1985). I want to indicate a point from which a serious constructive approach should start. When referring to the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event, New Testament scholarship "has no alternative but to think through in the most relentless, searching, and unrestricted way what it means by 'historical event'" (Bater 1969:64). This is true because the resurrection of Jesus is undoubtedly fundamental to Christian tradition, and Christianity, as a historical faith centered on the New Testament proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, "can hardly give up speaking of the Resurrection as a historical event" (Bater 1969:64). In short, the problem: "Christianity is a historical religion! Christianity is an Easter faith!" (Bater 1969:47).

2 THE ORIGINS OF RESURRECTION FAITH
Since there were no eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, questions concerning the historical origins of faith in it are not only inevitable (cf Galvin 1977:513), but also extremely difficult to answer. The origins of resurrection faith are not discussed in any New Testament document, but are constructions made from the available information in the texts. It is the stories which express and defend faith in the resurrection which need to be interpreted in order to determine its origins.

Usually, constructions of the origins of faith in the resurrection of Jesus rely on two sources: the discovery of the empty tomb and narratives of the appearances of the risen Christ (cf Walker 1972:42; Brown 1973:77-78; Galvin 1977:513; Pesch 1983:81). I will concentrate on the latter.

Pesch initially argued that the roots of resurrection faith lay neither in the empty tomb nor in the appearances but rather in the historical Jesus (1983:84; cf Galvin 1977:514-515). He later came to accept the Easter appearances as part of the historical cause of resurrection faith: "Die de facto-Evidenz der Auferstehung wurde den Jüngern in ihren Visionen zuteil ... Die Ostervisionen sind also der historische Ort, die notwendige Vorgabe der Entstehung des Glaubens an Jesu Auferstehung ..." (Pesch 1983:96-97). According to Walker it is accepted by most scholars that the disciples believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, not because they were unable to find his body in the tomb but because they were convinced that he had appeared to them (cf 1969:157). Wilckens and Brown confirm this:

It was the appearance of the risen Jesus in Galilee which inspired belief in the resurrection (Wilckens 1968:73).

In the genesis of resurrection faith it was the appearance of the glorified Lord that first brought his disciples to believe; and this belief, in return, interpreted the empty tomb (Brown 1973:127).
I am less interested in their conclusions than in the way they arrive at them. It is clear, however, that a large number of New Testament scholars accept the appearance narratives as being in some way connected to the origins of resurrection faith. For the sake of the argument this is taken as a valid position in order to illustrate how a historical construction of the origins of resurrection faith is made.

The appearance stories in the New Testament have so many diverse information regarding the time, place, sequence and people involved, that it is difficult to form a clear picture of what happened (cf Moule 1968:4; Bater 1969:61-64; Brown 1973:96-113). Therefore, two important aspects mentioned in a previous paragraph are of importance: without interpretation of the data no construction can be made by any scholar. As a matter of fact, there are no facts without interpretation (cf Wilckens 1968:75; Goguel 1953:66). For that reason, first, we are forced to set up hypotheses based upon assumptions and knowledge about human behaviour to interpret the data (cf Brown 1973:105,108,126; Wilckens 1968:61). Second, that forces us to accept that when the origins of resurrection faith are being considered, we are dealing with some kind of human construction. No attempt at explaining the origins of resurrection faith is without these two aspects.

2.1 A traditional approach
The position of people like Brown and Wilckens is a major trend in New Testament research into the resurrection and the origins of resurrection faith. If it is accepted that the origin of resurrection faith lies in the appearances of the risen Jesus, this can serve as a paradigm to determine a pattern in those constructions. My aim will be to determine that pattern and give an indication of the assumptions or presuppositions behind it which can broadly speaking be covered by the word traditional.

There are at least six accounts of appearance narratives in the New Testament texts (cf Bater 1969:61; Brown 1973:100). The question that preoccupies Brown is "How are we to decide which tradition is the oldest and where Jesus first appeared?" (1973:101). In other words, what he tries to establish from the various accounts is: who saw the resurrected Jesus when and where? Brown admits that the use of some kind of hypothesis is inevitable to make sense of the appearance stories on which the origins of the resurrection faith is built (1973:108-110). What has to be established is the correct sequence of appearances because it is simply assumed that a correct sequence will provide the answer to the origins of resurrection faith.

A basic pattern emerges: the origins of resurrection faith can only be explained as the result of an eschatological event (cf Nineham 1977:159; Watson 1987:366). Like Brown, Wilckens also assumes such an event when he argues that an inquiry into the Easter events should be the starting point for a historical explanation of the emergence of resurrection faith (cf Wilckens 1977:112). In the words of Perry: "only an Event (of some sort, normal, or
paranormal) could be adequate to give to the resurrection the formative importance it undoubtedly had for the early Christians" (1974a:139) or, in the words of Lampe (quoted by Moule 1968:4): "There was an objective Easter event which produced the dramatic change in the outlook of the disciples." Thus, either something happened or the resurrection belief was due to a mere subjective experience by the disciples (cf Yamauchi 1974a:663). To be more explicit: the amazing transformation in the disciples can only be explained by their assuming that Jesus really had risen, and appeared to them.

There is a second aspect to the pattern. From the "existence and rule of God ... the creator of the universe and the ruler of all its destiny ... who is the Father of Jesus" (Wilckens 1968:52) it follows easily that a historical investigation cannot give an adequate explanation "of the coming into being of new and effective factors in history, because the arbitrary element, which is part of the nature of such newly occurring events, is not susceptible to the process of analogical comparison which is the basic methodological principle of all historical investigation" (Wilckens 1968:61). Brown is even more outspoken on the nature of the phenomena under investigation. When dealing with the "moments of God's eschatological intervention on behalf of Jesus" (Brown 1973:70) one can only accept the uniqueness of such an event. Not only is the resurrection a unique eschatological event (cf Brown 1973:73), but the appearances of the risen Jesus also entail "a sight that goes beyond ordinary experience" (Brown 1973:113). If the historian can give no discernible explanation within his own scope, "it is not unreasonable to give weight to a well-supported claim that the explanation lies in some other realm" (Moule in Cupitt 1979:37). Underlying all the arguments in this paragraph are two other problematic aspects: an appearance narrative is taken at face value to be a "faithful historical record" (Watson 1987:368) and the simple acceptance that what are referred to are unique eschatological events presupposes that at first sight we know what the texts are referring to.

That the sources are used at face value is clear enough in the literature where many textual references are quoted in support of an argument. Obviously, any historian must, to some extent, take his sources at face value, but he cannot uncritically accept their points of view as being historically reliable.

What are referred to can only be "unique eschatological interventions" by God. This is, as we saw, the argument of Brown (1973:70,73,113), Wilckens (1968:61) and Moule (in Cupitt 1979:37). It clearly is a circular argument: a unique eschatological event is described because this is in line with the reliable narratives; that the narratives can be treated as reliable historical records is presupposed in the way they function as proof for the unique eschatological events. But it is precisely the historicity of the narratives that is in question, and it can therefore not be supposed from the beginning. There
is one more question to be asked: do we really know that the reliable texts refer to unique eschatological events?

In summary, it is traditional to accept that only a unique eschatological event can account for the origin of resurrection faith. It cannot be a normal historical event but has to be a unique eschatological event. The latter because we have the reliable testimonies of the first Christians in the New Testament that Jesus has appeared to them and we have no doubt what the texts are talking about: unique eschatological events.

2.2 A social scientific approach

Jackson argues that the New Testament evidence is so unsatisfactory "that our assumptions about human behavior are bound to play a decisive role if we seek to understand the origins of the belief in Jesus' resurrection" (1975:416). Therefore he uses a social psychological theory, namely the theory of cognitive dissonance, to examine the disciples' response to the crucifixion. He argues, mainly from the Gospel stories, that Jesus and his disciples committed themselves to a prophecy that was open to disconfirmation: they went up to Jerusalem filled with hope for the arrival of the kingdom of God and what happened instead was the crucifixion, which made a mockery of their beliefs and hopes (see 1975:418-420). They surely went up to Jerusalem expecting trouble, but "the most likely hypothesis would seem to be that on the night before his death they were expecting a supernatural vindication as the issue of this trouble, not a crucifixion" (Jackson 1975:419; cf Walker 1972:45ff). Jackson does not assert that inevitably it was the crucifixion that produced the resurrection but, given the fact that subsequently the belief developed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, "this belief is explicable in terms of dissonance theory." Therefore he says:

According to dissonance theory, it would have been impossible for the disciples to continue to hold the cognition that Jesus had a special relationship to the coming of the kingdom along with the cognition that he was dead. Since for these disciples dissonance was not to be reduced by abandoning faith in Jesus, they were therefore led to modify the cognition regarding his death, and the belief in the resurrection was the result (Jackson 1975:420).

The second important assumption in his argument is that it is a fallacy to think that the historian can approach his documents without making assumptions and without a critical examination of the assumptions (cf Jackson 1975:416). It just is not true that the historian sacrifices his own critical reasoning to swallow his sources' stories whole.

I want to elaborate on an implication of the above remarks, which is clearly opposed to what is traditionally assumed. Underlying the traditional approach is an assumption about human behaviour which can roughly be
seen as follows: followers of a religious movement (such as the disciples of Jesus) will inevitably abandon their beliefs when they encounter a severe setback (like the crucifixion) (cf Pannenberg 1968:96; Watson 1987:367; Jackson 1975:416; Wilckens 1968:61) and therefore only an eschatological event can account for their belief. Is this assumption accepted because they were the disciples of Jesus, or because no human being would behave like that?

The social sciences offer the historian the help of comparable studies on human action. Research on the theory of cognitive dissonance at least suggests that one need not accept the assumption regarding human behaviour current in the traditional approach. As Watson argues, there are numerous instances where a crisis has lead not to a total rejection, but rather to a re-interpretation of beliefs in the light of the crisis, and of the crisis in the light of beliefs (cf Watson 1987:367). The case of Sabbatai Sevi, which is a close parallel to that of Jesus, illustrates the principle. After the disconfirmation of expectations of a liberation of his (Sevi's) people and a restoration of creation to its paradisal harmony, it seems inconceivable that anyone of his followers would continue to believe in him as a Messiah (cf Jackson 1975:421). One of the responses to Sevi's apostasy from the faith of his fathers was that he had not apostatised but had been taken up into heaven (cf Jackson 1975:421-425).

That the two approaches mentioned are virtually opposite poles is beyond doubt. Although it is not always easy to clearly divide the issues on the philosophical, epistemological, and even ontological levels, my focus will be on the epistemology of the social scientific approach. In the final section of the paper I shall consider some of the epistemological assumptions apparent from the discussion of the social scientific approach to the origins of resurrection faith. I shall argue that from the debate going on in the social sciences in general some important epistemological challenges resemble the position represented by the social scientific approach. Although New Testament scholars using this approach to interpret New Testament documents may differ, they cannot ignore the challenge to become involved in the debate.

3 SOME CHALLENGES OF THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO NEW TESTAMENT RESEARCH

3.1 Historical study by means of the social sciences: an orientation
Of the many facets to this topic, only a few will be touched on. These include an interpretive historiography, historical data and historical evidence or facts, and the experience of the strangeness of the New Testament world.

In short, the "business of the historian is ... simply to find out as well as he can what actually happened in a given situation" (Bauer 1977:29). The historian, like the social scientist, is confronted with the question of how to "do justice to the strangeness that we discover when we encounter alien types of
activities, beliefs, rituals, institutions, and practices, without falsifying or distorting them" (Bernstein 1983:28).

There is a movement away from a "positivistic-minded historical approach" (Ware 1975b:183) which seeks to explain the brute data recorded in the sources, to a more phenomenological one. More attention is given to the understanding of facts and their meaning (cf Perry 1974a:136). Confronted with this task, the social scientific approach is a philosophical choice for a specific view on historiography: an interpretive one. It is opposed to a view "wat uit eerbied vir die gesag van 'n teks niks meer wil sê as wat die teks self sê nie, ook al word die sin van wat die teks sê, nie ten volle verstaan nie" (Rossouw 1981:20). In the words of Mommsen: it differs from a view which accepts that the historian should remain free of preconceptions and assumptions and should merely "reconstruct past reality on the basis of actual facts as the latter are presented in the sources" (1978:20).

This new approach to history is a movement away from the narration and explanation of essentially political events (see Pirenne 1959:96) - where the emphasis is on politics, the individual, and chronology (cf Hobsbawm 1980:6; Burke 1980:25) - to a "problem-oriented, analytic approach" (Iggers 1983:279). With the help of the social sciences it has become possible not only to describe, but also to "structure and explain historical data" (Kocka 1980:426). Not only the what and how questions, but also the why questions are addressed (cf Stone 1979:5) where analytical methods developed in the social sciences are used to "find some formula, some hypothesis, some model, some method which has immediate relevance to one's own work, and which seems to help one to understand one's data better and to arrange and interpret them in a more meaningful way" (Stone 1977:19).

With regard to historical facts, the implication of this approach is that there are no historical facts and data "until the historian finds significance in it by approaching it with certain assumptions and a specific line of inquiry" (Mommsen 1978:20). The historical data that we find in a source only become historical facts when they are placed in "patterns of relationship" (Mommsen 1978:22). It means that the past cannot be discovered by mere observation, but opens itself to us only in critical inquiry; "how we interpret the sources, which answers satisfy us, and how we tell, analyse, describe or explain, that depends on the concepts, categories and definitions that we use and on a given frame of reference" (Nipperdey 1978:4).

The historian confronted with alien phenomena cannot but be confronted with the question of their valid interpretation. The history of anthropology provides plenty of evidence for the basic problem of interpreting such phenomena: the temptation is to read into or project our own standards and concepts onto what is being studied or, on the other hand, to "go native" (cf Bernstein 1983:93-94). The work of Geertz is an excellent example of an interpretive approach.
Geertz emphasises the need to start from the native's point of view if we want to make sense of alien phenomena: "The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to" (Geertz 1979b:228), or the "culture of a people is an ensemble of texts ... which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (1979a:222). Geertz approaches this hermeneutic task by his distinction between "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts. One has to learn to gain access to the natives' or participants' interpretations of their symbolic forms, that is, "words, images, institutions, behaviors - in terms of which, in each place, people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another" (Geertz 1979b:228).

The task of interpretation undoubtedly starts off with a guess on what our informants are up to, or what we think they are up to (cf Geertz 1973:15). Therefore, to construct their descriptions demands somehow "an imaginative act" (Geertz 1973:15) where the guessing of meaning, the assessing of the guesses and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, follow from the initial imaginative act, or are similar to "grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke ... reading a poem" (Geertz 1979b:241).

But in the end it is the historian who has to make sense out of the phenomenon studied. As Mommsen says, from what the natives say they are up to, it is not possible to arrive at "definite conclusions about any, much less all, of the structures that actually affected these peoples' lives. These structures become visible only when viewed from certain perspectives" (1978:21). It is important to realise that one cannot perceive as the participants perceive, but one has to grasp the content of their experience-near concepts to such an extent as to place them in an illuminating connection with the experience-distant concepts that theorists use (cf Geertz 1979b:227-228). It is also true that "more often than not, their perspective will provide only a starting point from which the historian can then develop his own theory" (Mommsen 1978:21).

Smith has strongly reacted against the "pseudo-historical criticism" (1968:11) that is done in the field of biblical studies (cf Ninham 1977:77). To him the study of religion is similar to the study of poetry: "having experienced what the ceremony or the composition has to offer, the historian, like the critic, must then be able to return from the world of imagination to that of fact, and to determine the relation of the poetic or religious complex to its environment in the historical world" (Smith 1968:17). What he is advocating is the ability of the historian first to determine what his subjects are up to, and then to return from the concepts and understanding of the foreign group to his own language and experience.

The historian confronted with the question of the origins of resurrection faith faces exactly that dilemma: how to do justice to his sources and at the same time give an adequate interpretation. The two most serious differences between the approaches discussed become evident. Firstly, how do we deal
with alien phenomena such as a faith in the resurrection and the appearances of someone supposed to be dead? The historian has to navigate between the actors’ or natives’ conception and his understanding of such alien phenomena. Secondly, how do we approach and interpret in a meaningful way the sources that narrate such events? The traditional approach assumes that we already know what kind of phenomena we encounter, and that the sources provide reliable facts which need not be interpreted.

3.2 The origins of resurrection faith: what are we talking about?
In the process of interpreting historical phenomena the historian is confronted with data that is not only temporally, but very often also in worldview terms, miles apart from him (cf Nineham 1977:145-152; 1982:251). That is very true when the origins of resurrection faith – and, for that matter, the whole question of the resurrection of Jesus – are considered. Just as historical understanding is basic to our world-view, myth was basic to the ancient world-view (cf Ware 1975b:183). What did the writers mean by resurrection? What did they intend to communicate and express? Did they experience it as a unique eschatological event (cf Nineham 1977:161) or are we so familiar with what is meant by the resurrection in our Christian tradition that we find it difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the sense given to it by the first century actors and authors?

As Goguel says, it was "neither impossible or even difficult for men of the first century to entertain the idea of a dead man coming back to life" (1953:66). To be more specific regarding the possibility of a resurrection, Wilckens says that in surrounding Judaism "the resurrection was expected in connection with the Final Day of Judgment" (1977:125). I am not saying that the resurrection of a single individual was commonly known or expected in Judaism (cf Wilckens 1977:125), but that for the disciples of Jesus it was, within their general religious and theological milieu, acceptable to express such ideas. This difference in world-view strikes one in the comments of Wilckens on a first century person's reaction to revelations (such as those of Paul in Gl 1:15) and Christophanies when he says that "people in those days essentially accepted the possibility of such an extraordinary disclosure of 'hidden reality'" (1977:119). In sociological terms, it was part of the common knowledge of their society and could be accommodated within their world-view (cf Jackson 1975:423; Walker 1972:51-52).

The point I am making is that many scholars accept – at least in theory – that there is a difference both in the world-views and religious milieus of the first century people and the modern day historian. What is recorded in those first century documents does not sound familiar and would not be understandable to a 20th century historian unless he takes the meaning of the concept resurrection as a "concept which emerged as the eschatological thrust of an intensely this-worldly faith" (Bater 1969:65) which, with all its implications,
can only be understood from a study of the first century world-view, especially its religious and theological aspects.

3.3 The origins of resurrection faith: sources and historical facts
Contrary to the traditional approach, the whole argument regarding the need for historical interpretation suggests that, if the sources have to be interpreted to make sense, what the sources say cannot be accepted uncritically. What we need is to move away from "a 'canon mentality', an 'it-is-written approach'" (Botha 1989:1). No witness can be accepted as final authority; all sources must be subjected to "a rigorous cross-examination" (Henaut 1986:178), in which the merits of their testimonies are assessed. This is succinctly stated by Nineham (1977:79):

Data are nothing more than data. It is only by testing and sifting them in every possible way, and by refusing to take any of them on face value, that a historian can arrive at a picture which deserves to be called a genuinely historical reconstruction and will win respect from his fellow historians.

Unless it is accepted, as in the traditional approach, that the data that the sources report are clear and understandable, one can hardly use them to decide on the where, when and how questions of the appearances or the origins of resurrection faith.

Closely connected to this is an aspect of historical constructions: historical facts and evidence are the result of the historian's interpretation of the data. This implies that a historical construction is more than the fitting together of loose data (words and phrases) which refer to the resurrection of Jesus or the Christophanies. The line of questioning in the social scientific approach will give an indication of what I mean. Questions, for example, on the disciples' expectations and understanding of the kingdom of God (cf Jackson 1975:418-419) and their perception of Jesus as possibly a messianic figure (cf Walker 1972:46) all form part of the data needed to constitute the facts or evidence on which a construction can be built.4

It has already been said that the resurrection of Jesus was not seen or described by any of the disciples or any New Testament author. What are considered resurrection narratives are, at the very most, narratives of an inferred resurrection or of some sequel to the resurrection (cf Bater 1969:52). Perhaps the legacy of many centuries of triumphant Christianity has prevented us from doing justice to what the sources themselves intended. It seems as if the New Testament sources themselves resist the kind of treatment they receive in the traditional approach. If, as is suggested by the social scientific approach, resurrection faith did not originate from the Christophanies, then the approach has to be able to explain why and how the appearance narratives originated. An answer to this question will have to include a study of what the documents themselves want to communicate about the resurrection
and the appearances. Only some remarks on the function of the appearance narratives will suffice to illustrate the point.

Walker argues that, like the ancient Hebrews who legitimised sacred places by means of theophanic traditions, "the early Christians developed and used Christophany traditions to legitimise the leadership of particular individuals and groups within the church" (1969:163). Wilckens supports the idea that the legitimation of leadership was one of the functions of appearance stories in the early Church (cf 1968:59-60,69,73; and cf Pesch 1983:83). For example, Paul's references to his experiences of seeing the risen Jesus are not concerned with their historicity or actuality, but are used in the contexts of leadership, authority, or the validity of gospel versions in the early Church (cf Walker 1969:162). The three parallel versions of Paul's conversion in Acts, where Christophanies to Paul are narrated, are today seen by most scholars as "commissioning accounts" (cf Hedrick 1981:417; Mullins 1976; Hubbard 1977; Hubbard 1978; Collins 1986:114-115) which, inter alia, have the function of securing "that God's hand is continually seen as making possible each new step in the missionary program of the book" (Hubbard 1978:198).

Within the theological milieu of first century Judaism, this legitimising function of the Christophanies complements the social scientific approach. It at least emphasises the need to include in the construction of the origins of resurrection faith the function of such narratives in both the historical situation and the literary setting of the book.

3.4 The origins of resurrection faith: faith or history?
The differences between the two approaches to the origins of resurrection faith inevitably lead to a discussion of the faith-history problem. Obviously, only a few remarks can be made.

Given the assumptions of the traditional approach, it is argued that some events are not open to normal historical interpretation (cf 2.2). Closely connected to this, it is then often argued that it is very unscientific to decide beforehand that something like the resurrection is impossible on the basis of our knowledge of the natural sciences (cf Pannenberg 1968:98; Brown 1973:72; Nineham 1977:160). In both instances the principle of analogy is at stake.

Firstly, it is often said that the resurrection of Jesus and the origins of resurrection faith are unique and "not susceptible to the process of analogical comparison" (Christianity is an Easter faith). On the other hand, there "is no justification for affirming Jesus' resurrection as an event that really happened, if it is not to be affirmed as a historical event as such" (Pannenberg 1968:99) (Christianity is historical religion). Is some Holy Ghost historiography (cf Best 1983:184) unique to New Testament phenomena the answer?

Perhaps the most important challenge emphasised by the social scientific approach is the challenge of historical study of the New Testament per se: no one has the right to use the tag historical unless it can win the respect of fel-
The assumption that Christianity can have no priority over other religions leads to the second objection: if the possibility of unique occurrences is ruled out, what is being said is that it has been decided beforehand (unscientifically) to exclude the possibility of the resurrection of Jesus. From a social scientific approach there are obvious objections to this argument.

The argument goes hand in hand with a positivistic view on historiography. It accepts that what the sources say is trustworthy, that we at first sight know what the sources mean, and that because of that we know that the events were supernatural. Both these aspects are questioned (cf 3.2; 3.3). But there is a more fundamental objection which is closely connected to all historical study: the principle of analogy.

To be comprehensible an event should be comparable to others because "no historical event could be described, much less could it be in any sense explained, if it were wholly unique" (Mandelbaum 1960:231). Thus a basic assumption of the social sciences is that "all social science is comparative" (Lipset 1968:33) or in the words of Harvey: "without the principle of analogy, it seems impossible to understand the past" (1966:32). This implies, as Smith argues, that the historian "does require a world in which these normal phenomena are not interfered with by arbitrary and ad hoc divine interventions to produce abnormal events with special historical consequences" (1968:12).

The principle of analogy which is one of the basic principles of all social scientific study, is not restricted to the sceptical historian, but applies to all historiography as well as to everyday life. There is no other option but to apply to present practical standards of everyday life to determine whether the decision of the historian to reject the claims of some events narrated in ancient sources, is valid. If such arbitrary interventions by the "ol' Devil" (Smith 1968:14) or some supernatural intervention are not allowed in everyday life, and similar claims are not accepted in all ancient literature, then the argument is mere rhetoric. Only if the principle of analogy is not accepted as a rule for everyday life, can one express this objection to the historian's non-acceptance as possible everything recorded in the sources.
To be sure, any historian has to use the principle of analogy and therefore has a priori to exclude certain probabilities; this blade cuts both ways. Thus the question is not whether, but on what grounds, certain possibilities are excluded or included. The standards of everyday life are an indispensable criterion for a historian to a priori exclude certain possibilities. For that reason the historical study of the New Testament will have to include a debate on 20th century world-views. Against the objection to such exclusions one can echo Bater’s remark: "It is virtually decided in advance that the Resurrection is historical" (1969:55). Do the objectors not in advance (a priori) decide that what was recorded in certain sources (the Bible) did happen as recorded? One should thus ask whether the exclusion of certain possibilities or the objection to the exclusion rests on a doubtful historical presumption.

4 SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

A constructive study of the resurrection of Jesus and the origins of resurrection faith cannot even consider ceasing to refer to the resurrection as a historical event (cf Bater 1969:64). But, at the same time, it implies having to think through what it means by a historical event. If we as New Testament scholars refer to our work as scientific and historical, we have to include in our debates the issues raised by historians. That modern scholars are very much aware of this fact – as is reflected in what is said about resurrection faith and the origins of resurrection faith – cannot be doubted. Whether it is taken seriously is quite another matter.

One thing is sure, historical understanding is as basic to our world-view as was myth to the ancient world-view and, as Ware says, that implies inter alia that we have to rethink the way we talk and think about Jesus Christ (cf Ware 1975b:183). One can even add: and the way we see the origins of resurrection faith. If it is true that New Testament scholarship is seriously challenged by the social scientific approach, this challenge cannot be met by a withdrawal to the safe bay of theological certainties but it calls for a re-thinking and re-evaluation of the epistemological predilections which form the basis of the theological certainties. That the challenge is to New Testament scholarship, can hardly be doubted.

The traditional approach uses outdated categories for historical events: either they did happen or they should be seen as some kind of delusion. The challenge of an interpretive approach is not to make a final judgment on its ontology but rather to interpret what happened, starting from the actor’s point of view, using the principle of analogy and taking his world-view seriously. It is not concerned with the question of whether it happened as reported, but tries to understand what could possibly have happened. Once one has rejected the mentality of "it has meaning only if it happened as recorded", then it becomes possible to ask for the meaning present in an event (cf Meeks 1986:181).
ENDNOTES

1 The historicity of the empty tomb is argued by Craig (1985) who says that more and more New Testament scholars accept it. Both Wilckens (1977:116) and Brown (1973:113-125) accept that it was extremely probable that the tomb was empty and, because of the appearances, they understood and interpreted the meaning of the empty tomb. Although it is usually the aim of such arguments, it should be said that historical evidence of an empty tomb, no matter how reliable, cannot prove the resurrection of Jesus (cf Bater 1969:52).

2 A Jew, Sabbatai Sevi was born in 1626. He can in many respects be seen as a parallel to Jesus (cf Davies 1984:261-267). A young rabbi, Nathan of Gaza, proclaimed him the Messiah in 1665. This news quickly spread throughout the Diaspora and had an astonishing effect: massive repentance, spiritual regeneration and enthusiasm, visions, miracles, and a messianic revival. Sabbatai set out for Constantinople to overthrow the sultan. Before he got there he was seized and offered a choice by the Turkish authorities: either to reject his faith and be converted to Islam or be tortured to death. He chose the former (cf Zenner 1966:113-118; Jackson 1975:424; Davies 1984:258).

3 "An experience-near concept is roughly, one which an individual — a patient, a subject, in our case an informant — might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one which various types of specialists — an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist — employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims" (Geertz 1979b:227).

4 One can disagree about whether the theory of cognitive dissonance is a suitable one but whether it is accepted or not does not in any way change the basic assumption of this approach. A rejection of the specific model does not mean a rejection of the approach. As a matter of fact, it only encourages the New Testament historian to become involved in the theoretical debate in the social sciences in order to improve his own skills and use of the models and theories available to all historians (cf Malina 1986).

WORKS CONSULTED


Geertz, C 1979b. From the native’s point of view: On the nature of anthropological understanding, in Rabinow & Sullivan 1979:225-241.


Stowers, S K 1985. The social sciences and the study of early Christianity, in Green, W S (ed), *Approaches*


P F Craffert, Department of New Testament, UNISA, P O Box 392, Pretoria, 0001, Republic of South Africa.