THE EPISTEMIC STATUS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE EMANCIPATORY LIVING OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS IN ENGAGED HERMENEUTICS

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ABSTRACT

The present-day global culture challenges First-World theologians to coalesce with Third-World theologians. Such an enterprise is conditioned by the identification of commonalities in theological inquiry. Hermeneutics of the Bible, and especially of the New Testament, is an important common ground for ‘traditional theology’ and ‘contextual theology’ alike. This paper, however, argues that there is a foundational reason why the historical Jesus and not the canon should be seen as the common ground for the engagement by First-World as well as Third-World theologians. This argument relates to the epistemic status of the canon in liberation theology. The canon originated during the time when the agricultural society shifted to an agrarian one. This shift was accompanied by, among other things, the process of urbanisation and the increase of inequality and of the scarcity of resources. Our memory of the historical Jesus tradition keeps us in touch with Jesus’ emancipatory living during these circumstances—an emancipatory living that unmask the hegemony that could be embedded in the canon.

1 SUPPOSITION

This study is about conversion. I believe that distortions in society are not enduringly transformed by revolutionising societal structures, but by challenging the core values at the basis of the distortion. A transformation of or departure from specific dispositions and values in our social world needs a reflection on the theoretical beliefs that serve as legitimation of the social interactions basic to these dispositions and values—in spite of contextual hermeneutics’ preference for knowing by doing rather than for knowing by reflecting (cf. Lane 1991:36). It remains, therefore, worth while paying serious attention to David Tracy’s (1987:101, 107) insistence that those who strongly focus on praxis should not negate the cognitive demand for reflection on theories of doing theology as well as on the complexity of any process of interpretation (cf. Lane 1991:18-37). It is thus my assumption that emancipation starts with a change of consciousness. Against this background it is the aim of my paper—in which the direct words of scholars who are committed to the emancipation of the destitute are frequently
and deliberately used—to transcend particular shortcomings in existing contextual hermeneutical studies and to propose an alternative design for engaged hermeneutics. This design should be adequate for all exegetes and not only for exegetes who represent the marginalised in society. It is my intention to broaden the point of departure and the circle of conversational partners in contextual hermeneutics in order to emancipate the ‘oppressor’ as well as the ‘oppressed’. Therefore, the term ‘liberation theology’/‘contextual hermeneutics’ is deliberately replaced by the term ‘engaged hermeneutics’ to accommodate this broadened perspective.

The proposed design intends to avoid those interpretative fallacies which are generally seen (also by traditional liberation theologians) as legitimate criticisms, namely anachronism, reductionism and ethnocentrism—which all boil down to a strategy of reading against the grain of a text. In a very particular sense such a reading strategy flows from the assumption that the relation of the Bible and its readers’ social world should be taken for granted. More specifically, it is the readers’ struggle against exploiting structures that is taken as point of departure. These structures are those of contemporary experience, a set of ecological, cultural, economical and political conditions often very different from those in which the people of biblical times lived. Therefore, the interpretative fallacies mentioned above condense to what can be called the hermeneutic heresy of misplaced concreteness: pre-industrial biblical ‘facts’ are placed in a modern field of social relations.

2 POINT OF DEPARTURE AND CONVERSATIONAL PARTNER

In contextual theology we find an alternative point of departure in theological inquiry (cf McAfee Brown 1978:60-62), namely the economically poor and politically oppressed (and not the ‘givenness’ of an ‘infallible’ Bible, an ‘infallible’ church or the ‘inherent’ rationality of the human mind), and a different conversational partner (cf McAfee Brown 1978:62-64), namely the nonperson, the peripheral person (and not the ‘non-believer’, the one for whom belief has at least become difficult in an age of science). In the light of our present-day post-modern global culture, First-World theologians are challenged to coalesce with Third-World theologians.

1 In 1988, in other words before the recent changes in Eastern Europe and the previous Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Leonardo Boff (1988:3-4) explains the expression ‘Third World’, coined by the French sociologists in the fifties, as follows: ‘It designates those countries that exist on the periphery of the industrialised capitalist world (the USA and Canada, Western Europe, Japan, Australasia, making up the “First World”) and outside the orbit of the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, including the USSR, which make up the “Second World”’. According to Boff, the main feature of the Third World is its underdevelopment: economical and technological backwardness, widespread poverty, the existence of authoritarian political institutions, illiteracy and ‘the lack of participation by the people in the processes of society’, and on the religious level, the churches’ dependence on those in the centre for resources, of personnel and funds, and the proliferation
It is not only desirable but also essential that we become engaged with the crises that feature in the Third World. But as the First World, on the one hand, may not escape its accountability for its share of the disruption of the Third World, the Third World, on the other hand, cannot dream of living any longer in our postmodern global village without the economy and modern technology of the First World, just as postmodernity would be unthinkable without modernity (cf Van Aarde 1994b:609). Postmodernity represents only a selective departure from certain positions and attitudes that characterise the Modern Era. A dual engagement is a responsible way to do relevant theology in the postmodern world. Like Harvey Cox (1984:268), I believe the postmodern world will require a different theology....But I believe that such a theology cannot be successfully formulated unless the modern liberal legacy is appropriated and incorporated. Only a theology that has taken the modern age seriously will be able to take seriously what is coming next'.

By ‘dual engagement’ I do not necessarily mean that Third-World theologies should be exported to the First World as though they are export items. We First-World theologians will have to develop our own engaged hermeneutics. Much can be learned by reflecting on the epistemology of Third-World theologies. Hence, a dual engagement implies an adaptation of the dispositions, methodologies and teleologies in theological inquiry from both traditional theology and contextual theology. Such an enterprise is conditioned by the identification of commonalities.

3 SEEKING COMMON GROUND

Hermeneutics of the Bible, and especially of the New Testament, is an important common ground for ‘traditional theology’ and ‘contextual theology’ alike. Both theologies hold onto the importance of Scripture as the source for theology. More specifically, Jesus of Nazareth is seen as the ‘answer’ (cf Breech 1989:13) to our problems in the First as well as the Third World. Irrespective of the different points of departure in theological inquiry, one of the so-called salvation elements in the ‘life’ of Jesus is usually taken as the answer or solution to issues and problems faced by both First and Third-World theologians (cf Vorster 1994:626): incarnation, death and crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost and second coming. Contextual theologians usually emphasise either the incarnation or the crucifixion of Jesus, because they are interested in a Jesus who suf-
fers with the oppressed (cf Chikane 1985:46).

But what about the ‘Christ of the Western churches and the Jesus pursued by contemporary scholarship’—to use a phrase from James Breech’s previous Jesus-book, *The silence of Jesus: The authentic voice of the historical man*. According to Breech (1983:4) they are both ‘the products of specifically Western conceptions’. This observation concurs with the social phenomenon that to be a Western is for many almost identical with being a Christian and vice versa. Therefore, in the Third World the Christian church has been received as almost identical with ‘the powers that be’ (Song 1993:57-58). In protest against any kind of such an imposed ‘powerful ideology’, Third-World theologies have silenced the ‘Christ of faith’ witnessed by an authoritarian Westernised canon and church. Instead, they terminated the ‘silence of the authentic voice of the historical man’, Jesus of Nazareth. Leonardo Boff (1988:10) draws the following conclusion: ‘So liberation theology is critical reflection on human practice (of human beings in general and Christians in particular) in the light of Jesus’ practice and the demands of the Gospel, carried out in order to improve this practice and make it more effective.’

4 WHAT ABOUT THE CANON?

It thus seems that there is a foundational reason why the historical Jesus and not the canon as such should be seen as the common ground for the engagement by First as well as Third-World theologians. It relates to another important element in the epistemology of engaged hermeneutics, namely to the epistemic status of the canon. Traditional hermeneutics (from the perspective of Western androcentric theology) tends to accept the authority of the canon and the tradition. Its deepest wish is to allow tradition to be transmitted with its original force and it is therefore blind to the view of the canon as an ideological vehicle for domination and oppression. Therefore, in engaged hermeneutics one is challenged to reflect on the ideologically conditioned origins of the canon.

The canon originated in the time when the horticultural society shifted to an agrarian society. During the horticultural period people had lived on uncultivated plants and on hunting. ‘Agrarian societies can be characterized by the invention of the plow, the discovery of how to harness animal power, and the discovery of the basic principles of metallurgy. The latter made possible the forging of iron plowshares, which was a great advantage over their wooden predecessors. The subsequent invention of the wheel and the sail greatly facilitated the movement of

(1988:75), presents the resurrection of Jesus as the ‘radical symbol of Christian liberation’. Nthamburi focuses on ‘poverty and racism in South Africa, economic domination by transnational corporations, neo-colonialism and imperialism in the Church and in theology’.

4 Or, as Virgil Elizondo & Leonardo Boff (1988b:xii) put it: ‘For the peoples of the Third World...becoming Church often meant the fatal end of their customs, traditions, values and religious expression. The result has been that the Church has not been experienced as the sacrament of salvation but as the ultimate instrument of the oppressive colonisers.’
people and goods. Agrarian societies can be distinguished, on the one hand, from simple horticultural societies using the hoe, terracing, irrigating, fertilizing and metal tools. It is distinguished, on the other hand, from industrial societies, where the raw materials used are far more diversified, the sources of energy quite different, and the tools far more complex and efficient' (cf Van Eck 1993:259-260 note 56; based on the work of Gerhard Lenski\(^5\) (cf 1966:189-296; 1970:244-245; 1991; see also Van Aarde 1994a:88-94). This process reached its zenith during the so-called advanced agrarian society which commenced round about 500 BCE (cf van Aarde 1993a:515-545). By the time of Jesus, advanced agrarian societies were firmly established in the Middle East, throughout most of the Mediterranean world, and in much of India and China. Within the next thousand years the advanced agrarian pattern spread over most of Europe and much of southeast Asia and expanded further in India and China. Still later it was transplanted to the European colonies in the New World. Advanced agrarian societies still survive in hybridized form in much of Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, where they constitute the majority of the problem-ridden, underdeveloped nations of our day (Lenski 1970:251).

Cultural anthropologists demonstrate from a macrosociological perspective that the shift from a horticultural (7000-3000 BCE) to an agrarian society (3000 BCE-1800 CE) was accompanied by the emergence of world religions, the process of urbanisation, the growth of conquest states, the increase of inequality in social stratification and the increase of the scarcity of resources. Simultaneously, writing and money were invented as media (see Diagram, in Duling & Perrin 1994:56 and which is based on the macrosociological view of Gerhard Lenski, Jean Lenski & Patrick Nolan's [1991]) for the control of the scarce resources through power and the inequal distribution of authority. Scarce resources can be material goods: food, housing, land and income, as well as non-material resources: values, status, domination over territory, honor and prestige (cf Coser 1964:8; 1968:233).

The origins of the Old Testament canon, in particular, can be traced back to post-exilic, Judean functionaries (scribal, priestly activities) distinguishable from (aristocratic) political strongmen—cf Ezra's relationship to Nehemia. (Remember, it was the so-called 'cream' of the Judean people who had been taken into exile.) However, these functionaries attained limited autonomous power and authority. As retainers of the governing class they remained dependent on the grace of the governing class and as the brokers between the elite and the base communities they sought popular acceptance among the base communities. For

example, in Greco-Roman Palestine the Sadducean priests and scribes were the retainers of the (Jerusalem centered) Hasmonean nobility and those who belonged to the Pharisees sought coalition with the (Galilean centered) Herodian dynasty (cf Freyne 1988—compare p48 with p139). However, at times there also were exceptions on the rule, for example during the reign of the Hasmonean monarch, Salome Alexandra. She temporarily favoured some Pharisees with authoritarian status within the Jerusalem cult—deed that evoked tremendous conflict between the Sadducees and the Pharisees which echoes also years later during the life of Jesus (cf Saldarini 1988:234; Van Aarde 1994:107,110,131-132). The (Hasmonean) Jerusalem authorities competed with the Herodians for the favour of the Roman emperor and his delegates.

There was no middle class in agrarian societies. There were only the elites (the governing class and their retainers) and the peasant class (which included the so-called ‘impure’ expendables for whom society had no place) (cf Lenski 1966:280-284). The ‘top-dogs’ were about 10 % (the ‘rulers’ were 3% and their ‘retainers’ 7%) and the ‘under-dogs’ about 90%. The latter percentage almost concurs with the number of people who were illiterate (cf Harris 1989). Inferred from present-day theories about the coercive power of knowledge employed by people with authority (cf Foucault 1972, 1980; see also Meynell 1989) the following generalised probable scenario regarding the ideologically conditioned origins of the canon might be abduced (cf Elliott 1993:48): Scribes tried to influence the illiterate lower classes through the compilation of a ‘canon’ of sacred writings, implementation of schools in order to interpret these texts and the provision of education so that their ideology (an articulate reflection on a particular transcendent and immanent value system) could constitute the frame of reference among the masses that concurred with the symbolic and social world of the elite.

An ‘ideology’ often manifests itself in an articulation and codification of values that serve as a program, e.g. a ‘charter’ (cf Dahrendorf 1959:185; 1968). To Ralf Dahrendorf (1959:178-179) ‘manifest interests are always realities in the heads of the occupants of positions of domination or subjection’. Values, ideologies and norms as ‘articulated interests’ are maintained and enforced by the ‘laws’ of those in power. Control over scarce resources and the unequal distribu-

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6 John II Elliott (1993:48) explain—by making use of the insights of Linda Woodson (1979:1)—the difference in logic argumentation between deduction, induction and abduction as follows:

Social-scientific criticism involves a process of logic that is neither exclusively deductive (from model to material) nor inductive (from material to hypothesis) but inclusive of both in a procedure characterised as ‘abduction’.

Abduction (also called ‘retroduction’) ‘is a process in logic of the discovery procedure of working from evidence to hypothesis, involving a back-and-forth movement of suggestion checking. In this process two pieces of data could be explained by a hypothesis, the validity of which could be corroborated by the finding of another piece of data’.
tion of power and authority are interconnected (Dahrendorf 1959:165). The difference between power and authority is that power is related to a social position by means of which one can carry out his/her own will despite resistance, whereas authority is a legitimate relation of domination and subjection in the sense that a command with a given content will be obeyed by a given group of persons. As a point of critique of Karl Marx, Dahrendorf (1959:172-173) considers the distribution of authority, rather than property or even social class and status, as the ultimate cause of the formation of conflict groups. Different groups and coalitions in first-century Palestine competed for authority that was inequally distributed by the governing class, and for honor in the eyes of the peasants. The emerging conflict between the various groups (Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) was a manifestation of a power struggle to control the important social symbols within Judaism, of which the Temple was the most influential. The Temple was not only the seat of the political strongmen but it was also also the economic center (cf Oakman 1986).

Writing and money went hand in hand in the so-called advanced agrarian society. The images and inscriptions on coins were the most frequent available 'texts' 'readable' by the illiterate masses who were exploited by unbearable taxation (cf Fiensy 1991:92-105; Van Aarde 1993a:528, 530). Regulations in the canon provided the codification of this subjection. Canonisation thus functioned as a medium through which illiterate masses were influenced to accept the authority of the 'conventional wisdom' of 'court prophets and sages'. Through canonisation 'heretics' were silenced. It was a matter of Scripture against Scripture: the 'true' prophets against the 'false' prophets, the Samaritan Pentateuch against the Judean Pentateuch, the Sadducean Torah against the Pharisaic expansion of the Law to the Prophets and Writings, the Deuteronomic 'prophetic' literature against the Priestly literature (i.e 'Moses' against 'Moses'—cf Steinberg 1991), the rabbinical literature against the sifre minim (heretic writings—cf Katz 1984), the 'canonical' Christian New Testament writings against the 'apocryphal' Gnostic writings, dogmas against dogmas, et cetera. This process of 'manipulation' through knowledge appears to have the same kind of dynamics that we find in some of our present-day inter-denominational and doctrinal theological debates.

Within this framework the epistemic status of the canon is instrumental. It serves as a medium through which 'truth' is proven and claimed as opposed to 'false' proofs and claims. Lucien Richard (1981:70) puts it as follows: 'The normativeness of the Scriptures has been tied in the past to a supernaturalistic understanding of revelation. In this perspective the truth claim and authority of Scripture are conceived in a-historical and dogmatic terms. In any theological questions the Scriptures function as proof text or first principle'. And it is exactly this kind of manipulative theology that has been challenged by Third-World the-
ologies. Pheme Perkins (1993:88-59) refers in this regard to a ‘tension between the academy and the church over [biblical] interpretation’. She said: ‘Churches still expect to use canonical Scripture as they always have to provide norms for social control. In the university, feminist and ideological criticism challenge the hegemony of any socially privileged canon’ (Perkins 1993:91). The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians expressed the same kind of concern. An excerpt from this Association’s ‘Final Document, No 31’ reads as follows: ‘Let us reject, as unimportant, an academic mode of theology which is distinct from action. We support a radical epistemological break, which is committed to making our first theological act the introduction of a critical reflection on the historical praxis of the Third World’ (cf Gonzales 1988:112). E Schüssler Fiorenza (1979: 23) is also speaking in the same vein: ‘On this level, the Bible often functions as ideological justification of the moral, doctrinal or institutional interests of the Church’. However, she rightly emphasises that ‘the canon should not be viewed ...in an exclusive fashion as a negative judgment...It should be understood in an inclusive fashion as creating a pluriform model of Christian Church and Christian life’ (my emphasis).

In South Africa this particular shift with relation to the epistemic status of the ‘pluriform’ canon has been explicitly demonstrated and argued within contextual hermeneutics by Itumeleng Mosala. Mosala showed that liberation theologians often interchange the notion ‘Word of God’ with either ‘Moses’ or ‘Jesus’. Therefore, he—although himself a historical-materialistic liberation theologian—is critical towards the tendency within liberation theology to rely naïve-realistically on either ‘Moses’ or ‘Jesus’. He rightly demonstrated that such a norm amounts to reductionism. The Bible is ‘reduced to a simple socially and ideologically unmediated’ norm taken from the face value of the ‘Word of God’ (Mosala 1989, cited by West 1991:110). The following excerpt from the article of Engelbert Mveng entitled, ‘African liberation theology’, might serve as an example of what Mosala is challenging:

So the Bible appears as one of the basic sources of Black South African theological reasoning. It is the revealed Word of God: it tells us who is man and who is God. In the Bible man is created in God’s image: black, white, yellow, red, all are free and equal, in the image of God....The God of the Bible, of Exodus, the books of history, the prophets, the psalms, the books of wisdom and the gospels, is a liberating God and saviour, who protects the poor, the weak and the oppressed against the oppressor, the rich and the powerful. In South Africa the God of the Bible can only be on the side of the oppressed, namely the Blacks (Mveng 1988:25).

According to Mosala, Black theologians, for example Alan Boesak, are proponents of such a ‘naive-realism’, to use an epistemological term that did not occur in Mosala’s work.
However, the Bible isn't such an one-sided document, but should be seen, according to Mosala, as a complex text best understood as itself a *signified practice*.

As such, the Bible is coded differently in literary, political, cultural and ideological terms. It cannot be reduced to a simple socially and ideologically unmediated 'Word of God'. Nor can it be seen merely as a straightforward mirror of events in Ancient Israel (or first-century Palestine—A G v A]. On the contrary it is a *production*, a remaking of those events and processes. More specifically, some... 'layers'...of the Bible are cast in 'hegemonic codes' which represent social and historical realities...in terms of the interest of the ruling classes. Other [layers] of the Bible are encoded in 'professional codes' which have relative autonomy, but which still operate within the hegemony of the dominant code. Other [layers] of the Bible are signified through 'negotiated codes' which contain a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements, but which still take the dominant codes as their starting point. Still other [layers] of the Bible represent 'oppositional codes' which are grounded in the interest and religious perspectives of the underclasses of the communities of the Bible.

Instead of a historical critical, or even a social historical approach to the Bible, Mosala, following Norman Gottwald (1985), advocates a 'historical-materialist' reading of the Bible (see, however, my own critical stance regarding the 'reductionism' of Marxist theories and my reservations about its usage in engaged hermeneutics—Van Aarde 1992) as an appropriate critical tool to unmask hegemonic codes embedded in the Bible and in the dispositions of the exegete as well:

The category of struggle becomes an important hermeneutical factor not only in one's reading of his or her history and culture but also in one's understanding of the history, nature, ideology, and agenda of the biblical texts. Consequently, a biblical hermeneutics of liberation, using the same tool of struggle as to interrogate the reader's history, culture, and ideology, must now address the question of the material conditions that constitute the sites of the struggles that produced the biblical texts (Mosala 1989a:9).


Mosala uses in the citation above the term 'parts of the Bible', but Gerald West rightly replaces it with 'layers of the Bible'. The replacement, however, presupposes a reliance on insights from historical critical exegesis.

See Carolyn Osiek (1992:112-113) for a critical discussion of Mosala's critique of the so-called 'sociological' analyses of the Bible. Osiek asks for a cultural sensitivity with regard to differences in approaching western and non-western audiences—something that lacks in the one-sidedness of Mosala's critique.
canon critique. However, in my model of engaged hermeneutics I do not take the line of the deconstructionists, but rather enhance the Frankfurt School's emphasis on 'emancipatory interests' (cf Volschenk & Van Aarde 1994). But this does not mean that I do not have serious reservations against aspects of the neo-Marxist and 'utopian' stance of someone like Jürgen Habermas as a main representative of the so-called 'critical social theory' of the Frankfurt School. The impact of the heading of Ralf Dahrendorf's (1968b:107-108) contribution, 'Out of Utopia: Toward a reorientation of sociological analysis', remains striking. In another essay in the same collection (Dahrendorf 1968a), 'On the origin of inequality among men', Dahrendorf writes:

Of course, equality before the law, equal suffrage, equal changes of education, and other concrete equalities are not only possible but in many countries real. But the idea of a society in which all distinctions of rank between men [sic!] are abolished transcends what is sociologically possible and has a place only in the sphere of poetic imagination. Wherever political programs promise societies without class or strata, a harmonious community of comrades who are all equal in rank, the reduction of all inequalities to functional differences, and the like, we have reason to be suspicious, if only because political promises are often merely a thin veil for the threat of terror and constraint (Dahrendorf 1968c:176).

To take one step further by way of summarising: In the attainment of knowledge, contextual hermeneutics focuses on the central role of compassion and exposes the manipulative and exploitative power mentality of the powerful in ancient society and of modern science and technocracy. However, doing theology in the new age does not demand a sacrificium intellectus. What is required, is 'putting on a different kind of thinking cap' (cf Herbert Butterfield 1975:1, cited by Kopfensteiner 1992:47). Based on two respective citations from Herbert Butterfield's The origins of modern science: 1300-1800, and Thomas Kuhn's The Copernican revolution, T R Kopfensteiner (1992:47), in an article entitled 'Historical epistemology and moral progress', rightly argued in this regard as follows:

A shift of paradigm will result in 'handling the same bundle of data as before, but placing them in a new system of relations with one another by giving them a different framework, all of which virtually means putting on a different kind of thinking cap'. A scientific revolution has a dual nature; it is 'at once ancient and modern, conservative and radical'. To some practitioners the new paradigm will be the point of departure for previously unanticipated scientific activity; to others, however, the new paradigm will seem curiously akin to its predecessors....Hence, each evolutionary niche of development understands the world differently, but never independently of its predecessors.10

10 See also Kopfensteiner's (1992:57) following comments: 'The epistemological discussion within the philosophy and history of science has shown that...(t)he reciprocity of
(Kopfensteiner 1992:47; my emphasis).

In his 1984-book, *Religion in the secular city: Toward a postmodern theology*, Harvey Cox wrote:

> The postmodern world will also be one in which the exaggerated claims made for science and technology will be modulated. We already see an impressive element of self-criticism in recent scientific thought, a growing unwillingness to claim that science is either the best or the only mode of knowing....However, the answers to questions about the proper role of science and the appropriate place of technology are still unknown (Cox 1984:189).

Also in biblical scholarship Walter Wink, already in 1973, queried the so-called scientific 'objectivity' of the historical critical approach: 'the unhappy consequence of the unmasking is not just that liberal biblical scholarship also proves to have been ideological, but that it has ceased to be utopian, and no longer moves toward a greater comprehension of truth' (Wink 1973:12; see also Herzog 1974, 1983). The result today is a critical reflection on the subjectivity and ideology of historical critical and literary theoretical exegesis done from the perspective of a Western, androcentric paradigm. But this does not mean a total abandonment of historical research at all. Pheme Perkins (1993:90-91) writes:

> In the United States, African-American exegetes have learned the tools of historical criticism in order to illuminate those aspects of the Bible that are relevant to their experience [cf Felder 1991; see also Van Aarde 1994c with regard to African christology]. Texts which fail to speak of liberation in that setting have no authoritative voice. The challenge to the simple assumption that the Christian canon should be taken as the only authoritative voice appears to be even greater in the Asian context. Advocacy and exposition of the text as a word spoken to the present rather than the distant past are the primary interest of Asian interpreters....Whereas feminist, African-American, and ideological or materialist criticism often make use of historical critical studies, at the same time they demonstrate the alien character of the biblical material, its biases, and often its inappropriateness for the modern age.

Hermeneutics based on the radicality of the emancipatory living of Jesus of Nazareth has increasingly been seen as the challenge par excellence to the so-called tradition and the emancipation accounts for moral progress. At each evolutionary niche, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up to human freedom. This is the meaning of a shift of paradigm in a moral context, and its possibility rests on a historical rather than essentialistic understanding of the moral law'.

For example, scholars have become aware of the dangers of the biblical imagery that surrounds God as the powerful divine warrior and the frequent suggestions that God's enemies are to be exterminated (cf Sheppard 1991:61-82).
‘objective’ theological and dogmatical essentialities of the religious, doctrinal and denominational system from which the New Testament is approached and its ‘meaning’ within First-World theologies is inferred. Choan-Seng Song (1993: 132) put it as follows:

Doing theology in this way [contextual hermeneutics—A G v A] is very different from the way traditional theology has gone about its task....It will be badly served by the doctrinal approach and propositional method, the standard approach and method of traditional theology. That is why Jesus tells stories...taken from the life of the people with whom he shares daily problems and difficulties. Jesus does theology of God’s reign with them and does not do it for them. He develops it out of them and does not impose it on them. He empowers them to experience it and to claim it.

5 WHAT, THEN, SHOULD THE ‘AUTHORITY’ OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BE?

In his guidelines for contemporary Roman Catholics regarding the quest for the historical Jesus, Michael L Cook (1986:107-108) draws the following conclusion:

(1)It seems clear that knowledge of the historical Jesus will always be indispensable to the Christian faith....Yet, the real issue is not just the importance of the historical Jesus but the whole process of biblical criticism. In a word, there are simply no alternatives to biblical criticism if we wish to communicate the message of the Bible to today’s world, both within and outside Christianity. It is finally a question of the nature of the Bible itself...Moreover, a naive fundamentalism that tends to reduce everything in the Bible to a literal one-to-one correspondence with a presumably available objective reality (the ‘facts’) is...destructive of the true nature of the Bible for it misses totally its literary character and the importance of story....All of this gives rise to the final question: what is the authority of Scripture today? It lies, it seems to me, in our ability to enter into the story through ‘imaginative participation’. In the true sense of authority, no one can simply tell us that the Bible is authoritative for us. To remain at that level is to be arrested in one’s own development and growth at the level of the external, coercive kind of authority which a parent exercises when s/he perceives that a child is intractable and nothing else will work. The Bible becomes authoritative for us when we enter into the story and find ourselves there. Jesus did not impose his vision upon his listeners....He invited his listeners to enter in—not just to peek in from a safe distance but to resonate with the unfolding of the story so that they could recognize its truth for themselves....Only then will we truly know who Jesus is and who we are as his disciples.

According to Michael Cook this knowledge of the historical Jesus ‘will always be subordinate to the faith both in its tradition and in its contemporary manifestations’. To me, however, the usage of the term ‘subordination’ is in this respect wrong. The relation between Jesus and the earliest tradition as the ‘classical’ witness to
New Testament Christianity, is rather of dialectical nature. For David Tracy (1981:233-247; see discussions by William Thompson 1985:106-107; Brennan Hill 1991:44-46), also a Roman Catholic theologian, the only adequate norm is the tradition-as-actualised-anew in its constitutive role of ‘constituting’ the Christian community. According to Tracy a reconstructed historical Jesus, on the tradition’s own terms, cannot be our norm”. However, Brennan Hill (1991:45) rightly showed that ‘Tracy does recognize...that the Jesus of history is a secondary norm that preserves that which is “subversive” and “dangerous” in the memory of Jesus’ (my emphasis). To me, the Jesus of history is the norm. The Jesus of history keeps us in touch with the radical dimension of Jesus' message, a dimension that can easily be lost as the tradition develops—inside the canon or outside the canon. In addition, the historical Jesus serves as reference for the reform and renewal of the tradition. ‘The development of the traditions needs always to be measured against the historical word and deeds of Jesus’ (Brennan Hill 1991:45, reflecting on the insights of David Tracy).

Albeit the fact that he did not distinguish between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ, William Thompson himself, building upon the insights of Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy, made the following valuable comment:

Christianity is not a religion of a book, but of a person, Jesus the Risen One. But the Jesus event has left us ‘traces’ of itself in the New Testament, and it is chiefly to this ‘text’ that we must turn for ‘normative codification’ of the Jesus event. That we go to Jesus through the biblical text is finally rooted in our tradition-bound character. Like all other things human, Christianity is an historically-mediated religion (Thompson 1985:115).

Christians do not believe in the New Testament. In other words, the New Testament is not put ‘in the place of Jesus as the revelation’ (Marxsen 1968:284). William Marxsen (1968:282) precedes this remark with formulations like the following: ‘The real Canon is prior to the New Testament, and we are nearer to it in the sources the Synoptists [and other contemporary canonical and non-canonical writings- A G v A] used than in the Synoptic Gospels themselves’. Philip Devenish elaborates as follows with regard to Marxsen’s view on the relation between the quest for the historical Jesus and the ‘gospel of the Jesus-kerygma’:

Marxsen is also clear that treating Jesus as the ‘bearer’, rather than the ‘content’, of the gospel has led to a related set of errors....As we have seen, whereas for the Jesus-

12 According to David Tracy, the norm is the ‘apostolic’ [sic!] witness to Jesus—the actual Jesus remembered by the community and proclaimed as the Christ’. In other words, as William Thompson (1985:106) understood Tracy, ‘it would be “inappropriate” to the tradition’s own self-understanding to erect an historical Jesus into our norm for Christian truth’.
kerygma, 'person' and 'praxis' are two analytically distinct ways of speaking about a single and integral subject-matter, to regard Jesus as the 'bearer' of a 'gospel' is rather to envisage two really separable subject-matters. Thus, as 'bearer', Jesus is understood now as 'example', 'paradigm', 'hero', 'martyr', or 'great personage', as the 'author' or 'agent' who 'bears' a 'content' taken to comprise a 'message', 'teachings', or 'social program'. Such approaches misdirect attention either toward a 'who' it is that happens to bear certain words or deeds, or to a 'what' that happens to be said or done. In contrast, the Jesus-kerygma regards Jesus as acting and speaking; the gospel of the Jesus-kerygma is this same Jesus-as-praxis (Devenish 1992:xxvii; my emphasis).

In conclusion, knowledge about the historical Jesus seems to be essential for being a Christian in the past as well as in the present. Marcus Borg (1987:201-202 note 9), however, has an interesting nuanced view on this issue. For him, 'historical knowledge about Jesus' is not 'essential for the life of Christian discipleship'. According to Borg, 'historical knowledge about Jesus is no more necessary for the life of discipleship than it is for Christian faith'. Nevertheless, he continues, 'what Jesus was like is not irrelevant to discipleship. Indeed, we may suppose that for the earliest Christians in the first decades after Easter, the still-vivid historical memory of what he was like must have shaped their understanding of what it meant to "follow him"'. Borg says: 'My claim is simply that an image of the historical Jesus illuminates the path of discipleship'. However, in the light of our reflection on the epistemic status of the New Testament so far, I disagree with Borg in spite of the many similarities between his portrait of the historical Jesus and my own historical understanding of Jesus. Holding onto the importance of the dialectic between our understanding of the historical Jesus and our reading of ancient texts as the classical witnesses to New Testament Christianity is, to me, not only desirable but also essential for engaged hermeneutics in general and for being an engaged Christian today.

6 JESUS FROM THE SIDE

In view of all this, what is our conclusion so far? In engaged hermeneutics the emancipatory living of the historical Jesus appears to become the canon before the canon. This expression is borrowed from Willi Marxsen (1968:279-284) by means of which it is stressed that Jesus of Nazareth should be seen in preference to any interpretation but also paradoxically that there is no Jesus 'without and before any interpretation' (cf Devenish 1992:xii).

But who is this Jesus? He certainly does not appear to look like the many portraits of the Leben Jesu which were pretentiously depicted by the liberal theologians of the late eighteen and nineteenth century. Albert Schweitzer exposed this enterprise for what it was in 1906 in his book, The quest of the historical Jesus—imaginative products of historical-positivistic scepticism. But the Je-
sus in whom contextual theologians are interested is also not the apocalyptic visionary that Schweitzer—or the proponents of the so-called New Quest for the historical Jesus—thought to discover. Schweitzer's own endeavour (including those whose work he had discussed in his treatise) was coined as the 'Old Quest' (cf Van Aarde 1993b:400).

The first two historical Jesus-quests were part and parcel of the traditional power-struggle in First-World christologies between orthodoxy ('christology from above') and liberal theology ('christology from below'). The Jesus engaged hermeneutics, however, is not a 'Jesus from above' and also not a 'Jesus from below', but a Jesus from the side. Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey are the creators of the expression 'Christology from the side' and they themselves distinguished it from the expressions 'Christology from above' and 'Christology from below'. Christology 'from above' describes the assessments of Jesus that developed in fourth- and fifth-century conciliar debates. In those debates churchmen formulated a doctrine about Jesus as the divine Word of God descending from heaven and incarnated on earth, so that Jesus was confessed by the Church as 'true God' and 'true man'. Christology 'from below' refers to contemporary descriptions of Jesus based mainly on the synoptic gospels, where the focus is squarely on the humanity of Jesus. The contrasting of Christology as 'from above' and/or 'from below' implies a vertical perspective (e.g., heaven to earth or earth to heaven). This is often expressed in highly complex philosophical terms dealing with the metaphysical personhood and the psychological constitution of the person Jesus in terms of that metaphysical personhood (cf Van Aarde 1994c:354-355). And because it is an instance of vertical classification, this perspective is chiefly, if not exclusively, concerned with power or force (cf Malina 1986:71,82-83). In one form or another, Christology 'from above' and 'from below' focuses on the person of Jesus in terms of power symbols. Christology 'from above' reflects Christian tradition only after the time of Constantine, when hierarchy became the expressive social structure, with power or force a primary concern (cf Mayer 1983:61-213; Van Aarde 1994c:362). Christology 'from below'

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13 Hermann Samuel Reimarus (died in 1768—G E Lessing published his work posthumously between 1774 and 1778), David Friedrich Strauss (1835), Ernest Renan (1863), and William Wrede (1901). See inter alia Cook (1986:16-23).

14 The 'New Quest' was introduced by the students of Rudolf Bultmann (cf Van Aarde 1993b:407). They became the pioneers who moved beyond Bultmann's so-called 'No Quest' and pretended to deliver the goods that their mentor was not prepared to do. Questions and methods (i.e., 'criteria for authenticity') remained more or less the same during the periods of the 'Old Quest' and the 'New Quest'. What was 'new' is that historical scepticism was replaced by a gradual scale of 'continuity'/discontinuity' between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. What were in common between results of the 'Old Quest', the 'no Quest' as well as the 'New Quest' are twofold: (a) a consensus about a minimal knowledge of Jesus as an 'eschatological prophet/teacher' (b) stripped of all dogmatic drapery.
expresses twentieth-century concerns with the relationship of natural and supernatural and the possibility of transcendence in a secular world. According to Malina & Neyrey (1988:x) "both these views express Jesus' vertical relationship to God and would be rather anachronistic for an adequate understanding of New Testament views of Jesus.... Yet within Christian groups before Constantine, the chief expressive social dimension for non-Roman and Roman non-elite Christians was not vertical, but horizontal—"from the side"... In short, the focus is on the social processes whereby Jesus was acclaimed or defamed by members of his society who took him seriously and interacted with him as an equal".

Since the eighties scholars have increasingly become occupied with a kind of historical Jesus research that has been described by James Robinson as a 'paradigm shift' (cited by Borg 1991:2). According to Marcus Borg, Jesus is now regarded as a 'teacher of a world-subverting wisdom' (Borg 1991:15) and no longer as an 'eschatological prophet' who 'proclaimed the imminent end of the world' (Borg 1988:285). In other words, Borg construes a Jesus within a context of a cross-cultural conventional wisdom and 'subverting holy men' with revitalising aims (see especially Borg 1984, 1987). The latter is the Jesus of the so-called 'Third Quest'15 (cf Van Aarde 1993b:407-408; 1993c).

Through an engagement with this Jesus tradition, embedded in the classical texts of New Testament Christianity, empowerment of anybody—irrespective of one's social stance—can come to pass. It is a tradition that demonstrates the deliberate breaking down of boundaries. Jesus, however, did not transform the societal structures through revolutionising activities. By his emancipatory living Jesus challenged the basis of the distortion in his society, namely alienation through divine legitimation. The thrust of his emancipatory interest was to live within a 'brokerless' (cf Crossan 1991:225) household by experiencing and proclaiming the unmediated presence of God, because in the 'household of the heavenly father' (Jesus' redefinition of the concept 'kingdom of God') everyone is welcome to experience God's boundless love. Willem Vorster (1994:630; my emphasis) put it as follows: 'The values which Jesus stood for, the fact that he told open-ended stories to develop insight, and the fact that his own story was open-ended help one to realise that there is hope for anybody who takes his/her cue from Jesus'. This image of Jesus 'helps people to cope with life', in the Third World and in the First World as well.

And it is this emancipatory living of the historical Jesus that has become the

15 Thomas Wright (1992:12) describes the main features of the 'Third Quest' as follows: 'One of the most obvious features of this "Third Quest" has been the bold attempt to set Jesus firmly into his Jewish context. Another feature has been that unlike the "New Quest", the [proponents] have largely ignored the artificial pseudo-historical "criteria" for different sayings in the gospels. Instead, they have offered complete hypotheses about Jesus' whole life and work, including not only sayings but also deeds. This has made for a more complete, and less artificial, historical flavour to the whole enterprise'.
canon before the canon in engaged hermeneutics. Choan-Seng Song in this regard refers to Jesus' message about God's reign as a 'culture of empowerment'... 'over against the culture of intimidation and exploitation' (Song 1993: 113,136).

7 AGAIN, WHO IS THIS JESUS?

But is this Jesus only a construct that simply serves as a model for conversation within the framework of contextual theology? (cf e.g Mveng's 1988:19 unreflective combinational usage of the opposing terms 'historical Christ'). Or, is it a construct of the historical Jesus rooted in historical research—research that is built upon an epistemological reflection and accompanied by the usage of literary techniques? Only when the answer is 'yes', and indeed it is, can we, in the words of David Tracy, 'preserve that which is "subversive" and "dangerous" in the memory of Jesus'.

We have already indicated that the point of departure and the conversational partner in 'traditional' contextual theology are limited to the so-called 'nobodies' in society. Within this framework theology is critical reflection on praxis among the outcasts. Theology as a reflection on this praxis is drawn to the historical activity of Jesus as a human being, 'before the early Christians began to worship him as Messiah or risen Lord' (cf Pope-Levison & Levison 1992:31). Priscilla Pope-Levison & John R. Levison said in their 1992 book, Jesus in global contexts (referring to the work of the Latin American liberation theologians that the interest of liberation theologians in the historical Jesus separates them from scholars who are involved in the so-called quest for the historical Jesus:

Liberation theologians are not on a quest to establish objective data to recover precisely what Jesus said and did. Rather, they want to understand the relevance of the historical Jesus for their own...context. In this respect, their approach to the Bible provides an example of the model of interpretation as conversation. Understanding Jesus, as opposed to recovering Jesus, requires holding together in creative fusion two distinct horizons: the historical Jesus of the Gospels and the historical context of contemporary Latin America. These theologians believe they have an advantage over European and North American biblical scholars in the conversation between text and

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18 In contextual (Third-World) theologies the term 'historical Jesus' is used with four different although related meanings (cf Smit 1987:6-9): (a) in the sense of Jesus as he is described in the Gospels, (b) especially with relation to his humanity (c) as he appears in his actions towards the poor and the oppressed and (d) who still suffers with the suffering people of God in the present.
context. They observe that the situation of first-century Palestine is far more similar to
the Latin American context than it is to North America and Europe. Therefore they
contend that their situation enables them better to understand the significance of the

In other words, Christians (and not only from the Third World) believe that the
tradition within which they live originated with Jesus of Nazareth (cf the discus­sion above of the so-called salvation-events in the ‘life’ of Jesus that serve as starting points). However, historical inquiry shows that most of the patterns of
life and social and religious structures adopted by Christians as rooted in one or
more of these salvation-events, were not invented by Jesus himself (cf Breech
(1994:630-631) put it as follows: ‘The mistake of traditional theology is being unaware of the importance and influence of the modern theologian’s context in theological reflection. The mistake of [contextual] theology is that the importance of the historical context of Jesus and the distance between then and now are dis­regarded’.

8 CONCLUSION
It has become clear that the radicality of the emancipatory living of Jesus of
Nazareth, embedded in the writings of the earliest Christians, functions as the
cornerstone and ‘tester’ of Christian praxis. However, engaged hermeneutics
should not be unconscious of the historical distance between ‘what the text
meant’ and ‘what the text means’. A contextual hermeneutics presumes a social
analysis of the concept context. It is clear that the context of the historical Jesus
differs from, for example, the different ‘co-texts’ (cf Halliday 1976, 1978) in
which the narrated characters, for example, in the gospel narratives had been
plotted, and from the social locations of the gospels’ respective historical intended
audiences and the contexts of the variety of modern-day interpreters, which in­clude that of the ‘powerless’ who reflect on the Bible today. It is thus inappro­priate that Jesus is taken only at face value from the New Testament. Also within
the conceptual framework of engaged hermeneutics Jesus research demands a
three-dimensional textual investigation: literary, social historical and theological.
We need to take the comments of James Breech (1983:6) seriously: ‘Since
our only access to the historical Jesus is through the literature produced by those
who believed in him and who propagated a religious movement in his name, we
must employ the analytical techniques used by New Testament scholars in order
to discriminate between the words of Jesus and the words of his worshippers’.

What, therefore, is needed, is sound methodology. Hence, my proposal with
regard to historical Jesus research within the paradigm of engaged hermeneutics
is twofold. It comprises a social-historical construct of an ideal-type (cf Van
Aarde [1993c:950-954], making use of a Weberian model of social history) of the ‘whole life’ of Jesus of Nazareth (in his Jewish context). This ‘ideal type’ should be historically intelligible and explanatory. It should rely on contemporary canonical and non-canonical texts (including artifacts) which have to be interpreted in terms of a chronological stratification of relevant documents (making use of Dominic Crossan’s [1991:427-450] work). It also should coherently have to make sense within a social stratification of first-century Herodian Palestine (cf Van Aarde [1993a:515-545], making use of Fiency’s [1991] and Lenski’s [1991] macrosociological model). Secondly, my proposal comprises a biblical theological model of cultural transymbolisation. It is my intention to approach this issue from a cross-cultural perspective and from an engagement of First-World with Third-World christologies (cf Van Aarde 1994c). I believe that my concern to bridge the gap between contextual theologies and the tradition of European theological thought and scholarship would be intellectually significant at any time, but in the current situation in South Africa, and in the world at large, it is critical.

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