CONTEXT IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE JESUS TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Three distinguishable topics emerge in the six essays by Willem Vorster discussed in this article: 1. Context as a determining factor in the meaning of texts. 2. The way in which part of a text contributes to the meaning of the whole. 3. The significance of Jesus' Jewishness, specifically his Galilean Jewishness, as the context of communication for interpreting who he was. The common theme which runs through all of the essays is context as a determining factor in the expression of meaning. Characteristic of Vorster's work in these essays, as in all of his work, is not the promotion of final answers, even though he can be forceful in the expression of his views, but a call to methodological clarity in scholarship.

1 PREFACE

This was not an easy task: enter in dialogue with Willem Vorster on six of his articles concerning 'Tradition and the Jesus story'. I could not just review the six articles, although in one draft I did exactly that. What this has turned out to be is an essay on context as a crucial factor in determining meaning in texts as brought out by Willem in these six articles.

And then it occurred to me that there is also a context that can contribute significantly to an understanding of this essay. How well do I remember many conversations with Willem on subject matters such as this? One of the finest was while walking around the lake in Lullwater Estate at Emory University. I would like this essay to be understood as the basis for what could have been one more such conversation. Willem would read it with the understanding that we would discuss it in a walk around the lake. For that reason you will find no holds barred, as Willem would have liked it. Only in that way can I honour the seriousness of what he presented in these articles.

The essay is of course addressed to scholarship at large as a way of placing it in a broader context. So, I invite you to imagine what a conversation with him might have been like if he were to have been here to engage with me on my thoughts about his endeavours in these six essays. I am sure he would not have been defensive about critical points, but he would have been concerned to...
make sure that the issues were understood correctly, purely out of a concern for the subject matter. I am confident that the outcome of such a conversation would have been to move us a few steps further from what is presented here. I submit it to you for your critical appraisal, but more than anything else, I submit it to our friend and colleague for a discussion in an imaginary walk around the lake in Lullwater Estate.

2 INTRODUCTION

In a time of an abundance of books on Jesus, covering an ever widening range of interpretations, limited only by the methodological and material fantasies of their authors, Willem Vorster’s cautious approach to this kind of research in the six articles I was asked to discuss in this essay comes as a refreshing call to careful scholarship. In these articles Vorster does not attempt to answer the question who Jesus was. His concern is primarily and consistently methodological, although, as I will point out at the end of this essay, more than once a certain preferred image of Jesus does shine through. Vorster does not discuss this preference as a presupposition of his research as he does with others, but neither does it influence his reflections on the issues of history of Jesus research.

Vorster covers three distinguishable topics in these six articles: 1. Context as a determining factor in the meaning of texts, of which he provides two examples: (a) The parables of Jesus in the first part of Gelykenisse in konteks: Mattheus 13 en die gelykenisse van Jesus (‘Parables in context: Matthew 13 and the parables of Jesus’), and (b) miracle stories in On miracles and miracle stories: From the earthly Jesus to the written text. 2. The way in which part of a text contributes to the meaning of the whole, for which he also provides two examples: (a) The function of Matthew 13 in the structure of the first gospel, in the second part of ‘Parables in Context,’ and (b) the significance of Mark 13, for the expression of Mark’s meaning, in Literary reflections on Mark 13:5-37: A narrated speech of Jesus. 3. The significance of Jesus’ Jewishness, specifically his Galilean Jewishness as the context of communication for interpreting who he was, in the last three essays, On presuppositions and the historical study of the Jewishness of Jesus, Jesus the Galilean, and Jesus: Eschatological prophet and/or wisdom teacher.

There is nevertheless a common theme which runs through all of these essays: context as a determining factor in the expression of meaning. I would like to differentiate three interrelated aspects of this phenomenon: 1. Context of communication, the setting in which a text (oral or written) was produced; 2. Literary context, what comes before or after a textual unit, co-determining its meaning, better referred to as co-text; and 3. Interpretive context, those factors which enable an interpreter methodologically to interpret the meaning of a
text. Differentiation of these three aspects of context does not mean separation. So, for example, the placement of a textual unit within the overall framework of a larger text, that is, in a co-textual context, can play a crucial role in a reader’s approach to the meaning of the text, in that way co-determining the interpretive context, as we will see in connection with Vorster’s discussion of the placement of Matthew 13 and Mark 13 in their respective gospels. Similarly, the original context of communication, the setting in which a text was produced, functions as an important component in the interpretive context of the original receivers of a communication, and equally so in a contemporary interpretation of its meaning, as in the case of the parables of Jesus. Even in such a case, however, the context of communication and the interpretive context are not identical. Every hearer of Jesus’ parables would have perceived the context of communication more or less differently, markedly so in the case of his followers and his opponents.

I will use these three aspects of context to structure my discussion of Vorster’s six essays. Because of the intricate interrelationships between them, it will not be possible to discuss each one of them in isolation. Important aspects of co-textual and interpretive context will already emerge in the first section on the ‘Context of communication’. For that reason the discussions under ‘Co-textual context’ and ‘Interpretive context’ will be briefer, concerning primarily features that belong more distinctively to those aspects of context.

3 CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION

The original context of communication is typically not provided in a text because it concerns information that is shared, taken for granted, by a text’s producer(s) and receiver(s), and for that reason normally does not need to be communicated. So, for example, in a discourse or text which responds to a question, the question itself may not be mentioned at all because it is presupposed in the original context of communication. For that reason interpretation of the original meaning of such a text can become an almost insoluble problem for a subsequent receiver who does not know the question to which the text was a response, except if, and in so far as, it can be inferred from the text. The same applies to gestures, intonation, or other forms of behaviour on the part of a speaker. Such factors could be determinative for communicating the intended meaning, but are totally lost to someone who has access to an oral discourse only in a written form, unless it is provided co-textually by an introductory remark, such as, ‘Smiling, she said...’ In the case of our material, for example, the parables of Jesus, oral rendition cannot even enter into consideration because we have no access to it. We have to limit ourselves to the broader issue of the parables’ general settings of communication, and even here the situation is unfavourable, as Vorster points out when he draws attention to
context of communication as an insoluble problem for interpreting the parables of Jesus.

Vorster is aware that the parables of Jesus can be interpreted as aesthetic objects in isolation from any particular context of communication. I write 'particular context' of communication advisedly because in many cases a more general context of communication may be essential for understanding a parable even when taken in isolation, for example, in the Parable of the Sower a certain knowledge of Palestinian agriculture. Or does it? The allegorical interpretation of this parable clearly ignores its original agricultural context, and an allegorical interpretation has as much validity as any other interpretation which is removed from the original context. Nevertheless, as the Parable of the Sower reveals, there are aspects of the context of communication that may remain relevant even when a parable is interpreted as an isolated aesthetic object, that is, in an attempt to clarify its structure and internal meaning, disregarding for a moment what the author may have tried to say with it.

Vorster illustrates the interpretation of a parable as an aesthetic object by means of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-35). Even though Luke placed this parable in a specific context, a legal expert's question who his neighbour is (10:25-29, cf 36-37), which brings into focus Jesus' reason for telling it according to the gospel, '[there] can be little doubt that this narrative makes just as good sense without the Lukan reason why Jesus told it....In this sense the parable can function as an aesthetic object'. (1985:152). Vorster points out that the same applies to the Parable of the Sower. As the text stands,

the parable tells the story of a small beginning and a great ending, or the hyperbolic paradox of the impossible possibility. It serves as encouragement that notwithstanding a variety of factors that inhibits growth, seed ultimately bears fruit. It is again possible that we can isolate the parable from its context, and that we would be able to attribute meaning to the parable as such, as an aesthetic object (1985:152).

In the gospels, however, the parables are not told as isolated aesthetic objects, but in specific contexts, provided by the evangelists to give expression to meanings intended by them. As an example: The Parable of the Mustard Seed is told in different ways, giving expression to different meanings, in Q (as rendered in Matthew and Luke), in Mark, and in the Gospel of Thomas (1985:154-156). The fact that 'Matthew, Mark, Luke, Q and the Gospel of Thomas rendered and embedded the same parable in different ways in stories about Jesus', reveals how difficult it is 'to get behind the written text' to the context in which Jesus may have told it (1985:156). Vorster concludes, '...if we assume that Jesus did not handle the parables as aesthetic objects, but told them for specific purposes, we also have to assume that it is no longer possible
to establish the ‘original’ meanings of the parables of Jesus’ (1985:156). This statement does not make altogether clear whether Vorster thinks that Jesus did not tell parables as aesthetic objects—‘if we assume…’ could be hypothetical—but it does not really matter; his point is that if Jesus did tell a parable with a specific purpose in mind, made clear to his hearers by the context in which he told it, we can no longer get behind the parable as rendered in the gospels to what Jesus may have meant, because the original context cannot be derived from the parable itself, and the evangelists did not preserve it, but created new contexts for the sake of the meanings they wanted to communicate. Actually, even if Jesus did tell the parables as aesthetic objects, we would still not be able to know what he meant with them because of the multivalence of contextless parables. Such a multivalence is shown by the variety of ways in which the evangelists made use of them to express their intended meanings, and the variety of interpretations that have been proposed for them as isolated aesthetic objects in contemporary scholarship.

The multivalent use of the parables in the gospels can be clarified by means of the linguistic device of syntax. The meaning of isolated words in a language are typically multivalent, as can be seen by consulting a dictionary. When a word is placed under the constraints of syntax in a sentence that multivalence becomes restrained, that is, the word is made to express a more specific meaning. So, for example, the range that applies to the word ‘house’ includes nominal as well as verbal meanings, both of which come to unambiguous expression in the following sentence, ‘The house is sufficiently large to house a lot of people’. Something similar can apply to a complete sentence, such as the well-known, ‘Flying airplanes can be dangerous’. The ambiguity of this sentence would be placed under restraint, in that way disambiguating its meaning, when it is pronounced in a particular context, either of communication or if it is embedded co-textually in a longer narrative. Its distinct meanings would be unambiguously clear in the actual setting of an aeronautics show (a context of communication) or in a text describing one (a co-textual context), if the statement is made either after two airplanes collided in the air, or if an airplane flew dangerously low over a crowd of spectators.

The parables of Jesus taken by themselves are like words in a dictionary or isolated sentences without specific meanings, as discussed above. That is what has made their interpretation a virtual free-for-all, and what has kept scholarship busy from the earliest times. Recent scholarship has expanded the range of possible meanings considerably, especially by interpreting them intentionally or virtually as isolated aesthetic objects. There is nothing wrong with that as long as it is clear that such interpretations are not of what Jesus meant.

Vorster summarises the situation with regard to the parables as well as the rest of the sayings material very well in On presuppositions and the historical
...it is apparently assumed that if it is possible to reconstruct the original wording of a parable the meaning of the parable will be clear. The problem is that the reconstructed text is a contextless text, because by no means is it possible to reconstruct the original context of communication! The same goes for the rest of the sayings material since it is clear from the Gospels that many sayings of Jesus were re-applied in contexts other that those of the original communication for different purposes (1990:200-201).

Vorster correctly points out that whatever value the interpretation of the parables as aesthetic object may have, they cannot be considered parables of Jesus, except in the sense of being attributed to him. With keen perception he points out that even if it were possible to establish with certainty that Jesus did tell a specific parable, it would no longer be possible to determine what he meant with it, unless it were also possible to establish the context of communication in which he had told it, but that context is now completely lost because the parables appear in contexts provided for them by the evangelists at a literary level to communicate meanings intended by them (the evangelists themselves). In Q and in the Gospel of Thomas they were obviously collected without contexts of interpretation, their only contexts being the other contextual items in the collections.

What Vorster did with regard to parables in *Parables in context* he does in connection with miracles in *On miracles and miracle stories*. He states as his main concern 'to show that there are sound reasons for drawing a clear distinction between miracles and miracle stories and for adopting the view that the miracle traditions in the New Testament were meant to serve as propaganda for faith in Jesus and in Christianity' (1986:48). With regard to the question of the historical Jesus, the distinction Vorster makes between miracles and miracle stories places the miracles on a level similar to the meaning of the parables as told by Jesus: in both cases we have no real access to the origins. According to Vorster, investigating miracles in the New Testament in terms of what actually happened does not make much sense because the understanding of miracles in New Testament times and today differ. The miracles as such cannot have the same meaning for us today as they had for people of New Testament times (49-50).

That may be what prompted him to distinguish between miracles and miracle stories. He wants to relieve himself of having to deal with the historical question concerning miracles, focussing rather on their literary function in the gospels, as indicated in the subtitle of the article, ‘From the earthly Jesus to the written text’. According to him, a miracle ‘is an act’ (51) whereas a miracle story
is some person's narration and interpretation of the particular miracle. And whenever one tells a story, one does so from a particular perspective and for a particular purpose. Whenever one tells a story, one is doing something: one is conveying information to the hearer, one is attempting to persuade him, one is entertaining him, or whatever. A miracle story is a speech act (linguistic action) (:52).

Vorster's distinction between miracle and miracle story is not altogether convincing with regard to our material, and actually leads him in a direction opposite to his intended focus on the function of miracle stories in the gospels, where he briefly addresses the issue of actual miracles. He argues that miracles, not miracle stories, 'may have widely different functions' (:52). Thus he distinguishes between Peter's miracle involving Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 as a punitive miracle and Jesus' healing miracles (:52), leading him directly into a discussion of questions concerning the historical Jesus: 'Does the fact that Jesus according to tradition performed most of his miracles in Galilee, and this before people from the lower income groups, point to some social function which we need to take into account...? Admittedly Jesus' miracles also involved people form the higher income groups, but why so many individuals in dire straits who could not afford the services of a doctor?' (:52). Here Vorster postulates a rather definite context of communication for the actual miracles of Jesus, and so also for their meaning in the activity of Jesus. We will come back to this later in the final section on 'Vorster on the historical Jesus.'

My concern here is whether a distinction between miracles and miracle stories is as feasible as Vorster seems to think. In the first place, 'punitive miracles' and 'healing miracles' are not comparable concepts. 'Punitive' interprets the meaning of the miracle whereas 'healing' refers to the miracle action itself. Whereas the setting of a parable can make it relatively unambiguous (relatively, because different hearers—friends and enemies, for example—may still interpret it differently), even the actual setting of a miracle may still leave it highly ambiguous. Let us consider the miracle in Acts 5. That it is punitive is not a function of the miracle itself but an interpretation provided by the way it is narrated. The miracle action is the miraculous slaying of Ananias and Sapphira, which as such remains open to a variety of interpretation. It could have been interpreted as an act of vengeance, or purely a manifestation of Peter's power. In that regard it is the miracle story in Acts 5 that is unambiguous, because it provides its own interpretation, not by placing it in an external framework (a context of communication), which as such could still have left its meaning ambiguous, but by means of a co-textual context within the narrative itself in the form of Peter's repeated commentary (vv 3-4, and 9), more for the sake of the readers than to inform Ananias and Sapphira. Without Peter's commentaries the fear referred to in verse 11 would remain ambiguous. The author
of Acts—or his source—evidently allows for a degree of ambiguity by distinguishing between the fear of ‘the entire congregation’ and ‘all those who heard this’.

Miracle stories are used in the gospels and Acts in the same way as the parables: to express meanings intended by the evangelists. In the same way an evangelist could attribute a parable to Jesus and place it in a particular contextual context to express a particular meaning, so in chapter 5, the author of Acts was able to attribute to Peter a miracle to express his (the author’s) intended meaning by having Peter interpret its purpose as an internal feature of the miracle story. From the point of view of the authors of the gospels and of Acts, thus, parables and miracle stories function in similar ways. They are placed in literary contexts (co-texts) to express the authors’ meanings.

Another more general context of communication is the socio-religious-political setting in which Jesus acted, that is, as a Galilean Jew, which is the topic of the last three essays. However, as the title of the fourth essay indicates, On presuppositions and the historical study of the Jewishness of Jesus, Vorster’s intended main focus in these essays is more on interpretive context than on context of communication, which also applies to the fifth essay, Jesus the Galilean, although he does provide information on Jesus’ Galilean setting in the second part (1991a:129-134): geography, social setting, etcetera, which does of course provide valuable information concerning Jesus’ context of communication.

In the final essay, Jesus: Eschatological prophet and/or wisdom teacher, Vorster combines context of communication and interpretive context. Even though his main concern here, as in the previous two essays, remains the problem of interpretation, and accordingly the interpretive context of Jesus’ teaching, the way he discusses it is in terms of the context of communication. His concern here is not, as in the case of the parables, with particular settings or contexts of communication, but the overall, more general context of Jesus’ teaching, whether it was apocalyptic or wisdom. The question is ‘whether Jesus was an eschatological prophet or a wisdom teacher’ (1991b:540).

The relationship between interpretive context and context of communication comes to a fine expression at the end of Albert Schweitzer’s Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung where he makes it clear that the quest for the historical Jesus took place in the interpretive context of nineteenth century German idealism as an attempt to free Jesus from the bonds of dogmatics. When scholars hoped to have succeeded in this endeavour and saw Jesus coming towards them, he walked through their midst and returned to his own time, the only context of communication, and so also interpretive context, that was appropriate for understanding him. Nineteenth century German scholars mistook their own context of communication as the interpretive context for
their quest of the historical Jesus: they confused what gave meaning to them, their liberal hermeneutical context or horizon, with what gave meaning to Jesus and those who heard him, their apocalyptic hermeneutical context. Schweitzer allowed Jesus to return to his own time because he realised that apocalypticism was Jesus’ hermeneutical context, his context of communication, and for that reason also had to be the interpretive context for understanding him, removing him from the hermeneutical horizon of contemporary scholarship. Schweitzer’s critique brought about a shift from confusion of the nineteenth century context of communication as the interpretive context for the quest of the historical Jesus to Jesus’ own context of communication as the new interpretive context. We may leave aside for the moment the question whether Jesus’ context of communication was exclusively apocalyptic, as Schweitzer saw it. By denying the nineteenth century liberal context of communication as the interpretive context for understanding Jesus, he denied immediate hermeneutical value to the interpretation of Jesus, but then found Jesus’ spirit, like the disciples of old, at the lake-side, and in that spirit he left on his medical mission in Lambarene. In F C Burkitt’s fine translation, ‘it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it’ (1910:399).

Within the new framework proposed by Schweitzer, not to forget Johannes Weiss, according to Vorster, ‘New Testament scholars have accepted the eschatological nature of the teaching of Jesus as an axiom, and Jesus has been conceptualised in terms of a Jewish eschatological or apocalyptic prophet for the past hundred years’ (1991b:531). He does not negate this interpretive context for research concerning Jesus, but suggests that, important as Schweitzer’s insight was as a corrective, this new apocalyptic context may actually not be correct, or at least too limiting to be true to the situation. He points out that more recently a growing number of scholars, especially in the United States...have started questioning the eschatological framework in which Jesus and his teaching has been placed during the twentieth century (see Borg 1986; Mack 1987). It has been argued that the idea of apocalyptic eschatology in the teaching of Jesus was a later development in the Jesus tradition, and that Jesus himself was probably more of a sage than an eschatological prophet (:529).

He considers ‘[the] time [to be] ripe to reconsider fundamentally the question who Jesus was’ within an interpretive context of Jewish wisdom, but remains typically cautious: ‘It is too early to say whether we are misled by the eschatological lens through which early Christians like the first followers and Mark saw him after his death. Much more has to be done on the wisdom trajectory before we can say with any certainty that Jesus was not an eschatological prophet, and that he was a wisdom teacher’ (:541).
There are times when Vorster tends to favour a wisdom context, for example, expressing his skepticism about an apocalyptic understanding of Jesus;

There seems to be little, if anything, compelling in the conviction that the term [kingdom of God] should be interpreted eschatologically. Without the coming Son of man sayings, its eschatological interpretation is without foundation. The implication is that eschatological interpretation of Jesus and the kingdom of God in the light of the coming “Son of man” sayings becomes questionable. It also means that the image of Jesus as an eschatological prophet becomes problematic (:540).

What he questions here is taking the Son of man sayings as the necessary interpretive context for the kingdom of God. He is nevertheless unwilling to come to a final decision about the matter: ‘much research must be done before we can reach a totally convincing conclusion about Jesus having been an eschatological prophet. As I have said, for a century scholars have been convinced that the teaching of Jesus was couched in Jewish eschatological hopes. It is too early to make final judgments as to whether Jesus was an eschatological prophet or a wisdom teacher’ (:540).

Vorster’s view may be less the favouring of a wisdom setting than an unwillingness to take apocalypticism for granted. What prevails in his deliberations is ambivalence. At one point he is willing to ask whether Jesus may not have fitted the roles of both a preacher and a wisdom teacher. ‘It is possible that prophetic proclamation could include the genre of wisdom. One should therefore not make it an either/or situation from the outset. On the other hand, one should also ask whether eschatology/apocalyptic and wisdom are not two totally different perspectives on life’ (:539).

Vorster clarifies the difference between interpreting the Jesus materials in either an apocalyptic or a wisdom context by focussing on the beatitudes.

How should we interpret these sayings? Are they apocalyptic blessings or conditions for entering the Kingdom? If we take the term “kingdom of heaven”, which is the Matthean expression for “kingdom of God”, to refer to the apocalyptic reign of God and the coming of a new world, these sayings should be regarded as apocalyptic blessings. The poor, the humble and those of similar status will be blessed by God when the new world starts. The roles will be overturned as Luke says. Those who are happy will be those who are sad! But is it necessary to interpret these sayings from an apocalyptic perspective? Should they not rather be interpreted as general truths in kingdom terminology? Think of the Old Testament Proverbs where we have the proverbs and maxims of a sage comparable to the Beatitudes. Did Jesus not attempt to bring about a revolution in values among people who were distressed and oppressed? (:530).

In the end, Vorster’s undecidedness turns out positive in value. It makes clear to what degree research into the question who Jesus was depends on questions to which we have no clear answers, and where we think we do have answers,
they are determined by assumptions we bring to the texts, not by conclusions
drawn from them. We will come back to this below in the section on ‘Interpre­
tive context’ where it will be the specific topic under consideration.

One final comment on the context of communication: if the general context
of Jesus' teaching had been wisdom rather than apocalyptic, his sayings would
have been less dependent on particular contexts of communication to express
his meaning. With wisdom as the context they may appropriately be inter­
preted as isolated aesthetic objects, for example, the parables as expressions of,
to use Vorster’s terms, ‘general truths in kingdom terminology’ (:530). In
such a case, rather than ask what Jesus meant with a particular saying, trusting
in a context of communication to provide an answer, the saying itself would be
the meaning.

4 CO-TEXTUAL CONTEXT

Literary context, what I referred to above as co-text, already played an impor­
tant role above in our discussion of the way in which the evangelists supplied
literary contexts for the parables to express their intended meanings. Vorster
gives specific attention to this aspect of context in the second part of the first
essay on the function of chapter 13 in the gospel of Matthew, and in the third
essay on the function of chapter 13 in the gospel of Mark. In these discussions
his interest is in the literary functions of these two chapters in their respective
gospels. In both cases he makes it clear how important the co-textual place­
ment of these chapters are in their respective gospels, which by implication
applies to other parts of the gospels as well.

An analysis of the structure of Matthew reveals the centrality of chapter 13
(1985:158-159). Vorster shows how, among other features, chapters 5-7 (the
Sermon on the Mount) and chapters 23-25 (the coming of the Kingdom of
God) place chapter 13 in a distinctive perspective. According to Vorster, in
chapters 5-7 Matthew has Jesus tell how persons could enter the Kingdom, and
in 23-25 about its coming, but in chapter 13 the focus is on what the Kingdom
is like (:159). Thus Vorster concludes,

Because the parables in Matthew 13 are embedded in a speech concerning the
nature of the Kingdom, the Kingdom functions as the interpretive context in which
the parables have meaning. Related to this, it should be remembered that what is at
issue is Matthew’s conception of the Kingdom. Thus, one should also read the
parables within the context of Matthew’s gospel to determine their meaning in Mat­
thew (:162).

This reveals the reciprocal co-textual relationship between chapter 13 and the
gospel as a whole.

Vorster uses ‘interpretive context’ in the above quotation to refer to what I
have designated distinctively as ‘literary context’ or ‘co-text’. The difference is
materially insignificant. We both mean the same thing. Furthermore, there is of course a sense in which the interpretive context to which Vorster refers (my co-textual context) does have interpretive significance in the distinctive sense in which I use the expression to indicate what the interpreter brings to the text in the attempt to grasp its meaning. The interpreter does indeed have to recognise the context clarified by Vorster as constitutive for his or her context of interpretation.

The relationship of Mark 13 to the rest of the second gospel is more complex and so also more interesting. Vorster points to the length of the chapter and its placement in the gospel as indicative of its importance (1987:209); even more significant are certain chronological functions: all the events narrated before and after chapter 13 refer to events that take place within the gospel; by contrast chapter 13 refers to events that are still in the future. This contrast is heightened by the fact that whereas predictions in other parts of the gospel, notably the predictions of the Passion (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), are all fulfilled within the gospel narrative itself, the predictions in this chapter ‘are not fulfilled (emplotted) inside the [gospel] narrative’ (:211). Another significant difference is that the viewpoint in this chapter shifts from that of the gospel narrator to Jesus himself (:214).

Vorster sums up the situation in connection with this aspect of Mark 13 by pointing out that there is a change in the context of communication presupposed by the chapter.

The eschatological conflict and the promise of the return of the Son of man are obviously two of the master symbols of a new symbolic universe which the text offers, making it different from the previous sections. Mark 13:5-37 presupposes a new context of communication. The material given in Mark 13:5-37 refers to a narrative world which is different from that in the previous chapters and the reader is expected to have a different frame of reference from the previous sections in Mark’s story in order to understand the codes of the text (:217).

Vorster uses context of communication here in exactly the same sense I propose.

What makes this intriguing is that the reciprocal co-textual context of the rest of the gospel and chapter 13 guides the reader in a change of the context of communication in order to understand the relevant part that is read. In that way context in all three of its aspects is involved: the context of communication is determinative as a factor in the interpretive context of the reader. Comparing this aspect of the gospel of Mark with the parables in their original settings can help clarify what is involved. The now lost original context of communication of the individual parables of Jesus deprives the interpreter of an essential component in the interpretive context for understanding what Jesus may have meant with them. The gospels of course provide such a context co-
textually when the parables are introduced with the recurrent, 'The Kingdom of God is like...' placing them in the interpretive context of the Kingdom, but we have no means of knowing whether that was a context provided by Jesus himself.

Mark's gospel has the advantage of providing the reader co-textually with the appropriate context of communication, ensuring him or her with the necessary context of interpretation for reading the gospel as a whole, and distinctively chapter 13. What Vorster's deliberations make clear is that the context of communication for the gospel is the gospel itself. Unlike in Matthew and Luke, for whom the events narrated in their gospels are in the past, in Mark the reader of the gospel has to find her or his place within the gospel itself, looking towards the future. Vorster (1987:220) formulates this with great clarity:

In terms of redundancy the reader is in fact well prepared for the death and resurrection of Jesus. Mark 13 is however of vital importance for the time after the resurrection and for the implications of his being the Son of God, who will return as the Son of man. It substantially undergirds that total resocialization of the reader who has to accept the view that the Son of God had to suffer and that the end is not yet, neither with the death and the resurrection of Jesus nor with the rumours about end time signs like wars (cf 13:7). It implies a closure of the plot in the future.

I find this particularly well expressed in Vorster's rejection of Norman Petersen's projection of the disciples as the protagonists of the story (:220). According to Vorster, the disciples 'are not the protagonists in the story of Jesus in Mark 13:5-37. They are once again given the instruction to comprehend the implication of the story of Mark' (:221). Although he does not say so, it should be obvious that the readers of the gospels are addressed in the collective personality of the disciples. Where the disciples find themselves is the context of interpretation in which the gospel becomes understandable. The gospel may end literally with 16:8. In reality it does not end at all, but leaves its readers in the context of communication in which the disciples are placed in 13:33-37 as effectively the final location, the context of communication where the evangelist wants them to find themselves.

5 INTERPRETIVE CONTEXT

The interpretive context concerns specifically the clues provided for the interpretation of a text, either within a text itself or by the strategies employed by the interpreter. As we have seen above, Vorster shows how the placement of Matthew 13 and Mark 13 in their respective gospels provide important clues to the meanings intended by the evangelists, constituting critical components in the interpretive context of the gospels. The importance of this aspect of the interpretive context is that it is derived from an analysis of the material to be
interpreted, not from the interpreter’s context of communication. That does not exclude the involvement of the interpreter’s context of interpretation, which provides the methodological tools of analysis through which insights into the structure of the gospels are derived.

It is that aspect of the interpretive context to which we now turn our attention. Vorster is aware of the necessity of this context.

Without a knowledge of philosophy it is impossible to understand philosophy. In similar manner the New Testament historian has a pre-understanding of not only his sources, but also of historical investigation, the preaching of Jesus, semantics and so on. Pre-understanding is, however, not understanding; it simply offers the possibility of understanding. That is why it is important for the interpreter of a text to have his/her pre-understanding checked and controlled by the text (1990:198-199).

So, for example, ‘no historical interpretation can claim to be a reflection of what really happened. By their very nature historical judgments are not objective descriptions of what really happened. They are socially conditioned constructions of the past...products of the mind built on presuppositions and perceptions of a great variety’ (201-202).

The variety of views concerning who Jesus was is shown by the way ideological presuppositions determine the outcome: ‘For the rationalists he became a preacher of morals, the idealists regarded him as the prime example of humanity, the aesthetes portrayed him as a genius in the art of rhetoric, while the socialists maintained that he was the friend of the poor an a social reformer’ (see Vorster 1991a:123 referring to Jeremias). Vorster points out, ‘The only way to control presuppositions is to articulate them and to have them put to the test by other interpreters of the same material. In such a manner vantage points can be judged’ (1990:202), and complains that it is difficult ‘to study the presuppositions on which scholars base interpretations when they are not made explicit...’ (209).

In the rest of On presuppositions and the historical study of the Jewishness of Jesus Vorster tries to establish and test the presuppositions with which three studies of Jesus operated. These deliberations are in a sense the culmination of all the previous studies; in them he directs his attention directly to the way in which scholars engage in this kind of study. Even though he focuses specifically on three scholars, what he writes about them applies in one way or another to all such studies.

Vorster points out that even though Geza Vermes, the first scholar he considers, ‘is not explicit about his presuppositions concerning his views of history and historical interpretation’, they can be derived from ‘statements he makes concerning his aim, his data and the material he treats in his study of Jesus the Jew.’ Vermes claims that his book is concerned with the historical
interpretation of 'historical facts', with an interest in history and the historical significance of words and events recorded in the Gospels (:203). He leaves it to theologians to figure what those words and events were believed to signify. According to him 'the historian’s task is to discover the original meaning of their message' (:203).

With Vermes’ presuppositions established, Vorster is able to put them to the test. He points out that in the first place Vermes derives so-called ‘historical facts’ of the life of Jesus ‘mainly from an analysis of the names of Jesus’; which ‘is surprising since the names of Jesus in many respects reflect the ideological points of view of the authors of the Gospels, and perhaps are the best indication of how he was seen and not who he “really” was’ (:204). Furthermore, ‘Vermes never pays attention to the historical value of this sources, the Synoptic Gospels’ (:204).

A second line of questioning concerns Vermes’ comparison of Jesus with Honi the Circle Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, miracle workers from Galilee, like Jesus, using them as ‘the filter through which Jesus is seen by Vermes and the angle from which he constructs an image of Jesus’ (:204). Thus, even though Vermes claims to provides ‘objective history, not interpretation’, the ‘historical facts’ from which he constructs his image of Jesus are interpreted by means of the ‘prophetic, charismatic background of first-century Judaism’. Vorster concludes: ‘The point is of course that even in Vermes’s construction “facts” are interpreted facts and not “bare facts”. “Reality” is reality remade by the interpreter, also in the case of historical interpretation’ (:205).

It is necessary to differentiate between two kinds of issues in Vorster’s critique. Vermes’ uncritical reliance on the Synoptics, and especially on the names of Jesus, signifies an unhistorical use of his sources which may provide a picture of what the early Christians thought of Jesus, but certainly not a historical image of who Jesus was. His study of Jesus within a charismatic Galilean Jewish context of interpretation, however, even if it provides not bare, but interpreted facts, should be recognised as historically appropriate. At this point Vorster has clarified Vermes’ presuppositions correctly, but the last word should not be that Vermes’ facts are constructed, interpreted. Methodologically his procedure is sound. The question is how well he applies it, but that is not the issue here. It is the historically uncritical way in which he uses his sources which leaves his approach crippled in one of its ‘legs’.

Vorster commends John Riches’s recognition of ‘the insights of modern linguistics that people do things with words and that it is not enough to investigate the meaning of sentences only’ (:206). According to Riches, ‘Jesus retained the “core meaning” of the term [Kingdom of God], but changed its associations by using it in non-conventional contexts of communication’, that is, ‘sharing meals with tax collectors and sinners, his healings and exorcisms,
his call to discipleship which enabled him to strip the term of its conventional associations of purity and to replace them with others’ (Vorster 1990:206). The problem which remains, however, is how to construct ‘the original contexts of communication for the sayings of Jesus?’ (:207).

Here we are back at the context of communication, but whereas Vermes relies on the general context of the Galilean setting of Jesus’ activity, Riches is dependent on the actual settings in which Jesus’ sayings were pronounced, to which access is not available because, as we have seen, those contexts are not preserved in the gospels.

The problem of the settings of Jesus’ sayings is not a problem for the third scholar whom Vorster discusses, E P Sanders, whose concern is the interpretation of ‘certain assured “facts” about the life of Jesus historically and using his utterances only secondarily in interpreting the facts’ (:207). Sanders prefers to study the intention of Jesus by establishing the facts by means of which it becomes possible to explain why Jesus was in conflict with the priesthood in Jerusalem, why he died in the hands of the Romans and why an eschatological movement was initiated in primitive Christianity (see Vorster 1990:207).

Surprisingly, Vorster appears to have no problem with Sanders’ so-called eight ‘indisputable’ facts about the life of Jesus (:208), which he attributes to agreement among New Testament scholars (cf 1991a:128). Rather, he points to Sanders’ placement of these facts ‘thoroughly’ in ‘the context of Jewish hopes for the restoration of Israel’ which means that he ‘is no longer working with the “bare facts” in his construction of an image of Jesus. He works with his interpretation of the facts’ (1990:208). Vorster illustrates this by means of Sanders’ interpretation of the cleansing of the temple, appearing to have no problem with the cleansing of the temple as an indisputable fact, but with the fact that what Sanders presents as his ‘interpretation of the indisputable fact’ (:208).

This focus on the context of communication as the interpretive context for all three of these scholars are suggestive of what Vorster is driving at, not so much the facts about Jesus’ activity, but the context of communication. In that regard we are back with the first article according to which the problem is not primarily the parables as such, but the fact that one could not understand what Jesus meant with them because there is no way of establishing their original contexts of communication. Similarly, this reveals why he wanted to distinguish between miracles and miracle stories. His interest is not in ‘artifacts’, but with the way in which they mean.

Vorster makes the same point in Jesus the Galilean, arguing that also in the interpretation of Jesus against a Jewish background a given perspective determines what was found: ‘an eschatological prophet, a political revolutionary, a magician, a Hillelite or proto-Pharisee, an Essene, a Galilean charis-
matic or a Galilean rabbi. In addition, there are the different Jewish views of Jesus, which add to or complement the variety of views held about his Jewish-ness' (1991a:124-125). He shows that the same already took place in the gospels, for example, in connection with the saying about taking up one’s cross and following Jesus (Mk 8:35//Lk 9:23): ‘Mark is clearly emphasising that Jesus wanted his followers to be prepared to die for his sake and for the sake of his message. Luke, on the other hand, obviously “spiritualizes” the matter by adding “every day”’ (:125).

Vorster then proceeds to provide important information about Galilee and Jesus in that part of the world, pointing out that even among those who had gathered around Jesus, there would probably have been a variety of interpretations of his significance.

Being a member of the lower class of a society who had to labour for their daily bread in the most beautiful part of Palestine, somebody who had an openness towards the sufferings of the majority of the people, and a religious Jew with a message, he could have been interpreted from many different perspectives by his followers and his contemporaries, as well as by the members of the upper class and the retainer class when they became aware of his activities and what he had to say (:134).

That is what leads to the article which follows, Jesus: Eschatological prophet and/or wisdom teacher, which we already discussed in the first section on ‘Context of Communication’, revealing the differences in understanding of Jesus, depending on whether one interprets him in an apocalyptic or wisdom context, or possibly both.

6 VORSTER ON THE HISTORICAL JESUS

It is not as if Vorster is not interested in the historical Jesus. ‘The quest for the historical Jesus concerns our interest in the past and the attempt to understand those who lived in remote times. It also concerns what we think and believe and one should not too easily say that historical problems such as Jesus’ identity do not concern us. On the contrary, we are wittingly and unwittingly informed about the past by all sorts of sources that we simply presuppose’ (:126). Consistent with his basic concern about context, these remarks do not mark an engagement in a quest for the historical Jesus, but, as we have seen, are intended to clarify the ways in which the interpreter’s context of interpretation functions as a factor in producing the emerging image of Jesus. Vorster reasserts: ‘our views about who Jesus was play a significant role in our interpretation of the deeds and words of Jesus’ (:127). ‘All theologians and lay Christian believers can learn one thing from the historical Jesus problem, which is that their views on who Jesus is or was are their own’ (:128). The
same applies to Vorster’s own views of who Jesus was which he allows to slip through at various points in these six articles.

Vorster takes a step beyond interpreting who Jesus was to the actual context of his teaching in connection with the Parable of the Mustard seed, when he suggests, ‘If we assume that the parables of Jesus mostly concerned his eschatological preaching about the kingdom of God, it would mean that this parable, like the parable of the leaven (cf Mt 13:33), wanted to give the hearers the assurance that notwithstanding a small beginning in the kingdom there would be a great ending’ (1985:156). The image of Jesus which emerges here is of someone who was involved in an endeavour with a small beginning but which would culminate in a great conclusion when the kingdom of God arrives. As is characteristic for these essays, however, Vorster immediately draws back with considerations which discredit his own view on the matter. The fact that each of the evangelists, including Thomas ‘rendered and embedded the same parable differently in their stories of Jesus’ makes it impossible to determine the original context and thus meaning of the parable even if it were possible to reconstruct its original form (:156).

But then, the tradition of Jesus’ healing miracles reveals something more about Jesus than the general concept of the kingdom of God. Because the healing miracles involved ‘so many individuals in dire straits who could not afford the services of a doctor’ Vorster asks, ‘Does the fact that Jesus according to tradition performed most of his miracles in Galilee, and this before people from the lower income groups, point to some social function which we need to take into account…?’ (1986:52). This is Vorster’s own interpretation, not something he gets from his sources; nowhere does he clarify on what basis he is able to claim to know such a ‘fact’ as the context of communication of Jesus’ miracles. In his own formulation, what he presents is ‘according to tradition’, not ‘bare’, but interpreted fact. Once more, it does not matter with regard to the discussion of the tradition of Jesus’ miracles, because Vorster’s interest is not in the miracles as such, or what they may have meant in the life of Jesus, but in miracle stories, that is, in what the miracles mean as they are (re)told in the gospels.

The same image of Jesus emerges again in Jesus the Galilean, where Vorster notes that it is ‘remarkable that the ministry of Jesus is related to villages such as Nazareth, Capernaum and others, while large cities such as Sepphoris and Scythopolis are not mentioned’ (1991a:129), indicating a preference for the people of the land. Furthermore: ‘It is nevertheless possible that Jesus of Nazareth could have been understood as an opponent of the status quo, not to speak of as a rebel. Whatever the historical value of the Caesarea Philippi event, it is possible that some of his followers would have seen him as a messianic figure’ (:133). What this means comes to expression in Vorster’s
understanding that Jesus was a member of the lower class of a society who had to labour for their daily bread in the most beautiful part of Palestine, somebody who had an openness towards the sufferings of the majority of the people, and a religious Jew with a message, he could have been interpreted from many different perspectives by his followers and his contemporaries, as well as by the members of the upper class and the retainer class when they became aware of his activities and what he had to say...

Here interpretation and factual reality are implicitly, but nevertheless clearly distinguished: the factual reality is that Jesus was 'somebody who had an openness towards the sufferings of the majority of the people, and a religious Jew with a message', as a result of which 'he could have been interpreted from many different perspectives by his followers and his contemporaries, as well as by the members of the upper class and the retainer class'.

And then in the final article: 'It is obvious from our sources that Jesus was a charismatic leader who succeeded in making followers and changing ideas. He performed miracles and taught people how to live a happy life in accordance with the will of God' (1991b:539). That, according to Vorster, is fact; the interpretive question is whether Jesus could have been seen in 'the roles of both a preacher and a wisdom teacher, or was he one and not the other?' (:539). In this case Vorster returns to what he presents as the fact:

Unlike John he did not preach as an eschatological preacher....He created a symbolic reality for which people who were distressed and lost and oppressed, and gave them reason to find life meaningful....After his death he was put into many religious roles because of his significance for his followers. Before his death he enabled people, by his teaching, to cope with life and to pursue a lifestyle in accordance with his perception of the will of God (:541).

Here something as remarkable as it is consistent once more becomes clear about these articles. Vorster allows presumed facts to slip in, because his real interest is in the way they are interpreted. That is what prevents his presumptions from becoming subject to his own criticism of unexamined presuppositions. He obviously has firm convictions on crucial aspects of who Jesus was, but those convictions do not affect his investigations. It is for that reason that his interest is not in establishing actual parables as told by Jesus. Even if that were to have been possible their meanings would still be what was given to them by the evangelists, because we no longer have access to the original contexts in which they were told, and without those contexts we have no way of knowing what Jesus could have meant with them. Similarly, in the case of the so-called 'indisputable facts' on which he claims there is agreement among New Testament scholars. He gives no critical attention to this supposed consensus because it has no real significance for what interests him, namely, that...
that consensus does not concern bare facts, but facts that have meaning only as interpreted.

7 CONCLUSION

In these six articles Vorster does not try to answer the question who Jesus was, but with great consistency keeps raising questions that need to be taken into consideration before attempting to answer that question. As I have tried to show, the overarching issue throughout remains context as a determining factor in the meaning of who Jesus was and what he said. This is shown most clearly when he leaves Sanders’ eight ‘indisputable’ facts about Jesus unchallenged, but proceeds to question Sanders’ placing those facts within ‘the context of Jewish hopes for the restoration of Israel’ as their interpretive framework; similarly when he subjects his own views, for example, concerning the meaning of the parables, to the criticism that we cannot know what Jesus meant with them because we do not know the contexts in which he told them.

The contexts which concern Vorster range from the original context of Jesus’ activity and teaching to the context of contemporary scholarship, all of which contribute to the meaning we attribute to Jesus. In so doing, Vorster shifts the focus of the enterprise from the unanswerable question who Jesus was to the way in which that question can be addressed in a fruitful way, with keen awareness of the nature of the enterprise. That his own view of who Jesus was comes to the fore more than once reveals that that question remains fundamental. His primary concern in these articles, however, is not to find an answer to it, but to clarify what is involved in the attempt to find an answer. The value of such an enterprise can be summarised in the following two statements: ‘The quest for the historical Jesus concerns our interest in the past and the attempt to understand those who lived in remote times. It also concerns what we think and believe and one should not too easily say that historical problems such as Jesus’ identity do not concern us. On the contrary, we are wittingly and unwittingly informed about the past by all sorts of sources that we simply presuppose’ (1991a:126). ‘All theologians and lay Christian believers can learn one thing from the historical Jesus problem, which is that their views on who Jesus is or was are their own’ (:128). Here, close to the end of these articles, he encourages his readers to recognise that what may have appeared as a depressing state of affairs concerning the question who Jesus was, is actually something wholesome. It is not possible to establish isolated truths about Jesus because all meaning is contextual. We are all involved in the question who Jesus was, beginning with those who were around him, followers as well as opponents, those who collected his sayings and stories about him, others who incorporated those sayings and stories into coherent narratives in the gospels to
bring out their meanings, scholars over the centuries, and finally, we ourselves, theologians and lay Christians alike, who ask who Jesus was.

I have many times pondered the fact that nothing of what Jesus said was left for posterity—which is of course also true for Socrates, that other founder on whom we base our theological enterprise. Jesus spoke Aramaic and not in the Greek in which his sayings are recorded. Notwithstanding Joachim Jeremias’ valiant attempt to reverse the process, all we are left with are the products of our scholarly endeavours, or, failing that, what is more important, the products of those earliest Christians who were not interested in relics of what Jesus said, but allowed him to be alive among them by placing what he said and did in the new contexts in which they found themselves. What Vorster has shown us in these articles is that we are still involved in the same enterprise of keeping the Jesus tradition alive. These articles do not discourage a quest for the historical Jesus, but encourages an engagement in it with a clear understanding of what it means, knowing that those who are so engaged are not mere observers, but become involved in a quest which links them with Jesus’ contemporaries, the first to ask who he was.

WORKS CONSULTED


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