The 'third quest' for the historical Jesus — where should it begin: With Jesus' relationship to the Baptiser, or with the nativity traditions?

Andries G van Aarde

ABSTRACT

The 'third quest' is characterised by the attempt to set the historical Jesus firmly into the Jewish context of the first century and by its offering complete historical constructs about Jesus' whole life and work. The article aims at making a contribution in this regard by reflecting on the historical nature of such a construct and particularly on the question of where the quest should begin. It proposes a design of a social-scientific model—within the conceptual framework of Max Weber—in terms of which an ideal-type of the life of Jesus of Nazareth can be construed. This ideal-type does not start with Jesus' relationship to John the Baptist, but with the traditions regarding Jesus' disgraced birth record and his a-familial ethos. His birth record and the banishment by his relatives in Nazareth reveal much about his ministry among, especially, ostracised children and other nobodies, and the trust he put in God as his Abba.

Without Jesus' historical human career the whole of Christology becomes an ideological superstructure (Schillebeeckx 1987:13).

INTRODUCTION

Since the eighties scholars have increasingly become occupied with a kind of historical Jesus research that has been described by Robinson as a 'Copernican revolution' and 'paradigm shift' (cited by Borg 1994b:19), and labelled by Wright (in Wright & Neill 1988:379-403) as the 'Third Quest'. In his 1992 book, Who was Jesus?, Wright tagged on to this label:

...[I]n the last twenty years or so, we have had a quite different movement, which has emerged without anyone co-ordinating it and without any particular theological agenda, but with a definite shape none the less. I have called this the 'Third Quest'...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 of the third quest] 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 (Wright 1992a:13; my emphasis).

In a previous article (Van Aarde 1994a:240-246) I argued that the so-called ‘third quest’ departed only selectively from certain ‘assumptions’ that lie behind the so-called ‘new quest’ (coined in 1959, also by James Robinson, in distinction to what Albert Schweitzer called ‘the old quest’ in 1906). The dependence of the ‘third quest’ on the ‘new quest’ is particularly perceivable in the fact that the ‘third quest’ is unthinkable without specific results of historical criticism, which has been the energy of the quest for the historical Jesus since Schweitzer. The historical-critical dispositions of the ‘third quest’, complemented by sociological and cultural-anthropological studies, are built upon important presuppositions of the ‘new quest’, for example the Markan priority in terms of the synoptic tradition and the dependence of Matthew and Luke on the Sayings Gospel Q. The many investigations into the different layers within inter alia Q1, the Gospel of Thomas2 and the Gospel of Peter3 and theories about the social locations of these sources and the layers therein4 are part and parcel of the historical critical enterprise—though adapted to fit into the present-day interdisciplinary approach. Therefore, the explanation of the dynamics of the ‘third quest’ by using the term ‘paradigm shift’ falls short of the mark and is perhaps too premature. However, there are some assumptions which survived through the ‘old quest’ and remained important in the ‘new quest’, which should now really be seen as something of the past (see Van Aarde 1944a:246). And I do not merely think of the expansion of the quest by complementing the sayings of Jesus with his deeds.

Specifically, this paper aims at making a contribution by reflecting on the historical nature of the kind of hypotheses that are offered in the ‘third quest’ and referred to by Thomas Wright in the citation above and, particularly, on the matter of where the quest should begin. But, first, let me comment on an aspect mentioned by Wright in the citation in order to make my own theological supposition clear at the very beginning. Thus, there are actually two aspects which I would like to explore beforehand. The one has to do with his remark about the ‘artificial, historical flavour’ of previous research and the other with the ‘theological agenda’ of the ‘new quest’. The issue concerning ‘proper’ historical research will be linked with my discussion on the his-

---

2 Cf Davies (1983); Patterson (1993).
3 Cf Koester (1990:220); Crossan (1988b).
historical nature of my own ideal-type of the historical Jesus. Let me focus on the so-called 'theological agenda' for now.

2 THE THEOLOGICAL AGENDA

Wright (1992a:12) could be correct that the 'third quest' does not have 'any particular theological agenda', but still the words of Albert Schweitzer (cited by Lüdemann 1994:18) abide with me: 'Ein Christentum, das die historische Wahrheit nicht in die Dienst der geistigen zu stellen wagt, ist innerlich nicht gesund, auch wenn es sie stark vorkommt'. Historical research does not only help to bring faith out into greater relief. Contrariwise, the faith experience of the first Christians should be regarded as the most obvious historical access to the quest as to who Jesus of Nazareth might have been. But, on the other hand, as Schillebeeckx (1987:13) put it: 'Without the substratum of "human meaning" in the events of Jesus all religious meaning in him becomes incredible; only the human significance of a historical event can become material for "supernatural" or religious meaning, for revelation'. Only because of the idea for which he stood, of what he did and said, and only because of his comportment as the homeless man of Galilee, a movement of believers came into existence (cf Schillebeeckx 1974:38)—a movement referred to by Paul as the 'Israel of God' (Gl 6:16). The 'church', thus, came to be a movement of 'Israelites' who began to experience the boundless care of God through their experiences with and because of the stories about the historical Jesus, who after his death, lived on in the memories of some of his followers through their resurrection experiences. Gerd Lüdemann (1994:194) referred to this faith in the historical Jesus as follows: 'Da [die österlichen Erfahrungen] ist Zeit und Ewigkeit eins geworden'.

But I do not think that this is what Wright intended to argue as something which is on trial in the 'third quest'. What he probably has in mind might concern the aspect of christology. It boils down to the fact that theologians generally refer to the 'new quest' of exegetes as a 'christology from below'. This modern theological reflection is then interpreted as an exegetical response to the dogmatic 'christology from above'. The latter is understood as the direct product of Christianity determined by Western culture after Constantine when political hierarchy, with power and force as the main concern, constituted the structures of the church and the world at large (cf Song 1993:57-58). Such a 'christology from above' resulted from the conciliar debates about Jesus as having descended from heaven and having been incarnated on earth and, thus, confessed as 'true God' and 'true man'. A 'christology from below' expresses twentieth-century concerns with the relationship between natural and supernatural and the possibility of transcendence in a secular world. From an exegetical point of view, 'christology
from below’ is therefore much more interested in establishing a gradual scale of continuity or discontinuity between the *historical Jesus* and the *kerygmatic Christ* by means of historical-critical criteria. Exegetes involved in this christological enterprise do not aim, as in the case of the ‘third quest’, at reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus by means of logical argument and ‘rigorous cross-examination’ of the sources and artifacts (cf Sanders 1993:8) in order to propose an ‘educated guess’ about what could coherently fit into the social context of the first-century eastern Mediterranean. However, both the ‘christology from above’ and the ‘christology from below’ would be rather anachronistic for an adequate understanding of both the historical Jesus and formative Christianity. As Malina & Neyrey (1988:xi) rightly demonstrate, the historical construction of Christian groups—and, I want to add, the Jesus of history—before Constantine should focus on the social processes (which include the religious dimension) whereby Jesus was acclaimed or denounced by members of his society who interacted with him as an equal.

If the ‘third quest’ does have any agenda it seems to be the advocating of the humanistic interests of emancipatory living in general and not specific theological matters as is the case with the ‘new quest’. However, this does not mean that the results of the ‘third quest’ cannot play an important role in the life of the church today. On the contrary, Borg’s (1991, 1994a, 1994b) writings in particular address aspects both in the political arena and in the church—like evangelism (cf Borg 1994b:143-159). The same can be said of theologians like Küng (1988:282-283) and Schillebeeckx (1982:28-35).

To me, it is important in this regard to hold on to the characteristics of the so-called postmodern, secularised global village in which we live today when we talk about the theological or political agendas of doing historical Jesus research. In this postmodern world the ‘spiritual’ and ‘secular’ spheres are becoming increasingly intermingled. My view on the relevance of historical Jesus research for faith and society can be summarised cursorily in five statements. Unfortunately, we do not have room to elaborate on or explain these viewpoints now:

* Historical Jesus research matters—at least, it makes a significant contribution toward the *historical understanding of the New Testament*, because the Jesus of history is either the implicit or explicit point of departure for inquiry into the sources behind, the social locations of, and the theological tendencies represented by the New Testament writings.

* Historical Jesus research is fundamental to the *credibility of Christianity*.

** in that it is not a ‘book-religion’, but it represents belief patterns modelled on the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, the manifestation of God;
in that it is also not an abstract ideology, but based on the humaneness of the Jesus of history;

** in that it is challenged in the interreligious dialogue as being exclusivistic since it is built upon the Jewishness of Jesus.

* To substantiate the (not reductionally intended) claim that the 'subversive' Jesus of history is the canon before the canon (in light of the potential identification of deviating traditions both within and outside the canon), the quest for the historical Jesus should continue.

* The quest for the historical Jesus is to play an important role in postmodern theological thinking, with the view to showing the existence of a core-continuum between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith without, however, denying a discontinuity regarding various aspects or claiming that faith, in order to be 'true faith', must be based on 'historical facts'. This opinion should be seen against the background of the conviction that:

** postmodernity features a mondial and pluralistic perspective as a result of a broadened rationality which goes beyond both foundationalism and relativism;

** the category 'kerygmatic Christ' has increasingly lost its explanatory and heuristic power in the secular and postmodern religious age;

** a construct/an ideal-type of the Jesus of history is both plausible and practicable in spite of the limitations of both historical criticism as such and the Gospels as sources for historical investigation/reconstruction;

** the canon has no precedence over non-canonical writings with regard to historical reliability;

** New Testament Christendom represents variations of belief modelled—some more closely than others—on the Jesus of history;

** the particularistic Ebionite communities (not advocated by the New Testament writings) were not rooted in the Jesus of history—a condition which also pertains, to a certain extent, to some present-day 'Christian' communities;

** Constantiniad Christendom made all the difference, because it triggered a christology from above and the opposing christology from below—and because both christologies represent a dialectic of 'vertical classification' (Malina & Neyrey 1988:x), this perspective on Jesus has been concerned with symbols of hierarchy and power and is, therefore, not an adequate understanding of the Jesus of history.

* With regard to engaged hermeneutics, the ‘third quest’ for the historical Jesus illuminates what emancipatory living, in memory of the Jesus of history, existentially entails. Being the living symbol of God's unmediated
presence in terms of God's unbrokered 'royal household', the historical Jesus set and, as the risen Christ and Lord, still sets one (irrespective of gender, age, ethnicity, social and religious affiliation) free from one's distorted relationship with oneself, with others, and with God.

To proceed in my argument and keep an eye on my purpose, both to explain the historical nature of my work and to formulate a research gap in existing endeavours in historical Jesus research, it might at this point be helpful to sketch my Jesus—although briefly and cautiously.

2 WHO WAS JESUS?

To me, he was the fatherless carpenter, the son of Mary, the peasant who came from the Galilean village, Nazareth. He was someone who lived in a strained relationship with his kin, and who sought and found company among the followers of John the Baptist, only subsequently to separate himself from them, having his own core group of followers. His life began to be characterised by an absolute trust in God as his Abba, while especially the insignificant—the nobodies—of Galilean society formed his audience when he spoke about his 'father's rule'. To them, he was a pneumatic sage and healer (cf Borg 1991:57-75, 97-124), a 'popular king' (cf Horsley 1987; Sanders 1993:248)—very much like those prophets who spoke out against the elites (cf Crossan 1994a:43). His sayings had an edge, they were short, pithy and memorable (cf Funk 1990a:8-10; Crossan 1994d:21). His stories were symbolic in nature, open-ended and shocking (cf Bernard Brandon Scott [1989] 1990:54-62). His acts, particularly those of healing, were of the same nature and can be considered as metaphors in themselves—pointing to the idea of resocializing. Both his words and his deeds were unconventional in a radical sense, and always crossed the boundaries of his culture (cf Borg 1991:79-96; 1994a:69-95). He did not envisage the kingdom of God as primarily apocalyptic in nature—that is, something of the end of time which would bring about the vindication of martyrs—or as comparable to earthly kingdoms where humaneness vanishes behind various symbols of power and hierarchy, but as something which is comparable to a household in which distorted relationships are healed by means of a 'politics of compassion' (cf Borg 1994a:46-68) and God's unmediated presence (cf Crossan 1988a; 1991:423). His 'alternative wisdom' (cf Borg 1994a:69-95) took offence at 'conventional wisdom' embedded in the temple ideology of his day (cf Crossan 1991:355)—an attitude which was not fully understood by some of his prominent followers. He came into conflict with the Pharisees, was regarded as a threat by the Sadducees and priestly elites, and was eventually crucified by the Roman procurator—like a criminal. No family or fictive family took care of his body...
(cf Crossan 1991:354-394; 1994a:123-158; contra Sanders 1993:275). And so Jesus of Nazareth died as he was born—a nobody among nobodies.

3 AN IDEAL-TYPE

Earlier in the paper I referred to Wright’s evaluation of previous historical Jesus research as ‘artificial’ with regard to historiography. In his book Who was Jesus? Wright seems simply to be concerned about the monopoly of Jesus’ sayings over against his deeds in previous research. This issue, however, is epistemologically much more complicated and Wright discussed it at length in his book,5 The New Testament and the people of God, volume one: Christian origins and the questions of God (Wright 1992b:10, 11, 18, 27, 32-46, 60, 61-64, 88-98, 101-102). The application of different criteria in the process of distinguishing authenticity is another issue that needs reflection with regard to real historiography, specifically, when such a historical-critical approach ignores the social contexts in which the analytically analysed literary units are embedded (see Van Aarde 1994b:402-406). Even the criterion of coherency needs to be adapted to our insights today concerning a responsible identification of stratifications of texts and the social world of the eastern Mediterranean. Content and context should fit each other. Social history is therefore the ‘buzz word’ with respect to the so-called ‘third quest’ for the historical Jesus. Seen from this perspective, Jesus of Nazareth is historically studied like other historical figures (Van Aarde 1994a:246) and, therefore, his ‘whole life and work’ should be taken into consideration.

Apparently this last aspect mentioned is the reason why Wright (1992a:12-16) considers S G F Brandon and G Vermes as the two early pioneers in the ‘third quest’. B F Meyer, A E Harvey, Borg and, perhaps, Ed P Sanders, are regarded as most significant within the “Third Quest” (cf van Aarde 1994a:238). However, Wright’s opinion that the work of the Westar Institute’s Jesus Seminar (cf inter alia Funk 1992; Funk & Hoover 1993) and the works of Mack (1988; see also 1993) and Crossan (1991) should be seen as part of the ‘new quest’ is, to me, a misjudgement6.

5 The second volume, Jesus & victory of God (Augsburg Press) is due to be printed during 1995 and is not yet available.
6 See, for example Funk’s article (1992), entitled ‘The Jesus that was’; it contains a preliminary sketch of Jesus’ ‘whole life’ within a Jewish setting, and it is based on the Westar Institute’s Jesus Seminar’s red/pink database (as established so far) in terms of 95 parables, sayings and dialogues of Jesus; although Mack’s ‘Cynic-Jesus’ is not involved in the issues of the Jewish social world’, it contains a social critique. His most recent book (Mack 1993) on the book of Q and Christian origins also emphasizes the social locations of the very first Jesus movements.
However that may be, my construct of the historical Jesus deliberately wants to take Jesus’ whole life into account. It should be seen as an ideal-type of Jesus of Nazareth. In this regard I am consciously aware of the fact that ‘ideal-types’ must be applied with caution and must not be allowed to imply historical facts too easily. Epistemologically, however, I am convinced that the use of such a social-historical model can help me to do what I want to do, namely to construe a life of Jesus of Nazareth from birth to death.

The notion and use of the ‘ideal-type’ are associated with the German sociologist, Max Weber (1949:89-112). An ‘ideal-type’ is not a description of reality or a hypothesis about reality. It is a theoretical construct in which possible events are intelligibly related to constitute an internally coherent system. Such a structure is based, not on selecting what is common to all instances, not on taking what is common to most instances, but on concentrating on the most favourable instances, namely those offering more intelligibility and explanatory power. The use of such an ‘ideal-type’ is twofold. In so far as the historical situation satisfies the conditions of the ideal-type, the situation is illuminated. Precisely in so far as the historical situation does not satisfy the conditions of the ideal-type, it brings to light differences that otherwise would go unnoticed, and it sets questions that otherwise might not be asked. Therefore, its utility is both heuristic and expository—that is, it can be useful inasmuch as it suggests and helps formulate hypotheses and, again, when a concrete situation approximates the theoretical construct, it can guide an analysis of the situation and promote a clear understanding of it (cf Lonergan 1972:227-228).

Historically, my construct begins with the traditions regarding Jesus’ birth record and his relationship with his family. My understanding of the starting point of the quest for the historical Jesus should be seen against the background of Crossan’s book, The historical Jesus: The life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant. As Crossan (1991:375) in a particular sense commences with the Pauline vision of the ‘crucified Jesus’ as a death through which ‘sin’ is buried, I begin with Jesus’ baptism as a ritual event through which ‘sinful sickness’ was addressed and healed. Crossan (in an elaboration orally presented during a conversation on his work at the Jesus and Faith Conference, DePaul University, Chicago, February 4-5, 1993) understands the Pauline vision as ‘condensed history’, a plotted event that was preceded by a sequential series of other historical events prior to the crucifixion. He put it in writing as follows: ‘For Paul, the historical Jesus, particularly and precisely in the terrible and servile form of his execution, is part of Christian faith. It is to the historical Jesus so executed that he responds in faith’ (Crossan 1994b:10).

Crossan (1991:375) refers to Paul’s perspective on death through which sin is buried (1 Cor 15:3) as ‘historicization of prophecy’. He distinguishes
this concept with 'history remembered' (Crossan 1995:1) which, in his article 'The historical Jesus in earliest Christianity', is seemingly built upon Paul's reference to the 'folly of the cross' in 1 Corinthians 1:18. In his work Who killed Jesus?, Crossan (1995:1) commences his argumentation (mainly with Raymond Brown) with this concept of 'prophecy historized' and focuses the 'continuity' between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith again on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:3ff in particular (Crossan 1995: 191, 203, 204).

Moving from 1 Corinthians 15:3ff, I would like us to remind ourselves of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:14, 19 and 217, specifically those in verse 21: God made him for our sake sin, he who knew no sin. According to Bultmann (1985:159-160)—who concurs with Vischer in this regard—we do have in these words of Paul about καταλαλαγή the resemblance of the 'Jewish way of thinking', but in terms of a 'new order', a 'change or purification of human notions about God'. Death is viewed as a means of expiation, just as in most of the ἑπερ-passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:3. The death of Christ is therefore understood as a demonstration of God's grace, and 'this grace is available to the one who opens himself [herself] to it...so that καταλαλαγή...occurred apart from people, independent of their conversion; it is the surrender of Christ into death' (Bultmann 1985:160). He points out that the ἐν Χριστῷ formula marks the 'believers' new life', received by baptism (cf Gl 3:26-28; 1 Cor 12:13), used as a 'term for a new epoch' and 'applied to the individual in the sense of external healing or rescue, especially of the forgiveness of sin' (Bultmann 1985:157).

Whether Paul knew the tradition of the 'Christian cult' with regard to Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist cannot be ascertained. Whatever it may be, the 'sinlessness' of Christ is—according to Bultmann—maintained by Paul: 'he had not sinned...whether at his incarnation or his death' (Bultmann 1985:165). Bultmann reckons the phrase 'he who knew no sin' [τὸν μὴ γνώσας ἁμαρτίαν] refers to the same phenomenon found in inter alia Hermetic,

7 ἡ γὰρ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ συνέχει ἡμᾶς, κοιμαίτας τούτο, ὅτι εἰς ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπέθανεν, ἢτα ὀλὸς ἀπέθανον [v 14]...ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλαλάσσων ἑαυτῷ, μὴ λογίζουμεν αὐτῶν ἀπαντώτω· ἐν γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνης δια ἐν αὐτῷ [v 2] [ἐ]’We are ruled by the love of Christ, now that we recognize that one man died for everyone, which means that all share in his death (v 14).... Our message is that God was making all (hu)mankind his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends (v 19).... Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God' (vs 21) — TEV].
Mandaic and Rabbinic expressions that ‘innocent babes’ and ‘children’ do not know ‘what wickedness is’. However, for Paul, Christ is ‘treated as sinner by the fact that God allows him to die like a sinner on the cross (Gal. 3:13)’ (Bultmann 1985:164-165; cf Rm 8:3). This ‘Christ who knew no sin’ refers, according to Bultmann, to Χριστός κατὰ σάρκα—that is ‘Christ in his plainness [‘Umscheinbarkeit’], in his σωτηρία ως ἀθρωπος, his μορφή δούλου (P1hp 3:21)’ (Bultmann 1985:155; my emphasis). As with the author of Hebrews (4:15) and the Johannine literature (Jn 7:18; 8:46; 1 Jn 3:5), Bultmann (1985:165) interprets Paul as agreeing that ‘(n)aturally, there is no reference to the earthly Jesus’ as having sinful qualities, at least to the extent he could be tempted. And although Bultmann (1985:155 note 154) is correct in his understanding of the ‘resurrected Christ’ (cf Rm 1:4) as ‘Χριστός κατὰ πνεῦμα, the δοξοθείς [Rm 1:4] in the σῶμα τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ (P1hp 3:21), ὡς ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ (Rom. 8:34)’, it does not, to my mind, alter the statement in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that Jesus, innocent as a child—whether metaphorically intended or not—did not know what sin was and, nevertheless, died as a ‘sinner’!

Paul here helps to track a pathway that goes beyond Jesus’ remission of sin, a road that takes me to his sinful, though innocent, childhood. Therefore, in addition to Crossan’s perception that Jesus’ death can be seen as condensed history, Jesus’ baptism can, to my mind, likewise be perceived as condensed history. Why did Jesus want to be baptised? Is it because of ‘sinful sickness’? My intention is to show that the unfortunate relationship with his family and his critique against the patriarchal family can provide us with the probable clue. Moreover, what does Jesus’ birth record tell us about his relationship with his family and his kin in Nazareth? What does his birth record reveal about his ministry among, especially, children and other nobodies in his society? To me, the answers to these questions rely on a construct of an ‘ideal-type’ regarding someone in first-century Herodian Palestine who was healed from ‘sinful sickness’ (for example, the stigma of being a ‘fatherless son’) and started a ministry of healing/forgiving ‘sinners’ through the help of followers who were called to act likewise as ‘healed healers’ (to use an expression from Crossan’s insights). Jesus died because of the ‘subversiveness’ of this ‘ethos of compassion’ (to use Borg’s expression) in the Jewish society of his day. His followers were likewise threatened and some died in the same manner as their forerunner.

My aim is to demonstrate historically and in a literary fashion how this construct is built upon available Jesus traditions in terms of a chronological stratification of texts and multiple independent attestation (cf Crossan 1991:427-450) as well as a social stratification (cf Lenski, Nolan & Lenski 1995:175-222) of Herodian Palestine as an advanced agrarian society (cf Van
Aarde 1993a). Schaberg (1994b:32) considers my approach ‘a promising direction for research’. However, the real work has to wait for another time. The immediate goal is to identify a research gap in existing historical Jesus research.

4 IN OTHER WORDS, WHERE SHOULD THE QUEST BEGIN?

The reason why we have almost no references by the followers of Jesus to his childhood (besides that apologetic-confessional and legendary material in the infancy narratives inside and outside the New Testament—cf Schaberg 1993a, 1993b, 1994b) could be ascribed to the fact that the pre-adult traditions about Jesus were simply unknown or it could be that Mediterranean people attached legitimate authority only to men who went through an initiation rite which is regarded as a transferring from childhood to manhood. From a cultural-anthropological perspective it is, therefore, worthwhile to take note of the interpretations of Jesus’ baptism by African theologians. Maturity is very highly estimated in traditional African culture. Authority and legitimation depend greatly on adulthood. Jesus’ baptism (as well as his resurrection, understood as an exaltation to become the authoritative elder brother among the living dead—see also LeMarquand 1994:11) is indeed seen as an initiation rite (cf Nyamiti 1989:18; 1991:8; Mugambi 1989:67), just like the rituals of status transformation among the first-century Mediterranean people (cf McVann 1991:151-157; Van Eck [1995]:11). In traditional African culture this status transformation has to do with that phase in the life of a young man when he reaches maturity and, subsequently, is accepted as an ‘authoritative personality’ (cf Nyamiti 1990:45-47; Mugambi 1989:124).

Although it might be the case for Mark as well, the priority of the Markan text causes proponents of both the ‘new quest’ and the ‘third quest’ to start their quest for the historical Jesus with his baptism by John the Baptist. In his recent work on John the Baptist Ernst (1989:337) expresses this consensus in research as follows (my emphasis): ‘An der Tatsächlichkeit der Taufe Jesu durch Johannes besteht...kein begründeter Zweifel. Möglicherweise kann man noch ein Stück weitergehen und sagen, Jesus habe bei dieser Gelegenheit seines großes Berufungserlebnis gehabt’. Jeremias (1971:42) links this ‘call story’ with Jesus’ announcement of the reign of God in Mark 1:15. However, he asks:

But have we found the right starting-point if we begin with Jesus’ announcement of the reign of God? Does that really take us to the beginning? Does this starting-point not forget something, the question of how Jesus came to make an appearance and to proclaim the good news? There can be no doubt that something preceded the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus. The only question is whether we can come to any historical understanding of this first and most profound stage. Are we not
up against that which cannot be described? At least, we can put our questions here only with the utmost caution and the utmost restraint. Nevertheless, we can make some very definite and clear statements which give us a clue to what comes before Jesus' appearance, to his mission (Jeremias 1971:42).

What comes before, to Jeremias (1971:42-56), was Jesus' relationship to the Baptiser! To depart in the quest for the historical Jesus, irrespective whether 'new' or 'third', from Jesus' relationship to the Baptiser is such an overwhelming fact that mentioning only one or two prominent scholars representing these two paradigms respectively, will serve to demonstrate the point.

4.1 The 'new quest'
The 'new quest', to oversimplify it, mainly adopts a historical-critical perspective and the 'third-quest' a social-historical one. As regards the first, Bultmann (the scholar who actually introduces the so-called 'no quest') cautiously mentions a few characteristics of the deeds of the historical Jesus which could be deciphered: 8

Hence, with a bit of caution we can say the following concerning Jesus' activity: Characteristic for him are exorcisms, the breech of the Sabbath commandment, the abandonment of ritual purifications, polemic against Jewish legalism, fellowship with outcasts [deklassierten Personen] such as publicans and harlots, sympathy for women and children; it can also be seen that Jesus was not an ascetic like John the Baptist, but gladly ate and drank a glass of wine. Perhaps we may add that he called disciples and assembled about himself a small company of followers—men and women (Bultmann, in Painter 1987:102).

In a footnote to this summary Bultmann (1960:11 n 17) referred to Conzelmann's classic article on Jesus in Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (expanded and updated in 1973) for a similar viewpoint. Tagging on to this reference one could say that the students of Bultmann who moved in their 'new quest' beyond their mentor's so-called 'no quest', have not really come forward with new results (see Keck 1971:41-42 n 12; Borg 1994b:4; Scott 1994:256). To my knowledge, there is no other place in Bultmann's writings...
where we find such a concentrated glimpse of his historical reconstruction of the historical Jesus. In this very short sketch we have the core of Jesus life and, as far as his deeds are concerned, these few non-chronological organised pen strokes concur more or less with the ‘red choices’ of the fellows of the Westar Institute’s Jesus Seminar with regard to the work done so far on the deeds of Jesus. They are also coherent with the content of the red printed sayings in the Jesus’ Seminar’s Five Gospels (see Funk & Hoover 1993).

However, in his work on Bultmann’s interpretation of the history of Jesus, John Painter (1987:102) says that more can be said, according to Bultmann, on the teaching of Jesus. He refers to Bultmann’s (1988:13) own words in his Jesus book: ‘von seiner Verkündigung wissen wir so viel, daß wir uns ein zusammenhängendes Bild machen können’ ['we know so much of his [Jesus’] message to be able to make a coherent picture for ourselves’—my translation]. In his Nachwort to Bultmann’s Jesus book, Schmithals (in Bultmann 1988:149) emphasises the same:


It should also be acknowledged that the historical Jesus is treated by Bultmann ‘as a Jew in the context of the diversity of Judaism’ (Painter 1987:101). With regard to Jesus’ baptism, Bultmann (1951:26-27) says: ‘The account of Jesus’ baptism (Mk. 1:9-11) is legend, certain though it is that the legend started from the historical fact of Jesus’ baptism by John’ (‘... an das historische Faktum der Taufe Jesu durch Johannes angeknüpft hat’). According to Bultmann (1951:27) it is ‘told in the interest not of biography but of faith’. And in his Synoptischen Tradition Bultmann (1972:247) formulated in the same vein (my emphasis): ‘Without disputing the historicity of Jesus’ baptism by John, the story as we have it must be classified as legend. The miraculous moment is essential to it and its edifying purpose is clear. And indeed one may be at first inclined to regard it as a biographical legend; it tells a story of Jesus’. These words remind me of Norman Perrin’s (1976:22) reference to Wheelwright’s

⁹ Schmithals (in Bultmann 1988:150) has in mind the so genannte liberale Leben-Jesu-Theologie—that is, in Albert Schweitzer’s words, the old quest of the historical Jesus (see Bultmann 1988:10).
dictum in his definition of myth: 'Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories — some no doubt fact, and some fantasy....'

Although Bultmann (1972:247) does not want to refer to the account of Jesus' baptism in Mark 1:9-11 as a 'call story' (Berufungsgeschichte—see 1967:263) in order to avoid a 'psychological fallacy', and although he agrees (with Ed Meyer) that 'Acts 10:37f., 13:24f. prove that the historical fact of Jesus' baptism is not necessary for linking the ministry of Jesus ('Wirksamkeit Jesu'—see Bultmann 1967:263 n 1) to John's'10, and although Bultmann (1972:253) mentions the embarrassment11 experienced by the 'Christian cult' with regard to the problem of how 'Jesus (can) undergo a baptism for the remission of sin?', he does not, as far as I can see—including his Jesus book (Bultmann 1988:20-22)—elaborate either on what Pesch (1977:80) refers to as a vormarkinisch-täuferischen Tradition or the historical background of Jesus being a 'sinner' who needed remission and, therefore, became linked to the Baptiser's circle. In his Synoptischen Tradition he is only interested in the re-editing of this tradition by a (Hellenistic) Christian redactor (see Reumann 1972:181-199).

However, in his commentary on the Gospel of John it seems that Bultmann argues that the baptism of Jesus, though a historical fact, should be seen as irrelevant for the Evangelist. It is because the account of Jesus' baptism is not mentioned in the Gospel of John—or, at most, John's gospel only alludes to what is reported in the synoptics (see Tatum 1994:79-80). On the other hand, the ministries of the Baptiser and Jesus are definitely related to each other in the Gospel of John, and here we also do have a sharp emphasis on 'specific social and religious categories of people depicted interacting with JB. These include priests, Levites, and Pharisees (1:19, 24; also 4:1)’ (Tatum 1994:80). Bultmann (1968:65) comments as follows on the inattentiveness of the Johannine evangelist with regard to Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist:12

10 Bultmann (1972:247 n 2) adds: 'yet not that this linking must be made by the story of a baptism, or that it could only be made if the baptism of Jesus were not an actual historical fact'.

11 This embarrassment is expressed in Mt 3:14f and by Jerome (Against Pelagius, 3.2) who derived it from the Gospel of the Nazoreans. Bultmann (1972:253) refers to this document as the 'Gospel of the Hebrews', since Jerome (cf Koester 1987:201-202) 'assigned all known quotations of [the so-called] Jewish-Christian gospels to this one document, the “Gospel According to the Hebrews,” which, he held, was identical with the original Aramaic Matthew'. The real 'Gospel of the Hebrews' was used in Alexandria, while the Gospel of the Nazoreans, like the Gospel of the Ebionites, was used in the area of Syria and Palestine (see Koester 1987:203, 223). This document, the 'Gospel of the Hebrews', is preserved in Jerome's commentary on Isaiah 4 and the relevant citation does not refer to this particular embarrassment (see Tatum 1994:89).

12 'Man darf das freilich nicht so deuten, als sei die Tatsache der Taufe Jesu für den Evglisten eine Verlegenheit gewesen, sodaß er sie möglichst verschweigt. Vielmehr nimmt er auf sie sichtlich unbefangen Bezug; aber er erzählt sie nicht, weil er sie als
Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this that Jesus' baptism was an embarrassment for the Evangelist, so that he [John] passes over it as quickly as possible. On the contrary, he clearly refers to it without misgivings. Yet he does not give an account of it, firstly because he can assume that his readers are acquainted with the story, and secondly, because for him the mere historical fact is of no significance by comparison with the witness of the Baptist which is based on it (Bultmann 1971:94).

In his work, *Die Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien*, Bultmann (1965:34) admits that Jesus underwent a Bußtaufe and says that Jesus did not need to do so. However, the historical grounds, if any, on which Bultmann bases this opinion are unclear. I could not find the answer in Bultmann's writings, other than the implicit reference in his interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21 which has already been discussed earlier in this article. As we have seen, Paul said that Christ 'who knew no sin' was nevertheless made a 'sinner' by God. Could one infer that the historicity of Jesus' baptism is unwesentlich in Bultmann's opinion as well, so that he does not bother to take trouble with the question of why Jesus' sinfulness was experienced as an embarrassment by the 'Christian cult'? Clearly, seen at least from the perspective in the Gospel of the Nazoreans (in Jerome, *Against Pelagius* 3.2) and the Gospel of the Ebionites (in Epiphanius, *Heresies* 30.13.7-8; see Tatum 1994:89, 90), this embarrassment boils down to the question: 'why would Jesus want to be baptized?'.

Schmithals's (1994:183) 'kerygmatic' and 'existential' understanding of the baptism account is, like Bultmann's exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:21, an example of those meritorious exegetical attempts that do not succeed in taking the social-historical dimension of the account and the apology for it seriously. Departing from his correct description of the 'Bußpredigt und die Bußtaufe des Johannes' in the light of the 'apokalyptischen Erwartung der bevorstehenden Äonenwende' (Schmithals 1994:183), Schmithals links the historical baptismal event with the 'im Urchristentum entwickelte Sühne-, Versöhnungs- oder Stellvertretungs theorie' and interprets it as an 'eschatologisch Sündenvergebung' event (Schmithals 1994:99; 1986:83). This

13 Nevertheless, Schmithals (1986:82), in spite of his 'existential exegesis', still holds on to the historicity of Jesus' baptism: 'Daß Jesus von Johannes getauft wurde, gehört zu unserem sicheren Wissen vom Leben Jesus' (see also Jeremias 1971:49). Jeremias (1971:44) does not 'put on one side as lightly as usually happens' the explicit dispute of Josephus (AJ 18.117) that the baptism of John had anything to do with the forgiveness of sin. He understands Jesus' baptism as follows: 'Jesus experienced his call when he underwent John's baptism, in order to take his place among the eschatological people of God that the Baptist was assembling' (Jeremias 1971:49).

The problem, however, is that we seemingly do not have the ‘texts’ to direct us in answering the question of why Jesus wanted to undergo baptism for the remission of sin. Nevertheless, as social-historians, we ought not to shrink back from the problem of so-called no-evidence, specifically, if the historical inquiry is understood, in the words of Pheme Perkins (1983:23), as ‘a limited endeavour of probabilities and hypotheses linking its evidence together in intelligible patterns’. And this is exactly the task which one would expect from those historians of the origins of Christianity who have become involved in the so-called ‘third quest’ for the historical Jesus—particularly because they are known for their development of reading scenarios which pretend to take the ‘whole life of Jesus’ into account.

4.2 The ‘third quest’

However, with regard to the ‘third quest’, nothing—with the exception of an endeavour by Hollenbach (1982)—has really changed with regard to where the ‘quest’ should begin. To demonstrate this statement let me narrow my scope by concentrating on the Jesus book of E P Sanders. In this book Sanders (1993:10-11) again compiles a list of ‘statements about Jesus’ that are ‘almost beyond dispute’ (my emphasis):

[1] Jesus was born c. 4 BCE, near the time of the death of Herod the Great;
[2] he spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village;
[3] he was baptized by John the Baptist;
[4] he called disciples;
[5] he taught in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee (apparently not the cities);
[6] he preached ‘the kingdom of God’;
[7] about the year 30 he went to Jerusalem for Passover;
[8] he created a disturbance in the Temple area;
[9] he had a final meal with the disciples;
[10] he was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest;  
[11] he was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.  
We [E P Sanders] may add here a short list of equally secure facts about the aftermath of Jesus' life:  
[12] his disciples at first fled;  
[13] they saw him (in what sense is not certain) after his death;  
[14] as a consequence, they believed that he would return to found the kingdom;  
[15] they formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God's Messiah.

Sanders (1993:10) quite rightly says that a 'list of everything that we know about Jesus would be appreciably longer' and, in his book The historical figure of Jesus, he indeed abstracts many more details from the available sources and most of them are very convincing.

In the above-mentioned list he refers to two episodes in Jesus' life prior to his baptism by John—namely Jesus' birth during the Herodian regime and Jesus' childhood in Nazareth. Sanders (1993:12-13) mentions only two 'facts' with regard to these two episodes in Jesus' life: 'Jesus lived with his parents in Nazareth, a Galilean village... When Jesus was a young man, probably in his late twenties, John the Baptist began preaching in or near Galilee. He proclaimed the urgent need to repent in view of the coming judgement. Jesus heard John and felt called to accept his baptism. All four gospels point to this event that transformed Jesus' life' (my emphasis).

With regard to Jesus' birth and the role of his parents in these accounts, Sanders (1993:75) correctly says that so many 'novelistic interests' penetrated the gospel narratives with the consequence that we 'cannot write "the life of Jesus" in the modern sense, describing his education, tracing his development, analysing the influence of his parents, showing his response to specific events—and so on'. Elsewhere in his book he points out that the Matthean and Lukan birth narratives 'constitute an extreme case' because their use was solely 'to place Jesus in salvation history': 'It seems that they had very little historical information about Jesus' birth (historical in our sense)...' (Sanders 1993:88).

This insight concurs with that of Bultmann, Crossan and Borg—to mention only three scholars. In the whole section of Bultmann's treatment of the infancy narratives in his Synoptischen Tradition he never paid the slightest attention to the possibility that implicit individual apologetic features or conditions in these narratives could have a historical base in the life of Jesus. It is

14 There are a few exceptions—such as his constant, though more subtle now, idea of Jesus as an eschatological proclaimer of the kingdom.
simply legendary material (see Bultmann 1972:292, 295, 298, 302, 304, 306). He is even skeptical about the possibility that the polemic against the sort of defamations we read in Origen (Against Celsus 1.28) and the Talmud (e.g. Sab 104b) was originally intended (with regard to the Matthean story about the flight into Egypt) (see Bultmann 1972:293-294). Crossan (1994a:18; 1994c:68) interprets the tradition of the ‘illegitimate Jesus’ as the ‘instant and obvious rebuttal’ by the ‘opponents of Christianity’ of the ‘claims of virginal conception and divine generation for Jesus’.

In other words, according to Crossan, these ‘claims’ were not invented for the purpose of rejecting the reproach from the ‘synagogue’ (and later from Celsus and rabbinic Judaism) that Jesus is a premarital or an illegitimate child—an interpretation which is found, and rightly so, in the writings of inter alia Bultmann’s student, Schmithals (1985:337) and, specifically, Schaberg (1987, 1993a, 1993b, 1994b). According to Crossan the stories in Matthew and Luke about the ‘virginal birth’ and ‘David’s lineage’ were invented as ‘historized prophecy’. Such an opinion, seen from a historical point of view, boils down to the fact that these accounts originated within the ‘Christian cult’, to use Bultmann’s term, prior to the actual defamations by the ‘opponents of Christians’ of Jesus’ divine generation—thus, ‘mythology rather than history’ (Crossan 1994a:18). In his book A marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus, Meier (1991:230) argues that the precise ‘origins of the virginal conception tradition remain obscure from a historical point of view’. According to him the ‘seedbed’ for this idea should be sought in Jewish apocalyptic. Meier (1991:229) thinks in the same vein as Bultmann by regarding the rebuttal of Jesus’ divine generation as a reaction to the infancy narratives. He thinks—and I do not think he is correct—that there is no clear attestation of a ‘polemic tradition of Jesus’ illegitimacy until the middle of the second century’ (Meier 1991:22). Schaberg (1993a:20), however, reads the infancy narratives in Luke and particularly in Matthew ‘as a response to the truth of the illegitimacy charge’. With regard to these narratives she—while exposing Raymond Brown’s unsubtle reading of her argumentation—quite rightly asks: ‘But why could Jesus not be Son of God and son of an unknown—or even son of a nobody?’ (Schaberg 1994b:20). Schaberg (1994b:19) argues that ‘Joseph’s paternity is denied in Matthew and Luke because it was known in some circles that he was not the biological father of Jesus’. The Gospel of John (1:45; 6:42), however, refers apologetically to Jesus as Joseph’s son because, for him—as for Matthew who knew Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father and for Luke who referred in 4:22 to Jesus as

15 The references in Rm 1:3-4 and 2 Tm 2:8 to Jesus being born of the ‘seed’ of David should not be understood as allusions to the paternity of a historical Joseph (contra Schaberg 1994b:19 note 35). People misunderstood Bultmann’s (1985:155 n
Joseph's (adopted) son—'illegitimacy discredits Jesus' (Schaberg 1994b:19). The infancy narratives in Proto-James and in Pseudo-Matthew (see Schaberg 1993a) overstretch this notion to such an extent that they radically transformed *die Unscheinbarkeit* (Bultmann 1976:157) of the historical Jesus into symbols of power and hierarchy. In these narratives Joseph is 'exalted' to a wealthy benefactor and Jesus almost to a 'royal prince'! Subsequently, they skipped the *Anstoß of Jesus' plainness* and tragically missed what God's love is about! Therefore, Schaberg correctly does not agree that a disgraced Jesus should necessarily discredit Christian faith. Nevertheless, it is understandable that such a fact could be used 'to smear Jesus and his movement, to weaken his credibililty as a religious leader. The infancy narratives wanted to dispute this notion'. In other words, historical information can be inferred from these narratives.

On the other hand, like Bultmann, Crossan (1991:371-372) is of the opinion that there is no 'biographical information' about the historical Jesus in both complexes 'Jesus Virginally Conceived' and 'Of David's Lineage'. Borg (1992:4) also considers these accounts as 'symbolic narratives, not historical reports'. Crossan (1991:372)—just as in the case of his understanding of Paul's perspective on 'death through which sin is buried' and the 'historical narrative' in the Gospel of Peter about the 'resurrected, escorted cross that spoke' (see Crossan 1995:195-197; especially Crossan 1988b)—calls the two above-mentioned complexes a 'historicization of prophecy', a process in which a 'historical narrative' is written *from* prophetic allusions; that is, 'hide the prophecy, tell the narrative, and invent the history'.

However, he seemingly takes the 'names of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph', the 'only common features' in the 'long narrative accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2' historically for granted, specifically with regard to the references to Jesus as a 'child of the carpenter Joseph and Mary' in Matthew 13:55-56, Luke 4:22 and John 6:42 (Crossan 1994a:23-24; also Borg 1994a:25). In a paper presented at the Biblical Archaeology Society in 1993 (see Schaberg 1994b:16 note 28), Crossan (1994c:67) reads Matthew's citation of Is 7:14 as though the evangelist had a woman in mind who 'will conceive and remain a virgin'. In other words, Matthew, according to Crossan (1994c:67), 'takes it [the word παρθένος] literally and applies it to the virginal conception of Jesus'. Matthew is, however, not—according to Crossan—the interpretation of Rm 1:3-4 by deducing from his insight into Paul's important distinction between the *Χριστός κατὰ σάρκα* ('Christ in his plainness') and the *Χριστός κατὰ πνεῦμα* ('the resurrected Christ') an absolute discontinuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ, so that the historical Jesus is not considered as part of Christian faith. I do not interpret Bultmann in this way (see Bultmann 1960).
source of the idea of the ‘virginal conception of Jesus’. Crossan’s opinion is that—in the words of Schaberg—‘the source is the competition with Rome: the desire of the evangelists to show that God is manifested in Jesus born of a virgin and not in Augustus who claimed to be descended from Venus’. Consequently, the virginal conception is for Crossan (1994c:72) ‘not a literal statement about the biology of Mary’. It ‘should be taken metaphorically.... It is a credal statement about the status of Jesus’.

I read the narration about the genesis and birth of Jesus in Matthew also as a challenge-riposte story about two ‘kings’ (see also Horsley 1989): namely, Herod the Great, the unpopular elitistic king with a ‘shameful’ Idumean past, but honorifically accepted by Caesar, and Jesus, the popular king, also with a disgraced birth record, and by divine intervention having been made ‘son of God’ (see Van Aarde 1992). However, I do not see why the word παρθένος in Mt 1:23 ought to refer to a virgin and I also do not see why Greek mythology ought to be the background of this ‘Jewish’ gospel. How Greek mythology influenced the Lukan infancy narrative, I do not know, but that it could, is possible.

The Matthean infancy narrative does not describe how Jesus was conceived (γεννάω), but rather the reason why Mary’s pregnancy should not be perceived as shameful; that which is conceived in her is not impure but is of the Spirit (that is, God), and thus holy [τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύματος ἐστὶν ἁγιόν—Mt 1:20c] (cf Patte 1987:27). Matthew’s story clearly presupposes that Joseph thought that she was guilty of unchastity (cf Beare 1981:68; Brown 1979:125-128). The figure of Joseph, however, does not occur in the early sources: not in Paul, the Gospel of Mark, the Sayings Gospel Q, or the Gospel of Thomas. We meet Joseph in those documents that dispute the defamatory claims of the opponents of the Jesus movement: Matthew, John and Luke, and eventually the dependent Proto-James and Pseudo-Matthew.

Strangely enough, Crossan does not insist on a painstaking historical analysis with respect to these quite different traditions. To me, an analysis of a ‘unit’ of texts about Joseph reveals a clear picture of a trajectory. Why could the figure of Joseph not be considered part and parcel of what Crossan (1994a:23) referred to as the ‘confessional statement’, in at least Matthew and John, with regard to the ‘reply’ to the ‘obvious rebuttal’ by the ‘opponents of Christianity’ of the traditions about Jesus ‘divine generation’? Is Crossan (1994a:24) not too indifferent with regard to the difference between Mark 6:3: ‘Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of...’ and Matthew 13:55-56: ‘Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers...’? Why could Mark 6:3 also not be interpreted like Mark 1:9 as ‘without any defensive commentary’ (Crossan 1994a:44)? Are the
references in Thomas 105, and also John 19:9, not explanatory with regard to the expression 'the son of Mary'?

To my knowledge no scholar has so far in the debate referred to Pilate's question to Jesus: πόθεν εἶ σο?; ['Where do you come from?'] in John 19:9, and Jesus' non-response (ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἀπόκρισιν οὐκ ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ). David Fiensy (1991:164-165), describing the nature of the outcasts—the deklassierten Personen—in his book on Herodian Palestine, mentioned the priestly code that someone born from 'an adulterous or incestuous union' (including a child from a marriage between someone of the covenant and someone outside), 'must be silent when reproached about his descent because he does not know who his father was'. I read John 19:9, contrariwise to Mark 6:3 and Thomas 105, but like John 1:45, 6:42, 8:41, Matthew 1:1-17, 1:18-25, 27:64 and Acts of Pilate 2:3, as a narration with 'defensive commentary'. Specifically, I understand the Matthean story about Jesus' genesis and birth record as a 'confessional' commentary that reveals historically very much about Jesus' compassion towards the endangered woman and child—perhaps the most distinctive aspect in the life of the historical Jesus (cf Bultmann 1960:11 again). We also find in Mark 10 a very early account of the sympathy Jesus had for woman and children who were endangered because of abandonment (cf Van Aarde 1992).

It is quite possible, though very hypothetical, that Jesus could, in the words of Ben Sira (23:22-26), be the 'branch' of a 'strange man' and Mary who were forced by the priestly code to divorce (cf e.g Sayings Gospel Q 16:18). In the 'ancient Roman world' infancy and childhood narratives 'regularly prepared their readers for the later adult status and roles maintained by their protagonists' (Wiedemann 1989:49-83). Being 'fatherless', as our earliest sources depict Jesus, he could fit into the 'Pauline' description (1 Cor 5:21) of a child who was not supposed to know the nature of 'sin', or 'wickedness'—that is, someone who was foredoomed not to enter the congregation of the Lord, because—according to the ideology of the temple and its idea of systemic sin—he was denounced to have the status of being God's

---

16 In other words, contra the commentary in The Five Gospels (cf Funk & Hoover 1993:528; see also Miller 1992:321).

17 I interpret the phrase ἦ ἐσχάτη πλάνη τῆς πρώτης as referring to the opponents' reproach that the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection was a worse heresy than the first, that is about his acceptance and legitimation by God at his birth (see Van Aarde 1994b:255).

18 'Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and the one who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery' (Q 16:18). Matthew (5:32) defensively adds: 'Everyone who divorces his wife except in the case of infidelity makes her the victim of adultery'. Indeed, this Q saying, provided with context, satifies here my ideal-type of Jesus as a 'fatherless nobody'.

---
child. How and where would he find ‘remission for his sin’ if it could not occur, according to the priestly code, in the temple itself? In the words of the Gospel of Mark (1:9, 11), Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμεραῖς ἤλθεν Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου...καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν συ ἐάν οὐδὲς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα. Departing from these two remarks in Mark, the one about the Jesus of history and the other about the Jesus of faith, my understanding of the historical Jesus, accessed by experiences of faith, is formulated by Schaberg (1994b:14) as follows: the paternity is cancelled or erased by the theological metaphor of the paternity of God. This quest goes clearly beyond Jesus’ relationship to the Baptiser.

Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist, as we have seen from both Bultmann and Sanders, is regarded by Crossan (1994a:44) as ‘historically certain as anything about either of them ever can be’. As a historian Crossan doubts, like Sanders (1993:94), ‘things that agree too much with the gospel’s bias’ and ‘credits things that are against their preference’, although this ‘rule cannot be applied mechanically, since some things that actually happened suited the authors [the evangelists] very well....’

In view of this, it is most unlikely that the gospels or earlier Christians invented the fact that Jesus started out under John. Since they wanted Jesus to stand out as superior to the Baptist, they would not have come up with the story that Jesus had been his follower. Therefore, we conclude, John really did baptize Jesus. This, in turn, implies that Jesus agreed with John’s message: it was time to repent in view of the coming wrath and redemption (Sanders 1993:94).

Sanders emphasised the last phrase in this citation because of his conviction (similar to that of Bultmann and the other ‘new questioners’) that Jesus constantly held onto the Baptiser’s apocalyptic vision. Crossan (1991:227-264; 1994a:29-53), Borg (1994b:77) and Hollenbach (1982), among other ‘third questioners’, do not share this opinion. They interpreted the sources in such a way (and rightly so) that ‘Jesus changed his view of John’s mission and message’ (Crossan 1994a:47). According to Crossan’s (1994a:34), deciphering of Josephus’ biased account of the baptismal activity of John the Baptist as ‘not a magical or ritual act that removed sin’, one can establish as a historical fact that his baptism was about the remission of sin ‘just as surely as were the actions of the priests in Jerusalem’s temple’ (Crossan 1994a:34). What

19 A remark about the Jesus of history: ‘During that same period Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John...’ (The Scholars Version).

20 A remark about the Jesus of faith: ‘There was also a voice from the skies: “You are my favored son—I fully approve of you”’ (The Scholars Version).
Crossan is doing here is to take Sanders's understanding of what the 'reconstruction of history' is all about seriously: 'In the reconstruction of history, we must always consider context and content.' The better we can correlate the two, the more we shall understand (Sanders 1993:76). Crossan (1991:227-264) points out that 'John's vision of awaiting the apocalyptic God, the Coming One, as a repentant sinner, which Jesus had originally accepted and even defended in the crisis of John's death, was no longer deemed adequate' (Crossan 1994a:47-48; my emphasis). He reaches this conclusion because of his analysis of the relevant references in Josephus as well as in the intracanonical traditions in the Gospel of Thomas and the Sayings Gospel Q.

The consistent element in the life of the historical Jesus, prior to and after his baptism and breach with the Baptiser, it seems to me, is his being among and his continual friendship with sinners (Sayings Gospel Q 7:31-35; Crossan 1991:260)—identifying 'himself with those he was addressing, to emphasize that he shared with them a common destiny as we poor or destitute human beings' (Crossan 1994a:51). In this analysis Crossan is quite right. Sanders (1993:226-227), in answering the question of who the sinners were, is also right! He says: 'The most reliable passages about the sinners are those in which Jesus discusses the Baptist and contrasts himself to him' (Sanders 1993:227). The 'sinners' were those people who were 'outside the law in some fundamental way', those people who, unlike the chief priest and elders [remember again my remark above about the offence against the temple authorities and their ideology—A G v A], 'believed John the Baptist and repented' (Mt 21:32; cf Lk 3:3, 8) (Sanders 1993:231-233)—people who 'lived as if there were no God' (Sanders 1993:229; my emphasis). Against this background Sanders (1993:232) asks: 'what did he [Jesus] think he was up to?' According to Sanders (1993:233) Jesus was not primarily a 'repentance-minded reformer'. He rightly comments, 'That is, Luke's Jesus...' (Sanders 1993:233) and then continues:

In the New Testament that title ['a repentance-minded reformer'] clearly belongs to the Baptist...The prostitutes repented when John preached—not when Jesus preached...And Jesus was a friend of tax collectors and sinners—not of former tax collectors and sinners [against Josephus's biased perception of John the Baptist]...Jesus, I think, was a good deal more radical than John. Jesus thought that John's call to repent should have been effective, but in fact it was only partially successful. His own style was in any case different; he did not repeat the Baptist's

---

21 In his 1994 book *The essential Jesus: Original sayings and earliest images*, Crossan (1994d:9-13) explores this kind of combinational notion when he creatively and ingeniously links texts and pre-Constantine images in order to understand the 'essential', the 'historical', Jesus better.
tactics. On the contrary, he ate and drank with the wicked [see Bultmann 1960:11 again] and told them that God especially loved them, and that the kingdom was at hand. Did he hope that they would change their ways? Probably he did. But 'change now or be destroyed' was not his message, it was John's. Jesus' was, 'God loves you' (Sanders 1993:233).

There is good reason to relate these insights of Sanders with those he mentioned earlier in his book about repentance, punishment and forgiveness (Sanders 1993:34), though he did not do so himself. Explaining Judaism as religion—that is, the temple ideology to which both John the Baptist and Jesus took offence—Sanders says, 'God will always forgive the repentant sinner. Those who did not repent were subject to divine punishment, which was manifested, for example, in sickness. If they accepted this as God's chastisement for their misdeeds, they were still worthy members of the covenant'. Besides the fact that Jesus shares John's vision that remission of sin could be granted by God outside the structures of the temple, the consequence of his indifference about repentance is that both he and his company of 'sinners' would be regarded by the chief priests and the other Jerusalem elites and their retainers as people who lived as if there were no God (Sanders 1993:229). And just as certain as is the historical Jesus' baptism by John, is the historical Jesus' trust in God as his Abba!

However, Sanders, like both Bultmann and Crossan, never asks why Jesus was seen or saw himself as a 'sinner' who 'heard John and felt called to accept his baptism' (Sanders 1993:12-13). Sanders nevertheless says that the context that 'should immediately attract the attention of the modern historian' is 'the events that immediately preceded and followed Jesus' own ministry and that were closely connected to it.... (namely) the preaching of John the Baptist' (Sanders 1993:92) and the fact that the authors of the 'gospels and Acts' ('reveal[ing] that John had a sizable following') were a little embarrassed at having to admit that their hero, Jesus, had been at first a follower of the Baptist' (Sanders 1993:93-94; his emphasis). Robert Funk's Jesus Seminar also did not ask the question why Jesus wanted to be baptised (see the published report by Tatum 1994). Even Webb (1991), a fellow of the Jesus Seminar himself, who wrote extensively in his dissertation on John the Baptist from a 'socio-historical' perspective, did not either ask it or even refer to such a question—and that includes his Forschungsbericht published in the work on the current research with regard to aspects of historical Jesus research, edited by Evans and Chilton (1994:179-230).

To my knowledge, the only scholar who has come forward with an 'educated guess' is Hollenbach (1979:850-857; 1982:196-219). In two different articles he investigates the social world of 'John the Baptizer's preaching mission' and the 'conversion of Jesus'. In the latter article he is particularly
interested in ‘what Jesus was like before his conversion’ (Hollenbach 1982:198). Hollenbach (1982:199) assumed that Jesus ‘went to John in order to repent of his sin’ but, as to what Jesus repented of, he admits that ‘we are really in the dark because of lack of evidence’. The only allusions in the sources are those texts which express the embarrassment of Christians (cf *inter alia* Hebrews 4:15). Hollenbach (1982:200) finds his point of departure for inquiry in the Markan reference that Jesus was a carpenter (M:k 6:3). Being a ‘τέκτων’ in the sense of “contractor” or “builder”, Hollenbach (1982:200 note 9) then sets Jesus in a social class which ‘enjoyed considerable standing in society’: ‘...carpenters in particular offered a large number of varied services on which especially poorer members of society would depend as they attempted to eke out a living...It is likely then that Jesus, as a substantial member of society, came to feel at least a general concern for the injustices that he could observe daily from this vantage point’ (Hollenbach 1993:200).

Such, a picture, however, is totally misleading. Only two devastating arguments against it will be sufficient to prove this judgement, the one taken from Sanders’s insights and the other from Crossan’s. Why would Jesus seek repentance outside the structures of the temple? The temple ideology stipulated that ‘people who transgressed the law should make reparations if their misdeeds harmed other people, repent and bring a sacrifice. God will always forgive the repentant sinner’ (Sanders 1993:34).

As far as Crossan’s reception of Hollenbach’s hypothesis is concerned, we have an explicit acknowledgement of the insight of Hollenbach that ‘Jesus developed very soon his own distinctive message and movement which was very different from John’s’ (Crossan 1991:238). However, with regard to Jesus’ artisanship, he implicitly, and rightly so, repudiates Hollenbach: ‘If Jesus was a carpenter, he belonged to the Artisan class, that group pushed into the dangerous space between Peasants and Degradeds or Expendables’ (Crossan 1994a:25; cf Fiensy 1991:164; Lenski, Nolan & Lenski 1995:216-218).

Although one could expect Crossan to be aware of the aim of Hollenbach’s article, namely to ask ‘why Jesus went to John for baptism’ (Hollenbach 1982:199), he nevertheless does not ask the same important question. Crossan also never says that ‘no-evidence’ would be the reason why this gap in the existing historical Jesus research is beyond investigation. In the ‘third quest’ the whole life and work of Jesus of Nazareth is clearly not really at stake yet, as Wright (1992a:13) pretends it is. What I have in mind is certainly not what Sanders put so indelicately in an academic paper, as Wright (1992a:76) recalls: ‘the current flurry of interest in Mary’s hymen and Jesus’ corpse’.
5 CONCLUSION

From my construct of the historical Jesus, given earlier in my paper, the thrust of Jesus' life and work was that he trusted God as his Abba, and by doing so he redefined the kingdom of God in terms of a fictive household in which everyone, including the 'sinners', has a direct and an unmediated access to God. From the perspective of this assumption I believe a historical construct of Jesus 'whole life' within first-century Herodian Palestine can be built according to an imaginative sociological 'ideal-type'. 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. It also should have to make coherent sense within a social stratification of first-century Herodian Palestine.

Regarding a chronological stratification, Crossan, in an appendix to his book on the historical Jesus, provides an useful and excellent 'Inventory of the Jesus tradition by chronological stratification and independent attestation'. This stratification rests on the assumption that the Jesus tradition went through three major stages of retention and recording of 'at least the essential core of words and deeds, events and happenings; another of development, applying such data to new situations, novel problems, and unforeseen circumstances; and a final one of creation, not only composing new sayings and new stories, but, above all, composing larger complexes that changed their contents by that very process'. However, it does not mean that the first stage represents authentic information and the other unauthentic. One therefore needs a sequence of strata in terms of which the available traditions are chronologically stratified. Crossan compiled such a fourfold stratification. However, some of the dating of documents in Crossan's chronological stratification is highly debatable. The same can also be said of some of his arguments regarding the identification of hypothetical documents. Critical modification of certain aspects of his model is therefore necessary.

The first stratum covers the earliest Christian texts originating in the period 30-60 CE. It contains, inter alia, four authentic letters of Paul, the first layer of the Gospel of Thomas and the Sayings Gospel Q (consisting of three successive layers in its development). The second stratum originated in the period 60-80 CE and contains eight documents, among which we find the Gospel of Mark and the Signs Gospel/Book of Signs (a hypothetical text embedded within John's gospel [ch 2-14]). The third stratum contains nineteen documents from the period 80-120 CE. It consists of, inter alia, the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Luke, the Apocalypse of John, First Letter of Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, Didache 1:1-3a and 2:2-16:2, Shepherd of Hermas, the Letter of James, the Gospel of John, the seven Letters of
Ignatius, the First Letter of Peter, the Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians 13-14, and the First Letter of John. The fourth stratum contains twelve documents, dated from the period 120-150 CE. It consists of, inter alia, the Apocryphon of James, the Second Letter of Peter, the Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians, the Second Letter of Clement and, finally, the Gospel of the Nazoreans.

Crossan is clear that, in terms of the sequence of strata, the first stratum contains data chronologically closest to Jesus. Literary 'units' of Jesus tradition composed within the first stratum are not necessarily historically the most accurate. Theoretically, a 'unit' from the fourth stratum can be more original than one from the first stratum. A hierarchy of attestation of 'units' and, especially, 'complexes' of 'units' is therefore necessary, beginning with the first stratum and working from there to the second, third, and fourth.

This paper allows me only enough room to point out three 'complexes' which I intend to investigate more thoroughly in the future. It is my aim to start my investigation by taking Crossan's finding on the 'complex' Jesus-Kingdom-children as point of departure. This 'complex' comprises of six 'units', namely Thomas 22:1-2, Mark 10:13-16 = Matthew 19:13-15 = Luke 18:15-17, Matthew 18:3 and John 3:1-10. It is thus a 'complex' which is attested by a textual 'unit' belonging to the first stratum (Gospel of Thomas) and supported by multiple independent attestations of the second stratum (Gospel of Mark) and third stratum (Gospel of Matthew and Gospel of John). These multiple and independent attestations show how seriously Jesus' attitude towards children should be taken historically (Crossan 1991:xxxi-xxxiv). I would like to argue that it is possible to consider these 'children', from a perspective of the social stratification of first-century Herodian Palestine, as part of the lowest 'class', namely the 'expendables' (cf Van Aarde 1992). Hence I proceed, first, with the 'units' regarding Jesus' birth record (for example, the 'polemic traits' in the nativity traditions in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but also specific references in Thomas 105, Mark 6:3, John 1:45, 6:42, 8:41, 19:9 and Acts of Pilate 2:3—cf Schaberg 1987:145-178 [esp 157-158]; contra Van Tilborg 1993:3-58 [esp 18-21]) and, second, with the 'units' regarding Jesus' family (for example, Thomas 99:2, Mark 3:31-35 = Matthew 12:46-50 = Luke 8:19-21, John 7:3-5, 2 Clement 9:11, Gospel of the Ebionites 5—cf Smith 1990; Meier 1992; as well as references to the so-called 'a-familial ethos' of Jesus in the Sayings Gospel Q 9:59-60a; 14:26; 12:51-53; 16:13; 16:18; and 17:26-27—cf Jacobson 1992b).

Subsequently, this will lead me to my construct of the fatherless Jesus within the context of the social stratification of the first-century Herodian Palestine (cf Van Aarde 1993). 

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).
WORKS CONSULTED

Funk, R W 1992. The Jesus that was. Fourth R 5/6, 1-6.
Hollenbach, P 1982. The conversion of Jesus: From the Baptist to Jesus the healer. ANRW 2.25.1, 196-219.


Van Eck, E [1996]. The baptism of Jesus in Mark: A status transformation ritual. *Neotestamentica* 30 (1). (Forthcoming.)


Prof A G van Aarde, Faculty of Theology (Section A), University of Pretoria, PRETORIA, 0002 South Africa.