

## A New Road for Historical Jesus Research: Cultural Bundubashing

### *Introduction*

CURRENT CRITICAL JESUS SCHOLARSHIP is constitutionally incapable of dealing with culturally alien texts and phenomena in a sympathetic manner. The two roads in current historical Jesus research are inadequate for dealing with the cultural meaning and significance and are inattentive to the cultural processes assumed and described by the documents. *Cultural bundubashing*, as the track of anthropological historiography will be called, offers an alternative critical paradigm for historical Jesus research.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to avoid ethnocentrism and anachronism while striving to do justice to the cultural and historical singularity of those involved, it takes historical Jesus research through the cultural landscape of both the documents and the historical figure reported in them. It is not a middle position between the Wredebahn and the Schweitzerstrasse, and it does not occupy a position somewhere between critical scholarship (which thinks most of the material was created by the early church) and the naive fundamentalist (who thinks that everything in the Gospels comes from the historical Jesus) but, like anthropological historiography of which it is an instance, operates altogether on a different terrain.

This track often runs parallel to—and can even cross—the other two roads but mostly covers a different terrain. It offers a view of the same

1. Bundubashing is the rough ride of off-road traveling for which an off-road vehicle and toolkit are needed. Travelers are bound to run into serious difficulties (like crossing rivers and mountains where there are no bridges and proper roads). But this is the real way to see the countryside and experience the cultural richness of the land, the initiates say.

scenery but from a different point of view. It starts with a uniquely conceptualized research problem, which is the result of a differently conceptualized terrain and results in an alternative interpretation of the data. It does not offer alternative answers to existing questions but offers answers to alternative questions and problems. It consists of a redefinition of the questions instead of a rephrasing of the answers.

Cultural bundubashing is designed to take the historical Jesus researcher back to the strangeness of the cultural system and the pastness of the historical world in order to grasp the meaning, significance, and context of the events, phenomena, and people involved, while searching within the framework of anthropological historiography for the historical figure. Within this paradigm, the aim of historical Jesus research is to determine and describe across the historical and cultural gap what it was like in the strangeness of their world, and how things were in the life of Jesus in Galilee, and how that can be appreciated in a modern world. Cultural bundubashing remains loyal to the ideal of capturing *what essentially happened*, or what the case (or state of affairs) in the past was, but realizes this requires cross-cultural interventions.<sup>2</sup> In this view, history concerns itself not just with *facts* but with the meaning of things and the interpretation of details (see Malina & Neyrey 1988, 142). Instead of the search for criteria of authenticity or historicity, cultural bundubashing focuses on two other processes: the establishment of cultural plausibility and what will be called contextual particularity, and both make use of thick descriptions.

It is the acceptance of multiple cultural realities and ontological pluralism that constitutes the historian's task; this is much more complex than simply asking about what has happened as if a straightforward answer can be offered. Within this framework, the rules of evidence of both positiv-

2. Iggers and Von Moltke point out, "Indeed Ranke's oft quoted dictum '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*,' has generally been misunderstood in this country [the USA] as asking the historian to be satisfied with a purely factual recreation of the past. Ranke's writing makes it clear that he did not mean this. In fact the word '*eigentlich*' which is the key to the phrase just quoted has been poorly translated into English. In the nineteenth century this word was ambiguous in a way in which it no longer is. It certainly had the modern meaning of 'actually' already, but it also meant 'characteristic, essential,' and the latter is the form in which Ranke most frequently uses this term. This gives the phrase an entirely different meaning" (1973a, xix). This is confirmed by Wilma Iggers's translation of one of the relevant Ranke texts: "To history has been given the function of judging the past, instructing men for the profit of future years. The present attempt does not aspire to such lofty understanding. It merely wants to show how, essentially, things happened" (von Ranke 1973, 137).

istic and postmodern historiography can no longer be applied. Within this view of historiography, the distinction between truth and falsehood remains fundamental, but the concept of truth has become “immeasurably more complex in the course of recent critical thought” (Iggers 1997, 12). The historian continues to work critically with the sources that make access to the past reality possible because the concept of truth and the duty to uncover falsification have not been abandoned.

The aim of this and the following chapter is to explain this complexity of dealing with alien and distant historical Jesus material in a culturally sensitive manner. Therefore, in this study the terms *historical* or *historical interpretation* have specific meanings. They refer, in the first place, to situating and understanding the texts, events, and the person *Jesus of Nazareth* as phenomena in their pastness and otherness. To begin with, this constitutes a totally different research question: not what has happened or which source is correct, but what are the sources and stories about?

### *A Redescription of the Research Problem*

It was shown that in current historical Jesus research the interpretive process follows the inverse order of the linear development of the texts: interpretation moves backwards from the Gospels to the historical figure. Cultural bundubashing is based on a different interpretive process.

### *Abduction as Interpretive Process*

Bernstein, following Peirce, describes interpretation as a cable-like process. In science, we ought to trust the multitude and variety of arguments rather than the conclusiveness of any one of them, he says (see 1983, 224; 1991, 327). Our reasoning should not form a chain that is no stronger than the weakest link, but a cable whose fibers, though ever so slender, by their sheer numbers and interwovenness make it much stronger. In this description the features of an interpretive versus a positivistic theory of science is visible.

This process of reasoning from hypothesis to data and back as many times as necessary to gain insight, is what the philosopher Peirce calls *abduction* (see Malina 2001b, 9).

Abduction is reasoning that begins with data and moves toward hypothesis with the introduction of a new idea. *It is reasoning toward a hypothesis*; it deals with how a hypothesis is adopted on

probation, with reasons for suggesting a hypothesis in the first place. There are reasons for suggesting a hypothesis initially as a plausible type of hypothesis. The verification process makes known the approximation to reality of the suggested hypothesis. In turn, the hypothesis may render the observed facts necessary, or at least highly probable. (Malina 1991, 259–60; *italics mine*)

Working toward a hypothesis in a cable-like process (*abduction*) is complex because of the variety of fibers that are connected and that presuppose one another. Abduction differs from induction, which is an inference from a sample to a whole or from particulars to a general law. Induction classifies, while abduction explains.<sup>3</sup>

Scientific method, in this paradigm can “prove” nothing but tries to be “powerfully persuasive” (Lewis-Williams 1995, 3–4). It operates with the “best-fit” hypothesis, which accounts for all or most of the fibers that are interwoven, and is not based on a bedrock or foundation (such as an authentic kernel). In such a cable-like process, where interaction between many fibers make up the interpretive process, constant revision is a given, while certainty is not ascribed to a single link in a chain. Anthropological historiography is cable-like in that it does not depend on the prior identification of authentic material but consists of the testing and evaluation of several fibers in working toward the proposed hypothesis.

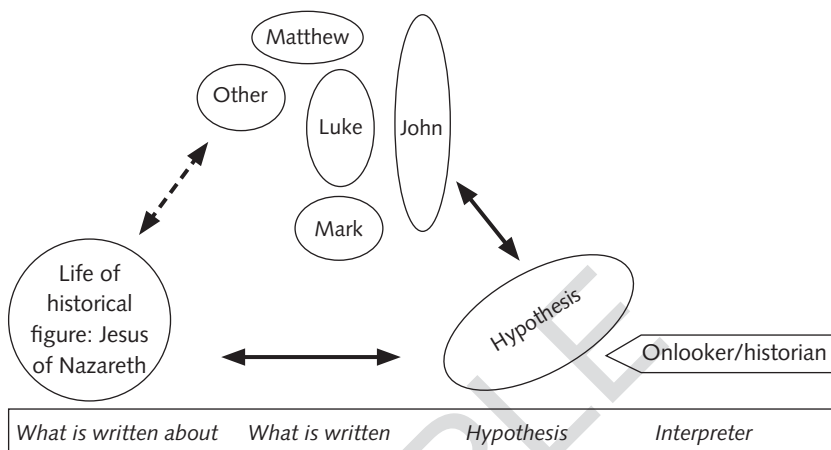
Within this understanding of interpretation, the question no longer is how to move from the literary documents (which are reporting about a specific social personage, and which are themselves the product of specific cultural processes) to the historical figure (which is ascribed with particular cultural events and phenomena presumably belonging to that social personage) but how to account for both the historical figure portrayed in the documents and the documents as cultural artifacts about a particular historical figure. That is, how to treat both the historical figure and the literary documents as cultural artifacts from a distant and alien cultural system. This question was already well formulated by Smith almost three decades ago:

What sort of man and what sort of career, in the society of first century Palestine, would have occasioned the beliefs, called into

3. Abduction “is an inference from a body of data to an explaining hypothesis, or from the effect to cause. . . . Abduction furnishes the reasoner with hypothesis while induction is the method of testing and verifying” (Malina 1991, 357 n. 27 quoting Fann). The *hypothesis and verification* method of the Schweitzerstrasse clearly belongs to the logic of induction.

being the communities, and given rise to the practices, stories, and sayings that then appeared, of which selected reports and collections have come down to us? (1978, 5–6)

Diagrammatically, it can be expressed in the following way:



**Diagram 3.1: The Cable-Like Structure of Cultural Bundubashing**

*This diagram captures a number of aspects regarding the interpretive structure of cultural bundubashing: (1) the texts and historical figure are configurations of each other (in being about a particular historical figure), while they were created in a historical continuum; (2) the hypothesis should account for both what is written (the documents) and what is written about (the historical figure)—expressed by the fact that hypothesis, historical figure, and documents are all represented as a similar type of geometrical figure (circle-like); and (3) the historian's lenses (hypothesis) highlights both the features of the text and the historical figure. It is via the particular hypothesis that the historical figure emerges from the evidence in the documents—evidence that itself is the product of the hypothesis.*

Formulated in this way, the question presents a clear dilemma. It is necessary to know about Jesus's social type in order to understand the Gospel pictures about him, but that cannot be understood without a glimpse of his social type. Put the other way around, in order to know what the literary texts are talking about, it is necessary to have a grasp of the cultural plausibilities of the historical figure, while an understanding

of the documents as reporting about a specific social personage is presupposed in reading them.

The interpretive process, therefore, is explicitly cable-like in that the same hypothesis should account both for what is written and for what is written about. The hypothesis provides the framework for working toward an understanding and explanation of what the historian encounters. It should, therefore, account for both the historical figure and the material evidence about the figure. It should explain the shape, content, and nature of the documentary evidence and also account for the nature, origin, and character of the historical figure reported in the texts.

### The Hypothesis of This Study

The challenge is, can we come up with a hypothesis about Jesus's social type that is well established historically and cross-culturally; that fits the first-century Mediterranean Galilean setting; and that can account for the underlying traits, stories, and deeds ascribed to Jesus in his lifetime: traits, stories, and deeds that led to the origin of the Gospel texts and that continued to make sense in the life of his followers after his death?

The hypothesis of this study is that *Jesus of Nazareth can be seen as a Galilean shamanic figure*. This hypothesis should at least account for:

1. Jesus as a social personage described in the literary documents;
2. the events and phenomena in the documents ascribed to him as a historical and a cultural figure;
3. the cultural processes and dynamics associated with the life of such a historical figure; and
4. the origin and shape of the literary evidence as the product of such a life, as well as the cultural processes and dynamics set into motion by such a social personage.

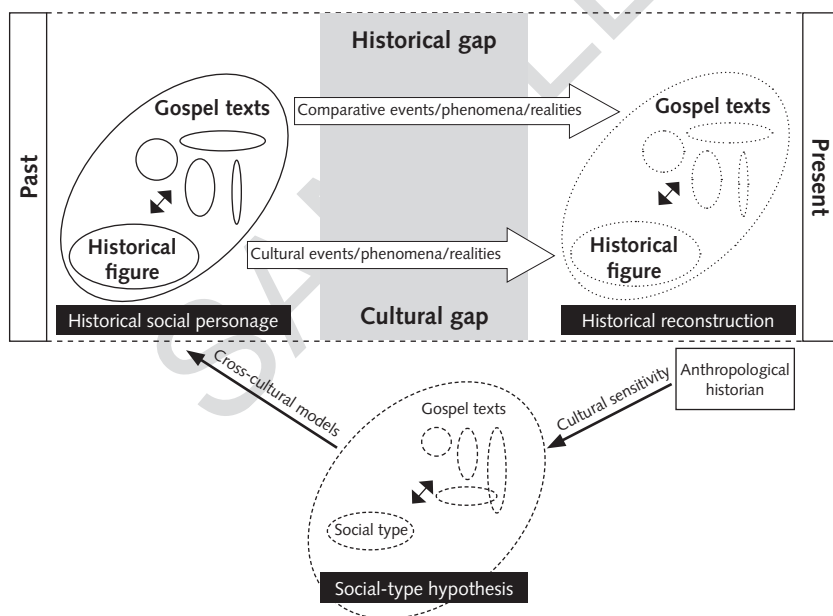
As is, generally speaking, the case with ancient societies, there are serious difficulties in applying such a model to Jesus of Nazareth. It can hardly be overemphasized that the information about Jesus of Nazareth is extremely scarce, and none of his *biographers* were field anthropologists interested either in reporting the details of his experiences or in conveying

the cultural information taken for granted by those sharing his cultural setting.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, one should not expect complete ethnographic detail on the person or profile of Jesus.

It is nevertheless important to explore the potential of this approach for revealing the evidence that is available. The shamanic complex is the primary model to be employed in order to bring to the surface the categories and cultural logic in terms of which the process of abduction (to and fro movement between hypothesis, data, and construction of the historical figure) are to be conducted. It will provide the categories and concepts in terms of which sense is made of the data, and in terms of which a picture is painted of the historical figure in a particular cultural setting.

By way of summary, the interpretive process of abduction in cultural bundubashing can be illustrated in the following way:



**Diagram 3.2: Examining the Past via Cultural Bundubashing**

*There are both temporal and cultural gaps between the historian and the past.  
What we are looking for and looking at are cultural artifacts from this foreign*

4. Davies quite correctly remarks that we have perhaps 1 percent (more likely 0.001 percent) of the information available to us in the texts, [information] that an anthropologist has, who has done fieldwork in a particular culture (see 1995, 42).

world, but the historical figure and the literary documents are seen as configurations of each other (indicated by the similar geometrical [circle-like] figures in the past). The gaps are to be covered by means of a hypothesis or cross-cultural model that facilitates a cultural sensitivity and enables cross-cultural interpretation (indicated by the model in dotted lines at the bottom). What the historian "brings back" is a picture of both cultural and comparative events, phenomena, and realities associated with such a social personage. The historian's reconstruction here is again a dotted picture of both the social personage and the literary documents, which are a configuration of the social personage mediated by the hypothesis. Unlike the authenticity paradigm, this is no linear process of trying to make sense today of what happened or what was said "there" but a round-about way, by means of cross-cultural models and strategies of interpreting and making sense "here" of cultural events and phenomena "there."

The most important implication of this way of conceptualizing the research problem is that whatever Jesus said and did was said and done as a Galilean shamanic figure. This is precisely the implication of working toward the shamanic hypothesis as the best explanation for understanding the kind of social personage about whom such documents were created. Already from these reshaped interpretive lenses, it is possible to identify different features of the interpretive landscape.

### *What Cultural Bundubashing Allows the Historical Jesus Researcher to See*

When anthropological historiographical lenses are applied, they not only show how preconceived lenses in the past have determined both the formulation of the research problem and the proposed solutions, but that certain features of this landscape that normally go unnoticed stand out clearly. While the detail of this perspective will only become apparent in the actual interpretation of the sources, it is necessary to offer a brief glimpse of the landscape that is revealed along this road. Since the culturally alien world, text, and social personage are absent from the view of the authenticity paradigm, it is necessary to explicitly begin with what cultural bundubashing allows the researcher to see regarding each of the three components.

## A Cultural Landscape with Cultural Artifacts

From the point of view of anthropological historiography, the Jesus scholar is, prior to reading any of the sources, confronted with the fact that these documents originated from and communicated in the preindustrial, agrarian, and preprint world of the first-century Mediterranean (see Rohrbaugh 1978; Botha 1992; Malina 2001a). This is not the place to discuss the content and internal dynamics of the first-century Mediterranean worldview (see below, Chapter 6). It is, however, necessary to become aware that cultural bundubashing takes us into a worldview landscape radically different from that of everyday life in a modern Western-oriented society. As Malina says:

Jesus was socialized and enculturated in an eastern Mediterranean society uninfluenced by globalism, universalism, scientism, the modern city, the industrial revolution, the nation-state, the Enlightenment, international law, the Renaissance, Arab-European scholasticism, Justinian's Code, Constantine's Christendom, the talmudic Jewish religion, and the like. (2002b, 4)

Everything that is known about the context and worldview of Jesus of Nazareth shows that he lived in—and that the texts about him originated and communicated in—a world that is historically and culturally far removed from that of the modern Western reader.

There is the gap of the industrial revolution (with its differentiation of social institutions) and the divide of huge cultural differences that separate the modern from the ancient reader. They operated with specific notions about human beings and personalities (the “self” as consisting of a body-soul/spirit configuration). Their worldview (world) was populated with many beings other than humans, who influenced human life. Religion was embedded in politics and family life, and divine power was believed to be mediated by a variety of means: temples, human beings, and various objects. The separation between human and divine spheres was very flimsy. And they arguably lived in a worldview where experiences such as dreams and visions contributed significantly to knowledge about life and the world (to be described below as a “polyphasic” worldview).

None, if any, of these features is explicitly described or explained in the sources—they are taken for granted because they represent an accepted cultural script. They are part of the absolute presuppositions of the first-century world by means of which Jesus of Nazareth was constituted as a

historical figure, and through which the documents originated as reports about such a figure.

Based on the earlier discussion about the reality and plausibility of cultural events and phenomena (see above, pp. 25–32), especially those events and phenomena connected to the lives of particular social person-ages, two important implications can already be noted.

#### CULTURAL EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF JESUS COULD HAVE BEEN REAL HISTORICAL (CULTURAL) EVENTS WITHOUT BEING “OUT THERE”

Of the events reported in the Gospels and ascribed to the life of Jesus, a very large part consists of *cultural events* that were experienced and that belonged to the first-century Mediterranean’s specific cultural system. These events, therefore, could have been intersubjectively (*objectively*) there without being ontologically objective—they could not have been photographed or analyzed by physical or chemical analyses.<sup>5</sup> Treating reports about such events and phenomena as if they were commonly human is related to the so-called *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*—the tendency to mistake an abstraction for a concrete thing (see Peacock 1986, 20). An example pertinent to this study is ASC experiences, which are common to polyphasic cultures (to be discussed in detail below).

Both everyday and extraordinary events are experienced in ASCs, but this does not mean that they are necessarily everyday events (or extraordinary events) “out there.” Even though such experiences include bodily events or human activities (such as hearing a voice or seeing an object or experiencing a sensation), this does not mean they are “out there.” Therefore, even if a video recording of an exorcism or of the visitation by an ancestor or demon is made, most of the “reality” will not be seen. This can be illustrated with a remark by a Native American after a shamanic medicine ceremony: “The Whites don’t catch anything when they take photographs, and therefore it is meaningless to photograph” (Hultkrantz 1967, 43). The fact that many such events cannot be photographed does not mean they are not real for the participants.

5. The dynamics of the *cycle of meaning* by means of which people construct such cultural realities will be discussed later (see Chapter 6 below).

WHAT “GOES BACK TO JESUS” IS NOT THE SAME  
AS SAYING “IT ACTUALLY HAPPENED”

This paradigm also reveals that in historical Jesus research the direct link is mistaken between claims about “what goes back to Jesus” (apparent early dating) and claims about “what actually happened” (or what can be taken as historical). Not only is this connection based on a vicious circle, but determining what actually happened is much more complex than is assumed in the authenticity paradigm and registered in its reality catalog. In this view, *what actually happened* is a much more complex issue than either identifying authentic historical nuggets or declaring most of the material as literary creations.

There is a vicious circle in the layered model of Jesus traditions between dating the material and claiming such material as historical or authentic. The sound historical principle of early material turns, in historical Jesus research, into the fallacy of historical closeness: if it can be shown to go back to Jesus, it is taken as actual events or as historical.<sup>6</sup> It also works the other way around: what cannot be historical (what is not possible) cannot be early, and therefore the Gospels are dated fairly late.

From the point of view of cultural bundubashing, the reports about the deeds of Jesus are forced by the authenticity discourses into categories where they just do not fit. The basic pattern on both roads is that of normal events that can be seen, plus either supernatural elements or mythical literary creations. Historicity refers to the pure and actual core event behind the story (except in the case of the Schweitzerstrasse, it is claimed that supernatural events are indeed “natural” and historical—though extraordinary and unique—but visible and photographable). In both instances, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness can be seen at work. On both the Wredebahn and the Schweitzerstrasse, historicity or “what actually happened” is taken as what can be shown “to go back to Jesus” (to “Stage 1” or to “the original layer”).

This is a vicious argument because the identification of early material does not depend on external evidence but is primarily based on the assumed development of ideas. Based on philosophical presuppositions or

6. Those on the Schweitzerstrasse take supernatural events together with natural events as observable events. Taken together with the assumed reliability of the synoptic tradition, these observable events are taken as belonging to the first stratum, or as going back to Jesus. In the case of the Wredebahn, all the elements that could not have been real do not belong to the small historical kernel and are ascribed to mythology or are regarded simply as stories created sometime in the tradition.

simply the reality catalogue of Western culture, it is already presupposed what could not have belonged to the life of a historical figure. Thus, common wisdom in critical Jesus research is that *how things were in Jesus's life* did not include a special virgin birth or a transfiguration experience or walking on the sea and the like (except for those who import the supernatural category). However, as shown above, determining the plausibility of an event or phenomenon is much more complex than simply determining its time of origin.

Plausibility does not depend on the number or age of the documents attesting to an event or phenomenon. How many independent accounts are needed, for example, to affirm the plausibility of an *extraordinary* cultural story, such as that the first shamans were not born but came to earth on a golden disk, or that Mary became pregnant without the intervention of a man?

Therefore, from the point of view of cultural bundubashing, events or phenomena can go back to the life of Jesus in Galilee as cultural events and phenomena without committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness by claiming that they actually happened in time and space as described. How things were can include both the belief in and the experience of such things as a virgin birth or transfiguration. Things can go back to the life of Jesus without our having to accept that they actually happened exactly as described, Davies reminds us (see 1995, 16–17).

It is necessary to emphasize one conclusion from this. Even if Q and *Thomas* (or the Common Sayings tradition) or any other document were to be dated to the thirties of the Common Era, that does not make them, by definition, historically accurate or historically reliable regarding who Jesus was and what he actually did.<sup>7</sup> Within this framework, it is not chronological distance but, first and foremost, the cultural gap that separates Jesus as historical figure from modern understandings of him. Therefore, the crux of the historical problem is not the parallel texts but the historical and

7. Crossan admits as much: if there is a tight linkage between the context and the earliest layer of text, “that is the best reconstruction of the historical Jesus and his companions presently available” (1998, 149). The two pillars of the historical-critical approach are clearly visible here: the earliest gospel traditions transmitted in stratified layers have been uncovered over the last two hundred years of research. In undermining the assumption of the distinction between the historical figure and the mythical Christ, and rejecting the idea of authentic snippets of Jesus material, the argument presented in this study is that if a tight linkage can be found between a known social type and the gospel presentations, that is also the best historical construction available.

cultural gap. Even if a copy of one of the existing Gospels dated to the year 35 CE were today to be discovered, we would face the same interpretive problem: how to understand the events, phenomena, and features ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth. His virgin birth, Davidic ancestry, and visionary appearances would not suddenly become more real or historically true. They remain cultural phenomena embedded in cultural documents. Even if all the available documents can be dated as early as, say, five years after the life of Jesus, it still would not guarantee that anything happened as described because they are cultural material about a cultural personage from a distant cultural system.

Therefore, attempts to push back the dating of the written material also suffer from the *fallacy of chronological closeness* in suggesting that the written documents are actually to be dated much earlier than the generally accepted suggestions.<sup>8</sup> The fallacy is to assume that *early* material that can be connected to Jesus is historical or authentic, or that it conveys “what actually happened.” Conversely, what can be shown to have originated in a later phase is taken as not historical.

From the perspective of cultural bundubashing, however, the position is that the historical figure is not to be found underneath the overlay of the literary texts but in them. Therefore, all *adequate* sources should be analyzed for what they are evidence for. If a historical figure could have been like the portrayals in the canonical texts, and the latter were not merely literary creations, all the documents that can, with some measure of certainty, be attributed to the beginning phase of the Jesus movement can be seen as residues of Jesus as a social personage.<sup>9</sup>

## Jesus of Nazareth as a Cultural Figure

When anthropological historiographical lenses are applied, it becomes apparent that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure within a particular cultural system, and that parallels with similar figures are abundant. Cultural

8. Ellis, for example, argues for a considerable degree of probability for some written transmission of Gospel traditions from the time of Jesus's earthly ministry (see 1999, 32–33). See also Bauckham 2006.

9. The inventory of textual remains containing the canonical Gospels, other gospels (such as the *Gospel of Thomas*), gospel fragments, and infancy gospels, together with other sources, is impressive compared to any other ancient figure. Besides the discussions of the data in most of the standard historical Jesus publications (see, e.g., Meier 1994, 41–166; Theissen & Merz 1998, 17–89; Dunn 2003b, 139–70), these texts are available in translated collections (see, e.g., Schneemelcher & Wilson 1991; Miller 1992).

bundubashing, therefore, does not share the assumption in Jesus research that a historical figure could not have been like the portrayal of Jesus in the sources. The similarity between the Gospel portrayals of Jesus of Nazareth and social figures (such as shamans) in many traditional societies and well known from anthropological literature warrants the hypothesis that a historical figure in first-century Galilee could have been like this. In other words, cultural bundubashing does not necessarily accept that large parts of the tradition were retrospectively rewritten from a post-Easter perspective. This might have been the case, but it can no longer be assumed *a priori*. Such a distinction is much more a function of an interpretive paradigm than of the evidence. In fact, if many of the elements ascribed to Jesus can belong to the life of a historical figure, they need not be ascribed to post-Easter literary activities or the like.

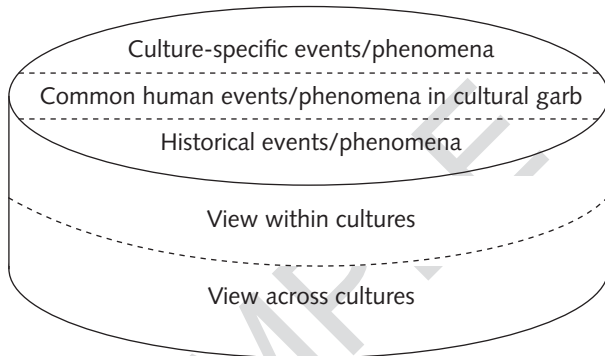
Furthermore, all the canonical Gospels consist of composite pictures of Jesus as teacher, healer, prophet, sage, visionary, and the like. It seems clear that at least for them, it made sense to describe a historical figure who in a natural and normal way combined these features and functions. They never find it necessary to explain to their readers that there is a difference between the actual historical figure and the kind of character that they were describing as a human being roaming the pathways of Galilee.

Contra the Wredebahn, cultural bundubashing, therefore, does not *a priori* accept that the historical figure is somewhere *underneath* the layers of mythical or literary overlay; the historical figure is *in* the literary documents. Contra the Schweitzerstrasse, cultural bundubashing does not recognize the documents as reports about supernatural events and phenomena but as cultural artifacts about a social personage who could have been real and historical (culturally speaking).

Furthermore, from looking at the Gospels themselves, it is clear that a large amount of the material ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth belongs to the category of *cultural events and phenomena* or to the category of common human events and phenomena described by means of cultural jargon. The Gospel authors have no problem in ascribing a variety of stories, events, and deeds to Jesus as human being, which would strike modern Western readers as extraordinary. Apparently it was quite acceptable to the first readers to learn that a *real person* (historical figure) could do the things ascribed to Jesus (and, for that matter, ascribed in that world to several other persons), such as controlling the elements and the spirits, healing the sick, appearing in visions or dreams, and receiving visitations from

ancestors. For both the authors and their readers, it was imaginable, and they could entertain the notion that a first-century figure in Galilee could act in the way Jesus did in the stories and have the attributes ascribed to him. The parallels with social types in other traditional societies (known from anthropological literature) are just too great to ignore.

In accordance with the exposition of the reality of cultural events and phenomena discussed in the first chapter, a rough but useful description of cultural figures can be presented by means of the components constituting such figures as social personages.



**Diagram 3.3: Components Constituting a Social Personage**

*The life and reality of a social personage such as Jesus of Nazareth can be described as consisting of a particular configuration of at least three types of events and phenomena: (1) culture-specific events and phenomena, (2) common human events and phenomena clothed in cultural garb, and (3) historical events and phenomena from that world and worldview. In all instances, what is seen about such a social personage as culturally unique and particular (viewed within) can also be viewed comparatively and cross-culturally (viewed across cultures).*

This spectrum represents a rough but useful framework for dealing with the reality of various kinds of events and phenomena ascribed to Jesus as a historical figure. There is a considerable overlap between the distinctions in this diagram because none is a watertight category. Furthermore, together they make up the biographical data of a human life, which does not fall into clean categories. Especially in the life of significant social personages there are many cultural realities that constitute such a life. The

important point, however, is that the reality of these different kinds of events and phenomena cannot all be determined with exactly the same sort of methods and argumentation. Consequently, each category demands different criteria and procedures for establishing plausibility. As the diagram indicates, cultural events and phenomena can be viewed from different perspectives: as culturally internal and as cross-cultural events and phenomena.

### The Gospels as Cultural Artifacts

Another feature that becomes visible from this perspective is that the Gospels, which ascribe specific cultural events to a specific kind of figure within a particular cultural setting, can themselves be treated as cultural artifacts referring to a cultural reality. In fact, all the ancient documents that originated because of the life and activities of Jesus of Nazareth belong to an alien worldview and describe a historical figure with specific features and are themselves cultural artifacts from that world.

Cultural bundubashing acknowledges that Jesus is a historical figure as well as that the Gospels are cultural artifacts from a specific (and alien) cultural system, and that there is a fundamental interconnectedness between the social personage and the documents as cultural artifacts reporting about him. This assumption does not tell us what kind of social figure Jesus was, only that there is a connection between the social personage and the literary documents that originated within a particular cultural system and because of his activities. This starting point suggests that Jesus's social personage and the Gospel texts are not independent entities but *configurations of each other* embedded in the same cultural system.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Jesus is knowable as a cultural phenomenon (social type) embedded in certain cultural processes of a specific cultural system, while the gospel texts are reports about that cultural figure, but themselves are the products of certain cultural processes, some of which were closely related to the social personage they describe.

In a sense, it goes without saying that if the literary documents are not taken as organically connected to the historical figure, they cannot be used as evidence about that figure. In other words, if they were merely

10. The phrase "configurations of each other" I owe to Pieter Botha, who uses it to explain that, in a culturally sensitive reading, it is inevitable to see text and context as configurations of each other; they are constituted from the same elements and display the same nature (2000, 2).

literary creations about the ideologies, theologies, or aspirations of a later generation, they are useless as sources about the historical figure they refer to. This study explicitly wants to explore the possibility that they were configurations of each other and connected via the cultural processes that constituted the social personage, the oral traditions and the literary texts. This means that what we are looking at is fundamentally determined by what we are looking for. The shape, nature, and content of the texts are constitutionally linked to the kind of social personage that Jesus was as a historical figure. The historical figure is not at the beginning and the texts at the end of a developmental process. Even though the literary texts originated later in time, they are configurations of each other within the same cultural area. Therefore, before the question can be addressed regarding how to move from the former to the latter, it is necessary to explore the cultural processes and dynamics of both what we are looking at and what we are looking for.

From this perspective, the Gospels are seen as rather different either from reports about actual supernatural events or from literary or mythological fiction. From this perspective, they are the residue of cultural processes that are connected to the dynamics of the cultural figure they report about. What is seen by means of the lenses of cultural bundubashing is that the Gospels not only contain cultural stories about events, they contain cultural stories about cultural events about a specific social personage within a particular cultural system. The texts themselves are not merely neutral reports but cultural artifacts that need to be analyzed in terms of the dynamics and processes that link them to the social personage they report about. These arguments will be explored in the following chapter.

In this view, it is not necessarily chronological distance but cultural processes and realities (which probably started during the life of Jesus as social personage) that are to be blamed for the very nature of the stories the Gospels contain and for the differences between them. All the literary texts about Jesus of Nazareth are compromised by being cultural reports subjected to such cultural processes and dynamics, and not necessarily because they are chronologically removed from his life. Even if the Gospels were all written very soon after the events or soon after the death of Jesus, from this point of view the first and foremost problem is determining what they were about to begin with, or what their cultural reality value is.

Treating the literary documents as cultural artifacts and as evidence about the life of a particular social personage (asking what they are evidence

for) has far-reaching implications for all aspects of scholarly beliefs about them. One is the question of which documents are to be used for working toward the hypothesis, and the other is about the date of the available documents. In short, which documents are to be taken as adequate for working toward the shamanic hypothesis.

As I have said several times, the database on the Schweitzerstrasse is primarily the Synoptic Gospels (cleansed from post-Easter overlay), and for the Wredebahn, the earliest kernels of Jesus sayings identified by means of multiple, independent, early attestation. In one way or another, the date of composition and the tradition history of the content are determinative in establishing the status of the database. With cultural bundubashing, it is not different—only that totally different considerations will play a role in establishing the database.

In cultural bundubashing, the historian is bound, like any other historian, to the first basic question about historical sources, namely, whether there is adequate evidence for the case (see Stanford 1986, 63–65); or as Iggers says, bound “to go to the archives” (1997, 16). That includes research about the age and manuscript history of documents: are they adequate sources for the case under consideration?<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to deal with these issues here in detail, but it is necessary to point out the implications of this discussion for the status of the database.

At present, the dating of the Gospels depends on a picture of what could have belonged to the historical figure, and on what was added as fictional or mythical material. It should be obvious that within the view of cultural bundubashing, the dating of all the Gospels could be reconsidered—that is, if it is accepted that what is normally taken as later elaborations and embellishments could have been part of Jesus’s life (part of his constitution as historical figure) in Galilee or of the earliest oral traditions. Since the current dating of the canonical Gospels is so closely connected to the traditional pictures of Jesus that have been challenged, the best solution would be to accept as valid sources all those that can, with some certainty of manuscript history, topically be connected to the life of Jesus as a social personage. Until proven otherwise, all documents from antiquity claiming to be about Jesus of Nazareth should be reconsidered as

11. For the literary remains attributed to Jesus, this type of research is well known (see, e.g., Koester 1990). Since the development of ideas remains an important beacon in determining the origin and historical development of the documents, it should be kept in mind that existing studies reflect the picture of the authenticity paradigm.

some form of residue of his life as social personage. Creating fictional texts could have been part of this process, but then not because the content is judged to be mythological or historically *impossible*.<sup>12</sup>

Although the point will not be pursued here, this also applies to all other sources, such as the infancy gospels. As I have pointed out, in the authenticity paradigm the scholarly verdict about the infancy gospels is similar across the two roads: they are products of the literary creativity of early Christians. However, within cultural bundubashing, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, for example, need no longer be seen as a collection of stories about a series of miraculous deeds by a young boy, Jesus, but as a cultural artifact that originated within the above interpretive processes. Thus, as an *adequate* historical source (based on the manuscript and other evidence) it could be seen as a cultural artifact that originated in the cultural dynamics of events, transmission, and enscripturation about a specific social figure.

The report in Luke (2:41–52), as well as other parallels to be discussed later (see below, pp. 377–80), suggests that the cultural event behind this account in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* could have been the creation and retelling of stories about the boyhood of a specific social personage during his lifetime. In fact, it can be understood within the dynamics of Jesus's life in Galilee that such boyhood accounts were ascribed to him because of his position as a social figure in that community. Seen in this way, these are not reports about Jesus's boyhood but boyhood accounts throwing light on a social personage in manhood.

Nevertheless, in this study mainly the canonical material will be used to work from and toward the hypothesis that, as historical and cultural figure, Jesus can be described as a Galilean shamanic figure. This is not a defense for the authenticity of the Synoptic Gospels but a practical choice—an interpretation must start somewhere.

12. It is worthwhile listening to the warning of J. A. T. Robinson: "I did not appreciate before beginning the investigation, how *little* evidence there is for the dating of *any* of the New Testament writings" (1976, 336). Because of the small amount of external evidence, it is well known that the current dating of the Gospels heavily depends on the constructed tradition history. For example, the destruction of the temple is not even sufficient to securely date the Gospel of Mark. After evaluating the arguments, pro and con, Kümmel concludes: "Since no overwhelming argument for the years before or after 70 can be adduced, we must content ourselves with saying that Mark was written *ca.* 70" (1975, 98).

### *Cultural Bundubashing and Historicity in Jesus Research*

In cultural bundubashing, the notion of *historicity* itself has been redefined from a concern with factuality only (because of the testimony of more than one independent witness) to one concerned with the meaning of things and the interpretation of detail within a concrete setting. The historicity of strange and alien cultural phenomena confuses the criteria of positivistic historiography because, as Lorenz says: “When we talk about facts and reality, we therefore always refer to reality *within a specific frame of description*” (1998b, 355; italics his). Historicity is not something in itself, and even ten independent accounts of an event do not guarantee historicity or factuality (in the sense of whether something actually happened when and as described) because multiple accounts of cultural events or phenomena are just that—multiple cultural accounts of cultural events or phenomena.

In a previous section, the notion of cultural plausibility has been narrowed down to the plausibility associated with a specific social type or hypothesis. That is, to affirm that historicity is not something abstract but concrete within a particular cultural system and related to concrete circumstances; in this case, historicity is related to a specific social personage. The question is not simply whether specific reported events and phenomena (like those ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth in the documents) are historical in the abstract (because of multiple independent attestation), but whether they plausibly belong to the biography of a specific historical character—thus, whether they are historical as components of a particular type of life.

In this study, the shamanic hypothesis provides the main frame of description and the context for offering explanations of how things hung together in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Historicity will be measured in terms of adherence to a particular social-type model: whether cultural events and phenomena ascribed to his life are considered historical will depend on this social-type model and framework. What is to be taken as historical or be labeled historicity depends on cultural plausibility in terms of this hypothesis.

In addition, it was earlier argued that the question of historicity in a cross-cultural setting normally results in at least two distinct answers; in a worldview of ontological pluralism, it requires cross-cultural interpretation and comparison. In an interpretive process of abduction, historicity is caught in the interplay among the proposed hypothesis (frame of descrip-

tion), the cross-cultural gap, and the alien data; and different answers and descriptions can be ascribed to the same events or phenomena.

Therefore, the search for cultural plausibility and contextual particularity are neither criteria of authenticity nor a new set of criteria for historicity but tools for constructing historical and culturally sensitive interpretations of detail and explanations of how things were. That is, the meaning and interpretation of both the historical figure and the documentary data. The implication is that in such a cross-cultural setting there is a to-and-fro movement not only between individual episodes and the overall hypothesis but also between cultural plausibility and historicity.

Two reservations need nevertheless be registered.

### Even a Perfect Fit with a Social-Type Model Is No Guarantee of Historicity

There is no “final proof,” even if the shamanic (or any other social-type) model can account for the content and nature of the stories ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels and for the social personage that is presented, that as historical figure he was indeed like that. Even with a perfect fit, it is possible that the historical figure could have been different from the Gospels’ presentations. However, if there is a proper fit, it is also plausible that as a historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth was indeed such a social figure. In other words, if it can be shown that a specific model (in this case the shamanic model) can account for most of the content, features, presentation, and shape of the Gospels, then it is reasonable to assume that Jesus as a historical figure fits into that pattern. This is based on the following considerations.

Either the Gospel authors accidentally created it, or they were familiar with such a pattern. The alternatives are either to assume they had no knowledge of it and accidentally created it in describing Jesus as historical figure by means of such a coherent social-type model, or they operated with a model of a social type that was familiar to their world. The former means that they have described a configuration that would not have made sense in their world.<sup>13</sup>

13. In his perceptive way, Smith makes this point: “the fundamental antithesis, that between ‘the Christ of faith’ as a mythological figure and ‘the Jesus of history’ as a preacher free of mythological presuppositions, is anachronistic. Where in ancient Palestine would one find a man whose understanding of the world and of himself was *not* mythological?” (1978, 4). The pattern that he describes as mythological has been identified in this study as a culturally plausible pattern associated with shamanic figures. Would it make sense to

If they were familiar with it, either Jesus was such a cultural figure, or they thought it was plausible to depict their hero in terms of such a composite picture. Either Jesus was indeed such a figure (social type) while living in Galilee, or they merely utilized such a social type for describing his life. It is suggested both that they were familiar with a social type similar to this religious pattern and that Jesus as historical figure likely fitted into that pattern.

If such a social personage was a cultural plausibility, it obviously applies for both options as a historical figure or as a literary creation. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between reports about a shamanic figure and made-up stories in the same cultural setting about such a figure. This challenge has to be admitted: it is difficult to distinguish such creations and additions to a reported tradition (say, about a shamanic figure) because, if Jesus was a Galilean shamanic figure, the additions and creations would presumably have been about him as precisely such a figure.

### The Historical Figure Could Have Been Different from the Textual Presentations

Given the particular nature of the Gospel evidence—everything originated in the existing format in a subsequent historical period—the connection between the portrayal in the data and the historical figure is more precarious than in many other historical instances. It has to be admitted that all the available material can indeed be fictitious! In fact, given the nature of the data, it would be almost impossible to distinguish a report about an actual shamanic healing from a fictitious account of a healing by a Galilean shamanic figure. The Gospel authors, as embedded in their cultural system and communities, were probably perfectly capable of creating everything that they have written. In other words, it is possible that either in the oral transmission or during the enscripturation phase, most of the stories and descriptions could have been made up and are therefore unrelated to any historical figure (see below, pp. 118–20, for a description of the process of enscripturation.)

But, by the same token, it is equally possible that constructions on the Schweitzerstrasse, based on the *authenticity* of the Synoptic Gospels, could be mistaken—they could simply be fictitious and so also could be the ±20 percent *authentic* or *original* material identified by the Wredebahn.

---

describe someone by means of a social type that does not fit into their cultural system?

As indicated earlier, even in current historical Jesus research, the final judgment for authenticity rests with a fit between identified material and a constructed historical setting (see above, pp. 59–61). But, as has been pointed out, it is assumed that such a fit points toward authenticity; there is no guarantee that the corpus of material used (the Synoptics or the sayings gospel) is not fictitious. It is possible that the historical figure was totally different from any of these images (that of the Wredebahn, the Schweitzerstrasse, or cultural bundubashing).

But, if the documents can, via the proposed hypothesis, be connected to the life of a social personage, they need not be seen as fictitious or as literary creations. In fact, if the hypothesis facilitates understanding of meaning and the interpretation of detail, it can be taken as valuable and historically plausible.

This is the case not only for the canonical texts but also the extracanonical texts (which can be connected to the historical era) such as the infancy gospels. When seen as cultural artifacts produced within certain cultural processes, they can be taken as related to the life of a specific kind of social personage. This means that they not only contain material about a social personage, but that they are material evidence of the cultural processes associated with such a figure as well as of the processes by means of which they themselves were created. In general terms, it means that the documents are the product of cultural processes related to a specific social personage and not merely the product of (cultural) literary creations.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Unlike the position that maintains that most of the material referring to Jesus of Nazareth is actually fictitious (for some, everything except a few sections from the Synoptics and *Thomas*, and for others everything except the Synoptic Gospels once stripped from theological overlay), cultural bundubashing assumes that the sources can be trusted that they are about a specific historical figure and offer cultural information of a historical nature about that figure. They are seen as the residue of a public life and cultural processes.

Two conclusions from this discussion need to be highlighted. One, if the Galilean shamanic model can account for both the historical figure and the content and nature of the sources, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed such a figure. Two, if the nature, shape, and

contents of the documents can be accounted for by the proposed shamanic hypothesis, they need not be seen as fictitious or later mythical or literary creations. They can then be viewed as cultural reports or literary residues about the cultural processes related to a Galilean shamanic figure.

As indicated above, anthropological historiography belongs to the category of interpretive theories of science: it strives to be powerfully persuasive by accounting for both the individual elements and the overall design, for both the historical figure and the literary documents. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to some of the cultural processes and the dynamics associated with the life of such social personages as suggested by the shamanic hypothesis. Those are the processes regarding the life of such a figure as well as those associated with the transmission of stories and reports about such a figure in traditional societies.

SAMPLE