

Introduction

IMAGINE THAT MOST OF what is written in the canonical Gospels is taken as reports about the life of a historical figure. Imagine that everything from the infancy narratives to the stories about an afterlife existence, from the healings and exorcisms to the claims about being a special emissary of the kingdom of God in his everyday activities, are seen as the residues of Jesus's life in first-century Galilee. Within the framework of current historical Jesus research, this is unimaginable because the canons of critical Jesus research state that a historical figure could not have been like any or all of the literary presentations available today. The historical figure is underneath the overlay of early Christian and church traditions that have transformed the stories about a historical figure into the mythical and literary compositions that they are. If the "miraculous," the "mythical," and the unbelievable reports in the Gospels are taken as belonging to the life of a social personage in first-century Galilee, a historical figure emerges who is incomprehensible in terms of the cognitive possibilities of most modern historical Jesus scholarship. This picture, however, is very much the product of a long interpretive tradition in critical Jesus research.

The aim of this book is to offer an alternative to both the existing historical pictures of Jesus and the historiographical paradigm by means of which such constructions are made. The aim is to offer a picture of the historical Jesus that from the start takes seriously that he was a social personage fully embedded in the cultural system and worldview of his time. What he said and did were said and done by a social personage embedded in the cultural processes and dynamics of the kind of figure that he was. Within the framework of what is called an *anthropological-historical perspective*, I will present a social-scientific picture of the historical Jesus as a Galilean shamanic figure. It is not a case of new answers to the old questions but of new answers to different questions since both what we are

looking for (the historical figure) and what we are looking at (the literary evidence) as well as the research problem and the interpretive process are altered in this perspective.

The process of redescribing the historical Jesus problem and redefining the constituting components is the result of a variety of developments and insights. These did not take place all at once but emerged piecemeal under the influence of various factors.

Developments in social-scientific interpretation have been a constant influence in my thinking. Social-scientific interpretation as a major force on the interpretive scene focuses primarily on constructing appropriate first-century Mediterranean cultural and social scenarios for understanding biblical texts in their own setting.¹ But so far, Malina (2002b, 4) remarks, “there has been no ‘life’ of the historical Jesus based on social-scientific interpretations.” As far as I know, this is still the case. One of the aims of this study is to redress that. If texts and documents are to be situated in appropriate cultural scenarios and social systems in order to know what they were saying, the same applies to a historical figure and the processes associated with the life of such a figure.

Some years ago I came across a book on shamanism and was struck by the similarities between the events and phenomena ascribed to the lives of shamanic figures and what is encountered in the canonical Gospels about Jesus of Nazareth. My first attempt at exploring the shamanic complex for understanding Jesus as historical figure was done within the framework of traditional historical Jesus research (see Craffert 1999a). The dominant theories about the sources as well as the distinction between the Jesus of history (the historical figure) and the Christ presentations of the Gospels were maintained, as it were. The shamanic model merely offered a different label (next to magician, Cynic, healer, prophet, and the like) for describing Jesus’s social type with the suggestion that it could account for more of the elements and features ascribed to Jesus than the other models. Over time, that has changed.

1. Social-scientific interpretation has been under development for the last decade or two by members of the Context Group. It has been discussed in several studies dealing with the issue of the historical and cultural alienness of the New Testament documents and legitimate attempts to bridge those gaps (see Elliott 1993; Craffert 1994; 1995a; 1996; and for example, the essays in Neyrey 1991; Esler 1995; Pilch 2001; and Stegemann, Malina, & Theissen 2002).

Familiarity with social personages, such as shamanic figures, in many cultural settings raised important questions about the use of the social-type models in Jesus research (be this prophet, healer, wisdom teacher, Cynic, magician, rabbi, and the like). I was struck by the fact that very few, if any, of the models adequately cover all the data ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth, and if he was indeed such a figure (as assumed by the social-type model), that very little of the dynamics and cultural processes that would have colored his life are currently considered. Once the insights from anthropological and cross-cultural research about religious figures and social personages in real-life situations are taken seriously as a potential framework for grasping the nature and reality of Jesus as a historical figure, it becomes clear that historical constructions should include analyses of the way in which these constructions are constituted. The nature and character of such social figures are closely entangled with the cultural processes and dynamics associated with their lives. What is real and historical about such figures is closely connected to such processes and dynamics. If the conclusion of this study can be anticipated—if Jesus of Nazareth was a shamanic figure—he was so during his lifetime in Galilee, when he healed and taught, in what he said and did, and in how he was constituted and experienced as a social personage.

Engagement with reflections and developments in historiographical discourse led to a description of *anthropological historiography* as one approach beyond positivistic historiography. Like many other humanities scholars and social scientists, historians are grappling with the plurality of viewpoints and the multiplicity of reality systems that characterize the landscape of postmodern thinking. A major shift that took place in late-twentieth-century secular historiographical discourse is based on the acknowledgment of different forms of intellectual life as real and on the recognition that the strange and exotic in other historical eras can no longer be treated as the known and the common. Historiography became subject to the discourse of ontological pluralism and is looking toward models and insights from anthropology and cross-cultural studies to deal with its subject matter in a responsible way. These insights proved to be indispensable in a responsible historical interpretation of the strange features and alien phenomena ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth as a historical figure and social personage.

From this perspective it thus became apparent that much of the gospel material contains data that cannot be dealt with by means of the cul-

tural system and reality construction of modern scientific societies. What Laughlin, McManus, and d'Aquili (1990, 155) say about Western science in general is equally true for historical Jesus research:

The failure of modern Western culture to prepare individuals for an easy, fearless exploration of alternate phases of consciousness has the unfortunate consequence for science of not equipping most ethnographers with the experiential and conceptual material required for sophisticated research into the religious practices of other cultures.

Traditional historiography in general and New Testament studies in particular do not equip historical Jesus researchers to deal with the events or phenomena ascribed to the historical figure in a culturally sensitive way. More to the point, if Jesus of Nazareth was a cultural figure from a distant and alien cultural world (such as shamanic figures are to most modern Western societies), traditional Jesus research is inadequate to deal with either the historical figure or the historical remains that have originated as a result of such a social figure's life. In fact, if he was a shamanic figure (or the like), current historical Jesus research does not even have the sensors for picking up the clues in the texts referring to the historical and cultural reality of such a figure's life. From this point of view it became clear that despite variation and constant renewal in historical Jesus research, it remains trapped in the framework of the positivistic historiography from which the question first emerged more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Historical Jesus scholars are still trying to answer the questions and problems that gave rise to the quest at its onset. There is much renewal and puzzle-solving in the paradigm of historical Jesus research but very little renewal of the paradigm. It became clear that renewal will not follow from new answers to the old questions but will only be brought about by a new perspective, a new historiographical framework, as it were, and consequently, new answers to different questions.

One of the implications of this redescription of historical Jesus research is that the traditional views on the Gospels as being constituted in a linear and layered way are abandoned in favor of viewing the documents as residues of both his life as a social personage and the cultural processes and dynamics associated with such a life. If Jesus of Nazareth was a shamanic figure, the stories, reports, and accounts about his life from the very beginning probably included the features and characteristics of such a figure.

Therefore, they are to be treated as the residue, as cultural artifacts, about the life of a historical and social personage as well as the cultural processes accompanied by such a public life.

What makes a study such as this particularly difficult is that it is simultaneously an explanation of “how to” and a “do-it-yourself” manual. It is necessary to explain the how, why, and what of the paradigm while at the same time offering an exercise in doing it. It is like mapping and describing a road while still constructing it—the method has to be explained along the way while trying to cover the terrain. Therefore, as opposed to the well-known metaphors of the Schweitzerstrasse and the Wredebahn used to depict current historical Jesus research, the metaphor of *cultural bundubashing* will be used. This metaphor, taken from off-road driving, describes the adventure of going places where no roads have been built. Through an exploration of the cultural landscape of the first-century Mediterranean world in general and the reality system of shamanic figures in particular, cultural bundubashing will work toward the hypothesis that Jesus of Nazareth could plausibly be seen as a Galilean shamanic figure.