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What Can We Know of Jesus And His Activities? – Arguments for the Historicity of Jesus

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Napoleon was on the peak of his power when in 1808 in Weimar he met the German poet and author Christoph Martin Wieland¹ and said to him that there are doubts about whether Jesus ever lived. The German poet gave a very quick-witted answer saying, “In this way one could after 1000 years also claim that Napoleon never lived and that the battle of Jena never was fought.” The emperor said “très bien!” (i.e. “well answered”) and passed smiling. This was a very good answer, but it does not replace arguments.

The thesis that Jesus did not exist was indeed developed at the end of the 18th century by two French authors, Volney and Dupuis, but without a careful analysis of the sources in the New Testament.² The first scholar, who founded his doubts on a careful analysis of the oldest sources, was a pupil of the famous German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, Brunom Bauer (1809–1882). It is remarkable that he started in an attempt to defend the historicity of Jesus, but he converted to a radical scepticism.³ He recognised that the Gospel of Mark is the oldest gospel; however, even in

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- 1 Napoleon met between 27.9–14.10.1808, in Erfurt, Tsar Alexander to complete an alliance with him. He took the opportunity to get to know the leading representatives of German culture: the poet Christoph Martin Wieland and Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and the Historian Johannes von Müller. The anecdote is told, citing an eyewitness, by K. von Hase, *Geschichte Jesu: Nach akademischen Vorlesungen* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 2nd edn, 1891), p. 176 n 22. Cf. M. Hengel and A. M. Schwemer, *Jesus und das Judentum* (Geschichte des frühen Christentums 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), p. 180.
 - 2 The first, who doubted the historicity of Jesus, were Constantin François de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney (1757–1820), a French philosopher, historian, orientalist, and politician in: *Les ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (Paris: Desenne, 1791), and C.-F. Dupuis, who explained in his book *Origine de Tous les Cultes: ou Religion Universelle* (A Paris: Chez A. Agasse, 1796) the religions by astral mythology: the solar hero dies in winter and experiences his resurrection in the spring.
 - 3 Bruno Bauer was a pupil of G. W. Hegel. After his habilitation in 1834 in Berlin for theology, he was moved in 1839 to the university of Bonn and was dismissed in March 1842 because of his radical criticism of the Gospels (cf. B. Bauer, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte des Johannesevangeliums* [Bremen: B. Schönemann, 1840]; idem., *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker* [Leipzig: O. Wigand, 3rd edn., 1846], original in 1841/1842). He became an atheist, an adherent of conservative politics, and an ardent anti-Semite. He defended the thesis that the Gospel of Mark was a product of the creative imagination of the eldest Evangelist and that the Gospel of John was a product of Logos speculation. All the letters of Paul were forgeries from the second Century. Christianity was, on one hand, derived from the ideas of the Roman Stoic Seneca (1–65 AD), and on the other hand from ideas of the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (d. 40). Cf. the article F. W. Bautz, “Bruno

the oldest source we encounter only the image of Jesus, the way in which the mind of the Evangelist has formed this image, but we encounter not Jesus himself. He developed the idea that Jesus was the literary product of the Evangelist. You must know, in Bruno Bauer's philosophy of idealism the whole of objective reality is destined to be transformed into subjective reality. Why not also Jesus? He published his ideas in 1841/2 and lost his post as an instructor of theology.

The second sceptic I shall name is the liberal German theologian, who was also a very committed social reformer, Albert Kalthoff (1850–1906).⁴ He regarded the figure of Christ not as the literary creation of individual people, but as the product of unprivileged social groups yearning for salvation and a better life. He published in 1902 a book on the "Christus-Problem". The subtitle was "Outline of a social theology".

He was followed in 1909 by the professor of philosophy Arthur Drews at Karlsruhe (1865–1935),⁵ who wrote the book: "The myth of Christ" (in German: "Die Christusmythe"). His thesis was: there has been a Christ myth already before Jesus. The concepts of dying and resurrecting "sons of God" were widespread in antiquity. Secondly, they have been historicised – i.e. they have been transformed into an alleged historical person in Palestine. This philosopher tried to establish a foundation for religion in a timeless system of symbols and ideas independently of the historicity of religious myths.

Bruno Bauer, Kalthoff and Drews represent three typical approaches to denying the historicity of Jesus: Jesus is either a literary fiction, a product of a social desire for salvation or a historicised myth. All had the vision of a new religion and spirituality. Bruno Bauer represents an idealism of subjectivity, Albert Kalthoff a protestant liberal pantheism, and Arthur Drews an antichristian pantheism. Bruno Bauer was an anti-Semite, Arthur Drews in his last years a sympathizer of National-Socialism. Getting rid of the historical Jesus was for them as getting rid of the Jewish foundation of their own culture. Albert Kalthoff, on the contrary, opposed anti-Semitism. He was a radical liberal, democratic and social-committed pastor.

In our times, it was above all the professor of German literature, G. A. Wells (born 1926), who challenges the historicity of Jesus in his book: "Did Jesus Exist?" (1975).⁶

Bauer," F. W. Bautz (ed.), *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon 1* (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH, 1990), pp. 416–417.

- 4 Albert Kalthoff (1850–1906) was a liberal, socially-committed pastor in Berlin. After his release by the Prussian Oberkirchenrat, he was first working as a pastor in Basel since 1884, then since 1894 in Bremen. He denied the historicity of Jesus (*Das Christus-Problem: Grundlinien zu einer Sozialtheologie* [Leipzig: E. Diederichs, 1902] = idem., *The Christ problem: Outlines of a Social Theology* [Leipzig: no publisher information, 1902]), and God was, for him, a symbol of freedom, truth, justice and love. F. Nietzsche was for him a 'revelation.' For a short time, he was the chairman of the association of the Monist. Cf. K.-G. Wesseling, "Albert Kalthoff", T. Bautz (ed.), *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon 3* (Herzberg: Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH, 1992), pp. 987–990.
- 5 Arthur Drews represented, as a pupil of the philosopher Eduard von Hartmann, a pantheistic metaphysics, and was professor of philosophy at the Technical University of Karlsruhe since 1896. He denied the historicity of Jesus (A. Drews, *Die Christusmythe* [2 vols., Jena: E. Diederichs, 1909–1911], a new edition in 1924; idem., *Die Leugnung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* [Karlsruhe: G. Braun, 1926]). Cf. F. W. Bautz, "Arthur Drews", Bautz, *BBKL 1*, pp. 1381–1382.
- 6 G. A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1975). Wells taught German at the Univer-

His solution to this problem is a revised mythical explanation: already before Jesus was the myth of wisdom; she (i.e. wisdom) has created the world, has been incorporated in wise men, has suffered among human beings and then returned to heaven. This myth of wisdom was afterwards attached to a fictive historical figure. Over 15 years ago, G. A. Wells revoked his theory in his book "The Jesus Myth" (1998). He is now convinced that Jesus lived. Now he says that Jesus lived, but was secondarily vested with a myth.⁷

The story of radical scepticism in Jesus-research started with a conversion from conservatism to radical scepticism. The story finished, for the time being, with a conversion the other way around. A sceptic came to the result: surely, Jesus lived.

But how can we be convinced of such a statement? To illustrate the problem, I like to tell the story of a physicist who was asked after a rail trip through the Lüneburger heathland and moorland, whether sheep-shearing already had happened. After pondering for a while he said: at least the sheep were sheared as far they turned to me and as far I could see it. Other people with common sense would say: the sheep have been sheared. But this scientist formulated a hypothetical assertion: *as far I could see the sheep and as far as they turned their skins to me, they have been sheared and cut!* That is typical for scholarship. We transform even everyday knowledge into hypothetical statements. *If* some general presuppositions are given and if our observations are right, something may be one way or the other – and this is true as long as we have no better knowledge. We very rarely say, "This is so and so!" rather we say, "Given certain pre-conditions of observation and terms of reconstruction it may be so and so." But what are these terms of reconstruction in historical Jesus research? In the following we deal with five terms of reconstructions.

1 The age of the sources and indications of familiarity

Concerning our physicist, we would begin by asking: how far did he approach the sheep? Was he able to see them distinctively? In the same way a historian asks: How far do our sources approach the historical events they are witnessing? How large is the temporal distance, how far is the local remoteness?

In ancient times, there is often a large distance between events and the oldest sources that are preserved. The oldest sources on Alexander the Great originated ca. 300–400 years after him.⁸ They are founded on sources of eye-witnesses that are not preserved. In spite of this large distance, historians are able to develop a clear image of Alexander. Nobody doubts that he lived from 356–323 BCE.

Concerning Jesus, the distance between his death and the oldest sources is much

sity of London. The first book in which he denied the historicity of Jesus was G. A. Wells, *The Jesus of the Early Christians: A Study in Christian Origins* (London: Pemberton, 1971). A good summary of his views can be found in G. A. Wells, "The Historicity of Jesus", R. J. Hoffmann and G. A. Larue (eds.), *Jesus in History and Myth* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1986), pp. 27–45.

7 His return to the assumption of his historicity is found in G. A. Wells, *Cutting Jesus Down to Size: What Higher Criticism Has Achieved and Where It Leaves Christianity* (Chicago: Open Court, 2009).

8 Cf. E. Badian, "Alexanderhistoriker", H. Cancik, H. Schneider and M. Landfester (eds.), *Der Neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike 1* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1996), pp. 453–454.

smaller. The oldest written sources are the letters of Paul written ca. 20–30 years after Jesus' death. They do not, however, say very much on Jesus. The oldest source with more traditions on Jesus is the Gospel of Mark that originated ca. 40 years after his death. The other canonical Gospels did not originate until ca. 100/110 CE. All of them are based on even older oral and written sources.

Within these texts we often find indications of a proximity to history. It is said about John the Baptist that he baptised in the desert of Jordan. This seems to be a paradox. How can you baptise in the desert? Those who are familiar with the countryside of Judea know that, in the south, the Jordan crosses a waste desert and that it is surrounded only by a small floodplain. Such observations motivated me to look systematically for "indications of familiarity" in our texts. I provide examples of two of them.⁹

In Matt. 11:7 Jesus speaks to the crowd, which is flocking to the Baptist: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?" Jesus answers this question with another rhetorical question: "Do you want to see a reed shaken by the wind?" He adds another question and answer: "To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses." Here the asceticism of the Baptist is contrasted with the luxury at the palace of Herod Antipas. But what about the reed in the first answer? When considering its interpretation, a coin of Herod Antipas came to my mind. On one of his coinages, you can see a reed at the place where on other ancient coinages you expect to see the head of the ruler. Due to the prohibition of images, no Jewish ruler could in those times dare to coin his portrait on his coinages. Herod Antipas took instead of his head a reed, because the coinage was coined in the year when his new capital Tiberias was founded at the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Antipas was very proud of his new capital, but what would the people in Galilee have said? If they could see a reed in the place of the ruler, they were seduced to mock Herod Antipas: he himself is a reed shaken by the wind. John the Baptist, on the contrary, was a tough prophet with firm principles. Jesus hints, according to my view, to this coinage, where the ruler of the small country appears as a reed shaken by the wind. Therefore we encounter the contrast between Antipas and the Baptist already in the first half of the saying. If my interpretation is justified, this saying would presuppose a high proximity to the historical events for the small bronze coins of Herod Antipas were current only in his small country and its immediate neighbourhood. Nobody beyond this small region was able to understand the allusion to Antipas as a reed. The coins with a reed had been coined only once – in the year of the foundation of Tiberias 19 CE.

My second example is from the passion history. As a rule, the adherents of Jesus are characterised by name; we hear of Judas Iscariot, Simon of Cyrene and Joseph of Arimathea, yet two persons are anonymous. One of them violates a soldier's ear when Jesus is arrested; the other one is fleeing naked after a close fight with the

9 Both examples are taken from G. Theissen, *Lokalkolorit und Zeitgeschichte in den Evangelien: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (NTOA 8; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1989) = *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (transl. L. M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress 1991): compare to Matt. 11:7 and the coin of Herod Antipas, pp. 26–44; compare to the characterization of persons in the passion history, pp. 161–200 (*The Gospels in Context*, pp. 26–42, 169–189).

police (Mark 14:43–51). The Gospel of John betrays the name of the person who strikes with a sword; it is Peter (John 18:10–11). In the Gospel of Mark, he remains anonymous. I ask now, why are just those persons anonymous who are in a conflict with the soldiers and policemen? My explanation is that this has to do with protective anonymity. As long as there lived in Jerusalem a soldier with an injured ear, it was better not to make public the name of the person, who had caused it. By such “indications of familiarity”, we can conclude that parts of the passion story was formed in the first two decades after Jesus’ death, as long as a protective anonymity was necessary. That some tried to expand my few observations into the thesis that the whole Gospels are written by eyewitnesses, is a premature conclusion.¹⁰

We may be sure, however, that some particular traditions come very close to the events. They are very old, but for a historian, a second term of his reconstructions is perhaps much more important: the plurality and independence of sources.

2 The plurality of sources and their independence

Let us return to our physicist. If we want to control his statement about sheep-shearing, there is a simple method. We must ask other people in the same trail trip, whether they have seen the sheep. Do they confirm the observations of our scientist? In this way, we get multiple independent witnesses, presupposing the witnesses did not influence one another. For a historian, the reliability of sources increases if they are confirmed by other independent sources. Concerning Jesus, the state of the sources is rather favourable. The letters of Paul do not have much information, but are independent sources and we possess a multiplicity of sources on Jesus in the Gospels and some short remarks in few other texts such as Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny. But are they independent from one another?¹¹

Here the following rule of thumb is valid: the sources should contain enough contradictions so that we can assume they are independent from one another and that nobody has copied from another one. On the other hand, the contradictions must not be so strong that we come to the conclusion that the sources refer to different events, persons or to fantasy. The contradictions must be strong enough to secure independency, but small enough to be interpreted as referring to the same historical reality behind the sources. Historians like contradictions in their sources. They are the chance to advance reality.

We have a theory on the dependencies of the Gospels that is supported by a broad consensus: the so called two-source theory.

10 R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

11 G. Theissen and A. Merz, *Der historische Jesus: Ein Lehrbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1996), pp. 35–124, gives a survey on the sources for the historical Jesus and how we can evaluate the historical sources.

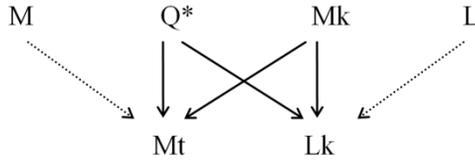


Table 1

According to this theory, Matthew and Luke are the youngest Gospels that are based on older sources, the Gospel of Mark and a reconstructed and postulated source of the Sayings of Jesus (called Q). Besides these two sources, there is special material in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, some of it presumably in oral form. All in all, we have four currents of traditions, potentially independent from one another. In addition to these four currents, we have two sources with a limited historical value: the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas, which was discovered in 1945. Many scholars think that they know the elder synoptic Gospels, but also they are convinced that they potentially contain independent traditions on Jesus. Our sketch is now a little bit more complicated with two more sources with potentially independent traditions.

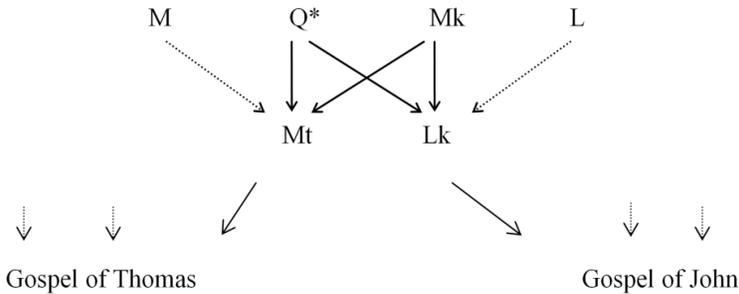


Table 2

We have now six potentially independent streams of traditions. What corresponds in all of them and is attested in most of them can be explained plausibly as an effect of the historical Jesus. In all streams of traditions, for example, Jesus is preaching the kingdom of God, i.e. the expectation that God will definitively rule in the world. That is radical monotheism. Jesus researchers agree that this theocentrism of the kingdom of God is the centre of Jesus’ proclamation. After Easter this centre of Christian faith was transformed into faith in Christ, instead of focusing on the expectancy of God’s rule.

But even more important is the fact that these six streams of traditions are surpassed by the internal multiplicity of Jesus traditions. Before a Jesus tradition was written down, it was transmitted orally in many small units (in “kleinen Einheiten”). Therefore we have to change our scheme once more. Even after the existence of written sources, there had been a stream of oral Jesus traditions for a long time. Traces of it are preserved in later Early Christian writings beyond the New Testament.

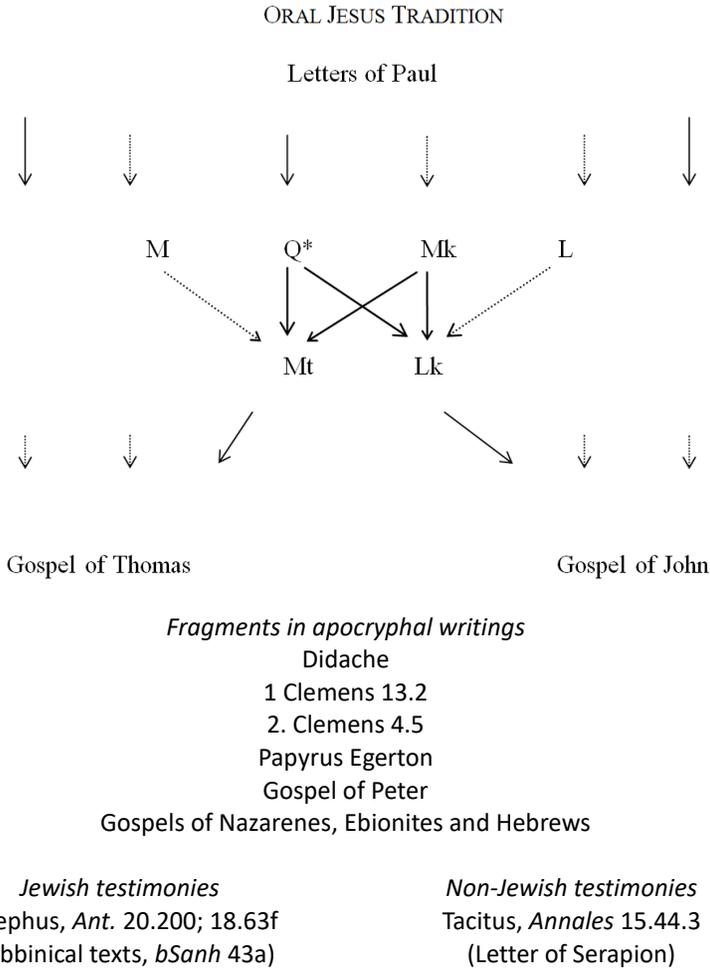


Table 3

For the sake of completeness I have added in the beginning the letters of Paul and at the bottom some Early Christian writings outside of the New Testament that contain some small fragments of Jesus tradition. I have also added the most important non-Christian sources on Jesus. They do not expand our knowledge on Jesus, but they are witnesses of the fact that in antiquity nobody doubted the existence of Jesus.

For our problem the oral pre-stage of the Jesus tradition is very important. This oral tradition is no amorphous stream, but consists in many small units like those we are acquainted with, such as jokes, proverbs, and anecdotes. These small oral units also have in our times special forms and structures. Above all, every joke,

every proverb, and anecdote can be transmitted independently of the other ones. They are potentially independent. The Jesus tradition is structured in the same way. Here you can see a map on the forms of Jesus sayings, as I have developed it. We are able to distinguish between the forms of his sayings as far as Jesus acts and speaks as prophet, as wisdom teacher, as interpreter of the law, or as narrator of parables. We may further differentiate between sayings with an appeal in the second person (You shall ...!), statements in the third person and utterances on himself in the first person. All of these small forms are witnessed by multiple examples.¹²

	Appealing sayings (often 2. person)	Objective statements (in 2. and 3. person)	I-sayings (1. person)
Prophet	Macarisms and sentences of judgment: Preaching of salvation and judgement	Sayings on the Basileia and the crisis: Preaching of salvation and judgement	Statements of his mission: Jesus has come for salvation and judgement
Teacher of wisdom	Exhortation (2. person) a) in singular b) in plural	Proverbs (3. person) a) general statements b) roles (on sons, daughters, wise men ...) c) images and metaphors	Sayings of the Sophia, Jesus as messenger and speaker of the Sophia
Interpreter of the law	Rules for disciples: Sayings of following Jesus, Instructions for missionaries	Sentences of law	Antitheses: Jesus as a critical interpreter of the law
Narrator of parables	Parables: argumentation with improbable stories, call to deviating behaviour	Parables: argumentation with typical events	Allegories: Encoded Sayings on himself

Table 4: *The Language of forms in Jesus sayings*

Most exegetes are convinced that we can identify in all categories of sayings at least one authentic tradition – and as a rule even more than one. It is possible that some exegetes are wrong in the one case, but it is improbable that they are wrong in all cases. My conclusion is, therefore: We know very well the forms of the preaching of Jesus, even if we are uncertain, whether Jesus has spoken this or that saying literally. If this is true, the preaching of Jesus is visible for us with some clear-cut outlines. He was a prophet preaching macarisms and woes, he formulated as the representative of wisdom sharp-witted aphorisms, he gave as the interpreter of the law some autonomous interpretations of the Mosaic Law, and he was a fascinating narrator of parables.

What is crucial is the plurality of sources. By the insight that oral tradition is transmitted in many independent units, we have multiplied these sources. Of

12 Cf. G. Theissen, “Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments als literaturgeschichtliches Problem”, *Schriften der Phil.-hist. Klasse der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* 40, Heidelberg: Winter 2007, p. 55.

course you could object that, if the sayings of Jesus had been transmitted orally before they had been written down, must we not be afraid that they lost their reliability? Is oral tradition not unconsciously transformed according to the requirements of the transmitters? Therefore, we have to deal with a third “term of reconstruction” in Jesus research: how much can we trust the continuity and reliability of oral traditions? Who has transmitted the sayings of Jesus? What have been their motifs? Was there a chance that they preserved his sayings in his spirit?

3 The continuity of tradition and the requirements of the transmitters

Once more I return to the anecdote of our physicist. Supposing that we heard this anecdote from one person, who got it from another person, who on the other hand claimed to have it from an eyewitness, we have something like a chain of transmitters and a continuity of tradition. If we know that all transmitters have been physicists, we should expect that the anecdote was told with a certain self-mockery in order to caricature a strict and a little-bit-odd scientific attitude. If the anecdote was told in the family of a physicist with some prejudices concerning the ivory-towered mentality of science, we should expect that the whimsical characteristics of our professor have been enhanced. Transmitters assimilate oral traditions to their convictions. They tell what they like to hear and what they expect that others like to hear. (Besides I should say: “My father was teacher in physics, my brother, my nephew, my son and his wife are physicists. I am familiar with physicists as friendly and reflective persons. The anecdote of the sheep-shearing did not originate in my family.”)

But what do we know about the transmitters of the sayings and anecdotes of Jesus? What were their interests? Was there a danger that they assimilated the Jesus sayings? This is a serious problem. Many sayings of Jesus are so radical that it is nearly impossible to live according to them in everyday-life. When Jesus says to a follower, who wants to bury his father: “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:22), such sayings seem to demolish family life. When he says: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25), it is extremely critical against possession. Such sayings seem to demolish economical life. When he demands not to be anxious about food and clothing like the birds in the air and the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:25ff), he contradicts working morality. When Jesus demands turning the left cheek to someone, if he strikes you on the right cheek (Matt. 5:39), it means renouncing elementary security and self-defence. In my first scholarly works I asked myself, who is really able to transmit such radical sayings? Who is able to practice them in a convincing way? My answer is: only people who are itinerant charismatics, who were supported by others, who had left their families, who lived without possession and without occupation, and who could avoid conflict by travelling to the next village – only such people could transmit such sayings in a convincing way. Such people are well attested within Early Christendom. They are the wandering missionaries following Jesus with the mission to spread his message. I called the

radicalism of Jesus' sayings "itinerant radicalism" (Wanderradikalismus).¹³ The radical sayings fit their radical lifestyle and that is why they were interested in not attenuating such radical sayings. Itinerant radicalism is their "Sitz im Leben." In this way, there is continuity between Jesus and the transmitters of his sayings.

If people with the same way of life as Jesus transmit his sayings, there is a chance that his sayings are preserved in his spirit, even if they have been orally transmitted for 20 or 50 years. The itinerant radicalism of the Jesus sayings derives from Jesus' self. Or should the itinerant charismatics have invented the image of Jesus as a teacher walking around in Palestine without a home according to their own life form? This is very improbable. We have no witness for itinerant teachers before Jesus. I did find only one, that is Judas Galilaios, who came from the Gaulanitis, appeared in Galilee, and worked later on in Judea.¹⁴ Even the Baptist seemed to live in contrast to Jesus: stationary at the border of the Jordan River. The itinerancy of the Jesus followers must go back to a dominant figure who introduced something new: to Jesus himself. The early Christian itinerant missionary imitated him. There is a continuity of tradition.

Now one question about confidence. In spite of old sources with indications of familiarity, in spite of recurrent elements in a plurality of streams of traditions, in spite of continuity in the oral tradition – we always come across no more than the image of Jesus, one such as the transmitters and the evangelists painted it. We never come across Jesus himself. Can we have confidence?

But the gospels do not only refer to Jesus, but also to Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas and the Baptist. Concerning these three figures, we are able to check the statements of the Gospels by other sources. Here we meet a situation that gives historians the confidence to have to do with "real" history and not only with fiction. We have so many individual facts fitting unusually well to one another, that it cannot be by chance.

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- 13 G. Theissen, "Wanderradikalismus: Literatursoziologische Aspekte der Überlieferung von Worten Jesu im Urchristentum", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 70 (1973), pp. 245–271 = idem., *Studien zur Soziologie des Urchristentums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979), pp. 79–105 = idem., "The Wandering Radicals. Light shed by the sociology of literature in the early transmission of Jesus sayings", G. Theissen, *Social Reality and Early Christians: Theology, Ethics and the World of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 33–59. A criticism and continuation of this thesis is T. Schmeller, *Brechungen: Urchristliche Wandercharismatiker im Prisma soziologisch orientierter Exegese* (SBS 136; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989); a comprehensive representation and an apology of this thesis is M. Tiwald, *Wanderradikalismus: Jesu erste Jünger: ein Anfang und was davon bleibt* (Österreichische Biblische Studien 20; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002) and G. Theissen, "The Saying Source Q and Itinerant Radicalism", M. Tiwald (ed.), *Q in Context II: Social Setting and Archaeological Background of the Sayings Source* (BBB 173; Göttingen: V & R Unipress 2015), pp. 93–110.
- 14 G. Theissen, "Jesus as an Itinerant Teacher. Reflections from Social History on Jesus' Roles", J. H. Charlesworth and P. Pokorný (eds.), *Jesus Research: An International Perspective: The First Princeton-Prague Symposium on Jesus Research* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 98–122.

4 The contingency of scattered dates, which fit to one another in a non-contingent way

I explain this principle of historical research with the help of our physicist. Why do we think that his scientific attitude is a little bit bizarre? 1) To begin with, we all know nobody shears all the sheep of his herd first on one side and afterwards all the sheep on the other side 2) Secondly, we know nobody is able to control his herd of sheep in a way that all sheep, by chance, will turn their sheared side to an observer. We conclude, intuitively, that all sheep have been sheared on both sides! The fact that the position of the sheep is absolute contingent – some sheep are seen from the left side, other ones from the right side – gives us the following certainty: The sheep have been sheared from both sides even if this is an inference beyond what we really can see. Contingent dates, which can coherently be interpreted as referring to the same reality, give historians the confidence that we do encounter real history and not only fiction (according to M. Bloch)¹⁵.

We can indeed assert the general reliability of the Jesus tradition much better if we compare his image in our sources with some minor roles in the Gospels. I take as an example first the tradition about Pilate. Some notices of him are preserved in Philo, Josephus, and Tacitus, and as well as some texts in the Gospels. We know of some coins of Pilate and even an inscription is preserved. The witnesses are scattered in a contingent way. But in spite of this, it is possible to interpret all these scattered evidences with regard to one and the same historical person, even if the interests and perspectives of these documents are very different. The same is true for Herod Antipas. Nobody doubts the historicity of this ruler. We may conclude by analogy that as far as we may exploit the Gospels for historical data in the case of Pilate and Herod Antipas, we may also exploit them as far for data concerning Jesus.

Now you may say that it goes without saying that politicians and rulers leave contingent traces, but Jesus was an itinerant preacher. He did not mint coins or place an inscription in memory of him. Comparable, however, to Jesus in this regard is John the Baptist. He was a prophet. We have a very interesting record by Josephus that is independent from the Gospels. The contradictions between Josephus and the Gospels are large enough that they are certainly independent. There is no doubt though that Josephus describes the same figure as the Gospels. As exemplified with the Baptist, we may demonstrate how scattered contingent particularities fit so well together that we must presuppose a historical figure behind the sources.¹⁶

The most important difference between the view of the Baptist in the Gospels and in Josephus' writing is the following: according to Josephus (*Ant.* 116–119),

15 M. Bloch, *Apologie der Geschichte oder Der Beruf des Historikers* (Anmerkungen und Argumente 9, Stuttgart: Klett, 1974).

16 The following considerations are developed in G. Theissen, *Lokalkolorit*, pp. 85–102 = idem., *The Gospels in Context*, pp. 81–97; idem., “Geschichten und Geschichte. Die Geschichte vom Tod Johannes des Täufers”, K. Nagorni and M. Oeming (eds.), *Geschichten vom Tod, der Liebe und dem Leben. Neue Zugänge zur Bibel* (Herrenalber Forum 39; Herrenalb: Evangelische Akademie Baden, 2003), pp. 26–57; G. Theissen and A. Merz, “The Delay of the Parousia as a Test Case for the Criterion of Coherence”, *Louvain Studies* 32 (2007), pp. 49–66.

Herod Antipas execution of the Baptist was motivated by political motifs, because he was afraid of a rebellion. When after the death of the Baptist Herod Antipas experiences some years later his Waterloo in a war against the Nabateans in the South, the people said: This is God's retribution for the execution of the Baptist. The logic of this interpretation remains hidden. What has the Baptist to do with the Nabateans?

The Gospels on the other hand explain the execution in another way. The Baptist had criticised the marriage of Antipas and Herodias. This marriage was a violation of Jewish law, because Herod Antipas married the wife of his brother while the brother was still alive. There is not the least hint of the danger of a political rebellion. The Nabateans are not even mentioned.

In spite of this, all of the data fits perfectly with one another. In order to marry Herodias, Herod Antipas had to divorce his first wife, a Nabatean princess. She had to take flight to her father, the Nabatean king, who since then was an enemy of his former son-in-law. Now we understand why the defeat of Herod Antipas could be experienced as a punishment of Herod Antipas for the execution of the Baptist; the Baptist had criticised the very marriage of Herod Antipas, and the divorce of this marriage was the reason for the enmity of the Nabateans. If Herod had obeyed the Baptist, the war with the Nabateans would have been avoidable; Antipas would not have suffered such a defeat.

Why though was Herod afraid of a rebellion? I think I can explain it. In those times, a prophecy of Moses that no son of Herod I would rule longer than their father circulated in Palestine. Herod I ruled ca. 33 years long (from 37 to 4 BCE). Two of his sons ruled longer than he had: Herod Antipas for 43 years (from 4 BCE to 39 CE); Herod Philippos for 37 years long (from 4 BCE – 33/4 CE). Now we can quite precisely say at what time the reign of the sons should have been finished according to this prophecy. This was ca. 26 CE, in the very time that the Baptist disseminated his preaching on Palestine. In exactly that time, Antipas had to be afraid that many expected his death. The criticism of a prophet within his country and the new enmity from outside must have enhanced this expectation. Many of his soldiers deserted – this is said to be the military reason for his defeat. The ancient rulers did know why they forbade the asking oracles after the death date of rulers. This was politically destabilising.

All the information that I have recombined are scattered in different texts. No writer in antiquity has combined them or made them fitting, but the result is a coherent story of the events. This gives an intuitive certainty: here we encounter real history and not only fictive stories. There was no committee at work in the old Palestine with the task to place different data in order to mislead later historians.

The Baptist is a prophetic figure like Jesus. As much as the Baptist really lived and his traditions refer to a historical figure, we may say as much of the same of Jesus. Pilate, Herod Antipas and the Baptist certify that it is possible to exploit the Gospels in a critical way for historical information.

There is no doubt, however: all views of Pilate, Antipas, the Baptist, and Jesus are formed by preferences and are biased. We have no disinterested witnesses, but we are not totally dependent of such tendencies. This is the fifth term of reconstruction for the historical Jesus: these are some elements in the Jesus tradition that are

preserved against strong tendencies in Early Christianity.

5 The tendencies of the Jesus tradition and preserved elements against these tendencies

Once more I come back to our physicist. If he is well known for loving sheep, but despises sheared sheep, then his statement, “The sheep have been sheared” is especially credible. Against his wishful thinking, the pitiable sight of naked and sheared sheep has impressed him. His statement contradicts his tendencies and wishes. It must be true.

There are some statements and characteristic features in the Jesus tradition that contradict the tendencies, wishes and convictions of the first Christians in the Gospels. I list here some important examples.

The first example is the provenance of Jesus. Jesus is always labelled as “Jesus from Nazareth.” This was an embarrassment for the first Christians. According to Micah 5:1, the Messiah was to come out of Bethlehem. In the Gospel of John, this is an objection against Jesus: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (Joh 1:46). The Gospel of Luke relocates the birth of the Messiah from Nazareth to Bethlehem, because an enrollment in the tax lists had to take place at the hometown of the whole family. We are sure that the origin from Nazareth did not meet the expectations of the first Christian, but especially therefore it is a historical fact. It was preserved against tendencies.

The second example of the preservation of some elements against tendencies is Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9–11 and parallels). His baptism was an embarrassment for the first Christians because of two reasons. Firstly, the baptism could be interpreted as if the Baptist was superior to Jesus, whereas the first Christians were convinced that Jesus was the stronger one of the two. Secondly, baptism presupposes that people charge themselves publicly for being a sinner, but the first Christians were convinced that Jesus was without sin. We can already within the Gospels notice how this problem was cleaned up and solved:

- In Matt. 3:13–17, the Baptist refuses to baptise Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus should baptise him, but Jesus insists to be baptised, in order “to fulfil all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). This clarifies that he is baptised as a righteous man, not as a sinner. He is superior, because the Baptist himself says that actually he should be baptised by Jesus.
- The most ingenious refusal of the idea that Jesus came to baptism as a sinner is found in the Gospel of John. According to John 1:29ff, Jesus comes burdened with sins to the Baptist, but he does not bear his own sins, but rather the sins of the world. He is the Lamb of God, who is bearing the sins of the world and takes them away (Joh 1:29).
- The Gospel of the Ebionites (Fragm. 3) underlines the superiority of Jesus vis-à-vis the Baptist: the Baptist hears the voice from heaven, he kneels down before Jesus and begs him to be baptised by him. There can be no doubt who is superior.¹⁷

17 In the Gospel of the Nazarenes (Fragm. 2), Jesus is asked by his mother and his brethren to be

Jesus' baptism is therefore considered to be a cornerstone for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus. The event is historical, but it is told with mythical motifs: heaven is opened, the voice of God says, "You are my beloved Son," and the spirit is floating from above Jesus like a dove. In this way the significance of this event is made visible for all Christians: the Christian is also a child of God as Jesus is, who also receives the same spirit as Jesus, and experiences that God loves him. In the NT, mythic motifs encompass historical events and make visible their deep significance for human beings.

The third example for the elements preserved against tendencies is several statements that underline the humanity of Jesus. These statements contradict the faith of the first Christians that Jesus is divine. They are statements of his adherents, of his family and his adversaries:

- A young man sympathizing with Jesus comes to him and addresses him as "Good Teacher", but Jesus rebukes him: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." (Mark 10:17f). This is in harmony with the baptism of Jesus. Jesus says there that he is a human being and a sinner. Not even he himself is "good."¹⁸ This is certainly not invented, as it contradicts the belief in Jesus' divinity.
- The family went out to Jesus in order to seize him. They think he is beside himself (Mark 3:21).¹⁹ This is in tension with the fact that after Easter, family members belonged to the Early Christian congregation and were convinced of the messianic significance of Jesus. This tradition is surely historical. It fits the sayings of Jesus that are very critical of family.
- The adversaries of Jesus blame him for his exorcisms as evidence of a pact with the devil. They say: "He is possessed by Beelzebub, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." (Mark 3:22). It is hardly conceivable that the first Christians invented such a charge that contradicts their conviction that Jesus does not side with Satan but with God.²⁰

A fourth group of elements that are preserved against the tendencies of the tradition are found in the passion story. For the first Christians, it was a problem that Jesus was crucified as a criminal. All knew that crucifixion was a death penalty for slaves and rebels, which should dishonour the executed one. Crucifixion included the message: This man has been in conflict with the Roman state and society. Paul himself says that the message of the cross is a stumbling block for Jews and a folly for the Greek. The first Christians had been eager to be good citizens. Their possible connection with a criminal in the eye of their environment was embarrassing for

baptized for the remission of sins, but Jesus responds: "What have I sinned, that I let myself go and be baptized by him, unless what I said was ignorance (an ignorance that is sin)." Jesus himself denied that he had sought baptism for the forgiveness of his sins and plays the baptism down. Baptism could only handle sins committed in ignorance.

18 The first Christians could transmit this story, because they understood the title and its rejection very ambiguously. If the young man calls Jesus "good" and this predicate belongs only to God, he attributed this predicate to Jesus' divine rank.

19 Again, the tradition could be transmitted, because it was somewhat ambiguous; "being beside yourself" can mean an ecstatic state, in which man feels being close to God.

20 Again, the tradition was only possible because Jesus rejects this accusation. If he is in league with Satan, then his exorcisms show that the kingdom of Satan is divided and will soon have an end.

them. Also the circumstances of the crucifixion had been embarrassing, for example, the behaviour of the disciples:

- One of them, Judas, betrayed Jesus. This was embarrassing for people, who thought faithfulness and faith to be a way to life.
- Another disciple, Peter, had disowned him. It is hardly conceivable that this was invented; Peter was an important figure in Early Christianity in the time after Easter.
- Finally the remembrance was preserved, that all disciples took flight. Only some women were present at the cross and watched from a distance.

6 Conclusions

Now we have dealt with five terms of reconstruction that make it possible to make historical statements about Jesus. I summarize them as the following:

1. The age of the sources and indications of familiarity: The sources approach Jesus much more than other comparable sources in antiquity approach the historical events. Indications of familiarity certify that individual traditions have been formulated during the first generations by people who shared with Jesus the same life-world.
2. The plurality of sources and their potential independency: There are many potential independent traditions in at least six streams of traditions and even much more, if we take into regard the small units of oral tradition. What is recurrent in some of them is probably historical and authentic.
3. The continuity of traditions and the interests of the transmitters: The transmitters of the sayings of Jesus shared the lifestyle of Jesus and were interested in maintaining their radicalism, not to mitigate it by adaptation. There is a good chance that we have the sayings of Jesus preserved in his spirit.
4. The contingency of scattered data that fit together: This contingency is a hint at real history. Concerning Pilate, Herod Antipas and John the Baptist, we come across so many scattered data that fit perfectly together that we may be sure to encounter historical facts. A conclusion by analogy can state that we can exploit the Gospels for historical data concerning Jesus. The Gospels are rooted in history.
5. The tendencies of the Jesus tradition and elements preserved against the grain: The Jesus tradition includes quotes of a lot of elements that must have been embarrassing for the first Christians contradicting their convictions. This is the basis for historical reconstruction.

Many of the arguments and examples I have given are derived from my own Jesus research. I want to demonstrate that it is possible to make Jesus research in a non-sensational way and even after 250 years of intensive research we can discover new things; however, just because I took examples from my own research, I want to underline: Colleagues will not agree with all, but they will agree that surely, Jesus lived. That is why it is meaningful to develop hypotheses about him and to refute them. Nearly all of them will also agree that it is possible to draw some outlines of his message and activities – also beyond the fact that he lived.

In the end I try to join together the different fragments of what I recognize as

historical and try to draw a short sketch of Jesus. What I am saying is not all what could be said on the historical Jesus.

We have seen that some elements preserved against the grain are authentic, those elements that have been embarrassing for the Early Christians. Here we touch real history behind the stories. The baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his activity and the crucifixion at the end, therefore, are cornerstones for every reconstruction of Jesus' life. All other traditions just fit in between these two facts.

Authentic is further on, what in many potentially independent traditions can be interpreted as coherent – that is all that is recurrent in many Jesus traditions, as for example, the preaching of God's kingdom. This preaching perfectly fits the fact that Jesus started as an adherent of the Baptist. Also, the Baptist announced the near end of the world and he was not alone in expecting it.

What is historical should be understood as the result of the Jewish history in those times, above all, if there are some new accents or ideas that hint to an outstanding person and can better be derived from such a person. In those times, many expected God's kingdom, but only Jesus was convinced that he already had entered this coming kingdom. It was coming with him and through him. We find no real analogy with other Jewish prophets concerning this realized eschatology. It is very original and Jesus differs in this regard from the Baptist. He must have experienced a development since the days when he was his disciple. The Baptist had expected the near final judgement, but the world continued to exist. Jesus has probably interpreted this positively: If God allows his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust, he demonstrates his mercy. He gives human beings a chance, even his enemies, and therefore should we love our enemies as God loves the unjust. God is not coming immediately with an axe to cut down the trees without fruits (Luke 13:6–9).

This is in line with the parables speaking of the mercy of God or the growing seed; the same way God's kingdom is already growing now. Also, these parables are witnessed in many streams of traditions. They are new in the history of Jewish literature – especially parables, which did not interpret scripture but had a message in their own right.

Speaking in parables and acting in symbols go with one another. Jesus spread his message with symbolic actions such as eating with publicans and sinners, the election of the twelve as a sign for the restoration of Israel, or the cleansing of the temple as a sign that the present temple must be renewed – either reformed or replaced. Also, this speaking and acting in parables is better understood if we understand it in the horizon of the eschatological coming of God's kingdom.

The expectation that soon will happen a reversal of the whole world and history, explains the end of Jesus: Jesus himself was convinced that he was the fulfilment of prophecy – more than the other prophets and more than John the Baptist. He brought God's kingdom and God's presence. The Jewish people in those times interpreted him in messianic categories. They expected that he will be the Messiah, the new king of Israel. That is why the Romans executed him. Jesus was executed as a messianic pretender, because he had instigated a politically dangerous movement that expected the great reversal – and in the course of this reversal, of course, also the disappearance of the Romans.

The disciples expected and hoped that now with Jesus God's kingdom comes; the crucifixion frustrated their hopes, but after his death, they encountered him in visions which gave them the confidence that he is alive. Such visions sometimes happen. What is unusual is that more than one person had such visions. It is above all unusual that they had such visions at the same time. Once the disciples had believed: "Blessed are the poor in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). Now they did not see God, but they saw Jesus instead of God. This was the origin of their faith that he was more than a human being and that he was to be placed at the right hand of God. God's rule, which should come with him, had indeed already started in heaven.

A historian never says: This happens in this or that way. He prefers to say: The preserved Jesus traditions can much better be explained as a product of Jewish history than as a product of Early Christian fantasy. A historical figure has provoked these traditions. All that is told of this figure is enveloped in fiction and myth. For the people who gave witness to him did not only say: Jesus lived. That is the Jesus of past times. They would like to say that he was the centre of the great story between God and men and that he is crucial for all human beings in present and future times. Surely, he lived, but even more-so: he is living now in the hearts of many people.

A historian, who is asked, whether that, which is maintained of the Jesus tradition, is historical and authentic, is justified to say: at least at the side that is turned to me, as far as I can judge, it is often historical. But many will see much more and what they see is perhaps more important than that what a historian can see.