Jesus of Nazareth
Jesus of Nazareth

What He Wanted,
Who He Was

Translated by
Linda M. Maloney
To the memory of
Father Heinrich Bacht, SJ
. . . ponder daily over death and life,
if thou mightest find it,
and let thy bearing be joyous
and go not out of the world
without first having publicly testified
thy love and reverence
for the Author of Christianity.

—Matthias Claudius, Letter “To my son Johannes,” 1799
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Preface

There are innumerable books about Jesus. The reason is obvious: we can never finish with him, and every age must encounter him anew. Some of the many Jesus books are very good. Some are very bad. The bad ones are bad because they are far from understanding that the real “historical Jesus” cannot be grasped independently of faith in him. Which faith? That of the first witnesses and those who handed on the story, those who had to describe “accurately” or, better, “faithfully to the person” what had encountered them in Jesus.

Historical criticism is indispensable to research on Jesus. It illuminates the world in which Jesus lived, and still more, it works out the relationships among the sources of the gospels, illuminates the various layers of tradition, and thus sharpens our perception of what the evangelists wanted to say about Jesus in their “final text.” Historical criticism inquires persistently about what happened, and thus it demonstrates that Christianity is about real history and not about myths or ideologies. But when biblical critics measure Jesus only by their own prior understanding, deciding ahead of time what is “historically possible” and what is “historically impossible,” they exceed their own limitations.

Nowadays Jesus is far too often made to be merely a prophet, a gifted charismatic, a radical social revolutionary, a successful healer, a benevolent social worker, or even only a pious rabbi. The real claim of what is shown and expressed in Jesus is set aside, and the inevitable consequence is the assertion that the early Christian communities “deified” him.

The present book refuses to join in such reductionism, which goes contrary to the perceptions of the first witnesses and those who handed on the tradition. Its method is altogether historical and critical—historical research must always be critical—but at the same time it agrees with Karl Barth’s statement in his commentary on Romans: “For me, historical criticism has to be more critical!”
This book intends to be serious about the fact that Jesus was a Jew and lived entirely in and out of Israel’s faith experiences, but at the same time he brought those experiences to their goal and fulfillment. Those who want to really understand Jesus and what he was cannot avoid allowing themselves to be drawn into this faith.

I desire nothing more than that this book will help many people today to approach the real Jesus by making critical distinctions and yet at the same time remaining open and full of trust.

Gerhard Lohfink
Bad Tölz
September 2011
Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to the memory of Father Heinrich Bacht, SJ (1910–1986), in gratitude. He was professor of fundamental theology at the St. Georgen College of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt, and it was he who showed me the path to priesthood.

As I was writing this book there were four books on my desk that I repeatedly consulted: Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), and Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Jesus und das Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), as well as the two-volume book on Jesus by Pope Benedict XVI. Those four books were both an aid and a great joy to me.

My own book would not have come into being without the urging of my student and friend, Professor Dr. Marius Reiser. I thank him for many suggestions. Originally we intended a common project, but it may be as well that two different books came of it. They shed light on the same subject from different points of view. Marius Reiser’s book is titled *Der unbequeme Jesus* [*The Inconvenient Jesus*] and was published by the Neukirchener Verlag in 2011.

Heartfelt thanks for the English-language edition are due to my former doctoral student, the Rev. Dr. Linda Maloney. She contributed all her biblical scholarship skills and personal application to the translation. Without her and Mr. Hans Christoffersen, academic publisher of Liturgical Press, this English edition would never have seen the light of day.

I owe special thanks to my brother Norbert, professor emeritus of Old Testament at St. Georgen. He accompanied this book with his advice from the outset and constantly encouraged me. He continues to make Psalm 133 a reality.

Finally, my gratitude goes to Hans Pachner, faithful in fetching books for me, and to Hans Braun, my careful copyreader, as well as to my
patient housemates Barbara Stadler and Manfred Lazar—and with these four also the great crowd of companions on the way in the Katholische Integrierte Gemeinde. I do not know how I could live without their friendship and their faith.

Gerhard Lohfink
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACW</td>
<td>Ancient Christian Writers</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADPV</td>
<td>Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins</td>
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<td>AnBib</td>
<td>Analecta biblica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ant.</td>
<td>Flavius Josephus, <em>Antiquities of the Jews</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ANTZ</td>
<td>Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte</td>
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<td>BDS</td>
<td>Bonner dogmatische Studien</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bell.</td>
<td>Flavius Josephus, <em>The Jewish War</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>BET</td>
<td>Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie</td>
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<tr>
<td>BibS(N)</td>
<td>Biblische Studien (Neukirchen, 1951–)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BThS</td>
<td>Biblisch-theologische Studien</td>
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<td>BTZ</td>
<td>Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift</td>
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<tr>
<td>BZ</td>
<td>Biblische Zeitschrift</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTM.PT</td>
<td>Calwer theologische Monographien, Reihe C., Praktische Theologie und Missionswissenschaft</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eccl. Hist.</td>
<td>Eusebius, <em>Ecclesiastical History</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>EKK</td>
<td>Evangelisch-Katolischer Kommentar</td>
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<tr>
<td>EuA</td>
<td><em>Erbe und Auftrag</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Forschung zur Bibel</td>
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<tr>
<td>GTB</td>
<td>Gütersloher Taschenbücher Siebenstern</td>
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<tr>
<td>HNT</td>
<td>Handbuch zum Neuen Testament</td>
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<td>HTKAT</td>
<td>Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament</td>
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Jesus of Nazareth

HTKNT Herders theolorischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
HTR Harvard Theological Review
JSHRZ Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit
KEK Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
LD Lectio divina
LThK Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche
NBL Neues Bibellexikon
NRSV New Revised Standard Version
NSKAT Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar, Altes Testament
NTS New Testament Studies
ÖTK Ökumenischer Taschenbuch-Kommentar
POxy Oxyrhynchus Papyri
QD Quaestiones disputatae
RST Regensburger Studien zur Theologie
SANT Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
SBAB Stuttgarter biblische Aufsatzbände
SBS Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
SBT Studies in Biblical Theology
TGl Theologie und Glaube
TQ Theologische Quartalschrift
TTZ Trierer theologische Zeitschrift
UTB Uni-Taschenbuchkommentar
WMANT Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZNW Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZST Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie
ZTK Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche
Chapter 1

The So-Called Historical Jesus

Why is it that new books on the historical Jesus appear almost every year? Why aren’t the gospels enough for Christians? It must have something to do with the curiosity of Western people and their eagerness to know “the facts.” They want to know how it really happened. They want to illuminate the past to the last detail. They stand in line to see an exhibit that shows them the world of the pharaohs, the Celts, or the medieval court. When they finally get into the gallery they believe that they have reached the original: they see documented before their eyes the time and the people that are the subject of the exhibit.

They are looking for the same kind of access to Jesus in the gospels, and yet the gospels are closed to their thirst for knowledge. They are silent about many details of Jesus’ life that would be of particular interest to the fact-hungry Jesus-seekers. And so they reach for the newest Jesus book . . .

But there is something else as well: since the time of the Enlightenment the gospels have been dissected as no other text of the world’s literature has been. The people of the Enlightenment regarded what they said as having been inflated by dogma. The true figure of Jesus was painted over with ever-more glowing colors and his contours exalted to the level of the divine. Therefore it was thought necessary to remove the over-paintings and finally reveal the real Jesus, who would then emerge in his true colors and outlines.
So here again—and especially here—we find the lust for facts. What can we really know about Jesus? Who was the “historical” Jesus? How much of his life can be reconstructed? Which of his sayings in the gospels are authentic? What are his “own words,” what are his “own original deeds”? Did Jesus and the apostles preach the same things, or did Jesus’ message about God become, after Easter, the apostles’ message about Jesus?

In and of itself it would be quite all right that the thirst for facts that has gripped the West since the Presocratics and the first Greek historians should extend to Jesus. We should, in fact, say that in the case of Jesus that curiosity is thoroughly justified. If it is true that in Jesus the eternal Word of God became flesh—entered radically into history—then Jesus must be open to all the techniques of historical research. Then he should certainly be the object of historical scholarship. Then it must be permissible to analyze all the texts about him, to probe them, to determine their genre, and to pursue the history of their traditions.

But the justified hunger for historical reconstruction has been associated for a long time with a radical critique of the gospels that seeks to discover the real Jesus not with the gospels but against them. In this very context there is constant talk about overpaintings and exaggerations of the person of Jesus by early Christian tradition. But this confuses two different things: what the gospel critics call dogmatic exaggerations are nothing other than “interpretations” of Jesus, and interpretation is not the same as exaggeration. Many Christians rightly reject such words as “exaggeration,” “overpainting,” “overdrawing,” “mythologization,” and “idolization.” They should not be defensive, however, against the word “interpretation.”

For the gospels must not be regarded as mere collections of “facts” about Jesus. They are not an assemblage of documents from a Jesus archive in the early Jerusalem community. Obviously the authors of the gospels had a multitude of traditions about Jesus at their disposal, but they used these traditions to interpret Jesus. They interpret his words, they interpret his deeds, they interpret his whole life. They interpret Jesus in every line, in every sentence.

May we take texts that are interpretation from beginning to end and filter them through the sieve of criticism in the hope that the “facts” will remain behind? May we—like people panning for gold—wash away the useless sand of the interpretations to get at the heavy gold of the facts? May we derive strata from narratives whose whole purpose is interpretation, in order to get at the “original”? In the end, after the removal of all
secondary layers, would we arrive at pure facts? The questionable nature of such an interpretive technique in reality is revealed by a simple question: where is the truth—in the facts or in their interpretation? Or, to use the image of the gold panner again: are the facts the gold, or is it the right interpretation of the facts?¹

**Fact and Interpretation**

What, after all, is a “fact”? The word is usually used with great confidence and without reflection, as if its meaning were obvious. But so-called facts are not that simple.

Of course the world is full of facts, and often we can speak of them as a matter of course. When, for example, an earthquake happens we can certainly call it a fact. But even such facts are already interpreted. The event of the earthquake is, of course, established by seismographs, its strength measured by the Richter scale, and the earthquake observers compare their measurements. But then geophysicists investigate the kind of quake it is, and distinguish between “collapse earthquakes” (when subterranean caves collapse), “volcanic earthquakes” (connected with volcanic eruptions), and, finally, “tectonic earthquakes” (when shifts take place within the earth’s crust). The “fact” of an earthquake is thus fairly clear. It can be described in straightforward terms. And yet even such a description already contains more than a fair amount of interpretation—correct interpretation, we may suppose.

But not all facts are on this level. What does it mean when there is something like an “earthquake” in politics?—when, for example, a social landslide occurs or a political scandal becomes public? What does it mean when a politician is toppled—and no one wants to take responsibility? What is the fact here? What really happened, and what were only sham maneuvers staged for the public? What was mere opinion making, and what was deliberate disinformation?

Political events require interpretation, and a great deal more interpretation than purely physical phenomena. What really happened must be painstakingly researched, analyzed, and interpreted. But the recovery of the course of events always involves interpretation from the very start. Beyond all these difficulties there is ultimately also the question: who is the authoritative interpreter? And which interpretation will triumph in the end? Hence the quandary: is there any such thing as pure fact when the real actors are people, with their desires, interests, and passions? Is
it not true that here every fact that appears is already bathed in interpretation from the outset, drenched in it through and through?

Jesus was apparently interpreted from the first moment of his appearance and in entirely different ways. There was the initially tentative but still believing interpretation of those who followed him. This culminated in the confession: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). Then there was the interpretation, quite ambivalent in many respects, by those who did not follow him but went out to see him, many of whom apparently thought he was the Baptist returned or one of the earlier prophets (Matt 16:14). And finally there was the aroused reaction of his opponents, who were sure that he was driving out demons with the aid of the head demon (Mark 3:22). Interpretations, then, from the outset: which was correct? It is unavoidable, at the beginning of this book, to delve more fully into the relationship between “fact” and “interpretation.”

The So-Called News

Let us begin with what appears to be the simplest kind of question: what is the nature of the facts communicated to us by the media? When a young person begins to read the newspaper seriously, or starts to gather information from news broadcasts, she or he may still believe that all the events in the world can be summarized in the daily news. Perhaps one might even be as naïve and innocent as Count Bobby, of whom it is said that one day he observed, quite astonished: “What a good thing it is that every day just enough happens in the world to fill a whole newspaper.” But one day we awake from our childish faith that the events of the world can be adequately summed up in the daily news. At some point every critical newspaper reader, radio listener, television viewer, or internet user realizes that the media can only relate a tiny section of what is really happening in the world.

The “news,” for example, that reaches newspaper readers in the United States or Germany, or those who are faithful followers of the nightly news is, from a purely geographical point of view, extremely limited. Lands like Burma or Burundi, Togo or Tanzania only appear occasionally in our media. What is presented to us as news from within our shores is in itself a profoundly limited selection. And what do we hear about our own country? We get what amounts to an excess of partisan quarrels and assessments of the social or economic situation, much of it in the form of statements prepared in cabinet departments, party headquarters,
or the offices of interest groups. Then comes the “cultural” sector, where nearly every segment reflects the subjective opinion of the correspondent carried to an extreme. After that we get sports, which in Germany means mostly soccer, in the United States football, basketball, baseball, and maybe hockey. Then there are the usual sensational stories that are to the media like spice in the stew: news of terrorist acts, murders, robberies, rapes, affairs, explosions, mine disasters, fires, weather crises, plane crashes. And finally there are those stories that always seem a little odd, on the model of “man bites dog.”

News programs of this sort are an unimaginably tiny and often subjective slice of reality. For what makes up the reality of world events is not first of all scurrilous doings, World Cup contests, accidents, and political quarrels, and not just movements in the social network and the economy.

Where do the real changes happen in the world?—the things that move peoples to the depth of their souls?—the things that petrify them or drive them forward?—that will incite this or that revolution or prevent it?—that destroy dreams or bestow new hope? Does any of that show up in the news? Can it be adequately shown?

A British computer scientist supposedly fed three hundred million so-called facts into a machine he programmed, nicely named “True Knowledge.” He wanted to find out which was the most boring day of the twentieth century. The computer found it: it was April 11, 1954. On that day, supposedly, nothing important happened: no famous person was born; no celebrity died; nothing exploded; no war broke out; no house collapsed.²

The way the media think is clearly revealed in this absurd computer game: an event has to be something that shrieks, stinks, or explodes. Incidentally, April 11, 1954, was a Palm Sunday. In case it might have been that on that day even a few thousand believers took the beginning of Holy Week and the entry of Jesus into his city so much into their hearts that their lives were somehow changed, then on that day a great deal happened, and it was very important indeed.

The So-Called Fact

So the question we have already hinted at finally comes to the fore: what is a historical fact, after all? We are all too ready to speak of facts, realities, true reality, actual events, undeniable facts. For a while now, politicians have been wont to say, “The fact is that...”
But what is a “fact”? How does something become a “fact”? Anyone who says “such-and-such is a fact” has already selected it from the endless stream of events, isolated it from the chaos of confused and interwoven sequences, sharply outlined it, and so already given it a conceptual label and interpretation. In other words: even the so-called pure fact, even the “naked reality” always arises out of an interpretive probe into reality.

Every “fact” has to be shaped into language and communicated (with paintings or films representing peripheral language phenomena). But to the extent that a “fact” becomes language it has already entered into a very particular horizon of understanding, into the broad field of preunderstanding. Interpretation has already begun one stage earlier. It starts with the reception of external sense impressions in our brain. Already, to a scarcely imaginable degree, there has been a process of selection, division, sorting, organizing, cataloging—and all this with the aid of models of experience that our brain has been constantly accumulating since we were embryos.

One Day in Capernaum

But so that I do not lose myself in a discussion of the theory of knowledge let me illustrate what I have said through the gospels—more precisely, through Mark 1:21-39. In this pericope, very close to the beginning of Mark’s gospel, we read the following:

They went to Capernaum, and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? You have come to destroy us. I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.
He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring villages, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. (Mark 1:21-39)³

We see immediately that this is a careful composition: everything takes place in Capernaum, and only in the last sentence does the event extend beyond that town.

It is not only the unity of place that is maintained throughout but the unity of time as well: the action begins on a Sabbath morning with the worship service in the synagogue. Jesus—still in the synagogue—heals a possessed person and then, with several disciples, goes to Peter’s house, where he heals Peter’s mother-in-law. On the Sabbath evening, as soon as it is permissible to carry sick people, a great crowd assembles outside the door of the house. Jesus heals many of them and then remains in Peter’s house for the night. Early in the morning he leaves the house and prays in a retired place. The composition thus extends from the morning of the Sabbath to the morning of the following day. The individual events are carefully connected, especially by the “immediately” (“just then,” “as soon as”) that is so typical of Mark.

There is also an internal unity in what happens during this one day: Jesus’ mighty deeds fill the whole of it. First he frees from possession, then from a feverish illness. First a man is healed, then a woman. In the evening the whole thing is expanded: now many are healed, some from possession and some from other illnesses.

Another motif that dominates the whole composition is Jesus’ authoritative “teaching.” The participants in the worship service are astounded at his way of interpreting Scripture. This authoritative attitude of Jesus is then linked directly to his power over demons. The people of Capernaum say, after the possessed man is healed: “What is this? A new teach-
Jesus of Nazareth

ing—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At the end, then, in the final verse of the composition, the combination of powerful teaching and mastery over demons appears again, now summarized as “proclaiming.”

But we should not look only at the structural lines of the composition. We must also appreciate the overall mood: Mark depicts a fully rounded day replete with holiness. It is certainly a day near the beginning of Jesus’ activity. It is an example of many other days. It can be no accident that it is a Sabbath, for that means it is a day on which creation, according to the biblical idea, arrives at its perfection.

Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility that within the time of Jesus’ public activity this one day, with all the events depicted, actually happened. That is certainly possible. But it is more probable that Mark here artistically distributed several pieces of tradition over a single day. He arranged disparate memories in such a way as to produce a full day’s happenings—including the night that followed. He describes a day when people and relationships are healed, find rest, and are restored to balance. In this way he placed pieces of tradition that were already available to him and that had been already interpreted in the telling within a still broader context of interpretation.

The Role of Liturgy

But the process of interpretation goes still further. The gospels, after all, are not displaced texts floating somewhere in the air. They are the church’s texts and their true “life situation” is the liturgy. There, they are celebrated as the word of God. There they are proclaimed as Gospel and authentically interpreted. In the Catholic Lectionary the Old Testament reading from Job 7:1-4, 6-7 is assigned to be read with the gospel on the Sunday when most of Mark 1:21-34 is proclaimed. There, Job speaks of the misery of human life. He says that life is like hard servitude, full of disappointment and toil. People spend it like day laborers who have to work all day in the heat and long for the shadows of evening. But there is no rest even at night. Job spends his nights as a sick man who tosses back and forth on his bed and wishes for morning because the night is endless. His nights and days are empty and without hope. Because his life is empty it has no weight. It swiftly disappears, and the thread of existence is cut off.

That is the content and especially the tone of the reading that is assigned to accompany the gospel of the “day in Capernaum.” Was Job
right? Of course he was. The torturous suffering he describes courses through the world and always has. So the liturgy creates a sharp contrast on this Sunday between the Old Testament reading and the gospel, and apparently that contrast was deliberately aimed at.

Job spoke of how dark, empty, and hopeless human days are. Mark, in the gospel, describes a full and fulfilled day that is complete in itself and is full of health, holiness, and salvation. But that creates a still more profound interpretive context. Now we are speaking not only about the power of Jesus’ preaching, and not only about his power over demons and sickness. Beyond that, we are speaking of his power over the world’s chaos.

It is true that Mark’s composition, viewed in itself, is not lacking in chaos. That is present throughout the day. It erupts in the man who begins to shout in the middle of the synagogue worship because he is being shaken by his demons. It appears in the illness of Peter’s mother-in-law. It shows itself in the many sick people and those plagued by the demons of society, the people who are brought to Jesus in the evening.

The chaos of the world, the chaos of society, this whole disorder and confusion is thus already present even in Mark’s composition. But through the liturgical composition—that is, through the church’s official interpretation—this motif now stands out in full force. Now, for the first time, we grasp the real profundity of the Markan text. But now we also grasp the extent of the salvation that is happening here. The world is, in fact, alienated from itself and without hope. But with Jesus the state of things comes back to plumb, people sink into rest, chaos is transformed, the demons of society to which individuals are helplessly surrendered are banished. The evening and the morning are no longer full of disappointment but are overflowing with messianic salvation.

This salvation that fills the emptiness and eliminates chaos arises precisely from the fact that Jesus, with his Gospel, has set loose in the world a history that overturns everything, one to whose service people can surrender themselves. This is no longer arduous service like that spoken of in Job’s lament but a service in freedom. Peter’s mother-in-law is healed because she is touched by Jesus, the one who fulfills all history, and she immediately stands up and serves this new thing. It is a magnificent composition that Mark has created here; it reflects the whole of Jesus’ activity. But in the light of the liturgy this composition emerges with a still greater depth of acuity.

It is probably clear by now what I am about here: the bits of tradition available to Mark had already interpreted events in the life of Jesus. Mark
then, most certainly, again interpreted Jesus and his actions with his composition of the “day at Capernaum.” The church’s liturgy then deepens this interpretive process still further: it places Jesus against the background of the Old Testament. Only then can we understand him fully.

So what about the correlation between “fact” and “interpretation”? Where are the pure facts in the composition of Mark 1:21-39, prior to the level of interpretation? And even if we could isolate the pure facts from the interpretations, would they be any kind of help to us at all? But above all: where is the truth in Mark’s composition? Is it to be found beyond the level of interpretation? Perhaps the following scenario can help us to get a little further.

A Thought Experiment

What if we imagine for a moment that the gospels had never been written, and that instead the first day of Jesus’ public activity had been filmed by a hidden camera and everything said in connection with his appearance had been recorded by a concealed microphone. Image and sound were then combined into a film that is presented to us today, uncut and without commentary—with the claim that it offers us pure fact and is absolutely authentic. What would we know in that case?

Well, something: in this way we would perceive an immense number of details that are entirely absent from Mark’s account, or only fragmentarily there. We would know how Peter’s house looked, outside and inside. We would know how Sabbath worship was conducted in Capernaum. We would see sick people getting up again and shrieking possessed people suddenly becoming quiet. We would finally have original examples of the Aramaic spoken in Galilee in the first century. Above all, we would then have words of Jesus that we could be absolutely sure are authentic. But would we understand them? We would have no evangelists—that was the assumption behind our scenario—to interpret them for us. We would lack the whole context of interpretation that the New Testament and the communities of the early church place at our disposal.

And as regards the figure of Jesus himself: what would we see? We would see a man of the Near East, or more precisely a Near Eastern Jew, and we would learn that he is called Yeshua. He would—probably to our profound horror—look quite different from the way we had imagined him. He would be neither the sovereign Christ of the Byzantine apses nor the fettered man of sorrows of Gothic art nor the Apollonian
The So-Called Historical Jesus

hero of the Renaissance. His Aramaic language would be comprehensible to only a few specialists. A lot of his gestures and postures would seem strange to us. We would sense that he lived in a different civilization and a different culture.

And yet: everything we would see would be important, exciting, even disturbing. We would know, in the end, many details that biblical scholars have been working to discover for a very long time. But would we, with all that, know what actually happened back then? Would we know more than what the gospels already tell us? Would we now really know with certainty that Jesus drove out demons “by the finger of God” and that his healings were signs of the reign of God now coming to pass (Luke 11:20)? Would we know, because now we could see the external events, that here, in this person, the Logos of God had become present entirely and forever? Let me emphasize: we would know nothing of what really matters about Jesus, his mission, his task, the mystery of his person.

To really experience anything of that we would have to be able to see the whole public activity of Jesus, be able to survey everything he did, not only on the first day. Above all, we would have to be aware of the claim that underlay his preaching and healing. We would have to be informed about the reactions of his audience, especially those he made his mortal enemies. Here already, then, the filmed documentation of only the first day of Jesus’ public activity would fall short. We would need a documentation of the whole period of his public work.

Fine; let’s make that part of our scenario. We document on film everything that happened from the time Jesus left his parents’ house until he was laid in his tomb—not only what happened to Jesus himself, but also among his friends and foes. That would mean that a lot of films would have to be running on a lot of screens alongside one another—and for about a year and a half. It would be an enormous burden of work just to watch it! We would not be able to hold out.

But suppose we did. Then the question would still remain: did this mega-documentation really help us? Could we, for example, even remotely grasp Jesus’ claim without knowing the Old Testament? Can Jesus be understood without the Torah and the prophets, without Israel’s experiences and hopes? Can Israel’s hopes be understood outside the history of the faith of that people? And can Jesus be understood if we look at his life without having as our perspective the fact that here the history that has taken place between God and Israel has reached its last and decisive phase? But how can this dimension of the event be made
visible by merely piling up facts, by a simple summary of external events? Here every medium that only shows us a series of external facts will fail us.

**Documentary Films**

Let us remain for a moment with the case of film, because we can learn a great deal from it. Every documentary filmmaker who understands her or his art would make a radical and decisive selection from the enormous quantity of filmed material we would have produced in our scenario and bring that selection into a carefully constructed composition—and so interpret it already. Perhaps she would interrupt the chronological sequence with flashbacks. Perhaps he would even build in visual allusions to the Old Testament to clarify events. In any case we can be sure that she would constantly introduce pieces of film that create connections by means of “quotations.” In addition, he would hint at things in the background and give symbolic dimensions to individual events.

In other words: every good filmmaker would choose only a little from the overflowing mass of material available, bring that little into a coherent context, and create a great many semantic relationships between the individual parts of the film, and would do exactly the same with the available sound material. And in this way the filmmaker would interpret the whole event, perhaps without inserting a single word of commentary from anyone off screen or providing a single interpretive title. In any case, if no interpretation is given to an external event it cannot tell us anything.

And now comes the crucial question: did the authors of the gospels do anything different? Did they not cut, recombine, quote, allude, comment, interpret? Of course they did! And they did so using all the tools of a true narrative craft, because they knew that without interpretation there can be no understanding. Even the most accurate and strictly factual depiction of history cannot do without constant interpretation.

On 25 February 2004 a highly honored film on Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and his attempt to assassinate Hitler was shown on German television. A commentator in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote of this film:

> This is the most accurate film about Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg’s assassination attempt that has yet been produced, and it is the least complete. Those who view it this evening on television can
rly on the correctness of the scenery, the uniforms, and the chronology. The director, Jo Baier, not only reproduced exactly the events of 20 July already researched by the Gestapo and found in their detailed files. He has precisely reconstructed Hitler’s barrack and the whole of the Führer’s headquarters in the East Prussian swamps, down to the mosquitoes. We cannot say in the strict sense that Baier has forgotten anything. . . . Anyone who wants to know what a German officer named Stauffenberg did throughout the day of 20 July 1944 will be well served here.

But anyone who wants to know what the last day in the life of Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg meant will feel lost. This has to do with the fact that this film is remarkably lacking in any kind of larger meaning. We could even say that it is a narrative without a context, a historical film with no history in it—and one that de-dramatizes history in the same remarkable way that dramas nowadays are de-historicized. We learn nothing of who Stauffenberg was or even who he might have been.  

This is the problem in a nutshell. To use another image: bare “facts” swirl chaotically through the universe in their billions. If no one organizes or interprets them they remain garbage, pure informational garbage. This informational trash has nothing to do with “history,” not in the least. The so-called fact is a prior level, a partial element, but it is not yet history. Thousands of facts, in and of themselves, are not history. History is interpreted event. Historical knowledge organizes and interprets the infinite chaos of facts.

The Interpretive Community

But who does this work of interpretation—interpreting the chaotic factual material that pours out at us every day and every year? Of course it seems obvious to say that this is the work of individual historians, specialists in history, who search the archives, seek out contemporary witnesses, gather material, and then one day produce a book in which they have placed the gathered facts in a larger context, shed light on them from various sides, and so narrated a piece of history.

Oh, if only it were so simple! In reality, individual historians do not work alone. Alone, they are nearly helpless. They presuppose the work of many others; they examine a great number of prior works that have already been produced by others. They have to depend on the statements and interpretations of earlier historians. All by themselves they could
never get an overview of the incalculable quantity of factual material, let alone organize it or interpret it. Besides, the documents the historian finds in the archives are for the most part already interpretations from the view and to the purpose of the witnesses of the time.

Thus, as with all serious research, there is something like a research community of historians. We need only think of the many dictionaries and reference works every historian has in her or his library. To put it more bluntly: there is something like an interpretive community of historians. Obviously, in this interpretive community as in all the scholarly professions, outsiders, contrary thinkers, oddballs, and blockheads try to make themselves heard. They too are necessary.

And of course there are struggles between groups, extreme positions, battles over positions, and quotation cartels, that is, groups of scholars who quote each other but persistently keep silence about the results of other groups’ research. But above all, there is endless combat. That is inevitable in every serious field of research.

But despite the never-ending battle among historians, they form something like an interpretive community that, up to a point, even creates consensus. Otherwise the mainstream of historical research and the great scholarly standard works that are used throughout the world would be completely unthinkable.

So what is being called “interpretation” in this chapter does not fall from heaven and cannot be accomplished by lone individuals. “Interpretation” presupposes a community of interpretation. “Interpretation” presumes communication between people. “Interpretation,” finally, in sociological terms, assumes a group that wants to secure its historical identity. And above all, “interpretation” presumes a “cultural memory” within that larger group.

The People of God as Interpretive Community

Everything said so far about historical scholarship is, of course, true also of theology. Here the larger group that makes historical interpretation possible is the people of God. They were a narrative community from the very beginning. They told how God acted among them in ever new ways. And as a narrative community the people of God became a community of interpretation, a community that again and again renewed and purified its memory.

All that, incidentally, is true not only of the past. The church is still an interpretive community today. It is vital for it to look back at its own
past, to examine it critically, and to try to understand the present on the basis of this critical retrospect. Only in that way can it take the next step into the future. At present the church, after causing infinite suffering to the Jews over centuries with its theology of Israel, has finally come to the point of revising its relationship with Judaism. This revision will profoundly change the church’s life.

So what has been said in sketchy fashion about every kind of secular historical interpretation is true above all of interpretation in faith: faithful interpretation of history presumes the people of God as the interpretive community. It is not only about perceiving the church’s own guilt but also about recognizing the deeds of God performed in his people and for the world through his people. Such perception and narration is impossible without an interpretive grasp grounded in faith. It is only possible when believers come together in believing communities, in the church.

But is there not widespread unease at this point, at least? Should not objections be heard? Interpretive understanding, interpretive recognition, interpretive perception, interpretation and more interpretation—is it not a fact that interpretation can also go horribly wrong? Is interpretation not something vague, subjective, irrational, arbitrary, more conjecture than knowledge? The objection is plausible, but it does not do justice to the phenomenon of interpretation because the interpretation of world and history is a fundamental process without which human beings cannot grasp reality at all.

There can be no perception of reality without an interpretive model. More than that: when people open their mouths and do not just put out animalistic sounds such as groaning and growling but use concepts, they are already interpreting their reality. Every language presumes an overarching interpretation of the world and is itself such an interpretation. Those who assign interpretation to the realm of the arbitrary call into question every field of scholarship, including the natural sciences. Still more, they question the value of every human discourse, because whenever we speak and construct sentences we are interpreting the reality that surrounds us.

The same is true of Jesus of Nazareth, and of him above all. He is unthinkable without Israel, the people of God, in whose tradition he lived, and he can therefore be adequately understood only in faith and out of the believing memory of the people of God. An understanding of Jesus demands the foundation that is Israel, that is the church. If we do not hold to the church’s interpretive tradition and seek its genuine realm
of experience again and again, then sooner or later the image of Jesus will disintegrate before us. Interpretation of him will become a matter of taste or at least be determined by the momentary horizon of the interpreter. We see this clearly in the many images of Jesus produced in the last several decades, each according to a shifting fashion. They show very little of the Jesus of the gospels but a great deal of the spirit of those who produce them.

So we see Jesus as an opium for the soul and as a political revolutionary. Here he is as the archetype of the unconscious, there a pop star. He appears as the first feminist and as the faithful advocate of bourgeois morality. Jesus is used by those who want to see nothing change in the church, and he is used as a weapon against the church. He is instrumentalized over and over again to confirm people’s own desires and dreams. At present he must above all stand for the legitimation of universal tolerance, which is no longer interested in truth and therefore threatens to slide off into arbitrariness. For example:

The Parable of the Ten Young Women

For many centuries the interpretation of the parable of the ten young women in Matthew 25:1-13 was obvious to Christians: these virgins are supposed to go out to meet the bridegroom and adorn the marriage feast with their lamps. The wise among them had equipped themselves with surplus oil for their lamps, and in their prudence they had acted quite reasonably. One should imitate them. The foolish, on the other hand, fell short of what they were supposed to do. They had not prepared themselves in advance. They had not understood what was at stake. Therefore, they were still looking for oil when the feast was already beginning. In the end they were left standing outside the door.

Today the earlier church’s view of the parable has been utterly reversed by many interpreters and preachers: the foolish young women for whom the door of the house remained closed embody people who are stigmatized, suffering, and humiliated. All sympathy belongs to them. We identify with them. The wise, on the other hand, have become offensive. Why didn’t they share their oil?

In one interpretation of the parable that came to my hands some time ago8 the “I do not know you” spoken by the bridegroom to the foolish virgins is seen as a “wounding reaction” and a “Darwinist mechanism of selection.” And the wise young women in the parable, who could not give away their oil because otherwise the messianic feast of the reign of
God would lose its brilliance, are demeaned as unjust, lacking in solidarity, and egoistic about their own salvation. Still more, the concern of the wise for the festival of the reign of God is declared to be “concealed violence” against those who did not prepare themselves for the feast. In other words, those who went out to meet the bridegroom acted inappropriately toward those who were unprepared.

That shears the point off of Jesus’ parable and perverts the whole thing. In the parable of the ten young women the issue is not one of solidarity, readiness to help, or tolerance, but something quite different: the neglected *kairos*, the hour not seized.

Church history shows how often Christians have failed to recognize their hour. Then a door closed and did not open again so quickly. Jesus had exactly the same experience: the majority of the people of God in his time did not recognize the crucial hour of God’s action. The consequences were horrible. Zealots and fanatics shaped the program for the next decades in Jewish history. Jerusalem was destroyed. It was a historical moment not grasped, one that would have demanded wisdom and the highest degree of readiness from the people of God of that time!

Should Jesus not have spoken of such a danger of failing in his own objective? Should he not have warned against it? The fact that aid and tolerance are important does not exclude the reality that there is a judgment, one that we create for ourselves. Those who are called to follow Jesus cannot remain behind for the sake of others who do not want to go with them. They must go out—precisely so that the new ingathering under the reign of God may come to pass in the world.

There are numerous texts in the gospels that signal a parting of the ways. They have been off-putting to a whole generation of churchgoers and reveal the degree to which many theologians have forgotten the church—or else they unlock what is crucially Christian and call people to discipleship anew. One such text is this parable about the foolish and wise young women. It is like a sharp sword. No one can understand this parable unless she or he thinks of sin in terms of the history of the people of God, its crises, dangers, and decisions.

Romano Guardini once asked, in one of his university sermons: What does that mean, exactly—looking at Jesus? How can I see him? How can I encounter him? And Guardini continues: oddly enough, here we find repeated in almost the same way what was true of the religions’ search for the hidden God: just as there have been many images of God, so also there are many images of Jesus. And as people have sought to take control of God, so also they try to take control of Jesus.9
Therefore, says Guardini, today especially the question becomes as urgent as it can possibly be: who can protect Jesus from us? Who will keep him free of the cunning and violence of our own ego, which does everything to avoid really following Jesus? His answer: the encounter with Jesus must not be left to subjective religious experience; “rather, there is a place assigned for it that is built correctly, in which he can be seen rightly and listened to, and that is the church.”

This is the crucial point. We need only to add that the “place” that is the church that protects Jesus from our own interests is not something that has been prepared for him after the fact; it surrounds him from the outset. It is around him as the space belonging to the people of God, into which Jesus was born and in which he grew up, in which one day he followed the Baptist to the Jordan to be baptized. Jesus comes out of Israel, and without the traditions of Israel he is unthinkable and cannot be understood.

But the place of the people of God, namely, the newly gathered, eschatological people of God, also surrounds what Christians have said about Jesus since Easter and Pentecost. The very first words of Jesus that were handed on, and the first accounts and stories that told what Jesus had done, were shaped within the “space” of the church. The Jesus tradition is grounded in the interpretive community that is “church.”

It could not be otherwise, for we have seen that there is no such thing as a pure fact. Every fact that is told is already interpretation. Without interpretation, no event in our world can be understood. And when we are talking about the history between God and the world—still more, when the subject is the culminating point of that history, the fidelity of Jesus to his mission even to death, which set in motion a history of freedom that overturns everything—how could such an event be grasped and told without interpretation? We could also say: how could it be grasped and understood without faith?

A Radical Process of Division

But at this very point another objection arises, and we dare not evade it: I quoted Romano Guardini’s question: who will protect Jesus from us? Who will preserve him from the “cunning . . . of our own ego,” which does everything to avoid really following Jesus? And his answer was: the encounter with Jesus must not be left to subjective religious experience; a place is appointed for Jesus, one that is built in such a way that he can be rightly seen and listened to—and that place is the church.
Lovely, and quite right! But is it so simple, “the church”? Have there not been some totally different interpretations of Jesus within the church itself, interpretations that were mutually exclusive? We only have to think of the great christological battles that led to the councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451).

But to review the lengthy history of christological interpretation carried out in the major councils of the ancient church would, in our context, take far too much time and be too complicated. Let me simplify things. Instead of looking at the great christological confrontations in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, let us look at the pictures of Jesus produced by the so-called infancy gospels.

In the “Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” for example, we read how the boy Jesus is playing at the ford of a brook; he diverts the flowing water into small pools and then, by his mere word, makes the muddy brew “clean.” Jesus is practicing, so to speak, for his later activity. The son of a scribe is standing near; he takes a branch and lets the water Jesus had gathered flow out again. How does little Jesus react?

> When Jesus saw what he had done he was enraged and said to him: “You insolent, godless dunderhead, what harm did the pools and the water do to you? See, now you also shall wither like a tree and shall bear neither leaves nor fruit.” And immediately that lad withered up completely; and Jesus departed and went into Joseph’s house. But the parents of him that was withered took him away, bewailing his youth, and brought him to Joseph and reproached him: “What a child you have, who does such things.” (2.2-3)

This writing, which originated in the second century CE, goes on in the same vein. Not only does it lack narrative skill and good taste, its Christology is also pathetic. A miracle child does whatever comes to mind and so shows himself to be a child of God.

There can be no question but that this gospel has its own image of Jesus, and a pretty miserable one. No doubt it was written with good intentions. It wanted to illustrate Jesus’ divinity, his wisdom and miraculous power. As a result, it circulated widely in the ancient church. The Greek original was translated into Latin, Syriac, Georgian, Ethiopic, and Church Slavonic. Apparently it was favorite reading for many Christians, or people liked to tell the legends collected in it.

And this was only one part of the much larger production of gospels and sayings of the Lord. We have a great number of other gospels and revelatory writings, preserved entire or at least in fragments—for ex-
ample, a Gospel of Peter; a Gospel of Thomas; a Gospel of Philip; an Infancy Gospel of James; various acts of the apostles, such as the Acts of Andrew and the Acts of John; as well as an Apocalypse of Peter, an Apocalypse of Paul, an Apocalypse of Thomas, and many other apocalyptic writings.

Certainly some of these were abstruse compositions that promised secret knowledge and could be rapidly dismissed. Others contained Docetic and Gnostic heresies, against which the church was in any case struggling to defend itself. But many of these writings certainly addressed the thoughts and feelings of the Christians of the time, especially their religious curiosity. Only against the background of all these so-called apocrypha can we discern the true quality of the New Testament, and above all the power of discernment exercised by those who created it. They had an inerrant instinct for the authentic Jesus tradition going back to the apostles.

This is the crucial point: the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and similar creations may have been widely read and popular in the ancient church; they may even have borne the names of apostles; but they were not acknowledged as apostolic writings. And that means that they were not accepted into the canon of the New Testament. The theological significance of that nonacceptance should not be underestimated. In principle, what happened here was a radical process of division—altogether comparable to the process of division that was taking place in the great christological discourses of the first councils.

This immense process of considering and choosing, of distinction and division, but above all the deliberate selection and assembly of the writings ultimately chosen as the canon of the New Testament was an “ecclesial” process. We could even call it “authorial activity,” because the result was the composition, the authoring, of the one book that is the New Testament, which is more than a bundle of randomly associated writings.¹¹

Obviously the authors of this process were concrete persons, often even clergy or others commissioned by the church in some fashion. But they were supported by all those among the people of God who believed with their whole being and who for that very reason possessed the gift of discernment. Without the faith instinct of the many, without the sensus fidelium, the process of coming-to-be of the New Testament as the final, concluding book of the Bible would have been impossible. What would have happened without this ultimate critical process of discernment is evident in the apocrypha, which over long stretches are bizarre, confused,
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and unhistorical. A constant rereading of the immense apocryphal Jesus literature from the ancient church is urgently needed, because only that can show us how unique and precious are the gospels of the New Testament canon.

Faith as Recognition

What does all that mean for a book about Jesus? It shows that for a scholar who works theologically it cannot be a question of reconstructing a “historical Jesus” against the New Testament and its interpretation of the figure of Jesus. Any theologian who does that exalts herself or himself above the first witnesses and the church and thus abandons any chance of understanding Jesus.

Of course that does not mean that no scholar who works purely in the history of religions may study Jesus. Nor does it mean that such a scholar could not say a great deal about Jesus that is illuminating. But if a scholar in the field of the history of religion uses her or his methods cleanly, it will be clear at some point that she or he has reached a limit. That limit, that boundary, runs precisely where the interpretation of Jesus in faith begins. Why?

Faith always includes knowledge; it includes recognition. Certainly this is not the kind of knowledge or recognition that can make the thing it considers an “object,” standing over against it in distanced fashion and analyzing it impartially. In the natural sciences that kind of knowledge is fundamental and indeed indispensable. But there is another kind of human knowledge that occurs only in personal encounter. It responds to the other, surrenders itself to the other, and adopts the other’s view of reality. In theology this kind of knowledge is called “faith.”

Faith is true knowledge, true recognition, but a recognition of a different kind from that which analyzes, that is, literally, “dissolves.” Encountering another as a person definitely does not mean “dissolving” that person, taking him or her apart psychologically and thus seizing power over the other, but seeing the other in her or his difference, even strangeness. Whoever wants to truly recognize another as a person must expect to encounter the unexpected and be led into a new world of which one previously had no idea—a world whose strangeness fascinates but also frightens.

The student of religions who uses refined methods and so approaches Jesus “critically” will at some time arrive at a point at which she or he recognizes “critically” that one must abandon the usual standards of
criticism and surrender to the different nature of this so very different person in order to do him justice.

Precisely here lies the point, or the boundary, where historical criticism also arrives by itself, where it must surrender its normal standards. It is only a very limited sector within the possibilities of human knowledge. The most important things in human life, such as affection, love, fidelity, and devotion, are based on a different kind of knowledge. As soon as historical criticism arrives at this boundary and honestly admits it, it points beyond itself. And that is, in fact, its greatest and loveliest possibility. It is precisely at this point that it is most appropriate.

So a purely historical approach to Jesus, or one undertaken entirely in terms of the study of religions, is possible. But it has its limitations. This book gratefully makes use of the primarily historical studies of many biblical scholars. Beyond that, it has not the least hesitation in critically reconstructing the original meaning of Jesus’ words and parables. A good deal of this book will be reconstruction. But I am convinced that in doing so I have no need to proceed against the knowledge of Jesus that belonged to the first witnesses or against the faith in Christ of the early communities.

Tensions within the Jesus Tradition

I am certainly aware that the theologians of the early church brought the Jesus tradition up to date and interpreted it in terms of their own historical situation. I am also aware, of course, that the gospels (like the traditions that preceded them) spoke of Jesus from very different perspectives. But in doing so they were not falsifying Jesus; they were formulating the unfathomable mystery of his life in deeper and deeper ways. It is, in fact, just this fruitful tension between the oldest layers of interpretation in the gospel tradition and newer layers that were added later that makes it possible for us really to understand Jesus.

To mention another example besides the interpretation of the “day in Capernaum,” we find in John’s gospel, clearly the latest of the four, a passage in which Jesus says to Philip, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (John 14:9-10). Jesus certainly never talked like that. This is meditative reflection on a claim that is present in Jesus constantly and wherever anything is said about him, though in other rhetorical genres and forms of discourse, but
much more reservedly. And yet the language of the Johannine Jesus touches precisely what Jesus was. The two levels of tradition, the Synoptic and the Johannine, must not be set off against one another. We must not make the oldest interpretation a monopoly, because it is only the whole body of layers of interpretation that, in their unity, bring out the picture of the real Jesus.

In this book the weight will certainly lie on the oldest texts, that is, the oldest layers of meaning available to us. I will not explicate the Christology of the Gospel of John, but I will attempt to extract Jesus’ claim and (to a degree) his self-understanding from the earliest possible texts. But this is not done against later Christologies; it is done with them and under their guidance. I am writing not as a student of religions but as a theologian. Nor am I putting up an “iron curtain” with watchtowers and barbed wire between words of Jesus that are certainly authentic and others whose authenticity cannot be demonstrated with the same assurance. Such drawing of boundaries, which is carried out among biblical scholars with an immense expenditure of intelligence and acuity, have a little whiff of silliness. Anyone who has thought about the oscillation between “fact and interpretation” can understand why in this book I will not constantly ask, to the point of exhaustion, whether Jesus really uttered a particular saying in precisely this form.

Pope Benedict XVI once summarized my concerns in this first chapter as follows: The Jesus of the gospels is “the only real historical Jesus.” 12