

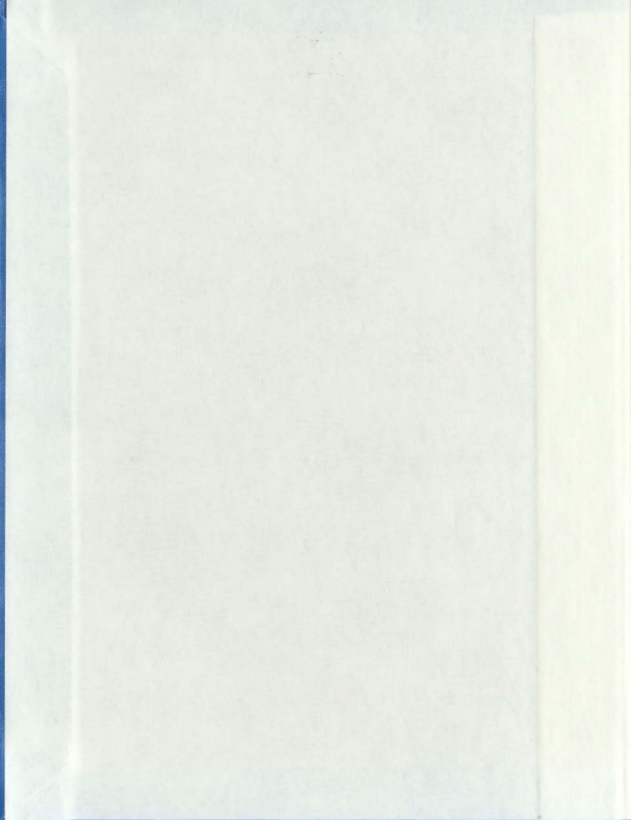
JON SOBRINO AND THE QUEST OF THE
HISTORICAL JESUS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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Canada

Jon Sobrino and the Quest of the Historical Jesus

by

David Stanley Williams

Thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the work of Jon Sobrino, one of the better known Liberation theologians alive today. Sobrino is especially well known for his writings on Christology. The starting point for Sobrino's Christology is the historical Jesus. Intent on presenting a Jesus who can relate to the poor and oppressed today, Sobrino has emphasized certain key characteristics and features of the life of Jesus that best exemplify a liberation perspective. He contends, for example, that the historical Jesus experienced conflict and opposition in Galilee and was forced to re-evaluate his mission and ministry. Through this "crisis," Sobrino says, the historical Jesus exemplified a faith lived out amidst conflict. For those in Latin America, the faith of the historical Jesus therefore becomes the archetypal model of faith in action. As Sobrino's Christology is based on the historical Jesus, it is illuminating to evaluate Sobrino's work from the perspective of western biblical scholarship, which has been concerned with the "quest of the historical Jesus" for over two hundred years. This thesis explores how the historical Jesus functions in Sobrino's Christology and evaluates whether Sobrino is successful in avoiding the failures of previous quests of the historical Jesus.

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First, I wish to thank Dr. David Hawkin for his guidance in the field of Religious Studies since I was a second year undergraduate. His support and encouragement sparked within me the desire to pursue graduate work in Religious Studies and for this I am grateful. In terms of his role as a supervisor, I thank him for his direction and insight as he has helped me understand what the quest of the historical Jesus is really about.

For the financial support that I received throughout my two years in the program, I wish to thank the School of Graduate Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their faith, support and encouragement. To them this work is devoted.

It is to these people that I am indebted for making this work possible. I thank them very much.

INTRODUCTION

Jon Sobrino was born into a Spanish family in Barcelona, Spain, in 1938. He was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1956 and moved to El Salvador. Academic pursuits earned him a master's degree in Engineering Mechanics from St. Louis University as well as a doctorate in Theology from Hochschule Sankt Gerogen in Frankfurt in 1975.¹ Concerned with the situation of what he calls the "victims," the "crucified people" of history, Jon Sobrino writes profusely on liberation theology in hopes of creating a "new and authentically Latin American Christology."² In his first major work, *Christology at the Crossroads*, Sobrino says the starting point for his Christology is the historical Jesus. This thesis intends to focus on the historical Jesus in Sobrino's writings.

Historical Jesus scholarship has a long history dating back to the Enlightenment. Since H.S. Reimarus's (1694-1768) work, *The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples*, attempts have been made to decipher what can be known about the historical Jesus through historical-critical scholarship. Eventually, life-of-Jesus scholarship came to the realization that historical criticism in itself was not enough to uncover the historical Jesus; furthermore, scholars of the so-called "first quest" foundered in attempting to create "biographies" of Jesus. While the "first quest" was considered a failure, the

¹Donald E. Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino: Latin American Contributions to Contemporary Christology* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), p. 53.

²Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. xv.

“second quest” was also ineffective in that it attempted to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. Realizing that the units of the gospels were clearly not strung together in chronological order (this was demonstrated by form criticism) and had been passed on through oral tradition, the scholars of the “second quest” realized that the Gospels were theologically constructed. In attempting to find the historical Jesus, the questers sought to separate out the theology from the history. This pursuit, however, was likewise deemed a failure in that the figure of Jesus so created seemed both irrelevant and remote to the practical needs of Christian teaching.³ Though the lines between the “second quest” and “third quest” are often blurred, those who are lumped into being part of the “third quest” (for example, Borg, Horsley, Meier, Sanders etc.) attempted to correct the mistakes of the first two quests. Spanning three “quests”, historical Jesus research from Reimarus to present day questers such as Crossan and Sanders shines with creative insights, but is nonetheless plagued with failures.⁴

In Latin American liberation theology, the historical Jesus has become the central concept of Christology. Scholars such as Jon Sobrino, Segundo Galilea, Ignacio Ellacuría and Juan Luis Segundo have produced such christologies.⁵ In liberation theology interest in the historical Jesus takes a different approach from in the West. While much of the quest for the historical Jesus, particularly the “first quest”, was largely driven to establish objective data concerning the life of Jesus, liberation theology is not as

³Marcus J. Borg, “A Renaissance in Jesus Studies,” *Theology Today* (45, 1988), p. 280.

⁴Borg, “A Renaissance in Jesus Studies,” pp. 280-2. In an attempt to identify a rebirth in contemporary life-of-Jesus scholarship, Borg looks closely at the successes and failures of previous attempts to uncover the historical Jesus and compares them with present day Jesus scholarship.

⁵Carlos R. Piar, *Jesus and Liberation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 2.

interested in the facts, but rather, the relevance of the historical Jesus for today. For liberation theology, the historical Jesus is the centre and focal point for faith. Through a focus on the historical Jesus, liberation theology hopes to come to a new synthesis of faith and history.

While this thesis intends to evaluate Sobrino's presentation of the historical Jesus, it is important to note that Sobrino does not set out to be a modern day 'quester.' Liberation theologians spend a great deal of time dealing with the character and practice of liberation in the Latin American context and Sobrino is no exception. Liberation theology itself is not an historical Jesus study; however, Sobrino is well aware of the quest of the historical Jesus and the tools of modern day scholarship that permeate the quest such as the historical-critical method. While Sobrino may ultimately be doing something different from life-of-Jesus research, he nonetheless is heavily reliant on these tools in his presentation of the historical Jesus.

Of central importance to this thesis will be the role of historical-criticism within both life-of-Jesus research and Sobrino's liberation Christology. Piar points out that "if the historical Jesus, the untheologized Jesus, is going to serve as the basis for, or be the normative model of, what a liberative praxis consists of, then it is extremely important that this historical Jesus be recoverable."⁶ This method of recovery is historical-criticism. Liberation theology, while offering a systematic treatment of Christ, is still interested in historical concerns, for as Sobrino himself propounds: "If we could really not know anything about him, or only insignificant things, the claim to produce a Christology based

⁶Piar, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 54.

on the historical Jesus would be futile.”⁷ While it would be difficult to critique Sobrino’s writings solely from an historical-critical method, Sobrino’s focus on the historical Jesus as a building block on which he bases his Christology offers ample opportunity to evaluate his work with respect to historical-criticism.

Historical-criticism has been the primary methodology of the historical Jesus quests. While historical-criticism was initially challenged on the basis of only presenting “biographies” of Jesus and having no relevance for “faith,” understandings of historical-criticism evolved to a recognition that the historical process offered more than just “facts.”⁸ John Dominic Crossan best exemplifies why an historical-critical approach to Jesus is still of necessity: “Can there be faith without history? If faith is not in the discernible facts, but in the ultimate meanings of history, what sort of Christian faith could exist without historical reconstruction?”⁹ The question that arises from this discussion is whether Sobrino is faithful to historical-criticism in terms of his presentation of the historical Jesus? Or is Sobrino selective in his presentation of the historical Jesus in order to fit his own viewpoint?

This thesis proposes to evaluate Sobrino’s work on the historical Jesus by setting it in the context of historical Jesus scholarship. The first chapter of this thesis will explore the successes and failures of the quest of the historical Jesus. Specifically, attention will be given to the changing role of historical criticism throughout the quest. Furthermore, attention will be given to the on-going discussion as to the relationship

⁷Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, trans. by Paul Burns and Francis McDonah (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 60.

⁸R.S. Barbour, *Traditio-Historical Criticisms of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1972), pp. 44-47.

⁹John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), p. 1.

between theology and faith in life-of-Jesus research. Exploration of the quest of the historical Jesus will offer an avenue on which to evaluate Sobrino: is Sobrino successful in avoiding the pitfalls of the quests or does Sobrino make the mistakes that previous questers made?

Chapter two intends to focus on liberation theology. As Sobrino is a liberation theologian, it is necessary to carefully explore liberation theology in hopes of understanding the motive and direction behind his work. Furthermore, such topics as the role of the historical Jesus within liberation theology as well as the relationship between the quest for the historical and liberation theology will have a direct bearing on an evaluation of Sobrino's work. Through an exploration of the central themes of both the quest of the historical Jesus and liberation theology, a clear context is created on which to evaluate Sobrino's work.

Finally, chapter three will critically explore Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus. One of the most significant features of Sobrino's work is his contention that in and through his humanity, Jesus "failed" in his first mission and was therefore forced to abandon his ministry in the heart of Galilee. Jesus' life, Sobrino contends, can, in fact, be divided into two distinct stages marked by a "Galilean crisis." After his failure in Galilee, Jesus underwent a change in his faith and his notion of the Kingdom of God. This "Galilean crisis," as Sobrino calls it, is a permeating feature throughout his writings and could be the single most important thread by which Sobrino sews together his Christology. Because Jesus experienced failure and as a result had to grow in faith and understanding, Sobrino contends that this makes Jesus truly "human." Jesus' life, ridden with conflict, evolution and a growing self-awareness, is the essence of Sobrino's

Christology and the central component of his presentation of the historical Jesus. To determine how successfully Sobrino is in using the historical Jesus as the proponent of a faith lived out in conflict is a central focus of this thesis.

Chapter three will also carefully explore the social role of the historical Jesus. Throughout the quest of the historical Jesus, attempts have been made to determine whether Jesus was a political agitator, Jewish cynic, social reformer and so forth. By so doing, scholars involved in life-of-Jesus research have often painted an image of the historical Jesus that fits their own agenda. Sobrino claims that giving such a slanted portrayal of the historical Jesus is not faithful to the concerns and tools of biblical scholarship. Chapter three will explore whether Sobrino is successful in avoiding such similar pitfalls.

The question is persistent: how successful is Sobrino in using his methodology to support his Christology based on the historical Jesus or does Sobrino fall into the trap of previous questers?

CHAPTER ONE

The Quest of the Historical Jesus

"But who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29)

Introduction

It was the translator of Albert Schweitzer's classic work *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* who first popularized the expression "the quest of the historical Jesus."¹ While the expression became famous after the English translation of Schweitzer's book, it was actually during the Enlightenment that hints of the first "quest" of the historical Jesus began to take shape. Coming out of a period in history that professed reason and challenged superstition, the historical Jesus was placed on the operating table of scholarly criticism. Consequently, questions were being asked about the Nazarene from outside the orbit of "faith." Using historical-critical methodology, scholars of the late eighteenth century began to write "lives" of Jesus and commenced the first "quest" of the historical Jesus. As time went on, changes in methodology and an increasing awareness of the need to consider faith and theology led to new approaches to studying Jesus.

This chapter intends to offer an overview of the quest of the historical Jesus. The quest itself, divided up into three distinct stages, seeks to answer one specific question: What can be learned about Jesus of Nazareth from the facts as presented in the Gospels? The history of historical Jesus scholarship has offered a barrage of possible answers to

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* trans. F. C. Burkitt (1910) New York: Macmillan, 1968., ET: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 17. It was not known that Reimarus was the author of the original article published in 1778.

this question. As the question was primarily focused on the 'historical data' of Jesus' life, scholars of the first quest agreed that a minimum of 'authentic' facts about Jesus could be ensured. The methodological basis of such a claim was historical-criticism. Historical-criticism endeavored to distinguish between what faith affirms about Jesus and what history recounts.² However, history and faith could not be easily separated.

While the first quest sought to hold to this strict non-dogmatic approach to Scripture, a growing awareness arose that it is not as simple to separate the historical Jesus from theology and faith as previously believed. Eventually, the limitations of the historical-critical approach became apparent for life-of-Jesus research. Scholars of the "new quest" or "second quest" of the mid-nineteenth century, and scholars of the contemporary "third quest," became empowered by new methodological approaches in an attempt to seek the historical Jesus. Historical-criticism still maintained a firm place in life-of-Jesus research, but it became viewed rather as a 'tool' to be used with discretion.

As a precursor to an overview of the three stages in the quest of the historical Jesus, it is helpful to discuss the contributions of Baruch Spinoza and Ernst Troeltsch. Both Spinoza and Troeltsch explored the role of historical-critical methodology. Spinoza affirmed the need to treat Scripture dispassionately while Troeltsch emphasized the merit of faith as a contributor to any discussion on Scripture. The role of historical-critical methodology is of paramount significance throughout the historical Jesus quest and its changing role as a tool of biblical scholarship is best exemplified in Spinoza and Troeltsch. This discussion will be addressed later.

²Hugh Anderson, *Jesus* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 2.

The bulk of the first chapter will revolve around certain key figures in the quest of the historical Jesus that greatly shaped its development and contributed to the discussion of the historical Jesus at large. Finally, as this thesis intends to focus on the historical Jesus in the writings of Jon Sobrino, this chapter will conclude with a discussion on his contributions to the quest of the historical Jesus and their implications for liberation theology.

Throughout this chapter special attention will be given to landmarks in the quest that relate to, or have a bearing on, the current discussion of the historical Jesus within liberation theology. For instance, the role of eschatology in the Gospels is still debated by liberation theologians as well as questions pertaining to biblical scholarship such as Markan priority. As these topics maintain a foothold in life-of-Jesus scholarship, a background of the main issues of debate is purposeful in furthering an understanding of their place in liberation theology.

In exploring some of the central figures of the quest of the historical Jesus, it should be noted that this thesis does not intend to cover every single figure who has influenced or furthered the quest of the historical Jesus. Such a survey is beyond the scope of this thesis. Further, this chapter does not intend to offer a complete biographical account of any of the questers nor does it intend to highlight personal convictions or motivations. The purpose of this chapter is solely to illustrate the advances in the quest, specifically advances that will pertain to a discussion of the historical Jesus in liberation theology. Thus, attention will be given to specific scholars who have had an impact on shaping the quest and adding to its achievements.

Spinoza and Troeltsch

The value of historical-criticism as a tool for interpretation of the Bible is an important question for any exploration of the historical Jesus. The historical-critical method itself has pierced into theology and with its imposed limitations and suspicions has become a fundamental tool of biblical scholarship. The quest of the historical Jesus itself is incumbent on using these tools of modern scholarship and is greatly indebted to the advances of the historical method. However, this is not to say that concerns and questions surrounding the methodology of historical Jesus research have not called into question historical-criticism. Historical-critical methodology has been unable to satisfy questions of theology and faith and therefore should be understood as a 'tool' that furthers discussion rather than an equation that hopes to solve a problem.

This "historical science" is not without a history and it is helpful to present a brief overview of two of the figures that greatly influenced the historical-critical approach: Baruch Spinoza and Ernst Troeltsch. While neither Spinoza nor Troeltsch was directly interested in historical study of the life of Jesus, both were philosophers who were largely concerned with historical method and had a dramatic impact on the shape and direction of the quest of the historical Jesus.

One of the key realizations that came out of the Reformation was a suspicion of dogmatic interpretation. Luther's approach to Scripture clearly illustrated an awareness of historicity. Luther's interest in discerning the meaning of biblical texts by paying

attention to historical context clearly identified an historical awareness.³ John Calvin also concurred with Luther's affirmation of the right of Scripture to interpret itself. Such points as the primacy of Scripture, the priority of exegesis, and an evolving exegetical method all came from the reformers. One figure who followed these advances and continued on with the Reformation's skepticism of dogmatic tradition was Baruch Spinoza (1632-77).

While the rise of modern historical consciousness cannot be attributed alone to Baruch Spinoza, his radical approach to the Bible and his insistency on history is not to be overlooked for he was among the very first to use the practice of what is now known as historical-criticism.⁴ In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza came down harshly on the Old Testament.⁵ Spinoza, an excommunicated Jew, argued that many religions exemplified superstition and that dogmatic Christianity must be overcome.⁶ While Spinoza's methods were not as reformed as later historical critical scholars, Spinoza nonetheless illuminated some of the major concerns of biblical-criticism.⁷ Harrisville best summarizes Spinoza's approach when he says: "[Spinoza's] new form of biblical criticism treats Scripture dispassionately. It places Scripture in historical context and takes from it only what human reason can know."⁸

³Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation*, trans. Roy A. Harrison (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 32-35.

⁴Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 26.

⁵When Spinoza is talking about the Old Testament he is talking about "revelation and reason."

⁶Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, pp. 39-40.

⁷Gregory W. Daves, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History* (Louisville, Kentucky: Deo publishing, 1999), p. 3.

⁸Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 41.

Presenting an all new method of biblical investigation, Spinoza stressed the need for such approaches to the Gospels as identifying authorship and context as well as uncovering the history of its transmission. Further, Spinoza stressed that the biblical interpreter should be concerned with the “meaning” of the text rather than the “truth.”⁹ This “truth” for Spinoza, falls into the realm of the dogmatic and does not recognize that in order to critically explore the Bible, it should be read and treated like any other text. Spinoza marked one of the first clear distinctions between ‘faith’ and ‘history’ and, in fact, attempted to illustrate how the two should be divorced. While Spinoza did not mention the “historical Jesus,” his approach to the Bible from a history driven approach outside the bias of faith anticipated what was to become the common exegetical method of the early questers.

While Spinoza attempted to divorce faith and history, Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) intended to do just the opposite. The quest of the historical Jesus had begun by the time Troeltsch began to write his “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” a work in historical-critical scholarship invaluable for the quest of the historical Jesus. Famous for his *die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (history of religion approach), Troeltsch is known as the great systematician of theological liberalism and historicism.¹⁰

Troeltsch’s approach to historical-criticism operates on three principles or levels: criticism, analogy, and correlation. First, critical reflection is needed when exploring documentary witnesses. The second point, ‘analogy,’ stresses the past can only be understood by reference to today. Finally, the principle of correlation states that all

⁹Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 3.

¹⁰Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation*, p. 44.

phenomenon of the past must be analyzed and understood within a particular context.¹¹ Historical-criticism working through these three principles, Troeltsch contends, results in theological tradition being set within the historical occurrence.¹² Only with an understanding of the relationship between theology and history could historical-criticism be effective.

Since Spinoza, the battleground of the Bible had been historical-criticism.¹³ Troeltsch had been aware of this distinction and made the question of faith's relation to history the primary religious pursuit of his scholarly life.¹⁴ Troeltsch's thought clearly identified the religious value of history. Faith, for Troeltsch, is an indispensable part of understanding theology through historical-criticism. As Dawes says, Troeltsch concluded that "the historical method could indeed produce theologically constructive results."¹⁵ Troeltsch's confident view of history, blending deeper theological understanding and historical-criticism of the Bible, was actually ahead of its time. Questions surrounding the challenges that arise between faith and fact were evident from the beginning of the quest of the historical Jesus but were not to take hold until the existentialist Rudolf Bultmann addressed the issue.

¹¹Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 28.

¹²Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation*, p. 45.

¹³Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 93.

¹⁴Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 160.

¹⁵Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 29.

The Quest Begins

Schweitzer dated the first quest of the historical Jesus from an anonymous article in 1778, "On the Intention of Jesus and his Disciples."¹⁶ This article, later revealed to be written by Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), offered the first thorough attempt to present an historical conception of the life of Jesus. From Reimarus' article sprang numerous other attempts to locate the historical Jesus. Notably, hundreds of biographical accounts, or "lives" of Jesus, that sought to emphasize some grand picture of Jesus (e.g., Jesus was a social reformer) came out of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ The "first quest," as it later came to be called, sought to write a biographical account of Jesus gained solely from the Gospel stories. The methodological basis of this first quest is the confidence that a "minimum of 'authentic' Jesus tradition can be found."¹⁸

Spinoza had stressed that it is necessary to decipher the meaning of the text rather than the truth of the text. Historical-critical methodology hoped to do just that. Attempting to escape the limitations of dogma, the quest of the historical Jesus sought to find a Jesus that was free from doctrine, creed and Church.¹⁹ These "lives" of Jesus were essentially bare facts about Jesus that could culminate into an 'historical' portrait. Throughout the first quest, advances were being made in biblical scholarship that sought to redefine how the Gospels were understood. One of the most discussed topics

¹⁶ Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 17.

¹⁷ Mark A. Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 13.

¹⁸ Gerd Theissen and Annett Merz, *The Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 7.

¹⁹ James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 28.

throughout the first quest, and one that continued to be a pertinent topic throughout the whole of life-of-Jesus research, was eschatology, or study of the end times. The relationship between Jesus and the Kingdom of God greatly altered how scholars would come to interpret the historical Jesus. Finally, advances in historical-critical scholarship such as questions surrounding the 'sources' behind the Gospels offered a whole new avenue of exploration. The priority of one Gospel over another led to an increasing discussion as to what sayings of Jesus were, in fact, the 'most' historical.

To effectively summarize the first quest of the historical Jesus it is necessary to carefully explore some of the most influential "lives" of Jesus while also highlighting some of the key advances in the discussion.

The "Lives" of Jesus

After the Enlightenment many scholars began what became known as the "quest of the historical Jesus." Primarily coming from Germany, numerous accounts of the life of Jesus arose that stressed certain key features of Jesus' life. While some more conservative accounts were, in fact, paraphrases of the Gospels (i.e., J. J. Hess's *The History of the Three Last Years of the Life of Jesus*), some scholars such as Reimarus, Schleiermacher, Paulus and Strauss went into great detail to present a critical study of the historical life of Jesus. Obviously, it is not possible to cover every figure who presented a biography of Jesus. The works of Bahrdt, Renan, Farrar, Edersheim, Westcott,

Lightfoot, Hort, and many others presented “lives” of Jesus, each with its own distinct and contributing qualities.

Largely influenced by Spinoza’s historical-critical method, Herman Samuel Reimarus approached the historical Jesus from a highly speculative position.²⁰ Exploring the New Testament for contradictions and irregularities, Reimarus concluded that the Gospel narratives were strewn with inconsistency. For Reimarus, inconsistency equaled falsehood. Leveling charge and attack against the Gospel narratives, Reimarus stressed that in order to understand the historical Jesus, it is necessary to drop such dogmatic conceptions as the Trinity and Divine Sonship and instead simply explore the Jewish world of thought in which Jesus lived.²¹

There is considerable merit to Reimarus’ use of the historical-critical method. He was the first to approach the historical Jesus from a critical position, grounding his claims in historical-criticism.²² One of the most significant insights to come out of Reimarus’ thought was his belief that the centre of Jesus’ preaching was the Kingdom of God. Schweitzer, commenting on the magnitude of this point, says “[Reimarus’] work is perhaps the most splendid achievement in the whole course of the historical investigation of the life of Jesus, for he was the first to grasp the fact that the world of thought in which Jesus moved was essentially eschatological.”²³ Reimarus’ presentation that Jesus’ life must be understood in terms of his relationship with the Kingdom of God clearly marked

²⁰Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 55.

²¹H. S. Reimarus, *Fragments*, edited by C. H. Talbert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970, original 1778).

²²Theissan and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 2.

²³Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 23.

a breakthrough for study on the life of Jesus. Harrisville says that Reimarus actually “went beyond Spinoza...because he was the first to conceive of Jesus’ world of ideas in the context of his times; that is, as consisting of an eschatological worldview.”²⁴

So what exactly did Reimarus say about the life of Jesus? First, Reimarus claimed that Jesus was not a religious figure at all. Jesus was simply a disappointed figure who failed with the masses and failed to accurately predict the return of the “son of man.” In terms of teachings, Reimarus concluded that Jesus’ preaching should be separated from what the apostles say about him in their own writings. As well, Jesus can only be understood, Reimarus states, from the context of Jewish religion.²⁵ Further, Reimarus concluded by arguing that in the wake of their failed messiah, the disciples invented a resurrection story and began to construct the foundations of what became the early Church.

Reimarus’ work on the historical Jesus was nothing less than monumental. Grouping the four gospels together in an attempt to find the intentions of Jesus, Reimarus provoked an awareness of the difference between John and the synoptics, a distinction that foreshadowed the field of source criticism. His contribution to the historical Jesus is essentially unparalleled in that Reimarus was the first to apply the historical-critical method to the life of Jesus. For Reimarus, Jesus was nothing more than a failed political advocate who believed it was his own destiny to establish God’s Kingdom on earth.

The first professor to lecture on the life of Jesus was Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Throughout Schleiermacher’s writings, an attempt is made

²⁴Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 65.

²⁵Theissan and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 3.

to link the Christian faith with the results of historical-critical method. However, Schleiermacher stressed that historical theology was actually incomplete and lacking without philosophical theology. Schleiermacher was one of the first to anticipate many of the concerns of the modern debate in the quest of the historical Jesus. For instance, Schleiermacher clearly distinguished in his popular literary work *Christmas Eve* a relation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.²⁶ As well, Schleiermacher anticipated many of Bultmann's conclusions such as paying attention to the "existence of detached narratives and collections."²⁷ Finally, Schleiermacher foresaw one of the major topics of Jesus research in the twentieth century as he concluded that it is impossible to achieve an accurate presentation of the life of Jesus that finds a balanced coexistence of faith and history.

Another figure that is well known for his "life" of Jesus is that of H. E. G. Paulus (1761-1851). Paulus, a rationalist, is well known for his discussion on the miracle stories in Jesus' life. Stripping the miracle stories of any supernatural explanation, Paulus concluded that there is a rationalist answer for the individual miracle stories in the Gospels. Interestingly enough, Paulus did not intend for his discussion on the miracles in his works to be the "principal thing" to be remembered.²⁸ Rather, Paulus was intent on arguing that the truly miraculous thing about Jesus was his holy disposition. Nonetheless, Paulus' naturalistic explanations of the miracle stories resulted in much opposition and became the most recognized characteristic of his work.

²⁶Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 73.

²⁷Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). This parallel was found in Harrisville, Roy and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 76.

²⁸Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 51.

The single most famous account of the life of Jesus was written by David Fredrick Strauss (1808-1847). Strauss' *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, a two-volume work, called for unbiased historical research on the life of Jesus. Responding to the "crude" supernaturalism of Schleiermacher and the "empty" rationalism of Paulus, Strauss argued that previous Jesus scholarship had failed in any attempt to reinterpret faith by means of the historical-critical method. Strauss maintained that the missing element to be taken into account is the myth.²⁹ Strauss argued that the Gospel stories were neither history nor deception, nor what they had been previously understood to be, but rather myth that needed careful interpretation.

In terms of historical facts about the life of Jesus, Strauss maintained that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, he was baptized by John the Baptist, assembled disciples, taught, opposed the Pharisees and summoned people to the messianic kingdom, fell victim to the hostility of the Pharisees and died on the cross. Outside of this basic historical framework of Jesus' life, Strauss concluded that myths were created around Jesus which fulfilled popular belief concerning the Messiah. Myth was, therefore, the product of religious imagination on the part of the disciples. Nonetheless, Strauss was not intent on condemning this fact but rather arguing that this "imagination" actually contained spiritual truths in narrative form.³⁰

Throughout his writings on Jesus, Strauss sought to work within both the claim to faith of Christianity and also to do justice to radical historical-criticism. As Harrisville says, it was Strauss who, though not providing an answer, certainly raised the question:

²⁹David F Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972, original 1835).

³⁰Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 89.

"Is historical-criticism necessarily destructive of faith?"³¹ While the methods of biblical-historical-criticism may not indeed hold finite answers for theology, it was Strauss who clearly and passionately identified that the tools of historical-critical scholarship are unavoidable in any discussion on the historical Jesus. Nonetheless, while Strauss may have intended to reinterpret faith by means of the historical-critical method, his approach quickly became perceived as an attack upon it.

After Strauss, most scholarly work on the life of Jesus took place under the title of "liberal lives of Jesus." Claiming that Strauss had "failed", the liberals attempted to locate and focus on the centre of Jesus thought.³² Focusing on the personality of Jesus, the liberals attempted to offer a Jesus who was relevant and challenging to the modern world. One of the central assumptions of the liberals was that Mark's Gospel was an unadorned account of the historical facts of the life of Jesus.

The Priority of Sources

When Reimarus made a distinction between the intention of Jesus and the intention of the Evangelists, he created a whole realm of discussion surrounding the basic sources that had been used by the Evangelists. This method of analyzing texts became known as "source" criticism. Source criticism raised the question as to the order of the Gospels and attempted to explore the similarities and differences in both order and context.

³¹Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 110.

³²Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 40.

The order of the Gospels that had become generally accepted from Augustine onward was that the first Gospel was the work of the apostle Matthew and that Mark abbreviated Matthew.³³ This view became widely challenged by J. J. Griesbach in his *Synopsis of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (1776). Claiming that the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were independent of John, Griesbach questioned any attempt to produce a strict chronology of the Gospels' accounts due to the fact that the Evangelists themselves were not interested in strict chronology.³⁴ Christian Baur, one of Strauss' teachers, also accepted the priority of Matthew and stressed a purely historical approach that avoided supernatural explanations. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century source criticism was beginning to challenge and explore the problems encountered when exploring the synoptic Gospels. This focus on source criticism led to what became known as the "synoptic problem."

In 1826 Gottlieb Wilke argued that Matthew had drawn on the account in Mark for the formation of his Gospel.³⁵ Then in 1835, Karl Lachmann's article "On the Order of Narratives in the Synoptic Gospels," proposed that Mark was the middle ground between both the accounts in Matthew and Luke. One of the most famous New Testament scholars who advocated the priority of Mark as the earliest Gospel (Markan priority) was Christian Hermann Weisse. Weisse argued that the composition and arrangement of Mark, from its fragmentary presentation, clearly points towards its being

³³Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History*, Third Edition (Philadelphia: Harcourt Brace College, 1994), p. 12.

³⁴Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 13.

³⁵Gottlieb Wilke, "Über die Parable von den Arbeitern in Weinsberge, Math. 20, 1-16," *ZWT* 1 (1826), pp. 73-88.

the first Gospel.³⁶ In terms of the Gospel of John, Weisse stressed that the Gospel should be ruled out due to its unhistorical nature. As he comments in his "Problem of the Gospels," Weisse says, "I have, to tell the truth, no very high opinion of the literary art of the editor of the Johannine Gospel-document."³⁷

The view that Matthew and Luke were dependent on Mark led to an increasing focus on what became known as the 'Q' theory, developed by H. J. Holtzmann. Holtzmann claimed that the material common to both Matthew and Luke that is not found in Mark can be explained by an hypothetical source 'Q' that both the Evangelists of Matthew and Luke drew on. This "two source theory" as it came to be called, became the generally accepted position of scholars by the end of the nineteenth century.

In the aftermath of Weisse, Markan priority became a pervasive force in biblical studies. Schweitzer, in fact, labeled the turning away in scholarship from the Markan priority an escape from a "torture chamber" due to the tendency of liberal scholars to answer all the challenges on the life of the historical Jesus solely from Mark's Gospel.³⁸ Scholars such as Schenkel stressed the historical validity of Mark's Gospel and proposed that the life of Jesus can only be understood from the 'historical' account in Mark. Those who are proponents of this view claim that Jesus' ministry in Galilee can be divided into a period of failure and abandonment and results in a gradual development in the life and thought of Jesus during his public ministry. It was only through the work of William

³⁶Christian H. Weisse, *Die evangelische Geschichte kritisch und philosophisch bearbeitet* ET: *A critical and Philosophical Study of the Gospel History* 2 Vols. (Leipzig, Breitkopf and Härtel, 1838).

³⁷Quoted in Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 127.

³⁸Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 131.

Wrede (1859-1906), who is most famous for his "Messianic Secret," that Gospel scholarship took on a new direction with respect to the priority of sources.

Wrede saw the Evangelist Mark not as an objective historian, but rather as a theologian. Commenting on how many scholars have professed the Markan priority in order to present a chronological life of Jesus, Wrede says, "It must frankly be said that Mark no longer has a real view of the historical life of Jesus."³⁹ Wrede's work flew in the face of the liberal "lives" of Jesus. Wrede stressed that any attempt to produce a portrait of Jesus simply by taking Mark's story-line is simply inaccurate. As the Gospel is a document of faith, Wrede claims, the Evangelist shows no interest in presenting a psychological development of Jesus. Bruno Bauer also seriously challenged the use of Mark's Gospel as historical. Bauer stressed that the order of Mark does not give accurate information concerning the chronology of Jesus' life since the Gospel is not a chronicle.⁴⁰ Finally, K. L. Schmidt, in his *Der Rahmen Der Geschichte Jesu*, argued that no chronological sketch of the story of Jesus can be given from Mark's Gospel alone. Instead, Schmidt stressed that what is of importance are the single stories put into a framework.⁴¹ Breaking down the stories of the Gospels into units would be a task to be taken up by Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius.

³⁹William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, Trans. J.C.G. Greig (Cambridge: J. Clarke, 1971), p. 70.

⁴⁰Bruno Bauer, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker*. 3 vols. (Aalen: Leipzig, 1841-1842).

⁴¹Karl Schmidt, *Der Rahmen Der Geschichte Jesu* (Berlin: Trowitzsch and Sohn, 1919).

The Eschatological Discussion

One of the main avenues of discussion that came out of exploration on the life of the historical Jesus was eschatology. Attempts to establish the basic character of Jesus' thought quickly led to an awareness that the Parousia was an integral focus in Jesus' teachings. One of the first figures to critically evaluate Jesus' eschatological discourses was Timothée Colani (1824-88). While Colani is not remembered for the conclusions he drew from his study of Jesus' eschatology, he is paramount in determining a critical analysis of eschatology and its role in the Gospels.⁴² One of the pioneers of eschatology in the Gospels was Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89). Ritschl contended that any theological reflection on the life of Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of God must take into account the historically certified characteristics of Jesus' active life. Further, the Kingdom of God should be defined as an inward union between Christ and believers. By so doing, Ritschl had connected Christian theology with believers' moral relationship to Christ.⁴³ Nonetheless, Dawes points out that "insofar as [Ritschl's] theology claimed to be based on an historically defensible reconstruction of Jesus' intentions, it was open to historical objections."⁴⁴ The figure who would most effectively deal with these objections was Ritschl's son-in-law, Johannes Weiss.

In 1892 Johannes Weiss published *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* in which he agreed with Ritschl in stating that Jesus' teaching was in fact eschatological. Weiss

⁴²Timothée Colani, *Jésus-Christ et les croyances messianiques de son temps* (Strasburg, 1864), p. 255.

⁴³Albrecht Ritschl, "Instruction in the Christian Religion," *Albrecht Ritschl: Three Essays*, trans. Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

⁴⁴Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 172.

stressed that in order to focus on the Kingdom of God it is necessary to offer an historical investigation of what Jesus meant by "Kingdom of God". Weiss explored the very intentions of Jesus with respect to the Kingdom, the very thing that Ritschl's presentation was lacking. Weiss claimed that Jesus did not see himself as the active founder of the Kingdom, but rather only proclaimed the coming Kingdom.⁴⁵ This distinction would mark Weiss's perspective on eschatology. The "passive" Jesus, as Schweitzer puts it, saw the Kingdom as belonging to the future and came to see himself as becoming the Son of Man. As well, Weiss' Jesus came to realize that the Kingdom would only come after his death. Furthering Weiss' interpretation of eschatology and challenging Wrede's skepticism, came Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965). Schweitzer stepped into the quest of the historical Jesus and ended up forever changing life-of-Jesus research.

The key to understanding the Gospels, Schweitzer contends, is to keep in mind the apocalyptic context of Jesus' thought. *Whereas Weiss had made eschatology the key to Jesus' teaching, Schweitzer stressed that it was the key to Jesus' life.* Commenting on Weiss' conclusion that Jesus took a 'passive' role towards the Kingdom of God, Schweitzer argued that Weiss' assertion was "scientifically unassailable" and that Jesus in fact came to understand himself as an active participant in the coming Kingdom.⁴⁶ Heavily dependent on Matthew 10 and 11, which Schweitzer regarded as historically accurate, he proposed that Jesus was incorrect in believing that the Reign of God was near.⁴⁷ After the end did not come, Schweitzer argued, Jesus took action to bring about

⁴⁵Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamations of the Kingdom of God*. trans., edit., intro. Richard Hyde Hiers and David Larrimore Holland (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 80.

⁴⁶Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 241.

⁴⁷Schweitzer points to Matthew 10:23: "You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of Man comes."

the messianic tribulations that had to precede the Kingdom of God. Having to rethink his whole mission, Schweitzer says that Jesus chose to embark on a quest to offer himself to bring about the Kingdom. What dogmatic interpretations of Jesus had missed in their sentimental portraits of Jesus was that the historical Jesus was wrong, not only once, but twice.

Schweitzer concluded that Jesus was a “misguided eschatological prophet” who was of no relevance in a contemporary age. As Schweitzer so painfully puts it, “the historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma.”⁴⁸ While understanding eschatology as important for interpreting the life of Jesus, Schweitzer nonetheless did not see its value for theology. Schweitzer ultimately concluded that it is not the historically known Jesus, but rather the Jesus as “spiritually arisen within men” that would be significant for today.⁴⁹ What Schweitzer had in fact done, was bring an end to the quest.⁵⁰ No longer could the historical Jesus be recovered from only the tools of historical-critical scholarship. To do so would present a Jesus who is void of relevance for theology. Schweitzer’s *Quest of the Historical Jesus* shattered all previous interpretation of the historical Jesus. Schweitzer clearly illustrated that attempts to write a biography or life of Jesus only resulted in a Jesus who reflected the authors’ own contemporary perspective. As Harrisville says, “Schweitzer shows in merciless fashion

⁴⁸Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 399.

⁴⁹Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 400.

⁵⁰This point is debated among scholars. It is probably more accurate to say that Schweitzer’s book marked an end to the quest rather than caused the end of the quest. This point is well articulated by James Robinson in James M Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and Other Essays*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

that the Jesus discovered by liberal theology was the mirror image of the scholars who made the quest."⁵¹

In the wake of Schweitzer, all those involved in historical Jesus scholarship were forced to evaluate their work and question whether or not their own rendering was biased. Nevertheless, Schweitzer's own work showed considerable limitations. Schweitzer's heavy dependence on Matthew 10 and 11 is a serious limitation of his work in light of modern redaction and form criticism. Schweitzer did exactly what he had condemned the liberals of doing. By selectively choosing data about the life of Jesus from the Gospels, Schweitzer made the evidence fit *a priori* notions about Jesus' life.⁵²

Schweitzer's work, despite evident criticisms, was nothing less than a bombshell to life-of-Jesus study. Schweitzer had effectively immobilized historical Jesus research by arguing that any attempt to present a rendering of the historical Jesus would be unable to avoid modernizing the historical Jesus for a contemporary perspective. Could unbiased scholarship still present a Jesus that is of relevance for today? It was not until decades later that this question was addressed.

The "No Quest" to the "New Quest"

The aftermath of Schweitzer's work resulted in what was called the "theological irrelevance of historical Jesus research."⁵³ Schweitzer's work effectively closed the door

⁵¹Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 204.

⁵²David J.Hawkin, *Christ and Modernity: Christian Self-Understanding in a Technological Age* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1985), p. 18.

⁵³Marcus J. Borg, "A Renaissance in Jesus Studies," *Theology Today* (45, 1988), p. 280.

on the historical Jesus and brought the old quest to an end. While the first quest itself had closed, many questions were still left unanswered. To say that the historical Jesus was a "stranger and an enigma" to our time did not satisfy everyone. Questions on the relationship between faith and history took centre stage as the theological irrelevance of the historical Jesus was evaluated. The Bultmannian or "no quest" period (1921-1953) was a pivotal happening for life-of-Jesus research. As the first quest lacked a theological, dogmatic, or kerygmatic nature, the 'no quest' stressed a keen sensitivity to such matters. The resultant "new quest" arose as a reaction to the Bultmannian skepticism of what exactly is significant for theology. The new quest claimed a separation of the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history while still maintaining a firm theological motivation.

The Period of the "No Quest"

One of the first to reject the assumptions on which the first quest had been based was Martin Kähler (1835-1912). Commenting on the first quest, Kähler says "I regard the entire life-of-Jesus movement as a blind alley."⁵⁴ For Kähler, the problem is not simply an historical problem. Study on the life of Jesus had endeavored to use sources that are not trustworthy and do not measure up to the standards of contemporary historical science. Attempting to find some sort of direction on which to focus a discussion on the relevance of historical Jesus research, Kähler asks a most paramount

⁵⁴Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans., edit., and intro. Carl E. Braaten; foreword by Paul J. Tillich (Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1988), p. 47.

question: "What is the life-of-Jesus research really searching for?"⁵⁵ Kähler's answer is the *real* Jesus. In order to find this *real* Jesus, Kähler argues that it is essential to ask *why* we seek to know the figure of Jesus. The answer to the question though, Kähler argues, could not be given by the biographers. Kähler came to conclude that the *real* Jesus was the Christ who is preached and this Christ who is preached is the Christ of faith.

While condemning the methods of those who attempted to write a biography of Jesus, Kähler had placed the historical Jesus into a new area. No longer could the historical Jesus be simply explored from historical-critical methods alone. Rather, as the historical Jesus will only be shaped by the theological assumptions of the interpreter, it is much more fruitful to speak of the *historic Christ of the Bible* rather than the historical Jesus alone.⁵⁶ Kähler concluded that historical details themselves are insignificant for Christian faith but rather attention should be placed on the impact that the historical Jesus has today. Principally, what Kähler had done was to argue that it was impossible to separate the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history.

Kähler's criticisms and protests against the quest of the historical Jesus were taken up by two famous dialectical theologians: Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Throughout the writings of Karl Barth there is very little attention given to the historical Jesus; but, as Dawes points out, this indifference to the matter is itself important. For Barth, the missing link in previous biblical scholarship had been the little attention placed on "revelation."⁵⁷ Insofar as the first quest had hoped to reach 'behind' the text by means

⁵⁵Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, p. 56.

⁵⁶Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 215.

⁵⁷Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1:2 *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 492.

of historical-criticism in the hopes of discovering some religious significance, Barth stressed that such an approach was unfruitful. Historical-criticism could not in itself penetrate what lies behind the text; rather, it was only available through revelation. Any attempt to discern what lies beneath the text by means of historical methodology would ultimately be theologically irrelevant though it was the twentieth-century existentialist theologian, Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), who would take this discussion in a new direction.

Bultmann, considered to be this century's most famous New Testament scholar, claimed that the Christ of faith alone is significant for theology. Whereas Kähler had stressed that the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history were inseparable, Bultmann saw a clear distinction between the two. Bultmann, one of the pioneers of form criticism and well-known existentialist, evaluated the oral traditions of Jesus and concluded that very little in the life of Jesus can be traced back to his historical past. While there is no doubt that Jesus actually existed, Bultmann argues, it is Jesus' proclamation of salvation and resurrection rather than historically discernible facts that are important for theology. In terms of focusing on historically precise data on the life of Jesus, Bultmann says, "I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus."⁵⁸ When asked the question "of what significance, then, is the Jesus of history?" Bultmann replies, "only that he lived and died."⁵⁹

Bultmann's biting conclusion of the fruitlessness of any attempt to discover the 'historical' Jesus effectively testified to the conclusion of the first quest. In place of an

⁵⁸Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 8.

⁵⁹Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 223.

historical focus on the life of Jesus or a focus on the meaning of one individual Evangelist, Bultmann claims that the new focus of attention should be on “kerygma theology.”⁶⁰ For Bultmann, it is Christ’s message alone that is central to any study on Jesus.⁶¹

The period of the “no quest,” as Borg calls it, maintained three convictions about historical Jesus research: first, the theological irrelevance of historical Jesus research; secondly, the skepticism that very little could be known about the historical Jesus; finally, a third conviction proclaimed that the little that could be known about Jesus was, in fact, eschatological and needed to be demythologized.⁶² Ultimately, the period of the “no quest” concluded that historical Jesus scholarship is ineffectual.

The “New Quest”

In a lecture entitled “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” a former student of Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann (1906-98), inaugurated what would become known as the “new quest” for the historical Jesus. While Barth had stripped away any reliability of historical research, Käsemann claimed that the historical facts of the Gospels were indeed important for theology. Käsemann does not take any emphasis away from the *kerygma* theology that Bultmann had so adamantly endorsed, however, but stresses that the

⁶⁰David J. Hawkin, *The Johannine World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 40.

⁶¹Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, p. 12.

⁶²Borg, “A Renaissance in Jesus Studies,” p. 281.

kerygma has an essential historical foundation. Käsemann clearly recognized Bultmann's conclusion about the historical Jesus being no longer important for Christian faith. However, Käsemann stresses that "for two hundred years, critical research has been trying to free the Jesus of history from the fetter of the Church's dogma, only to find that such an attempt was predestined to failure."⁶³ This "failure" led to a questioning of the historical reliability of revelation. What was needed, as Käsemann effectively argues, is a closer evaluation of the relationship between faith and history.

Käsemann argues that history should not be set up in opposition to dogma but rather it is necessary to find some sort of relationship between history and faith. The historical life of Jesus, Käsemann contends, can only be reached through the *kerygma* of the community. Ultimately, Käsemann concludes that the Gospel cannot be "anonymous" but rather needs to be grounded in the historical figure of Jesus.⁶⁴ For Käsemann, the important issue to focus on in the earthly Jesus was his preaching. Jesus did not come just to proclaim the Kingdom, but rather he inaugurated it. While recognizing that the earthly Jesus was swallowed up by the exalted Lord, Käsemann nonetheless stresses that a continuity must be found between the two. In effect, Käsemann "re-opened" the question of the historical Jesus.

Concern with the message of Jesus and its relation to the *kerygma* was taken up in the new quest by Günther Bornkamm. While Bultmann had reduced the *kerygma* to the existential, Bornkamm claimed that faith "does not begin with itself but lives from past

⁶³Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 17.

⁶⁴Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, p. 48.

history.”⁶⁵ Concerning the historical element in the life of Jesus, Bornkamm was not interested in chronology of events, psychological motives, or self-understanding of Jesus. In terms of eschatology, Bornkamm stressed the present element or ‘realized’ element of the Kingdom in contrast to the unfulfilled futurist eschatology in Bultmann, Weiss and Schweitzer.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Bornkamm also believed that while there was a “present” aspect to Jesus’ eschatology, there was also a future element. Bornkamm’s stance on eschatology, that of “already and “not yet” has become the most pervasive view in all of New Testament studies.

Like the first quest of the historical Jesus, the new quest has also been deemed a failure. As Borg points out, what made the new quest ‘new’ was a concern for theology but it still shared the central characteristics of the first quest: “a minimalist portrait of the message of Jesus conceived in eschatological terms.”⁶⁷ The new quest had abandoned any attempt to write a biography of Jesus. In its place, the new quest focused on the message and preaching of Jesus. Ultimately, the Jesus of the new quest was still irrelevant and as Schweitzer had contended, “a stranger and an enigma to our time.” The first quest had failed to see the theological significance of the Gospels whereas the second quest or “new quest” failed in not separating theology and history. While the new quest was not as skeptical as the no quest about the ability to reach the historical Jesus, the new quest nevertheless still tended to spend more time dealing with theology rather than exploring anything new about the historical Jesus.

⁶⁵Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1960), p. 23.

⁶⁶Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 52.

⁶⁷Borg, “A Renaissance in Jesus Studies,” p. 282.

The Third Quest

It was N.T. Wright who first labeled a “third quest” of the historical Jesus in the light of resurgence in contemporary Jesus scholarship. Mark Allen Powell in his book *Jesus as a Figure in History*, claims that the “distinction between the third quest and the new quest is simply chronological.”⁶⁸ While Powell is correct in saying that the third quest is essentially the ‘contemporary’ quest, his point is founded on the lack of a unanimous methodological basis for the third quest. Even so, this “third quest” does have clear distinctions that distinguish it from previous quests. The major trends in contemporary historical Jesus scholarship reflect an interpretive distinctiveness and, to quote William Telford, may in fact “herald a new Age.”⁶⁹

Borg may have said it best when he labeled the third quest the “interdisciplinary quest” as the third quest encompasses varieties of approaches with conflicting views and methods.⁷⁰ To define a central premise of the third quest is difficult. However, some recurring themes in the third quest are worth noting. First, Jesus is not believed to be the Jesus of liberal Protestantism nor of the second quest. Furthermore, the Jesus of the third quest is an historical figure steeped in the social, religious, economic and political influences of first-century Judaism. Finally, the third quest is not motivated to answer

⁶⁸Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*, p. 23.

⁶⁹William R. Telford, “Major Trends and Interpretive Issues in the Study of Jesus,” *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations in the State of Current Research*, edited by Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), p. 57.

⁷⁰Borg, “A Renaissance in Jesus Studies,” p. 284.

theological questions; rather, the third quest is interested in social science and literary theory. Many contemporary attempts in historical-Jesus research tend to offer lists of scholars that belong to the third quest. Problematically, these lists differ from scholar to scholar in that approaches to methodology vary. Categorizing those in the third quest is therefore a difficult process. In order to effectively overview the contributions of the new quest, it is purposeful to highlight some of the major contributors to contemporary historical Jesus research.

In 1985 Robert Funk founded the Jesus Seminar. With the intention of examining every recorded word of Jesus in order to decipher what he really did say, the Seminar gathered scholars from across the globe regardless of religious faith in hopes of offering a definitive representation of the historical Jesus. Through a balloting system that enabled Seminar participants to vote on their opinion of the authenticity of the sayings and facts of Jesus, the seminar hoped to indicate various levels of authenticity. The seminar's methodology was something like the radical redaction-critical tradition of the life of Jesus. Questioning the methodology of the seminar, many scholars such as Bloomberg, Johnson and Wright argue that the seminar has distorted its objective.⁷¹

One of the most interesting personalities to come out of the Jesus seminar is John Dominic Crossan. Showing amazing expertise in almost every field of research related to the life of Jesus such as archaeology, anthropology, sociology, source criticism, and literary criticism, Crossan has become known as one of the most engaging and well-rounded scholars in the contemporary quest of the historical Jesus. On the life of Jesus,

⁷¹Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*, p.76. Powell highlights many of the major critiques leveled against the Jesus seminar. The "distortion of its objective" mentioned by Bloomberg, Johnson and Wright is a claim that those involved in the seminar have made results out of presuppositions.

Crossan concluded that Jesus was a Jewish peasant cynic who preached an ethical eschatology.⁷² The cornerstone of Crossan's work and what he concludes is at the very heart of Jesus' program is what Crossan calls "Magic and Meal."⁷³ Magic, or miracles, for Jesus were, in fact, not supernatural healings but rather curing people from mental problems. In terms of 'meal' Crossan stresses that a large part of Jesus's ministry was openness towards 'open commensality,' or little concern for social etiquette. After the magic, or the healing from illness, Jesus was given a meal where he then told parables. In terms of other conclusions on the historical Jesus, Crossan concluded that Jesus believed the Kingdom would be experienced here and now but he himself did not have a messianic consciousness. Further, Crossan says that while Jesus was actually crucified, the passion narratives were fiction. There was no resurrection but rather, bodily resurrection means that the *embodied* life and death of the historical Jesus continues to be experienced.⁷⁴

While Crossan has been interested in what can be said about the historical Jesus in terms of his placement in Judean life, another contemporary Jesus scholar, Marcus Borg, is interested in what kind of person Jesus was. Throughout his writings, Borg is clearly aware of historical-critical study of the New Testament. Nonetheless, Borg stresses that any attempt to begin a study of Jesus with the words of Jesus will result in a radical historical skepticism (i.e. Jesus Seminar).⁷⁵ Concerned with the history of interpretations surrounding Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom of God, Borg has concluded that Jesus did

⁷²John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

⁷³Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 301.

⁷⁴Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 302.

⁷⁵Borg, "A Renaissance in Jesus Studies," p. 290.

not proclaim the imminent end of the world. Borg goes on to argue that since Schweitzer, Jesus' mission has been understood entirely as eschatological. This view, however, Borg contends, is not correct and does not adequately take into account the true message and ministry of Jesus. For Borg, what is important is that Jesus was "spirit filled." A healer, exorcist, and political prophet against Jewish nationalism, Jesus challenged conventional wisdom and instead offered "political holiness."⁷⁶ Borg does believe in a crucifixion but separates the resurrection from the notion of the cross. Ultimately, Borg stresses that instead of a "Jesus of history" and a "Christ of faith" Jesus should be understood in terms of a "pre-Easter" and a "post-Easter" Jesus, both of which are historical and are relevant for theology and faith.

One figure in the contemporary quest of the life of Jesus that has focused on what the phrase "historical Jesus" really means is John P. Meier. Meier concludes that the "historical Jesus" is not exactly the "Jesus of Nazareth."⁷⁷ In the opening of his book *A Marginal Jew*, Meier states that a great deal of confusion in the "quest for the historical Jesus" results from the confusion between the "real Jesus" and the "historical Jesus." Historical research cannot know the "real Jesus;" however, historical research can set out to understand the historical Jesus. In fact, the term "historical Jesus" is quite technical in contrast to the "real" Jesus. Meier says:

In contrast to the 'real Jesus,' the 'historical Jesus' is that Jesus whom we can recover or reconstruct by using the scientific tools of modern historical research. The 'historical Jesus' is thus a scientific construct, a theoretical abstraction of

⁷⁶Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984).

⁷⁷Sometimes a distinction is made between the "Jesus of history" and the "historical Jesus" but for the purpose of this thesis the two terms will be used interchangeably.

modern scholars that coincides only partially with the real Jesus of Nazareth, the Jew who actually lived and worked in Palestine.⁷⁸

Greatly concerned with the tendency in contemporary historical Jesus scholarship to secularize Jesus, Ben F. Meyer contends that such an attempt is impossible considering nearly all of the activities surrounding Jesus and the Gospels are "relentlessly religious matters."⁷⁹ Concerned with the mission of Jesus and how Jesus came to understand this mission, Meyer concluded that Jesus can be evaluated from the perspective of his consciousness. Facing rejection, Meyer says that Jesus had to adopt a new strategy in his mission.⁸⁰ The mission of Jesus, therefore, should be understood with respect to the Reign of God and restoration of Israel.

One of the continuing themes throughout the contemporary quest, or "third quest" of the historical Jesus, is Jesus' relationship with Judaism. Probably the single most noteworthy scholar to deal with this topic is E.P. Sanders. Sanders' book, *Jesus and Judaism*, presents a Jesus who is an eschatological prophet who stood in the tradition of Jewish restoration theology. For Sanders, it is the 'facts' of Jesus that are essential to any study of the historical Jesus. Sanders states that Jesus did preach the imminence of the Kingdom of God but did not necessarily understand himself as the 'son of man' but did view himself as one who could speak with full authority on behalf of God.⁸¹ Jesus did work miracles, but these miracles were only miracles as the Galilean people knew them;

⁷⁸John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 4.

⁷⁹Ben F. Meyer, "Master Builder and Copestone of the Portal: Images of the Mission of Jesus," *Toronto Journal of Theology*, (9, 1993), p. 189. See also his book *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979).

⁸⁰Meyer, "Master Builder and Copestone of the Portal: Images of the Mission of Jesus," p. 202.

⁸¹E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Press, 1993), p. 238.

further, these miracles were actually 'signs' of the coming of God's Kingdom. Crucified for his actions in the temple, Sanders argues that Jesus did think the Kingdom would come after his crucifixion, but in fact he was mistaken. In this sense, Sanders seems reminiscent of Schweitzer and echoes his conclusions that Jesus was a mistaken eschatological prophet. Nonetheless, Sanders does not go as far as Schweitzer does in claiming that Jesus orchestrated his own death.

In contrast to Sanders, N.T. Wright stresses that Jesus believed that he would actively bring about the Kingdom of God by his own death. A socio-political figure, Wright's Jesus warned about imminent judgments and expected the end of the present world order.⁸² Similar to Sanders, Wright argues that Jesus' miracles were prophetic signs announcing that Israel's God was bringing the exile to an end. Nonetheless, Wright drew a different conclusion about the life of Jesus than Sanders. While Sanders concludes that Jesus was wrong in his prediction of what was to come to his generation in the near future, Wright contends that Jesus was correct and never said he would return in a glorified state.⁸³ To overview the whole of life-of-Jesus research, Wright contends that there are two basic streams of Jesus research: thoroughgoing skepticism and thoroughgoing eschatology. Essentially, the whole of the three quests still wrestle with two fundamental questions: first, how far can an historical-critical approach be used in studying the life of Jesus? Secondly, what is the role of eschatology within the Gospels?

⁸²N.T. Wright, "How Jesus Saw Himself," *Bible Review* (12, June 1996), p. 23. See also his books *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), *The Original Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

⁸³Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*, p. 158.

The third quest of the historical Jesus reflects a multiplicity of methodologies and interpretations. Questions surrounding the sources of the Gospels are as pertinent today as they were during the period of the first quest. As well, the extent to which historical-criticism should be used to probe the Gospels is still a heavily debated topic. Jesus' relationship with Judaism, Jesus' self-understanding, Jesus' role as a political and social figure, and finally the old question of the role of eschatology in the Gospels all constitute hot topics in the third quest. One thing is for sure, the quest today is healthier than it has ever been before and shows no sign of dying.

The Quest for Jesus in Latin America

Throughout the quest of the historical Jesus, the desire to treat Scripture dispassionately has been greatly challenged by those who have sought to find in the historical Jesus some significance for faith and some relevance for today. Today in Latin America, liberation theology has taken the figure of the historical Jesus as an object of faith. Those seeking the historical Jesus in liberation theology do not approach Jesus in the same way that the early biographers of Jesus did; rather, liberation theology is not interested in the historical facts of Jesus but interested in how the situation of Jesus parallels that of contemporary life. This 'quest' for Jesus in Latin America takes a different approach to the historical Jesus than modern day questers such as John P. Meier and Marcus Borg who profess, above all, objectivity in scholarship. Nonetheless, the

way in which liberation theologians approach the historical Jesus has been greatly anticipated throughout the quest of the historical Jesus.

While Spinoza had argued the need to treat Scripture objectively, Troeltsch had stressed the value of faith in any historical discussion. Accounting for faith has been a great challenge throughout the quest of the historical Jesus. The confrontation between an historical-critical approach to the Bible versus the desire to find meaning in Scripture without over-analyzing the text has been a heavily debated topic. It is clearly not as easy to locate the 'historical' Jesus as believed in the early nineteenth century. The quest of the historical Jesus has continually struggled to answer the question of the role and limit of historical-criticism as a tool of biblical scholarship. The concern of Protestant theologians toward the historical-critical method is not without significance. Troeltsch's comment, "give the historical method an inch and it will take a mile," reflects a deep rooted concern that once an historical-critical approach is used it will swallow any hope of exploring the Bible from a faith driven perspective.⁸⁴

Aside from the use of historical-criticism as a tool for historical Jesus research, the quest of the historical Jesus has been greatly challenged by the desire to find in the biblical text meaning for today. Attempts to find meaning for today in a study of the historical Jesus can be found dating back to the first quest. Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89), one of the first to recognize the centrality of the Kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching, clearly showed a keen interest in the impact that historical Jesus research would have on

⁸⁴From *Religion in History*: Ernst Troeltsch found in Gregory W. Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 35.

believers today.⁸⁵ To correctly pay attention to Christian doctrine, Ritschl argued, it is necessary to engage in nothing less than a systematic exposition of Christian theology. As Dawes says, "Ritschl believed that any depiction of Jesus which relied on historical reconstruction alone and which did not take into account his impact on believers would be radically incomplete."⁸⁶ The figure that would best articulate the relationship between the biblical text and meaning for today was Rudolf Bultmann. As Rowland and Corner say, Bultmann "recognized that by asking what the Bible meant for a people who lived two millennia ago...we avoid the crucial question of what the Bible means for us today."⁸⁷

Bultmann's existential conclusions, greatly influenced by Martin Heidegger, dealt with how the kerygma of Christ could still be of significance in a modern world. Bultmann's belief, that the interpretation of Scripture required something more than what historical data could offer, marked a significant turning point in the quest of the historical Jesus. To write a story of Jesus, as had been done in the first quest, was simply not acceptable. While Bultmann may have been on the extreme end of biblical interpretation, arguing that the past particulars of history were of little significance, he nonetheless articulated the need to see Jesus speaking to today. What the Bible means for believers today is exactly what liberation theology has focused on.⁸⁸ While Bultmann concluded

⁸⁵ Albrecht Ritschl, "Instruction in the Christian Religion," *Albrecht Ritschl: Three Essays*, trans. Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), pp. 222-32.

⁸⁶ Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 153.

⁸⁷ Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberation Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 79.

⁸⁸ Clearly there are parallels between Bultmann's existential approach to exegesis and liberation exegesis. This is pointed out by Rowland and Corner in *Liberation Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*, pp. 69-74.

that it is enough for faith that Jesus actually existed, theologians of liberation are much closer in thought to Ernst Käsemann who acknowledges that some data concerning the life of Jesus must be historical.

While the quest of the historical Jesus is different in Latin America than in the West, there are clear parallels between the two. Furthermore, the quest of the historical Jesus has laid down a foundation on which to explore the historical Jesus from the standpoint of faith and figures such as Bultmann have clearly articulated the relationship between the biblical text and its meaning for today. Bultmann, in his "The Problem of Hermeneutics" (1950), says, that without a prior "context of living experience to which the subject belongs...the texts are mute."⁸⁹ What liberation theology has done is to give a voice to the biblical text, a voice from the perspective of the poor.

⁸⁹Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," *Essays, Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 254.

CHAPTER TWO

Liberation Theology

Introduction

It was over thirty years ago that liberation theology acquired its name from a book entitled *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutiérrez. Since then, liberation theology has evolved into a reputable and influential movement that seeks to challenge any social or political structure that discriminates against the poor. Often described as a “grass roots church movement,” liberation theology mushroomed out of basic ecclesial communities in hopes of presenting a stance of liberation in the midst of oppression.⁹⁰ As Jon Sobrino is a liberation theologian, this chapter will explore the origin as well as some of the central themes of liberation theology with a view to presenting a firm background to Sobrino’s writings.

Before chapter three’s evaluation of Sobrino’s treatment of the historical Jesus, it is necessary to analyze some of the key tenets of liberation theology that have a direct bearing on Sobrino’s work. Specifically, as Sobrino’s Christology is a systematic theology intent on focusing on the poor and oppressed, it is necessary to first explore why liberation theology is often labeled as a “fresh new way of doing theology.” Of interest is the methodological way in which liberation theologians approach the biblical text and come to interpret Scripture. Flowing from this discussion, this chapter will move on to

⁹⁰Thomas L. Schuberck, *Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models, and Norms* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), p. 6.

explore why and how the poor have become liberation theology's 'object of the preferential.'

Hand in hand with liberation theology's commitment to the poor is the concept of the Kingdom of God. This chapter will, therefore, provide a critical analysis of how the "Kingdom of God" is interpreted in liberation theology. One of the central themes of liberation theology that is of great interest to the quest of the historical Jesus is the role of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God serves as the focal point of interest for liberation theology's commitment of hope and ultimate liberation. As discussion on the Kingdom of God maintains a pervasive role in the writings of Jon Sobrino, it is helpful to focus on the role of the Kingdom of God in liberation theology.

The next section of this chapter will critically explore the historical Jesus in liberation theology. As this thesis will look at the historical Jesus in the writing of Jon Sobrino, it is necessary to understand how the historical Jesus has come to be of such importance in the writings of many liberation theologians. Topics to be explored are why liberation theology begins with an *a priori* affirmation of Jesus' humanity as well as why an 'historical process of liberation' is so central to liberation theology and its focus on the historical Jesus.

Finally, as this thesis evaluates Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus, it is helpful to explore the relationship between liberation theology and the quest of the historical Jesus. Liberation theology is a systematic theology that hopes to relate the biblical stories to today's present-day setting. Following from this, systematic reflection has a higher priority in liberation theology than a concern for historical exactitude. Jesus' words and actions are, therefore, first recognized as objects of faith and of secondary

importance is the factual data behind them. Nonetheless, the quest of the historical Jesus has had a direct impact on the writings of many liberation theologians such as Sobrino. Many of the tools and tactics used by those of the quest of the historical Jesus have been adopted by liberation theologians.

This chapter begins with a brief overview on liberation theology.

What is Liberation Theology?

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, describes liberation theology as a “fundamental threat to the faith of the Church.”⁹¹ In contrast, others have lauded the merits of liberation theology and many reputable scholars and theologians such as Karl Rahner, Robert McAfee Brown and Johannes Metz, contend that liberation theology is a fresh new way of doing theology.⁹² As difficult as it is to come to a consensus on the merits of liberation theology, it is equally as challenging to define the movement as there is no one homogenized liberation theology. Liberation theology as a movement is fluid and takes shape within specific contexts. Phillip Berryman, a priest from Panama who worked in Latin America in a pastoral practice while liberation theology was emerging, offers, in three points, one of the best descriptions of liberation theology:

⁹¹Ratzinger, as quoted in Paul E. Sigmund, “The Development of Liberation Theology: Continuity or Change” *Liberation Theology: The Politics of Latin America*, edited by Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth (Washington: Washington Institute Press, 1988), p. 21.

⁹²Sigmund, “The Development of Liberation Theology: Continuity or Change,” p. 21.

1. An interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor.
2. A critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it.
3. A critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.⁹³

Despite conflicting evaluations over the merits of liberation theology, the movement has nevertheless altered the face of Latin America and has attained an international appeal in countries like Africa and the Philippines. Furthermore, other countries have adopted the liberationist qualities of the movement forever altering political life in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Haiti. During the late seventies and early eighties, liberation theology became a household term as the movement evolved into a media sensation with its striking critique of the social, political, and religious situations of Latin America. Due to liberation theology's indirect assessment of class structures and its unwavering priority to the poor, liberation theology has been continually labeled as a translation of Marxist class struggle into a Christian context.⁹⁴ While many theologians of liberation are unanimous in their desire for social analysis, it is safe to say that attention on Marxism has often exaggerated the restricted role of Marxism in liberation theology. Further, liberation theology's commitment to the poor and the liberation of the poor is very much a Christian theme with a strong biblical lineage.

The origins of liberation theology can be found in a reaction against the political, economic, religious, and cultural situation of Latin America during the 1960's.⁹⁵ The

⁹³Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 6.

⁹⁴Clodovis Boff and George V. Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, trans. Paul Burns, (Maryknowll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 131.

⁹⁵Marc H. Ellis, "Liberation Theology and the Crisis of Western Society," *The Politics of Latin America Liberation Theology*, forward by U.S. Senator Dave Durenburger, Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth eds. (Washington: Washington Institute Press, 1988), p. 51.

movement did not begin as a well-crafted scholarly pursuit; rather, before liberation theology was even known as “liberation theology” it was a “grass roots” movement, originating in the lives of farmers, workers, migrants, day-laborers, and so forth.⁹⁶ In fact, when asked to describe the difference between this new “theology” and the so-called traditional theology of Europe and the United States, a Latin American theologian said “European theology may best be described as ‘prologues in search of courage.’ Latin American theology, on the other hand, should be characterized as ‘courage with primitive weapons.’”⁹⁷

While it may be that the names of such scholars as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo and Jon Sobrino have become known as the “liberation theologians,” the true authors of liberation theology are the poor of the world. Ultimately, it was the swarming multitudes of the poor and suffering whose collective cry for freedom and liberation gave liberation theology its first voice. As Miguez Bonino says: “Liberation theology reflects and guides a Christianity that is identified with those who suffer, that represents a freedom of transformation, and that proclaims a God whose love frees us for justice and faith.”⁹⁸ Boff is quick to point out that “Liberation theology is a cultural and ecclesial phenomenon by no means restricted to a few professional theologians.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 2.

⁹⁷ Alfred T. Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documented History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p. xv.

⁹⁸ Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documented History*, p. xvii.

⁹⁹ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 11.

For the base communities of Latin America the Bible was, and still is, a mirror of life. Seeking to find comfort and solace from situations of oppression, mass poverty, and suffering, many Latin Americans have come to read the Bible with great freedom and have sought to find liberation in the stories of Scripture.¹⁰⁰ This search for liberation through Christian Scripture is the true origin of liberation theology. The motif of liberation from oppression is prevalent throughout both the Old and New Testaments. From the Exodus out of bondage and captivity in Egypt, the overcoming of the struggles of landowners as found in the story of David and Goliath, to the figure of Jesus, who through his suffering, death and resurrection, sought to free peoples from a world of sin, the Bible offers a prominent theme of liberation that the peoples of Latin America have come to interpret and apply to their own situations.

Interpreting the biblical stories for the sole purpose of relevance for today, liberation theology is a systematic theology. For instance, the historical Jesus is understood as a figure whose earthly sufferings reflect the sufferings of the poor and oppressed today. As well, the Kingdom of God is approached in liberation theology as having direct bearing on the liberation of the poor and oppressed today. As Sobrino says: "it is the poor who will guide the fleshing out of what the Reign of God is today."¹⁰¹ Roger Haight, commenting on the essence of liberation theology, says, "the most basic and fundamental experience underlying liberation theology is *the experience of*

¹⁰⁰Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, p. 9.

¹⁰¹Jon Sobrino, "Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology," *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 62.

poverty...but for liberation theology this experience is a *religious* experience”¹⁰² For liberation theology, systematic reflection on the “religious experience” of poverty is the key to the movement. All topics such as the Kingdom of God and the historical Jesus that dominate the writings of liberation theologians should therefore be understood from the standpoint of systematic reflection.

There has been a great maturing in the writings of liberation theology since its initial use of “primitive weapons.” Pablo Richard’s plea, that in order for liberation theology to survive it must have a strong professional or ‘academic’ backing, has been well-fulfilled.¹⁰³ Jon Sobrino, for instance, earned a master’s degree in engineering mechanics from St. Louis University as well as a doctorate in Theology from Hochschule Sankt Gerogen in Frankfurt in 1975. Liberation theologians have pioneered new avenues of theology and clearly established themselves as a reputable force. Describing the merits of the work of liberation theologians, Míguez Bonino says: “Liberation theology, in sum, both continues and radically departs from modern theology. As a continuation, liberation theology represents a radical engagement of Christianity with the world.”¹⁰⁴ Landmarks such as Gutiérrez’s “priority of praxis in theological reflection” and Segundo’s utilization of the “hermeneutical circle” for the purposes of liberation theology have offered rich and complex avenues for theology.¹⁰⁵ Praise of liberation theology has

¹⁰²Roger S.J. Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 16.

¹⁰³Pablo Richard, “Liberation Theology: A Difficult but Possible Future,” *The Future of Liberation Theology*. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro eds. Maryknoll (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 509.

¹⁰⁴Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documented History*, p. xvi.

¹⁰⁵Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documented History*, p. xxii.

labeled it “the first major current in modern theology to develop outside of Europe”¹⁰⁶ and the most influential theological movement since the Second Vatican Council.¹⁰⁷

In terms of its hermeneutical approach to Scripture, liberation theology is best described as “grassroots liberation exegesis.” Liberation theology has been commonly described as offering a fresh new way of doing theology. The cornerstone of this new approach is liberation exegesis: biblical interpretation with a commitment to the poor. To further understand this, it is necessary to carefully explore the hermeneutics of liberation theology.

A New Way of Doing Theology: Liberation Exegesis

Liberation theology methodology is driven by the desire to interpret Scripture with the sole focus of its relevance for present-day reality. While theologians of liberation profess the need for meticulous exegetical study of Scripture, their overall emphasis is on orthopraxis, the behavior of Christians in the world.¹⁰⁸ Theologians of liberation have not entirely done away with the sophistication in historical methodology, but rather have come to a new understanding of interpretation that is relevant for today.

¹⁰⁶Juan C. Scannone, “Theology, Popular Culture, and Discernment,” *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, edited by Rosino Gibellini and Trans. John Dury (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), p. 215.

¹⁰⁷Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documented History*, p. xv.

¹⁰⁸This point is best explained by Donald E. Waltermire, in his *The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino: Latin American Contributions to Contemporary Christology* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), p. 5.

To understand the way in which many liberation theologians approach Scripture, it is essential to look at what is meant by “liberation exegesis.”

Crucial to an understanding of what makes liberation theology’s approach to Scripture unique, is the symbiosis of the liberation scholar or academic and the typical day-laborer of Latin America. Both are considered equal participants of liberation theology and both desire to read the Bible in search of a message for *today*. The interpretation of the Bible in basic ecclesial communities is a profoundly religious experience. Faith is a key component of this interpretation as great freedom is taken with the biblical text. As Carlos Mesters points out, it is not the concerns of historicity that are highly prioritized, but rather the value of the symbolic element in life.¹⁰⁹ Mesters describes this type of interpretation as a “new reading of the Bible.”

Liberationist readings of the Bible are dramatically different from those in the secularized environment of the West. The purpose of reading the Bible in the base ecclesial communities of Latin America is for faith and direction. The Bible is much more than simply an object to be critiqued but rather it is a mirror of life, of the situations of oppression in the contemporary world. While the Enlightenment brought with it a scientific approach to the Bible, the Bible’s relevance for society was lost in an enterprise of academic scrutiny.¹¹⁰ What liberation theology has done is to offer a new approach to Scripture that makes the Bible a ‘text’ of life.

But what is to be said of the need for an educated approach to interpretation? It is not fair to say that those involved in liberation theology are frivolous in their approach to

¹⁰⁹Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, p. 6.

¹¹⁰Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*.

Scripture. Figures such as Segnudo, Boff, Gutiérrez and Sobrino all reflect a clear understanding of the western tools of scholarship and the need for some guidelines while interpreting Scripture. The concern, as Rowland and Corner point out, is that without being careful in biblical exegesis, sections of Scripture will be used to selectively function in support of various positions.¹¹¹ Notwithstanding, an historical-critical awareness in itself does not ease this concern for it brings with it new challenges. Most liberation theologians would agree with Käsemann's concern for the limits of historical-criticism: "the issue today is not whether criticism is right, but where it is to stop."¹¹²

What liberation theologians have attempted to do is find an historical method of interpretation that will embody freedom and yet still adhere to an historical-critical awareness. Liberation theology does, in fact, draw on the wealth of contemporary approaches to interpretation and methodology; however, the primary focus of interpretation remains the dialectic between text and interpreter. As Rowland and Corner point out, this is not to say that the interpreter is given free reign at the expense of the text.¹¹³

Liberation exegesis could simply be labeled "interpretive freedom." This freedom is not without guidelines though and liberation exegesis does profess, but is not limited to, a use of the historical method. Contextual concerns of interpreting Scripture are not a high priority for liberation exegesis. Rather, liberation theologians *creatively*

¹¹¹Rowland and Corner label this type of slanted interpretation "exegetical anarchy" in *Liberation Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 36.

¹¹²Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 36.

¹¹³Rowland and Corner, *Liberation Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*, p. 78.

transpose the history of the Gospels into the present. The hermeneutical key to liberation exegesis is a concern for the poor.¹¹⁴ Within liberation theology, God is understood to be partial to the poor and therefore it follows that interpretation of the biblical text should be given from the vantage point of the grassroots communities in Latin America and the poor of the world. This interpretation of Scripture is done solely from the perspective of the poor. Therefore, liberation exegesis is essentially “grassroots exegesis.” This grassroots exegesis is reflection on Scripture primarily driven to seek what meaning Scripture has for the poor today. This dynamic approach to biblical interpretation is what gives liberation theology its uniqueness.

The very breath of the theology of liberation is its concern for the poor. As Rowland and Corner say, liberation theology would “not exist in any meaningful sense” without the preferential option for the poor.¹¹⁵ As the option for the poor is of such significance within the theology of liberation, it is purposeful to overview how this ‘option’ came about and its significance.

Concern for the Poor

While the historical Jesus may be the starting point for Sobrino’s Christology, Sobrino nonetheless stresses that the “view of the victims” (the poor and oppressed) is

¹¹⁴Rowland and Corner, *Liberation Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*, p. 46.

¹¹⁵Rowland and Corner, *Liberation Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*, p. 43.

central to any liberation theology in general.¹¹⁶ In fact, Sobrino says “the origin, thrust and direction of the theology of liberation is...the experience of God in the poor.”¹¹⁷ In terms of Sobrino’s presentation of the historical Jesus, Sobrino says that: “Christ’s historical life, his mission and his purpose, are described clearly in terms of poverty and his option for the poor.”¹¹⁸ As the concern for the poor constitutes an integral part of Sobrino’s presentation of the historical Jesus, it is purposeful to explore liberation theology’s concern for the poor. Specifically, attention will be placed on what has come to be known as the “preferential option for the poor.”

So who are the poor? The poor are the oppressed, the unemployed, and those who live in an impoverished human situation. As Jaén says, they are “people who live at that economic and social level that is technically called, “absolute poverty, that is, those who live in a truly subhuman situation with regard to food, shelter, health care, work and culture.”¹¹⁹ Many liberation theologians adhere to starting their theologies with the concern for the poor for it is poverty that stands as the central motivation for doing a theology of liberation. Boff, commenting on the origins of liberation theology being rooted in the poor, states: “liberation theology was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor.”¹²⁰ Concern for the poor has rooted itself in every major

¹¹⁶Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 8.

¹¹⁷Jon Sobrino, *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. xi.

¹¹⁸Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonah (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 18.

¹¹⁹Néstor Jaén, *Toward a Liberation Spirituality*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1991), pp. 14-15.

¹²⁰Boff and Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, p. 3.

discussion of liberation theology including the three major events that greatly shaped liberation theology: the Second Vatican Council, the Council of Bishops at Medellin, and the Puebla Synod. Throughout these three meetings the literature of liberation theology began to take root proceeding theologically from the position of the poor.

On January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council became known as the church's openness to the modern world as Vatican II sought to pull down "many of the objective and subjective walls" and remove the church from its cushioned reality.¹²¹ During the opening of the Second Vatican Council on September 11th 1962, Pope John XXIII declared: "The church is and desires to be the church of all, but principally the church of the poor."¹²² While Vatican II may have professed an equal balance between the value of worldly activity and that of religious activity, the council nonetheless seemed to be more concerned with the latter of the two. As Waltermire points out: "The documents of the Second Vatican Council as a whole emphasize a Church of service over a Church of power."¹²³ In fact, Vatican II recognized the importance of defining the role and function of the Church with respect to the poor and afflicted. In Latin America, Vatican II was the door opener of theological production, for up until Vatican II, theologians in Latin America did not contribute much

¹²¹Roberto Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation," *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 4.

¹²²Boff and Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, p. xii.

¹²³Donald E. Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino: Latin American Contributions to Contemporary Christology* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), p. 2.

to the thinking of the universal church.¹²⁴ In effect, Vatican II set the stage for what would become known as the “preferential option for the poor.”

In August of 1968 one hundred and thirty Catholic bishops met in Medellin, Columbia, with the goal of applying Vatican II to Latin America. In the three years after Vatican II, Latin America experienced political upheavals and an unquestionable need for the Church to speak.¹²⁵ Convened by Paul VI, the second meeting of CELAM (Latin American Bishops’ Conference), called for a transformation of society and sought to deal with all facets of life from pastoral work and education to justice and poverty.¹²⁶ At Medellin, a terminology for liberation was crystallized as the bishops frequently used terms such as “liberation” and “base communities” (referring to small lay-led groups of Christians) and also began to speak of an “option for the poor.” Sixteen documents in seven commitments of the Latin American Church were drawn up by the bishops at Medellin but the most noteworthy of these documents was a “Document on Poverty.” It was this document that first spoke of the need for giving “preference to the poorest and neediest.” Nonetheless, the Medellin conference left a good deal of ambiguity and resulted in raising as many questions as it answered.

The phrase “preferential option for the poor” is undoubtedly the most famous phrase to come out of liberation theology. Medellin had encouraged “preference to the poorest and neediest and to those who are segregated for any reason” and since that time the phrase has become one of the cornerstones of liberation theology and become a

¹²⁴Oliveros, “History of the Theology of Liberation,” p. 14.

¹²⁵Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino: Latin American Contributions to Contemporary Christology*, p. 3.

¹²⁶Berryman, *Liberation Theology: The Essential facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond*, pp. 22-23.

common formula for all.¹²⁷ In order to understand the expression “preferential option for the poor,” it is necessary to clarify both “preferential” and “option.” Gutiérrez, stressing that the word “option” has not always been interpreted correctly, says that “this option for the poor is not optional in the sense that a Christian need not necessarily make it;” rather it is “a deep, ongoing solidarity, a voluntary daily involvement with the world of the poor.”¹²⁸ This idea of a ‘preferential’ for the poor stems from the belief that Jesus was poor and demonstrated solidarity with the poor. The term “option” has nonetheless caused a great deal of difficulty in liberation theology. Many have chosen to use the phrase “preferential love” rather than “preferential option” in hopes of softening Medellín’s original commitment; however, John Paul II seems to have deemed both expressions as mutually agreeable, stating in an encyclical: “I should like to mention the *preferential option or love* for the poor.”¹²⁹

In terms of the word “preferential” Sobrino says: “to these poor (i.e. economically poor), Jesus showed undoubted partiality, so that what is now called the option for the poor can be said to start with him.”¹³⁰ Essentially, as Jesus was “partial” to the poor and oppressed, liberation theology proposes that the church should also take a position of partiality towards the poor. As the struggle of poverty is evident within Latin America, the historical Jesus’ empathy with the poor and suffering of his own time reflects a continuance in Jesus’ message that is pertinent to today’s Third World. Today,

¹²⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Option For the Poor,” *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría Maryknoll eds. (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 26.

¹²⁸ Gutiérrez, “Option For the Poor,” p. 26.

¹²⁹ John Paul II, as quoted in Gutiérrez, “Option For the Poor,” p. 27.

¹³⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 81.

“preferential option for the poor” still maintains the same desire and concern for the poor, however, as Hennelly points out, today’s option for the poor has a larger universal translation as “choosing life for the poor rather than death.”¹³¹

As Medellín attempted to clarify the ideas of Vatican II, the Puebla Synod was formed to clarify Medellín. In 1979 CELAM met in Puebla, Mexico to shed light on the relationship between the poor and the rich. In effect, since Medellín there had been an attempt to soften Medellín’s original commitment to the poor.¹³² The Puebla Synod bestowed a powerful endorsement of the need to acknowledge the poor. The plea of Puebla, to “affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation,” became a commonly used slogan.¹³³ On Christological reflection, Puebla entitled a chapter “The Truth about Jesus Christ, the Savior We Proclaim” in which the Synod recognized the importance of the historical Jesus and exploring such topics as Jesus’ poverty, his servant-hood, and his liberating character.¹³⁴

The topics and themes that came out of Vatican II, Medellín and the Puebla Synod greatly shaped the course of liberation theology. Vatican II, with its openness to new ideas and perspectives, alerted the Church to the situation of the poor and oppressed and the necessity of understanding the relationship between the poor and the Church.

¹³¹Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documented History*, p. xxv.

¹³²Berryman, *Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond*, p. 43.

¹³³Puebla Final Document, “A Preferential Option for the Poor.” *Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops* (Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, January 27-February 13, 1979) in *Liberation Theology: A Documented History*, edited by Alfred T. Hennelly. Maryknoll (New York, Orbis Books, 1997), p. 254.

¹³⁴Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, pp. 20-21.

Medellín, which resulted in what has become known as a “new way of doing theology,” continued on with the issues of Vatican II and laid the first steps towards a partiality for the poor.¹³⁵ While offering a different view of history and the Church, Medellín also stressed that all theology must be grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ.¹³⁶ At the Puebla conference, the CELAM adopted a definitive evangelical perspective of the poor and recognized the importance of the many features of Jesus of Nazareth, of the “historical Jesus.”

Liberation theology’s commitment to the poor is one of the most important contributions to the life of the universal Church. As Gutiérrez points out, “Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has become more aware of its mission to serve the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast.”¹³⁷ The plight of the poor continues to be a topic that permeates from today’s liberation theologians. Sobrino emphasizes that the figure of Jesus in liberation theology is nothing less than the “liberator of the poor and marginalized.”¹³⁸ For liberation theology, focus on a Jesus who was poor and associated with the poor and marginalized, offers hope to the poor in the Third World today. Offering Christologies from the vantage point of the poor is essentially what is unique about liberation theology and what is unique about liberation theology’s approach to the biblical text. Throughout liberation theology, all of its central themes are closely tied in with a discussion of the poor. This point is exemplified in the notion of the Kingdom of

¹³⁵ Carlos R. Piar, *Jesus and Liberation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 1.

¹³⁶ Piar, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 1.

¹³⁷ Gutiérrez, “Option For the Poor,” p. 36.

¹³⁸ Jon Sobrino, “Systematic Christology: Jesus Christ, the Absolute Mediator,” *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría eds. Maryknoll (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 139.

God in liberation theology. As the Kingdom of God is one of the most pervasive themes in liberation theology, it is helpful to overview how the Kingdom of God is understood in liberation theology.

The Kingdom of God

The trend in biblical scholarship to view Jesus' message as eschatological has been adopted in liberation theology. The centrality of the Kingdom of God, or Reign of God, as it is more commonly called in liberation theology, found in Jesus' message, is widely accepted among liberation theologians as a message of liberation of the poor. In the writings of Jon Sobrino, the Kingdom of God is of utmost importance. Sobrino says the whole activity of the historical Jesus "must be viewed primarily in terms of the Kingdom of God drawing near to liberate people."¹³⁹ Furthermore, Sobrino contends that it is only possible to understand the historical Jesus "in and through the notion of the Kingdom of God."¹⁴⁰ As the Reign of God maintains such a central position in Sobrino's writings and has a direct bearing on his interpretation of the historical Jesus, it is advantageous to show how the Reign is understood and its role within liberation theology.

The notion of the Kingdom of God in liberation theology comes from the "biblical concept of the Kingdom of God, a vision of societal existence marked by

¹³⁹Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 50.

¹⁴⁰Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 41.

justice, peace, and loving collaboration."¹⁴¹ In Luke's Gospel, Jesus proclaims that there is a distinct division in society between the rich and the poor.¹⁴² Importantly, this distinction has an important tie to the inheritors of the Reign of God: "How happy are you who are poor: yours is the Kingdom of God."¹⁴³ Throughout the writings of liberation theology there is a clear tie between the Reign of God and the poor. Ignacio Ellacuría says that the "evangelical *base* of the Kingdom of God is made up of the poor."¹⁴⁴ Jesus' news of the Kingdom of God is, therefore, considered good news to the poor. As Sobrino says, it is to the poor, the segregated, the despised, the sick, and the helpless that Jesus "addresses his proclamation of the coming Kingdom."¹⁴⁵ Finally, both Clodovis Boff and George V. Pixley state that the Reign of God's focus on the poor is the ultimate symbol for liberation theology.

For liberation theologians, the *eschaton*, the ultimate element in faith, is the Reign of God. Bultmann had stressed that the kerygma of the resurrection was the true eschatological event.¹⁴⁶ In liberation theology, however, the Reign of God is bound with the poor and their liberation. As the message of Jesus is one of liberation, Gutiérrez says, the Reign of God is Jesus' "good news."¹⁴⁷ Systematically thinking, both Gutiérrez and

¹⁴¹Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documented History*, p. xx.

¹⁴²Boff and Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, p. 59.

¹⁴³Luke 6:20

¹⁴⁴Ignacio Ellacuría, "Church of the Poor, Sacrament of Liberation," *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría eds. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 557.

¹⁴⁵Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁶Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 8.

¹⁴⁷Gutiérrez, "Option For the Poor," p. 34.

Sobrino stress that the Reign of God is in fact a Reign of 'life.' By this, Sobrino and Gutiérrez mean that the Reign of God offers life to the poor as the poor are the primary addressees of the Kingdom. As Sobrino says, the term "*life*" means that, with the advent of the Reign, the poor cease to be poor."¹⁴⁸

The Reign of God in liberation theology follows Cullmann's view of embodying both a present and a future component. For most liberation theologians, the Kingdom of God is understood as being actively present within society, alive in liberation throughout history, but also having a future and 'coming' factor. This view follows from the contributions made during the Second Vatican Council that taught "earthly progress can contribute to the better ordering of human society."¹⁴⁹ Commenting on how the future Kingdom will come about, Boff says that "it will come as a result of the human effort that helps gestate the definitive future."¹⁵⁰ For Gutiérrez, the Kingdom is closely tied to the arrival of a 'just' society.¹⁵¹ This society of 'brotherhood' and 'justice' therefore offers a promise of hope.

One of the most significant features of the Kingdom of God for liberation theologians is its historical dimension. Sobrino, Gutiérrez and Boff all stress that the Kingdom is an historical liberation. The Kingdom of God, Gutiérrez stresses, is concerned with "peace, justice, love, and freedom," all of which imply an "historical

¹⁴⁸Sobrino, "Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology," p. 67.

¹⁴⁹Thomas L. Schuberck, *Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models, and Norms* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), p. 26.

¹⁵⁰Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World: the facts, their interpretation, and their meaning yesterday and today*, trans. Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 118.

¹⁵¹Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Maryknoll, 1973), pp. 232-233.

liberation."¹⁵² As the inauguration of the Kingdom has a clear social role, it has often been described as a utopia. The Kingdom does happen within history and transforms history but can the Kingdom ever truly be realized?¹⁵³ Sobrino's answer is, in fact, yes, and no. As the Kingdom takes on an historical dimension, Sobrino says, it insists on its actual realization in history. However, since the Kingdom is indeed a utopia it can never truly be realized in history.¹⁵⁴

To summarize, the Kingdom of God in liberation theology maintains a partiality to the poor. As Juan Luis Segundo says, "the Kingdom of God is not proclaimed to all."¹⁵⁵ For liberation theology, the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor. Liberation finds its basic hope in the Reign of God. Through the actual revitalizing spirit of the Kingdom working out in history the Kingdom offers a transforming optimism to the character of the poor. The Kingdom of God within liberation theology is the "ultimate." By this, the Kingdom is understood as the central message and meaning to liberation theology.

The Historical Jesus in Liberation Theology

While traditional Catholic theology has taken as its starting point the dogmatic formulations of the Council of Chalcedon, many liberation theologians have sought to

¹⁵²Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 167.

¹⁵³For Weiss and Schweitzer the Kingdom of God was entirely future.

¹⁵⁴Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 129.

¹⁵⁵Juan Luis Segundo, "Jesus of Nazareth Yesterday and Today," Vol 3 *The Humanist Christology of Paul* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 132.

first know Jesus as an historical figure.¹⁵⁶ To create an effective, relevant Christology, Boff and Segundo have stressed that the Christology must begin with an *a priori* affirmation of Jesus' humanity.¹⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, in his famous work *A Theology of Liberation*, stresses the need to discover the historical Jesus: "to approach the man Jesus of Nazareth, in whom God was made flesh, to penetrate not only in his teaching, but also in his life...is a task which more and more needs to be undertaken."¹⁵⁸ In fulfillment of Gutiérrez's request, liberation theologians such as Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino have written profusely on the historical Jesus and have sought to offer to the field of liberation theology developed Christologies that take as their starting point the historical Jesus.

Theologians of liberation do profess the totality of Jesus Christ as fully human and fully divine. Nonetheless, many liberation theologians have accorded a *methodological primacy* to the historical Jesus within the totality of Christ.¹⁵⁹ Starting liberation theology with the historical Jesus is, as many liberation theologians state, starting Christology "from below" rather than "from above." Starting Christology "from below," on the concrete historical experience of Jesus, liberation theology offers to ground reflection and praxis in the message of the historical Jesus.

The origins of why many liberation theologians begin with an *a priori* affirmation of Jesus' humanity rather than Jesus' deity can be found in the Enlightenment. It was from the Enlightenment with its empirical and scientific milieu that scholarly interest in

¹⁵⁶Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁷Piars, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 20.

¹⁵⁸Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 226.

¹⁵⁹Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 55.

the historical Jesus was heightened. Beginning with the church's inception, theological primacy has been given to the glorified Christ, the "Christ of faith."¹⁶⁰ Piar, commenting on this point, says: "The focus on the Christ of faith led to such an emphasis on the transcendent that Christology lost all relevance to the work-a-day world; it fell short of affirming Christian praxis."¹⁶¹ The result of the Enlightenment and specifically the resultant quest of the historical Jesus was a turn from a focus on christological dogma to the challenge of finding the historical Jesus.

While liberation theologians seek to ultimately profess the totality of Christ, clarity in stressing this "totality" has often been misleading and unapparent. Many liberation theologians have been highly criticized as diminishing Christ's humanity and charged with presenting an adoptionist perspective of Jesus that emphasizes Christ's humanity over and above his divinity.¹⁶² Nevertheless, presenting a Jesus that is of no relevance for today (i.e. focusing on the Christ of faith) continues to be a recurring concern of many liberation theologians such as Boff, Gutiérrez, Segundo and Sobrino. Gutiérrez, highlighting the problem of stressing the divinity of Christ over and above Christ's humanity, argues that Christianity has led to an "iconization" of the life of Jesus making the life of Jesus "no longer a human life, submerged in history, but a theological life."¹⁶³ As liberation theology emphasizes liberating praxis it seeks to shift accent from the Jesus of the kerygma to the Jesus of history. This Jesus, a Jesus steeped in a concrete

¹⁶⁰Piar, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 17.

¹⁶¹Piar, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 17.

¹⁶²John P Meier, "The Bible as a Source for Theology," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* (43, 1988), p. 19.

¹⁶³Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 225-6. This idea of Jesus being turned into an "icon" is also found in J. Comblin, *Teología de la revolución* [Bilbao, 1973], p. 306.

historical experience offers meaning for a liberationist theology that seeks to ground itself in historical praxis. As Sobrino says, "there is no *spiritual* life without actual *historical* life."¹⁶⁴

In liberation theology the historical experience of the poor, the actual real-life situations of hardship and oppression bring out the true need for faith in an historically liberating Christ. All facets of life, including interpretation of Scripture, are molded together so as to encounter liberation. With a turn to existential and historical interpretation of Christian truth, liberation theology, as Haight says: "focuses not simply on the fact of Jesus but on *the dynamic unfolding of the actual life and history of Jesus*."¹⁶⁵ As such, the historical Jesus has become the central component for systematic reflection in the writings of many liberation theologians.

Crucial to an understanding of the historical Jesus in liberation theology is what has been called the "experience of historicity." As liberation theology is based on the concrete praxis and experience of faith, it has sought to ground itself in historical reality, or as Sobrino says, the "historical (in history) liberation of the oppressed peoples of the earth."¹⁶⁶ Haight, expressing that human existence is historical, says, "The experience of historicity, of sharing in an *historical consciousness*, is a presupposition of liberation theology even as it is latent in the way it experiences poverty."¹⁶⁷ The historical Jesus, being poor himself, was sympathetic to the plight of the marginalized of society. For

¹⁶⁴Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 4.

¹⁶⁵Roger S.J. Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 107.

¹⁶⁶Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁷Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology*, p. 17.

liberation theology, Jesus' actions and deeds were therefore historically liberating. This liberating quality of Jesus' life is therefore meant to transcend history. As Jesus liberated the poor of his time, theologians of liberation stress that believers today should actively promote the liberation of the poor. Faith in Jesus is therefore faith in a hope of liberation.

Throughout the writings of many liberation theologians, mention of the "historical experience," or of the "historical process" is common. Boff, for instance, stresses that in order to understand liberation theology, "we must first understand and take an active part in the real and *historical process* of liberating the oppressed"¹⁶⁸ (*italics mine*). It is this search for the "historical process" that merits a return to the historical Jesus. As liberation theology professes that the history of today must be bound with the history of Jesus in the Gospels, Sobrino stresses that the "past and present constitute mutually clarifying poles."¹⁶⁹ As such, a need arises to know Jesus of Nazareth, and to gain an ever-increasing knowledge of who Jesus was and is.

For many liberation theologians, the historical Jesus is the cornerstone on which they develop their liberation Christologies. The history of Jesus, his actions and praxis in history, embody liberation *action* in history. Christian practice can therefore be grounded in history rather than being solely focused on an abstract Christ that serves no relevance for the poor and oppressed today; hence, here lies liberation theology's plea to begin with an *a priori* affirmation of Jesus' humanity. As the historical Jesus is such a prevalent topic in liberation theology and as study on the historical Jesus is the focus of the quest of

¹⁶⁸Boff and Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁹Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, p. 174.

the historical Jesus, the next section of this chapter discusses some of the differences and similarities between the two with regards to the historical Jesus.

Liberation Theology and the Quest of the Historical Jesus

There is a recognizable distance between the first “questers” of the nineteenth century and liberation theologians today. The distance is made evident in the understanding that liberation theology is a systematic theology whereas the quest of the historical Jesus began as an attempt to distinguish what is historical in the life of Jesus from outside the bias of faith or dogma. Nonetheless, while today’s liberation theologians do not share the same skepticism towards faith as those in the first quest, theologians of liberation are indebted to life-of-Jesus research for work done on the historical Jesus. Specifically, in their presentation of the historical Jesus, liberation theologians embody many of the tools and tactics used in life-of-Jesus research. While searching for an historical Jesus that is relevant to the lives of believers today, liberation theology has not abandoned the tools and methods of biblical scholarship. Rather, liberation theology can be said to take a radical re-orientation of these methods.

Liberation theology’s priority on the historical Jesus has been described as bringing a new and different atmosphere when it comes to the use of “Jesus-research.”¹⁷⁰ Meier contends that because the Christologies of liberation theologians such as Sobrino and Segundo have been “forged in the furnace of oppression, violence and the need for a

¹⁷⁰Meier, “The Bible as a Source for Theology,” p. 1.

liberation praxis and theology," they "represent a fierce drive to make academic theology speak to and be responsible to the lived Christianity of a suffering people yearning for liberation."¹⁷¹ While the figure of the historical Jesus, or "historicized Jesus" has become a central focus of Christology in liberation theology, many theologians such as Sobrino and Segundo do not approach the historical Jesus in hopes of writing a biography of Jesus. Rather, the historicist presumption of creating "lives" of Jesus such as Strauss and Renan hoped to do, is considered of little value in a systematic theology.

The hermeneutical approach of the early questers, that of the application of the historical-critical method to the text, or as Piar says, "distinguishing fact from myth," is looked on rather harshly by liberation theologians such as Sobrino and Segundo.¹⁷² This is not to say that theologians of liberation do not employ the tools of critical scholarship (i.e. historical-criticism) but, rather, they attempt to steer clear of a one-sided approach in hope of maintaining a balance between faith and what history recounts.

One of the most common approaches to the historical Jesus that has permeated the entire quest is a trend to acquire a list of concrete facts of the life of Jesus (for example, the Jesus Seminar). While not all those involved in life-of-Jesus have attempted to define a list of undisputable facts of the historical Jesus, attempts to do so can be found from Reimarus up to the present day with Sanders. One of the most challenging obstacles to defining such a list is the awareness that the Gospels themselves were written by believers and for believers. Strauss had made this point clearly evident as he stressed that sections of the New Testament were clearly influenced by the Evangelist's own

¹⁷¹Meier, "The Bible as a Source for Theology," p. 2.

¹⁷²Piar, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 51.

interpretation. Awareness that the Gospels are theological documents is clearly found in the writings of liberation theologians. Approaching historical 'facts' of the life of Jesus, liberation theology's position is reminiscent of Weisse who argued that only the basic outline of the life of Jesus is historically accurate.¹⁷³

In terms of myth, Bultmann sought to interpret Jesus through an existential approach and ended up presenting a "demythologization" of the Gospels. For Bultmann, the "Christ of faith" is alone significant enough for theology and the only thing that matters about Jesus' history was in fact that Jesus was an historical figure.¹⁷⁴

Theologians of liberation, however, do not share the skepticism of Bultmann that history is needless for faith. Rather, as the post-Bultmannians argue, the historicity of Jesus has a key importance for faith. In this sense, liberation theologians resemble the post-Bultmannians such as Ernst Käsemann and Günther Bornkmann in the need to find continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.¹⁷⁵ What distinguishes liberation theology from other European theology in the orbit of the "quest" for the historical Jesus is liberation theology's desire to do systematic reflection.

The central question that liberation theologians seek to answer is: "What is the significance of Jesus Christ for the liberating praxis which is needed in Latin America today?"¹⁷⁶ Liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff and Juan Luis Segundo still maintain the importance of the concrete history of Jesus. Boff, Segundo Galilea, Ignacio Ellacuría and numerous others follow the plea of Gustavo Gutiérrez, "to approach the

¹⁷³Weisse, *Die evangelische Geschichte kritisch und philosophisch bearbeitet*.

¹⁷⁴Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*.

¹⁷⁵Piars, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 51.

¹⁷⁶Piars, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 10.

man Jesus of Nazareth, in whom God was made flesh, to penetrate not only in his teaching, but in his life, what it is that gives his word an immediate, concrete context, is a task which more and more needs to be undertaken."¹⁷⁷

Ultimately, the distinguishing factor between critical life-of-Jesus study and liberation theology's approach to the historical Jesus is that of systematic reflection. Appeal to the historical Jesus in liberation theology is done solely on the basis of the act of believing and conversion. The historicized Jesus operates as a focus for personal access to Jesus. As Sobrino says, "the real starting point is always, in one way, overall faith in Christ, but the *methodological* starting point continues to be the historical Jesus."¹⁷⁸ All discipleship, praxis and practice are therefore grounded on the historical Jesus.

¹⁷⁷Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 226.

¹⁷⁸Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 55.

CHAPTER THREE

The Historical Jesus in the Writings of Jon Sobrino

Introduction

In *Christology at the Crossroads* Jon Sobrino says, "my starting point is the historical Jesus."¹⁷⁹ With a concern to concretize his Christology on the dialectic of faith and oppression, Sobrino has focused on the historical Jesus in hopes of leading to a renewal of faith in Latin America.¹⁸⁰ Taking the historical Jesus methodologically as the starting point for Christology, Sobrino says, offers guidance and orientation for Latin American liberation theology. Sobrino, interested in systematic reflection, argues there is a clear parallel between the situations of the poor in Jesus' day with that of the present situation in Latin America; furthermore, Sobrino stresses that the best way to give expression to faith in Latin America is through a comparison of the present-day situation with the situation of the historical Jesus.¹⁸¹

Exploration of the historical Jesus is undertaken, as Sobrino says, with the hope of securing the "traits of Jesus which are most securely guaranteed by exegesis, and which offer us a most trustworthy image of the historical Jesus."¹⁸² As a warning to those who

¹⁷⁹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 3.

¹⁸⁰Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino: Latin American Contributions to Contemporary Christology*, p. 61.

¹⁸¹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁸²Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 14.

may criticize his Christology of being narrowly focused, Sobrino argues that his interpretation of the historical Jesus will not be given *directly* in terms of the situation in Latin America but rather from the *standpoint* of the Latin American situation.¹⁸³ Essentially, this thesis intends to explore whether or not Sobrino is successful in presenting the historical Jesus from the *standpoint* of Latin America while still keeping faith with the tools of critical scholarship and exegesis. Previous quests for the historical Jesus offer a history of interpretations and presentations of the historical Jesus. It is from an analysis of the failures and successes of the quests that Sobrino's own rendering of the historical Jesus can best be evaluated.

To begin, it is necessary to first explore the methodology used by Sobrino in his presentation of the historical Jesus. Specifically, attention will be placed on Sobrino's treatment of 'history' and his awareness of the need for historical-exegetical study of the Gospels. Since this thesis will incorporate a discussion of the quest of the historical Jesus into Sobrino's own presentation, attention will be directed on how Sobrino's methodology compares and contrasts with that of the quest.

Following from this, an evaluation of Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus will focus on two aspects of his Christology. First, a central theme of Sobrino's Christology is 'conflict and crisis.' The historical Jesus, for Sobrino, underwent a crisis after experiencing rejection and opposition to his ministry. Jesus' faith and perseverance amidst this conflict, Sobrino says, offer hope for those in Latin America today. To explore the topic of 'conflict and crisis' three key themes will be critically evaluated: Jesus' crisis in Galilee, Jesus and the Kingdom of God, and finally Jesus and his

¹⁸³Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 78.

temptation. The second aspect this chapter will explore is the social role of Jesus. Throughout the quest of the historical Jesus, scholars have arrived at various 'images' or 'portraits' of the life of the historical Jesus. For instance, Morton Smith believed Jesus to be a magician and F. Gerald Downing saw Jesus as a cynic philosopher. For Sobrino, his 'portrait' of the historical Jesus is greatly influenced by his desire to see the historical Jesus as a liberator of the poor. Specifically, attention will be placed on Jesus' preference for the poor and how Sobrino links that focus to a liberating focus for the exploited and oppressed peoples of Latin America.

Through an exploration of these two aspects of Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus, that of 'crisis and conflict' and the social role of the historical Jesus, it is possible to carefully and critically evaluate Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus.

Methodology

Sobrino prefaces all his major works on Christology with an explication of his methodology. Sobrino's concern for methodology stems from his sensitivity to a "crisis of existence" in the Latin American church.¹⁸⁴ Sobrino contends that liberation theology is forced to evaluate the very question of who is Jesus Christ and who is the God revealed in him. Answering this question, Sobrino contends that his approach to Christology intends to be "ecclesial, historical, and trinitarian."¹⁸⁵ The starting point for an evaluation

¹⁸⁴Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino: Latin American Contributions to Contemporary Christology*, p. 54.

¹⁸⁵Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. xx.

of Sobrino's work should begin with an understanding of these three points for it is on these points that Sobrino shapes his presentation of the historical Jesus.

First, Sobrino argues that his Christology seeks to be ecclesial: "it is ecclesial in that it reflects the life and praxis of many ecclesial communities in Latin America."¹⁸⁶ Essentially, Sobrino means that Christianity can only be understood in light of one's own situation and praxis. On the second point, that of Sobrino's theology being "historical," Sobrino emphasizes that the *starting point* of Christology is "the affirmation that this Christ is the Jesus of history."¹⁸⁷ Historical importance is placed on such "categories" as sin and conflict.¹⁸⁸ For Sobrino, conflict in the life of Jesus presupposes a "process of evolution" within Jesus. As such, Sobrino stresses that the history of Jesus will be viewed in terms of conflict and evolution rather than "idealistic terms." Finally, Sobrino says his Christology is "trinitarian." In effect, Sobrino says that reflection on the historical Jesus can only be carried out with due respect for Christian theology. Considering that Christology is part of theology, Sobrino says, "I am suggesting that we cannot do Christology at all except within the framework of the trinitarian reality of God."¹⁸⁹

For his presentation of the historical Jesus, all three components of Sobrino's methodology (ecclesial, historical, and trinitarian) are of equal importance. For purposes of this thesis, discussion on the historical Jesus in Sobrino's Christology falls primarily

¹⁸⁶Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. xx.

¹⁸⁷Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. xxi.

¹⁸⁸Sobrino says in *Christology at the Crossroads*, that Jesus understands sin as saying no to the kingdom of God, p. 51.

¹⁸⁹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. xxiv.

on the second component, that of his Christology being historical. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Sobrino is relentless in his desire to present a *theological* work of relevance for *ecclesial* communities. In order to effectively understand Sobrino's methodology it is therefore necessary to explore how his treatment of the historical Jesus is guided by his desire to do systematic reflection. Further, since Sobrino has employed the tools of western scholarship in his recovery of the historical Jesus, it is purposeful to come to an understanding of how Sobrino uses the tools of western biblical scholarship.

Systematic Reflection

As the nature of liberation theology proclaims a systematic approach to the life of Jesus, it is purposeful to begin a critique of Sobrino's historical Jesus from the standpoint of systematic reflection. Systematic theology is defined as a "branch of theology concerned with summarizing the doctrinal traditions of a religion especially with a view to relating the traditions convincingly to the religions' present-day setting."¹⁹⁰ For Sobrino, focus on the historical Jesus gives meaning to the lives of the poor and suffering today in that approaching the historical Jesus "seeks personal access to Jesus."¹⁹¹ Since Sobrino's work is a work of systematic reflection, it is essential to clarify why he is interested in the historical Jesus as well as what it means to discuss the 'historical' Jesus.

¹⁹⁰Merriam Webster's dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

¹⁹¹Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 54.

Throughout his writings, Sobrino goes to great length to clarify the distinction between what he means by the “historical Jesus” and what European scholarship has meant when it uses the term “historical Jesus.”¹⁹² In fact, Sobrino adamantly warns that those who use western methods of criticism should not ignore the “sound pastoral concern” of Latin America Christologies in order to “give answers to the questions thrown up by their secularized environments.”¹⁹³

When Sobrino discusses the historical Jesus he does so to gain “access” to Jesus for “guidance and orientation.”¹⁹⁴ Clearly Sobrino’s interest in the historical Jesus is driven by more than simply writing a biography of Jesus. The historical Jesus, for Sobrino, offers direction to those in Latin America today. This point is furthered with Sobrino’s desire to begin his Christology with an *a priori* focus on Jesus’ humanity. By so doing, Sobrino hopes to focus on the elements of Jesus’ humanity that have the most relevance for the situation in Latin America today.¹⁹⁵ To do this Sobrino says that his purpose is to discover the ‘historicized Jesus’ rather than simply the historical Jesus.

Sobrino argues that the task of finding in Jesus the features that best relate to the present situation of those in Latin America is the task of “discovering the historical Jesus through the historicized Jesus.”¹⁹⁶ In order to come to terms with this statement, it is critical to understand what Sobrino means when he speaks of the “historical” Jesus.

¹⁹²The best example of this is given in Sobrino’s *Jesus the Liberator*, pp. 59-61.

¹⁹³Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 49.

¹⁹⁴Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 10.

¹⁹⁵Sobrino is clearly in agreement with Leonardo Boff who states that focus on the historical Jesus in liberation theology offers “a structural similarity between the situations in Jesus’ day and those in our own time.” Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, p. 279.

¹⁹⁶Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 73.

While Sobrino condemns any attempt to locate the historical Jesus solely from the methods of the “naively biographical quest,” he has come to the shared consensus among many other liberation theologians that it is almost impossible to know much about Jesus with accuracy.¹⁹⁷ Concerning the reliability of the Gospel narratives as historically accurate, “factual data,” Sobrino argues that historical exactitude concerning Jesus is not immediately accessible from the Gospel narratives.¹⁹⁸

So, to return to Sobrino’s conception of “history,” it is necessary to explore what he means by finding the “historical Jesus through the historicized Jesus.” Sobrino emphasizes that the most historical element in the life of Jesus is his practice.¹⁹⁹ To locate this ‘practice’, Sobrino turns to Scripture and seeks to find the most “historical aspects of Jesus.” The Scripture Sobrino speaks of are passages on the historical Jesus that speak of his reality, a reality that places him in relationships, situations, and actual experiences of real life. Concentrating on Jesus’ practice, Sobrino contends, offers access to Jesus.²⁰⁰ Therefore, when Sobrino speaks of not being interested in “factual data,” he is rather referring to an emphasis on practice over and above “what can be situated in space and in time.”²⁰¹ It is not the actual “history” or “facts” of Jesus that Sobrino says he is interested in; rather, Sobrino’s concern is what stands out about Jesus’ character and actions. For Sobrino, it is the value of reflection on Jesus’ actions and character that helps people

¹⁹⁷Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 48.

¹⁹⁸Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 73.

¹⁹⁹Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 66.

²⁰⁰Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 54.

²⁰¹Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 66.

formulate “ultimate questions common to everyone and giving them specific responses.”²⁰²

Previous approaches to Christology, Sobrino says, were under the influence of the Enlightenment that advocated a “fetishism of historical facts.”²⁰³ Sobrino is quick to condemn this approach as he argues that in an attempt to free individuals from “myths and authorities,” first-Enlightenment suspicion lost the realization that faith is a central component for understanding the Gospel narratives. Commenting on the Gospels, Sobrino says, “It is well known the Gospels were written by believers for believers and that therefore they should not be expected to tell the life of Jesus, but to give a theological interpretation of his life.”²⁰⁴ In fact, Sobrino contends that theology is a necessary component for any Christology that hopes to explore the historical Jesus. The task of going back to Jesus, or focusing on the historicized Christ, as Sobrino hopes to do, offers substance to believers’ faith and encouragement to their lives. Being caught up in the facts of “history,” however, Sobrino says, reflects an approach that is so objective that it loses any ability to mirror the experience of Latin American Christians.

Sobrino and the Tools of Western Scholarship

While Sobrino presents his Christology from the perspective of systematic reflection, or to ‘mirror’ the experiences in Latin America, it is essential to note that

²⁰²Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, p. 3.

²⁰³Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 248.

²⁰⁴Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 59.

Sobrino does not disregard the historical tools of biblical scholarship. As this chapter intends to explore Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus with respect to the quest of the historical Jesus, it is necessary to comment on how and why Sobrino uses the tools of western biblical scholarship. As Sobrino's Christology is a work of systematic theology, it would at first seem difficult to evaluate Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus from an historical-critical approach. However, while Sobrino's intentions in recovering the historical Jesus may be different from those engaged in life-of-Jesus research, Sobrino nonetheless admits to using the tools of modern biblical scholarship.

Sobrino does claim to be doing something much more than simply exploring the historical Jesus in the same way that European theologians approach the historical Jesus. He claims that previous attempts to explore the historical Jesus have been blinded by the authors' own desire to interpret the Gospels from outside the basis of faith and in so doing have missed the fact that the Gospels are theological documents and should be interpreted from a faith position. Sobrino concludes that this is what makes the Jesus he presents different in Latin America from in Europe.²⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Sobrino contends that liberation theology as a whole "accepts the reservations imposed by historical-criticism."²⁰⁶ Furthermore, having studied in the United States and Germany, Sobrino shows signs of being indebted to such western scholars as Pannenberg, Bultmann, Moltmann and Rahner.

In *Jesus in Latin America*, Sobrino states that while liberation theology has not determined criteria for judging historicity, it does hold to the criteria for studying

²⁰⁵Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 50.

²⁰⁶Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 61.

historicity of the Gospels as outlined by Edward Schillebeeckx.²⁰⁷ In his book entitled *Jesus*, Schillebeeckx says that the historical Jesus is retrievable by the methods of historical-criticism.²⁰⁸ This is one of the central tenets of the quest of the historical Jesus as scholars adamantly profess that what occurs in history is broader than the history recoverable by an historian.²⁰⁹ Therefore, any attempt to recover the “real” Jesus by scholarship is impossible; rather, what is termed ‘historical’ becomes what can be established by objective scholarship.²¹⁰ Sobrino claims that any logical evaluation of the historical Jesus depends on the “necessity of meticulous exegetical and historico-critical work” when exploring history as presented in the Gospels.²¹¹

Commenting on liberation theology’s approach to historio-critical work, Sobrino says that while liberation theology is not primarily interested in ‘facts’ about Jesus, it does not ignore the *search* for facts. The guiding principle, Sobrino says, is that the Gospels are to be understood as “accounts of faith as literary criticism has shown.”²¹² Sobrino does understand that to approach the historical Jesus, due caution should be given to the guidelines imposed by historical-criticism and western methods of biblical scholarship. Sobrino says that his own treatment of the historical Jesus is done “with due respect for all the precautions imposed by critical exegesis.”²¹³ In fact, Sobrino contends

²⁰⁷Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 74.

²⁰⁸Taken from John P Meier, “The Bible as a Source for Theology,” p. 6. Meier is quoting Schillebeeckx from his book *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979), pp. 67-71.

²⁰⁹Meier, “The Bible as a Source for Theology,” p. 6.

²¹⁰Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and Other Essays*, p. 26

²¹¹Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 75.

²¹²Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 61.

²¹³Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 352.

that in order to be able to confess meaningfully that Jesus is Christ, it is necessary to know and analyze data about him.²¹⁴ While Sobrino's motive may be to present a Jesus who best exemplifies the qualities of liberation, Sobrino, nonetheless, hopes to remain faithful to historical-scholarship.²¹⁵

In terms of the basic data or facts of the historical Jesus, Sobrino contends that the following are historically accurate:

Jesus' baptism by John, a certain initial success in his ministry, some early conflicts, the selection and dispatch of a group of followers, the use of parables, a crisis toward the middle or end of his public life, the journey to Jerusalem, some kind of meal with those close to him, his arrest, and his crucifixion.²¹⁶

To begin an analysis of the historical Jesus in the writings of Jon Sobrino, it is purposeful to start with Jesus' conflict and crisis.

Conflict and Crisis

One of the most pervasive themes running throughout Sobrino's Christology is the concept of what he calls "faith in conflict."²¹⁷ As liberation theology is interested in

²¹⁴Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 38.

²¹⁵Carlos Piar also agrees that liberation theologians such as Sobrino are dependent on the tools of western scholarship. Piar says that "Liberation theologians, like many contemporary theologians, presuppose the validity of historicism and utilize it...in their consideration of the biblical text." Found in Piar, *Jesus and Liberation: A Critical Analysis of the Christology of Latin American Liberation Theology*, p. 50.

²¹⁶Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 74.

²¹⁷Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 89ff.

the expression of faith today in situations of oppression and conflict, Sobrino seeks to ground this faith in the historical figure of Jesus who, Sobrino contends, had a “crisis toward the middle or end of his public life.”²¹⁸ From this “crisis” in the life of Jesus, Sobrino identifies an “evolution” or “self-awareness” going on in the life of Jesus. Sobrino says in *Christology at the Crossroads*, that his goal as a liberation theologian is to see Jesus “in the historical process of change and development.”²¹⁹ For Sobrino, a Jesus who experiences “crisis” and has an evolving faith amidst conflict offers a recognizable figure for Latin Americans who hope to relate their own situations to that of Jesus. It is the historical significance of Jesus’ evolving character, his ongoing crisis of self-awareness, that is a central component of Sobrino’s Christology.

As mentioned previously, it is not really the ‘historical Jesus’ that is of utmost importance for Sobrino, but rather it is the historicizing of the historical Jesus for today. As Piar says, Sobrino hopes to focus “more on the *meaning* for today of the events in Jesus’ life than on the *actuality* or historicity of the events.”²²⁰ Further, the historicity of Jesus’ specific words and deeds are not as important for Sobrino as the historicity of his overall intentions, attitudes, and disposition.²²¹ For Sobrino, Jesus’ ‘intentions,’ ‘attitudes’ and ‘disposition’ are of key importance to his Christology. This is not to say that historical-criticism does not have a role in uncovering information about the historical Jesus, but rather, Sobrino is heavily reliant on the exegetical tools of modern scholarship in discovering Jesus’ intentions, attitudes and disposition.

²¹⁸Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 74.

²¹⁹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 84.

²²⁰Piar, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 55.

²²¹Piar, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 55.

To reflect back on Sobrino's methodology where he contends his Christology intends to be ecclesial, historical, and trinitarian, Sobrino stresses that conflict in the life of Jesus presupposes a "process of evolution" within Jesus. The culmination of this 'process' or evolution in the life of Jesus is best exemplified in three topics: Jesus' crisis in Galilee, Jesus and the Kingdom of God, and finally, Jesus and temptation. Significant for this study is that Sobrino grounds this 'evolution' in the life of Jesus on historical events. In the analysis of these three topics, critical attention will be given to Sobrino's method and approach to the Gospels as well as Sobrino's adherence to or departure from historical-critical scholarship.

Galilean Crisis

The idea of a "Galilean crisis" initially appeared in Sobrino's first work on Christology, *Christology at the Crossroads*, and continued to be prevalent throughout his later works.²²² Dividing Jesus' public life into two distinct phases, Sobrino claims that Jesus encountered conflict and opposition in Galilee and ended up abandoning his initial mission to the heart of Galilee.²²³ As a result, Jesus headed first to Caesarea Philippi and then towards the Decapolis on the borders of Syria and Phoenicia. This geographical break (hence the title 'Galilean crisis') Sobrino says, reflects "an even deeper break in the

²²²The idea that Jesus underwent a crisis at Galilee that largely affected his life and mission can be found in *Christology at the Crossroads* (1978), *Jesus in Latin America* (1987), and *Jesus the Liberator* (1999).

²²³Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 93.

person of Jesus himself."²²⁴ Sobrino contends that Jesus' crisis in Galilee disrupted not only his mission but his whole understanding of his relationship to God.²²⁵ Not only did Jesus fail in his mission to Galilee but he failed in predicting the time of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The key to understanding Sobrino's motivation for presenting a 'crisis' in the life of the historical Jesus is the theme of 'conflict.' The crisis that Jesus underwent in Galilee was, as Sobrino puts it "mediated through his external conflicts."²²⁶ It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, "only a God who suffers can save us."²²⁷ In many respects, liberation theology takes this principle as part of the liberation experience. Sobrino argues that it is not only suffering, but faith lived out in conflict that is of utmost importance for any historical theology of liberation. The history of Jesus, Sobrino says, should be understood in terms of conflict rather than "idealistic terms."²²⁸ In the relationship between the conflict-ridden situation of the historical Jesus and that of Latin America today, Sobrino argues that "change and conflict are part of every movement in history....that is why change and conversion are incumbent on any historical subject or agent."²²⁹ Only through crisis and conflict in Jesus' life, Sobrino says, is it possible to

²²⁴Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 93.

²²⁵Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 165.

²²⁶Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 90.

²²⁷Found in Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 197.

²²⁸Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. xxii.

²²⁹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 85.

see “real growth and development of his awareness.”²³⁰ The awareness Sobrino speaks of is the fashioning out of Jesus’ learning that he is human and God’s son.

Sobrino, concerned with the faith of the communities in Latin America, sees the Galilean crisis as the pinnacle of Jesus’ faith worked out amidst conflict. Essentially, Jesus had to learn to trust in the Father like any human being in history while experiencing conflict. Sobrino stresses that such a perspective on Jesus’ humanity does not deny his divinity, but rather shows openness towards the Father. With the crowds rejecting him and the religious leaders not accepting him, Sobrino argues that Jesus is forced to realize that his mission had failed as he had previously understood it.

Sobrino believes that this “rupture in his inner consciousness,” as a result of failure and abandonment, suggests a rupture in Jesus’ faith. Essentially, Sobrino speaks of this happening in Jesus’ life as his historical way of living out his trust in the Father. After the Galilean crisis Jesus overcomes his crisis with a “thoroughly reshaped faith.”²³¹ What this means for liberation theology, Sobrino contends, is that faith is made concrete in praxis. Piar, commenting on this point, says as life is a “journey of faith and the twists and turns on that journey cannot be foreknown... whatever conflicts they might encounter... they must nevertheless maintain their commitment to God.”²³² Therefore, the key reason why Sobrino points to a conflict in Galilee is to illustrate the steadfastness of Jesus’ faith.

Sobrino’s desire to see Jesus’ life as a period of success and failures is an integral part of his Christology. Almost as if in response to those who would challenge the

²³⁰Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 364.

²³¹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 94.

²³²Piar, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 29.

conception of a 'Galilean crisis,' Sobrino says that "Jesus has been changed and this change has not been simply a peaceful evolution. Whether one calls it "crisis" or not, or whether it can be dated and located as "Galilean" or not, is secondary."²³³ Clearly Sobrino is interested in emphasizing the importance of such a crisis rather than presenting an accurate historicity of the events. To continue with a discussion on the historical reliability of the Galilean crisis and to further an understanding of 'conflict and crisis' in Sobrino's Christology, it is advantageous to turn the discussion towards eschatology.

Kingdom of God

The most all-embracing theological concept concerned with "liberation" is the Kingdom of God. Sobrino points out that Jesus "preached not merely 'God' but 'the Kingdom of God.'"²³⁴ This point is of significance because Sobrino argues that all of Jesus' activities including miracles and his pardoning of sins, "must be viewed primarily in terms of the Kingdom of God drawing near to liberate people."²³⁵ The Kingdom of God is, therefore, a central concept to Sobrino's Christology as Sobrino understands the life of Jesus to be inextricably bound up with the Kingdom. For Sobrino, the idea of an evolution and self-awareness going on in the life of Jesus is exemplified in Jesus' relationship with the Kingdom of God.

²³³Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 152.

²³⁴Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 44.

²³⁵Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 50.

In terms of the “evolution” going on in the life of Jesus, Sobrino claims that Jesus moves from no longer simply proclaiming and anticipating the Kingdom, to actually being the only way “in which one can come to understand that God is drawing near to human beings and how he is doing it.”²³⁶ To begin with, Sobrino marks this transition in two basic phases. In the first phase of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus believes that the Kingdom is taking place *in and through* his proclamation of its nearness.²³⁷ In the second phase of his ministry, Jesus has come to re-evaluate his faith and mission. Jesus comes to understand that he must become a sacrifice for the Kingdom to be inaugurated. Sobrino believes that in the second phase, after Jesus’ “failure with the masses and his fights with those in power,” his life was threatened and the work of “implanting the Kingdom took on the features of the work attributed to the suffering Servant of Yahweh.”²³⁸ In effect, Sobrino stresses that Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom demonstrated a faith in God’s plan, a plan that would ultimately mean Jesus’ own death.

Sobrino contends that Jesus’ realization of his role with respect to the coming Kingdom reflects an “awareness” that came about in the life of Jesus. For instance, Sobrino says that Jesus became “aware” that the Kingdom of God had arrived in a hidden form and would soon reveal its power. The awareness of Jesus’ salvific function, for Sobrino, reflects the need to take action and the demand for discipleship. In the case of the twelve apostles, Sobrino says that after Jesus’ failure with the masses, the twelve had to now follow the “suffering-laden” pathway presented by Christ himself. Jesus, in

²³⁶Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 59.

²³⁷Karl Rahner, *Christology – systematically and exegetically* (Freiburg: Herder, 1972), p. 31.

²³⁸Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 58.

essence, was the catalyst for their discipleship and “their discipleship [was] now typified by Jesus in all his historical concreteness.”²³⁹ Furthermore, Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom of God ‘evolved,’ and the role of discipleship changed. Sobrino argues that because Jesus believed the Kingdom of God to be imminent, he restricts his discipleship to only a few. At first, the twelve apostles are sent out to preach the Kingdom and to work signs that attest to the presence of the Kingdom. At a later stage in Jesus’ life, when he realized the Kingdom of God was not coming soon, the moral demands of discipleship became basic and universal.²⁴⁰

Both Jesus’ crisis in Galilee and his failure in predicting the time of the Kingdom point to an ‘awareness’ or evolution going on in the life of the historical Jesus. What Sobrino is obviously concerned with is the changing nature of the historical Jesus in both external mission and internal awareness.²⁴¹ The crisis in Galilee best exemplifies the reasons for such a change of approach. What Sobrino seems to be concerned with is a psychological development within Jesus. Jesus’ awareness and evolution, Sobrino argues, were not achieved peacefully. While Jesus experienced conflict in his abandonment and failure in Galilee, Sobrino stresses that this external conflict led to an internal crisis of self-identification. The epitome of Jesus’ crisis of self-identification in the writings of Sobrino can be found in the story of the temptation of Jesus.

²³⁹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 58.

²⁴⁰Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 116.

²⁴¹Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 152.

Temptation

The story of the temptation is found in all of the synoptics. Sobrino stresses that the setting of the temptation in the Gospels, set at the first part of Jesus' life, is clearly a theological choice made by the Evangelists.²⁴² He says "they [the temptations] are the fruit of theological reflection rather than an historical description of what happened at the start of Jesus' public life."²⁴³ The temptations of Jesus are set at the beginning of his public life and are found between his baptism and the start of his mission. Therefore, Sobrino contends, the temptations deal with "what is deepest in Jesus, his ultimate attitude to God."²⁴⁴

Sobrino argues that temptation occurs throughout all of Jesus' life, especially after the Galilean crisis. In terms of faith, Sobrino says the temptation is the "historical condition for the historization of his faith."²⁴⁵ The faith of Jesus is therefore mediated by his history as an historical figure who underwent conflict and temptation. To clarify this presupposition, it is helpful to illustrate Sobrino's argument that through temptation faced by Jesus, Jesus' faith was perfected. In the famous passage in which Satan tempts Jesus, Sobrino argues that this temptation is actually a critical crisis of self-identity. The figure of Satan, as Sobrino suggests, is merely used to illustrate the struggle and choice going

²⁴²Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 149.

²⁴³Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 96.

²⁴⁴Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 149.

²⁴⁵Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 100.

on in Jesus' own person. Sobrino says, "in functional terms the temptation has to do with the concrete way in which Jesus will carry out his mission."²⁴⁶

The story of the temptation holds great significance for Sobrino's hope in presenting a Jesus who evolved in character. It could be leveled against Sobrino that he actually demonstrates a concern for a psycho-history of Jesus rather than a strictly historical account of the life of Jesus.²⁴⁷ Sobrino does argue that there is not enough information in the synoptics to warrant a discussion on the "absolute awareness or consciousness of Jesus about himself;" however, he stresses that these aspects of Jesus' life such as the temptations and crisis in Galilee, *indirectly* point to an ongoing self-awareness in Jesus' life. As Sobrino says, "all we can get at is his *relational* self-awareness: i.e., what he thought about himself in relation to the Kingdom, and the decisive importance of his own person in its arrival."²⁴⁸

Sobrino says that attempting to figure out what Jesus thought about himself exactly is an impossible task. However, he does attempt to find out who Jesus is in a different manner. He says: "then knowing who Jesus is will mean finding out to whom Jesus surrendered himself and how he did it."²⁴⁹ For instance, he does attempt to reach an understanding of how Jesus viewed himself by looking at Jesus' relationship to other things (i.e. the Kingdom of God). In the case of Jesus' relationship *vis-à-vis* the Father, Sobrino says "Who Jesus is and what he thought about himself is to be deduced from his

²⁴⁶Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 98.

²⁴⁷Rudolf Bultmann says, "Whoever is of the belief that only through history can he find Enlightenment on the contingencies of his own experience, will necessarily reject the psychological approach. Found in *Jesus and the Word*, p. 6.

²⁴⁸Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 70.

²⁴⁹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 72.

awareness of a relationship with the Father."²⁵⁰ Clearly Sobrino is more interested in a psychology of Jesus rather than an accurate historical account. The question arises: does Sobrino's desire to identify conflict and crisis in the life of the historical Jesus overshadow his faithfulness to the tools of western scholarship?

²⁵⁰Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 74.

The three topics, that of Jesus' crisis in Galilee, Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom of God and Jesus' temptations, are all central to Sobrino's portrayal of a Jesus who experiences crisis, change and evolution. Sobrino's desire to illustrate how the historical Jesus experienced a faith lived out amidst conflict is directly related to his offer of hope to Latin America. A Jesus who remained faithful and grew closer to God in time of conflict is of utmost significance for Sobrino. However, in presenting such themes as conflict and evolution, Sobrino tends to freely choose sections of Scripture to prove his position. This point is best illustrated with an overview of some of the major concerns and criticisms against Sobrino's treatment of the Galilean crisis, the Kingdom of God and Jesus' temptations.

Sobrino's portrayal of the historical Jesus often mirrors a close resemblance to that of Albert Schweitzer's. Schweitzer's thorough-going eschatology determined that Jesus' expectation of the imminent coming of the Kingdom was unfulfilled. Schweitzer, like Sobrino, focused on the plan of the life of Jesus as constructed in Mark's Gospel. For Schweitzer, the historical Jesus experienced failure. Schweitzer's conclusions about Jesus originated from the passage in Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus tells his disciples that he does not expect to see them again until the return of the Son of Man.²⁵¹ After the end did not come, Schweitzer argued, Jesus took action to bring about the messianic tribulations that had to precede the Kingdom of God.²⁵² For Sobrino, however, the

²⁵¹Matthew 23:39

²⁵²Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 5.

history of Jesus' conflict and failure reflects the history of a faith in the midst of a conflict-ridden situation.²⁵³ While their conclusions are different as to what 'failure' means in the life of the historical Jesus, both Schweitzer and Sobrino are heavily reliant on the chronology of events of the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospel of Mark.

In *Christology at the Crossroads*, Sobrino says that the Galilean crisis is noted by all the Evangelists.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Sobrino is aware that it is primarily in Mark's Gospel that such a crisis is found and it is in Mark's Gospel that Sobrino believes the Galilean crisis is brought out most clearly. While reference is made to John chapter 6 and Matthew chapter 13, the significant New Testament passage that is used to illustrate a break in Jesus' life is Mark chapter 8.²⁵⁵ If such an interpretation is backed up by Scripture, that of Jesus experiencing some sort of conflict in his early ministry, it is solely reliant on the chronology of events in Mark's Gospel. Michael Cook, commenting on the Galilean crisis contends that the idea of Jesus going through two distinct stages "is at least structurally, pure Mark."²⁵⁶

Throughout the quest of the historical Jesus, the idea of dividing Jesus' ministry into two stages has been heavily debated. Weisse stressed that it is unfair to divide Jesus' Galilean ministry into a period of failures and successes strictly on the basis of Mark's account.²⁵⁷ The trouble with such a division, Weisse stressed, was that it is not reliable to

²⁵³Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 94.

²⁵⁴Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 365.

²⁵⁵Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 92.

²⁵⁶Cook, "Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America," p. 274.

²⁵⁷Christian H. Weisse, *Die evangelische Geschichte kritisch und philosophisch bearbeitet*. 2 vols. (Leipzig, Breitkopf and Härtel, 1838). See Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 131.

base the history of the life of Jesus on the sole chronology of one Gospel. Later in the first quest, William Wrede stressed that the historical reliability of the Gospel of Mark was questionable.²⁵⁸ Furthermore, Bruno Bauer blatantly rejected the use of Mark's Gospel as a chronology of Jesus' life.²⁵⁹ However, it was not until the advent of form criticism that the question of reading Mark's Gospel as a chronological history became greatly challenged. Schleiermacher argued that "it is undeniable that we cannot achieve a *connected presentation of the life of Jesus*."²⁶⁰ In a seminal work, Karl Schmidt also argued that the outline of Jesus' ministry is Mark's own invention.²⁶¹ Further, John Meier criticized focusing solely on Mark because, "there is no attestation by multiple *sources*, and no argument for historicity simply from agreement among the three synoptics."²⁶² The difficulty in taking Mark's Gospel as an outline for the life of Jesus lies in the possibility that the Evangelist behind Mark's Gospel created a chronology of events to fit his notion of the historical Jesus. These scholars clearly challenge any heavy reliance on the 'crisis' as portrayed in the chronology of Mark's Gospel.²⁶³

In terms of eschatology, Sobrino's position that Jesus failed in his belief that the Kingdom was coming soon, is clearly reminiscent of that of Albert Schweitzer.

²⁵⁸Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*. Also see Ben Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, p. 47.

²⁵⁹Bauer, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker*. See Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 149.

²⁶⁰Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, edited by Jack C. Verheyden and trans. S. Maclean Gilmour (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 76.

²⁶¹Karl Schmidt, *Der Rahmen Der Geschichte Jesu* (Berlin: Trowitzch and Sohn, 1919), p. vi.

²⁶²Meier, "The Bible as a Source for Theology," p. 9.

²⁶³Another liberation theologian that also refers to a Galilean crisis in his presentation of the historical Jesus is Juan Luis Segundo. However, the Galilean crisis in Segundo's work has been critically challenged by John Meier on the basis that Segundo overemphasizes the priority of the Markan account.

Schweitzer, evaluating the life of the historical Jesus, concluded that Jesus was a failed eschatological prophet. Since Schweitzer, the concept that Jesus' 'failed' in his expectation of an imminent Kingdom of God has been a significant topic throughout the whole quest of the historical Jesus. The question of whether Jesus was 'right' or 'wrong' has found its way into the contemporary quest of the historical Jesus. E.P. Sanders, like Schweitzer, sees Jesus as an eschatological prophet whose radical expectation of the coming Kingdom reflected a failure in that Jesus believed the Kingdom was imminent.²⁶⁴ Nonetheless, there has been considerable criticism of this perspective. John Meier argues that Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom is *possibly* imminent rather than *necessarily* imminent.²⁶⁵ N. T. Wright has also challenged the idea that Jesus 'failed' and concludes that Jesus was actually right.²⁶⁶ What is interesting to note is that Ben Meyer says that most systematic treatments of eschatology in the Gospels blur the problem of Jesus' eschatology in that they avoid dealing with problems that arise concerning a failure in the life of Jesus.²⁶⁷ Sobrino, however, does not shy away from the idea that Jesus' failed in his prediction of the coming Kingdom for the idea that Jesus 'failed' clearly fits in with Sobrino's theme of 'conflict and crisis.'

Sobrino's interpretation of Jesus' temptation is significant to note in that while holding to the historicity and chronological account of a crisis in Galilee in Mark's Gospel, Sobrino is clearly skeptical of the temptation of Jesus by Satan as an historical

²⁶⁴Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*.

²⁶⁵John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 398-506.

²⁶⁶Wright stresses that Jesus did not actually say that he would return in a glorified state during the present generation. Wright says that the events Jesus did predict actually occurred historically. Found in "How Jesus Saw Himself," *Bible Review* (12, June 1996), pp. 22-29.

²⁶⁷Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, p. 245.

event. Referring to Jesus' temptation as "a literary and conceptual device," Sobrino clearly reflects the thought of Strauss who pioneered the idea that the Gospels contained myth inserted by the Evangelists; however, in the case of the crisis at Galilee, Sobrino does not question the possibility that Mark's account of the events in Jesus' life could be the Evangelist's own theological invention. Yet, Sobrino is clearly aware in other aspects of his presentation of the historical Jesus that the Gospels can often be skewed in terms of historicity. He says that the Gospels are not so much interested in the factual historical Jesus, but rather, they are "believing, theologized accounts of Jesus."²⁶⁸ Furthermore, in his latest work on Christology, *Jesus the Liberator*, Sobrino makes reference to the 'Q' source.²⁶⁹ By so doing Sobrino clearly shows that he is aware of the scholarly discussion of the synoptic problem and the difficulties in arguing for the historical validity of one Gospel over another. Nonetheless, what Sobrino's methodology resembles, as Michael Cook says, is an approach that is "closer to the Gospel of Mark than to the historical Jesus."²⁷⁰

As Sobrino's presentation of the historical Jesus is concerned with an 'evolution' in the life of Jesus, it may be safer to call Sobrino's work a discussion of a 'psychohistory' rather than a purely historical-reconstruction. The topic of psychological development has been an area of debate within the quest of the historical Jesus. As early as Wrede, questions were being raised as to the validity of using the Gospels to present psychological accounts of Jesus. Wrede concluded that Mark cannot

²⁶⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 38.

²⁶⁹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 68.

²⁷⁰ Cook, "Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America," p. 273.

be used to develop a psychological account of Jesus.²⁷¹ While Schweitzer's account is similar to that of Sobrino, that Jesus' life was fraught with conflict and change, Schweitzer did not believe that history, as presented in the Gospels, was concerned with psychological processes.²⁷² Martin Kähler also argued that such developments in the life of Jesus cannot be simply defined by the Gospels.²⁷³

The key to Sobrino's idea behind Jesus evolving amidst conflict is not actually found in the Gospels, but rather in the letter to the Hebrews. For instance, throughout Sobrino's work on Christology he makes clear reference to select passages in Hebrews such as Hebrews 2:10 that speaks of Jesus needing to be "perfected," and in Hebrews 5:8 which says that Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered." Sobrino seems to have attached himself to these select passages and drawn on them for his theme of the historical Jesus who 'evolves' during conflict.

It seems clear that it is not Sobrino's priority to distinguish with accuracy what is recoverable about the life of Jesus through scholarly means. In terms of the Galilean crisis, Sobrino does not hold to his own criteria of multiple attestation for verifying the validity of an event in the Gospels.²⁷⁴ What Sobrino ends up doing is presenting a chronology of Jesus that is reminiscent of the early nineteenth-century questers who sought to write a biography of Jesus. While Sobrino is not interested in defining a list of 'facts' about Jesus, as some of the early biographers did, his devotion to the chronology of Mark clearly reflects the methods of the liberal questers.

²⁷¹Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, p. 129.

²⁷²Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 352.

²⁷³Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, p. 221.

²⁷⁴Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 74.

To understand how Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus is heavily reliant on his desire to do liberation theology, it is purposeful to explore the social role of the historical Jesus.

The Social Role of the Historical Jesus

Throughout the quest of the historical Jesus, scholars have debated Jesus' role or function within society. Scholars throughout the quest have come to treat the historical Jesus in numerous ways. Was the historical Jesus a political figure or a religious figure? Was he a social revolutionary or a Jewish spiritual teacher? In the writings of Sobrino the historical Jesus is clearly the liberator of the poor and oppressed. Since the historical Jesus is a social and political liberator of the oppressed in Sobrino's Christology, analysis will be given to Sobrino's interpretation of the historical Jesus in this context.

The most dominant feature of the historical Jesus, for Sobrino, is Jesus' partiality towards the poor. Sobrino argues that the historical Jesus shows a clear preference for the oppressed, economically poor, outcast and sinners. Sobrino says that "the poor are those to whom Christ's mission is primarily directed, simply because they are poor."²⁷⁵ On a larger level, Sobrino argues that God himself is a God of the poor. He says, "being a God of the poor...[he] blesses the poor and curses those who live in abundance and who vitiate creation by oppressing human beings."²⁷⁶ Sobrino's attention and focus on

²⁷⁵Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 21.

²⁷⁶Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 15.

the poor are common to the movement of liberation theology. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Council of Medellín had clearly emphasized Jesus' mission to the poor. Medellín document on poverty, no. 7 reads: "Christ, our savior, not only loved the poor, but rather, 'being rich He became poor,' He lived in poverty. His mission centered on advising the poor of their liberation."²⁷⁷

What makes Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus unique is that Jesus' whole mission and ministry are inextricably bound up with a Kingdom of God that has profound implications for the poor. Sobrino points out that in the Gospels, Jesus is found in the midst of situations embodying oppression and divisiveness, and that the "Kingdom is the transformation of a bad situation, of an oppressive situation."²⁷⁸ Sobrino defies the Kingdom of God as grace and says that Jesus viewed the Kingdom in two senses: first, the Kingdom is already at hand and breaking through; second, the arrival of the Kingdom is salvation and the Kingdom "has the decisive connotation of liberation."²⁷⁹ Sin, for Sobrino, is essentially rejection of God's Kingdom that is drawing near in grace. Furthermore, Sobrino says that "the real sinners are the persons with power who use it both to secure themselves against God and to oppress others."²⁸⁰

Sobrino points out that the situation of having oppressors and oppressed is not necessarily eternal law, but "the situation is rather the historical consequence of

²⁷⁷Medellín Document on Poverty, No. 7. Taken from Sobrino's *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 5.

²⁷⁸Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 47.

²⁷⁹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 46.

²⁸⁰Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 53. Sobrino describes the Kingdom of God as Grace in *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 46.

collective sin" (i.e. poverty exists because the rich will not share their wealth).²⁸¹

Importantly, Sobrino points out that it is necessary to emphasize the "eschatological character of the Kingdom."²⁸² As Sobrino argues, eschatology means "crisis." Sobrino says, "God's Kingdom does not confirm the present reality of humankind and its history; rather, it passes judgment on that reality in order to re-create it."²⁸³ In essence, Sobrino argues the concept of "eschatology" is consistent with Jesus' fundamental demand for a conversion.

The Kingdom of God in Sobrino's writings is clearly directed to the poor and it is the poor who best understand the meaning of the Kingdom. Jesus is, therefore, the bearer of good news to the poor. While Sobrino argues that Jesus did not offer salvation only to a particular group, he nonetheless contends that this "does not prevent Jesus from having a specific addressee in mind when proclaiming the Kingdom of God."²⁸⁴ The whole of the historical Jesus must therefore be understood with respect to the Kingdom of God. The transformation of society, for the historical Jesus, was interchangeably bound to the Kingdom of God. In this way, the historical Jesus was a social and political reformer in that he preached the transformative aspect of society through the Kingdom of God.

Sobrino contends that Jesus did not think in terms of present-day structures and social classes but rather saw the relationship "existing between use of power and a

²⁸¹ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 54.

²⁸² Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 65.

²⁸³ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 65.

²⁸⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 79.

situation of oppression.”²⁸⁵ Sobrino does say that the historical Jesus should not be looked at “for theories of society and its transformation.”²⁸⁶ Nonetheless, Sobrino does say that the historical Jesus preached reform. This reform, Sobrino stresses, is preached as re-creative justice. He says: “The justice of Jesus, then, points toward some new form of social coexistence where class differences have been abolished, at least in principle.”²⁸⁷ Class differences, Sobrino claims, lead to inequality, religious oppression, and racism. In this respect, Sobrino is clearly reminiscent of scholars such as Borg and Sanders in the third quest who see Jesus as an agent of social change.

The historical Jesus is a socially liberating figure in Sobrino’s Christology. There is a clear relationship between the political realm and the Kingdom of God in Sobrino’s writings. Proclaiming of the Kingdom, Sobrino argues, is therefore proclaiming what society should be. In terms of understanding the historical Jesus as a political reformer preaching re-creative justice, Sobrino follows the continuing awareness in contemporary life-of-Jesus research to understand Jesus’ message as being highly political. Powell points out that since Reimarus, Jesus-scholarship has come to neglect the political dimension in Jesus’ life. Only in the works of such contemporary scholars as Borg and Witherington has the political dimension to Jesus’ life been reinstated.²⁸⁸

Sobrino argues that Jesus was actively involved in the political situation of his time. He says, “it is historically certain that Jesus did situate himself in the political

²⁸⁵Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 53.

²⁸⁶Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 161.

²⁸⁷Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 120.

²⁸⁸Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*, p. 175.

situation of his day and react against it in a definitive way.”²⁸⁹ In fact, Sobrino claims that one of the reasons Jesus was condemned to be crucified was because he was a political agitator.”²⁹⁰ However, the nature of Jesus’ political message, Sobrino argues, was that of a ‘political love.’ This love is ‘political’ in that it is situated concretely in history, Sobrino says, and is a proclamation of hope *against* the oppressors.²⁹¹

Illustrating the political nature of the historical Jesus, Sobrino points to a number of passages in the Gospels such as Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees regarding justice (Matt. 23:23) and Jesus’ disapproval of the rulers of this world for governing despotically (Matt. 20:26).²⁹² Sobrino argues that Jesus does not focus on condemning particular groups; rather, he is shown as in opposition to any group that creates an atmosphere that is hostile to the Kingdom of God. It was Reimarus who first argued that Jesus entered a highly-charged political atmosphere in Palestine.²⁹³ Sobrino agrees with Reimarus’ view and argues that the political situation of Jesus’ day was a highly politicized period of Palestinian history. What the historical Jesus advocated, Sobrino contends, was renewal and a re-creation of society. Sobrino admits in *Spirituality of Liberation* that liberation theology does entail a need to revolutionize socio-economic structures. In this sense, argues Sobrino, liberation theology does “entail a powerful element of political struggle.”²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, pp. 210-211.

²⁹⁰Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 209.

²⁹¹Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 214.

²⁹²Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 211.

²⁹³Reimarus, *Fragments*.

²⁹⁴Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, p. 29.

Throughout the quest of the historical Jesus, much attention has been given to the miracles of Jesus. For Sobrino, even Jesus' miracles should be understood with respect to the Kingdom. Sobrino seems hesitant to describe the miracles performed in the Gospels as acts of supernatural wonder. In this sense, Sobrino himself seems to be under the Enlightenment suspicion that questioned wonders that are not logically explainable. Sobrino argues that the miracles of the Gospels cannot be understood in the same way as that of the modern western worldview. Sobrino contends that the modern western conception, that of miracles violating the laws of nature, is generally accepted "not to be the biblical concept of miracle in the Old Testament."²⁹⁵ Sobrino's attitude towards Jesus' miracles is closer to the thought of Strauss than that of Paulus. While Paulus argued that the miracles could be understood by rational explanations, Strauss contended that the miracles were symbolic or mythical accounts that conveyed meaning to audiences of Jesus' day.

The miracles of the historical Jesus, Sobrino says, should be understood as 'signs' rather than 'miracles'.²⁹⁶ These 'signs' are to be interpreted as being related to the Kingdom of God. Essentially, Sobrino presents the miracles of Jesus similar to contemporary scholars of the Third Quest. E. P. Sanders, for instance, believes that Jesus did work miracles, but these miracles were only miracles as the Galilean people knew them; further, these miracles were actually 'signs' of the coming of God's Kingdom.²⁹⁷ Sobrino says that the miracles of Jesus are actually signs of liberation. The miracles announce that the Kingdom of God is drawing near and therefore liberation is drawing

²⁹⁵Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 88.

²⁹⁶Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 48.

²⁹⁷Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*.

near. The miracles are therefore signs that reflect the closeness of the Kingdom, Sobrino says.²⁹⁸ In the case of the miracles of Jesus, Sobrino interprets this aspect of the historical Jesus as being directly related to the cause of liberation.

Discussion of the miracles of Jesus in Sobrino's writings points towards a questioning of Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus. Does Sobrino interpret all aspects of the life of Jesus to fit his liberation perspective? While it is not unique to Sobrino to interpret Jesus' life as being eschatological, Sobrino claims that only in and through the Kingdom of God can Jesus' mission and life be understood. Sobrino says in *Jesus in Latin America* that what is 'ultimate' for Jesus is the Kingdom of God.²⁹⁹ As the Kingdom of God is the "establishment of justice and right with regard to the poor," what Sobrino has done is to direct all discussion on the historical Jesus into a liberation perspective.³⁰⁰ Making the poor and the oppressed Jesus' preferential, Sobrino has specifically focused on making his Christology speak directly to the people of Latin America.

Contending that Jesus' message is directed at the poor and claiming that the poor are the 'specific addressees' of the Kingdom of God, Sobrino can be criticized as being too narrowly focused. One of the main charges leveled against Sobrino's treatment is that he is "socioeconomically naïve."³⁰¹ John Meier contends Sobrino is too simplistic in assuming that the whole of Jesus' audience was economically poor and that the only people Jesus offended were the rich and powerful. Sobrino's dictum, "what is good news

²⁹⁸Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 89.

²⁹⁹Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 84.

³⁰⁰Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 86.

³⁰¹Meier, "The Bible as a Source for Theology," p. 4.

for the poor is bad news for the mighty," clearly shapes his treatment of the historical Jesus.³⁰² Paul Ritt has critiqued Sobrino's treatment of Jesus' preferential to the poor. Ritt has carefully explored the concept of the "Lordship of Jesus Christ" in Sobrino's Christology. Arguing that Sobrino has restricted Jesus' lordship to his dominion over the social order, Ritt says "the Kingdom of God cannot be reduced to an effective political program."³⁰³

Summation

In his works on Christology, Sobrino seems to have interpreted the life of the historical Jesus in order to fit a liberation perspective. What Sobrino does is to use selections from the Gospels to bring out his own point which primarily is exploring possibilities in the historical figure of Jesus that focus on his liberating significance while at other times omitting the treatment and consideration of certain passages.³⁰⁴ What is left is an historical Jesus who reflects certain key points for Sobrino's Christology. For instance, Jesus' crisis in Galilee, the Kingdom of God, and Jesus' temptations are all interpreted in a fashion that best supports Sobrino's theme of conflict and crisis. By so doing, Sobrino presents an historical Jesus that exemplifies the qualities that are important to his liberation Christology.

³⁰²Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, p. 18.

³⁰³Paul E. Ritt, "The Lordship of Jesus Christ: Balthasar and Sobrino," *Theological Studies* (49, 1988), p. 727.

³⁰⁴John Meier is in agreement with this point in his "The Bible as a Source for Theology," p. 5.

In terms of Jesus as the social or political reformer, Sobrino's Jesus is none other than Jesus the liberator. For Sobrino, the whole of Jesus' life, from his preaching of the Kingdom to his miracles, is interpreted as having a direct message for the poor today. Jesus' political message, for Sobrino, is therefore interpreted as a message of love to the poor; furthermore, Jesus' social reform is a message of re-creative justice that proclaims justice to the poor. Clearly Sobrino's overarching concern to present a 'view from the victims' has dictated the way in which he has presented the historical Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Sobrinho's treatment of the historical Jesus may best be described in a statement by John Meier. Meier says: "it is telling that Sobrinho admits that his position is a problem from the standpoint of historical-criticism, but an advantage from the standpoint of systematic reflection."³⁰⁵ From the perspective of systematic reflection, Sobrinho's treatment of the historical Jesus is indeed creative and offers a clear parallel between the situations in Jesus' day to those of the poor and oppressed in Latin America. However, from the perspective of life-of-Jesus scholarship, Sobrinho's treatment of the historical Jesus is indeed problematic.

The advantage of treating the historical Jesus from a vantage of systematic reflection lies in a demand for conversion as well as a renewal of faith in Latin America. Sobrinho's desire to present a Christology that is based on the 'view from the victims' is well founded in his treatment of the historical Jesus. Conflict and crisis in the life of the historical Jesus illustrate commitment and faith in God amidst external opposition and hardship. Sobrinho hopes that in and through a focus on the faith of the historical Jesus amidst such conflict, the human condition of Jesus' faith will be illustrated. By seeing "how Jesus lived in history," as Sobrinho says, followers of Jesus will be able to 're-create' his path rather than simply 'retrace' it.³⁰⁶ Because the life of Jesus is historically

³⁰⁵Meier, "The Bible as a Source for Theology," p. 7. Meier offers one of the most striking critiques of Jon Sobrinho's work and challenges Sobrinho's methodology in approaching the historical Jesus. He says, "Sobrinho's whole presentation of liberation theology claims to be based on the historical Jesus; and that is where it is most seriously lacking."

³⁰⁶Sobrinho, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 139.

situated, Sobrino argues that Jesus offers a concrete path that leads to the Kingdom of God. While not an 'absolute' path, as liberation theology is concerned with offering various approaches due to contexts and situation, the path is one that demands discipleship.

In terms of the social role of the historical Jesus, Sobrino's steadfast commitment in presenting Jesus' preference to the poor offers hope to the base communities of Latin America. The path of the historical Jesus is one of liberation. It is the historical Jesus, Sobrino says, who "brings out clearly and unmistakably the need for achieving liberation, the meaning of liberation, and the way to attain it."³⁰⁷ Liberation theology's commitment to change and continual probing and reflection on Scripture have come to shape a new faith in Latin America. Sobrino's Christology, that takes the historical Jesus as its centre, furthers this commitment to change. Sobrino's creativity in his selection of Scripture presents a Jesus that embodies liberation and justice and the way to attain it.

Part of Sobrino's creativity in interpreting Scripture may come from liberation theology's distinct exegetical approach. Hoping to interpret the life of the historical Jesus for the relevance of the grassroots communities in Latin America, Sobrino displays a 'freedom' of interpretation. Sobrino is clearly in agreement with Carlos Mesters who claims that in the base communities of Latin America the Bible is viewed as a text of life.³⁰⁸ Sobrino's systematic approach to Scripture hopes to find meaning for the poor today and takes the life of the historical Jesus as a mirror to live by. Jesus' faith amidst conflict is therefore the archetypical model of the life of faith.

³⁰⁷Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 332.

³⁰⁸Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, p. 9.

Also distinctive about Sobrino's Christology is his approach to eschatology. The Kingdom of God, Sobrino contends, is ultimate justice and liberation. Unlike those involved in the quest, Sobrino is not caught up with the discussion surrounding the present or future aspect of the Kingdom. In contrast, Sobrino is interested in how the Kingdom takes on the distinctive role of offering hope to the oppressed and marginalized today. For Sobrino, the Kingdom of God is therefore of central importance to his Christology.³⁰⁹ It is the poor, the very addressees of the Kingdom, which are the driving force behind Sobrino's interpretation of Scripture; furthermore, it is the poor who make discussion of eschatology meaningful.

From the perspective of western biblical scholarship, Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus is weak. What can be termed as 'creativity' from the perspective of systematic reflection is clearly 'selectivity' from the perspective of historical-criticism. Claiming that the historical Jesus experienced a crisis in Galilee, Sobrino holds to the strict chronology as presented in Mark's Gospel. However, in other areas of his work such as Jesus' temptations, Sobrino is skeptical of reading the Gospel as historical narrative. Proposing a Jesus who failed and experienced conflict in his life, Sobrino hopes to illustrate the steadfastness of Jesus' faith amidst crisis. For the communities in Latin America experiencing oppression and hardship, the historical Jesus becomes not only the object of faith, but the ultimate example of faith in action. However, in supporting his presentation of the historical Jesus, Sobrino selectively chooses certain aspects of the Gospels that best 'fit' his position. Consequently, Sobrino is no more effective in his treatment of the historical Jesus than those engaged in the first quest.

³⁰⁹Sobrino contends that insofar as liberation theology is concerned with 'liberation,' its most all-embracing theological concept is 'the Kingdom of God.' Found in *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 37.

Throughout his writings, Sobrino shows a clear understanding of the history of the quest of the historical Jesus. Those of the first quest, such as Reimarus and Strauss ended up writing “biographies” of the life of Jesus and neglected the theological component of the Gospels. Neglecting the theological component of the Gospels is clearly not a problem in Sobrino’s writings. Sobrino is aware that the Gospels themselves are theological documents; furthermore, he stresses that it is impossible to write a history of Jesus and neglect theology.³¹⁰ Reflecting on the reliability of the Gospel narratives as historical documents of the life of Christ, Sobrino says: “one can never dismiss the possibility that the gospel narratives were the fruit of the imagination of the communities. That they are this in part is more than likely.”³¹¹ Critiquing the first quest of the historical Jesus, Sobrino argues that the problem with the quest is that it was under the first-Enlightenment’s suspicion that faith is “mythical and authoritarian.”³¹² For Sobrino, faith is the underlying motive for any exploration of the historical Jesus.

While Sobrino may have avoided some of the pitfalls of the first quest such as not neglecting the theological component to the Gospel, he is nonetheless no more successful in creating a history of Jesus than Albert Schweitzer. The true difference between Schweitzer and Sobrino’s interpretation of the life of the historical Jesus is in their dramatically different conclusion as to what ‘failure’ in Jesus’ life actually means. The Jesus that Schweitzer arrived at from the methods of biblical criticism and analysis was a failed eschatological prophet. For Schweitzer, this left him with the conclusion that

³¹⁰Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 63.

³¹¹Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 75.

³¹²Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 75.

"there is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the life of Jesus."³¹³

Sobrino, on the other hand, draws a different conclusion. While Sobrino's Jesus is fraught with failure and conflict, Sobrino believes this fact makes the historical Jesus all the more relevant for today. For Sobrino, a Jesus who failed and had to re-evaluate his mission is the epitome of faith worked out in crisis.

While Schweitzer and Sobrino come to different conclusions as to what a 'failure' in the life of the historical Jesus means, they both *approach* the historical Jesus in the same way. Schweitzer is heavily reliant on the historicity of such passages as Matthew 10 and 11. Sobrino, however, decides to focus on the outline of Mark's Gospel in order to present a crisis and process of evolution in the life of the historical Jesus. The problem for Sobrino is that he attempts to claim too much about the historical Jesus while basing his interpretation of the life of Jesus on select passages of Scripture. Essentially, both Schweitzer and Sobrino fall into the trap of the liberals of the first quest in that they make Jesus' history fit their own preconceived ideas.

In terms of the actions and deeds of the historical Jesus, Sobrino differs from Bultmann who stressed that the actions and deeds of the historical Jesus were void of significance for faith. In this respect, Sobrino's presentation of the historical Jesus is much more closely knit with the perspective of the new quest. The new quest recognized the continuity between the Christ of dogma, the Christ proclaimed by the Church, and the Jesus of history.³¹⁴ Sobrino agrees with this perspective and argues that the historical

³¹³Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 398.

³¹⁴Piars, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 51.

Jesus can only be understood within the totality of 'Christ'.³¹⁵ However, Douglas McCready says that "even those engaged in the new quest of the historical Jesus would be unlikely to grant that much of what Sobrino claims originates from the historical Jesus instead of the early Church."³¹⁶ In other ways, Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus would clearly fit into the third quest. Meyer stresses that the third quest is not interested in the 'particulars' of Jesus; rather interest lies in what is significant for faith.³¹⁷ Sobrino's Christology, as systematic theology, is focused on faith. In terms of the 'particulars,' Sobrino says that Latin America is not interested in the so-called 'facts' of Jesus, but rather in presenting a reflective treatment of the historical Jesus.³¹⁸

The Latin American situation and Jesus' situation, Sobrino says, show striking parallels.³¹⁹ What Sobrino has done, however, is to impose the themes of liberation theology upon his interpretation of the historical Jesus. Liberation theology's steadfast commitment to the poor drives Sobrino's Christology. Essentially, Sobrino comes to interpret all facts of the life of the historical Jesus including the role of the Kingdom of God as having almost an exclusive focus on the poor. It is to the poor that Christ's message is directed, Sobrino says, and it is the poor who will understand the Kingdom of God. Sobrino's Jesus is a political figure, but his politics are in the area of proclaiming hope to the poor and challenging social structures that oppress the poor. The miracles of Jesus are signs of the Kingdom and these are signs of liberation dawning. Clearly what

³¹⁵Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 55.

³¹⁶McCready, "Old wine in new skins: Jon Sobrino's liberation theology," p. 312.

³¹⁷Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, p. 50.

³¹⁸Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 73.

³¹⁹Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. 72.

Sobrinho has done is to interpret the historical Jesus in a fashion that will best suit a liberation perspective. Sobrinho's desire to adopt the 'view of the victims,' has so greatly dominated his Christology that he has neglected to remain faithful to the tools and methods of western scholarship.

Sobrinho has neglected to remain faithful to the criteria of criticism that he set forth in approaching the historical Jesus. Sobrinho's desire to approach the historical Jesus "with due respect for all the precautions imposed by critical exegesis," is therefore unsuccessful.³²⁰ Furthermore, Sobrinho condemns "selectivity" of interpretation that favors a distinct position.³²¹ Discussing the problematic approach of organizing the story of Jesus to fit a particular position, Sobrinho says that if we "organize the story of Jesus in terms of his own real history, we may organize it in terms of some preconceived ideas which we then find reflected in his history."³²² While being aware of interpreting the historical Jesus 'selectively,' Sobrinho nonetheless does this himself.

Throughout Sobrinho's writings he makes a number of broad theological statements about the life of Jesus (for example, Jesus "evolved" in character) that he uses Scripture to "prove." Arthur McGovern has commented on this happening in the writings of many liberation theologians, and says: "Liberation theologians tend at times to use Scripture in the way traditional Catholic apologetics once did to "prove" Catholic doctrines...they select the particular facts of interpretations that most favor a liberation position."³²³ Essentially, this is exactly what Sobrinho does. John Meier is in agreement

³²⁰Sobrinho, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 352.

³²¹Sobrinho, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 83.

³²²Sobrinho, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 85.

³²³McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, p. 82.

with this point as he argues that in Sobrino's Christology, "the historical Jesus seems to be Jesus insofar as he fits into Sobrino's program of liberation theology."³²⁴ While Sobrino argues that "Latin American Christology is not especially interested systematically in determining Jesus' 'data' with exactitude, his concrete words and actions," Sobrino is choosy in his selection of what events or occurrences in the life of Jesus he deems as historical.³²⁵ As such, Sobrino is too deliberate in his use of historical-critical tools and ends up choosing his *own* history of Jesus.³²⁶

The question thus arises as to whether Sobrino's failure to conform consistently to the rigors of historical critical analysis renders his theological enterprise questionable. This is really a variation of the ancient question of how history and theology are related, and it is question which takes us beyond the scope of this thesis. What we can say is that Sobrino's work is rich and distinctive enough to be a seminal source of further creative and reflective thought.

It was Albert Schweitzer who concluded that those engaged in recovering the historical Jesus ended up creating a portrait of Jesus that mirrored the intentions and biases of the author. The problem of Sobrino's treatment of the historical Jesus is basically just that. Sobrino ends up selectively creating a portrait of Jesus that best fits

³²⁴Meier, "The Bible as a Source for Theology," p. 3. Meier's point has been sharply challenged by scholars such as Arthur McGovern and Jon Nilson who contend Meier judges Sobrino by his own field and does not take into consideration that Sobrino is an hermeneutical theologian attempting to find "new dimensions of Jesus neglected in traditional Christologies." McGovern's perspective can be taken from his *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (1989) and Nilson's in his article "A Response to John P. Meier" (1988).

³²⁵Piars, *Jesus and Liberation*, p. 55.

³²⁶Arthur McGready goes as far as to say that "Sobrino uses Scripture selectively to support his conclusions, almost as if he formulated his Christology and then sought out text to support it." Found in McGready, "Old wine in new skins: Jon Sobrino's liberation theology," p. 312.

his liberation perspective. Jon Sobrino describes his own work as “Latin American Christology” and that is exactly what it is.³²⁷ From the perspective of the quest of the historical Jesus, Sobrino’s attempt to recover the historical Jesus is no more successful than those engaged in the first quest. As Cook argues, the basic weakness of Sobrino’s approach is “it wants to claim too much about the historical Jesus without sufficient evidence.”³²⁸ From the perspective of systematic theology, Sobrino’s treatment of the historical Jesus successfully offers hope, renewal and liberation.

Κύριε, πρὸς τίνα ἀπελευσόμεθα; ῥήματα ζωῆς αἰωνίου ἔχεις, καὶ ἡμεῖς πεπιστεύκαμεν καὶ ἐγνώκαμεν ὅτι σὺ εἶο ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ.

³²⁷Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, p. x.

³²⁸Cook, “Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America,” p. 273.

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