

**WHY JESUS COULD WALK ON THE SEA BUT HE  
COULD NOT READ AND WRITE**  
*Reflections on Historicity and Interpretation in Historical Jesus  
Research*

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**Abstract**

Most scholars consider the stories about Jesus walking on the sea (Mark 6:45ff par) not authentic and without historical truth. They also accept that Jesus could read and/or write (John 7:15, 8:6 and Luke 4:16-30). These examples are used to discuss aspects of historical interpretation and historicity in historical Jesus research. Read within the historical and cultural context of the day, we argue that the second is historically implausible while the story about Jesus walking on the sea probably contains historical truth. Reference to “criteria of authenticity” and “historical reliability” in conventional scholarship ignore that such “methodo-logical” aspects relate to culturally determined assumptions. Confusion with regard to multiple cultural realities leads to misleading criteria for historicity.

**1. Introduction**

Anyone familiar with NT scholarship will think that the title of this paper has it wrong: current scholarship is fairly unanimous that Jesus could read and write but that he probably did not walk on the water. Although some scholars are skeptical about the texts, there is multiple independent attestation from John and Luke that he could actually write and/or read. As Meier (1991, 268), for example says, some would say “the question is ridiculous, since three NT passages prove that Jesus could read and/or write:

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1 This article is part of a joint project to rethink historicity and historiography in Jesus research. Pieter Craffert was largely responsible for writing sections 1-3, and Pieter Botha for section 4.

John 8:6; John 7:15; and Luke 4:16-30". After considering some of the objections (which will be reviewed below), he concludes that Jesus was probably able to read the biblical Hebrew and therefore, "he was literate" (1991, 278).

As for Jesus walking on the sea (Mark 6:45-52; Matt 14:22-33; John 6:16-21), the vast majority of scholars who comment on it seem to doubt its historicity. It is only those who postulate the category of "supernatural interventions" in the life of Jesus, who argue that this episode can be considered authentic. Even a fairly conservative scholar, such as Meier (1994, 921), concludes that "the walking on the water is most likely from start to finish a creation of the early church, a christological confession in narrative form". As for the Jesus Seminar, the case is clear: "Almost to a person, the Fellows doubted that Jesus actually walked on the water" (Funk and The Jesus Seminar 1998, 93).

Is it possible to affirm the historicity of Jesus' walking on the sea without relying on theological supernaturalism and to deny that Jesus was literate while taking both the textual evidence seriously and conforming to sound principles of historiography? It is precisely on the basis of such principles that it will be argued that Jesus probably "walked on the sea" (when understood adequately as a *cultural event*) but that he probably could not read and write. In fact, progress and renewal regarding questions of historicity will result from a new perspective of and different lenses for looking at existing material and not from new materials or data. Lens shapes image and we have to reflect about our lenses.

## **2. Jesus' Walking on the Sea**

### *2.1 Review of current research*

Madden (1997), who offers an extensive overview of the history of exegesis of this episode, identifies five groups of interpreters. The first group comments only on the symbolic features but makes no judgment about the historicity of the event (1997, 2-8). These include notions about the identity of Jesus and remarks that he is symbolically identified with hero ancestors in this episode.

The second group of interpreters argues that the pericope of Jesus' walking on the sea in fact goes back to "a historical miracle performed by Jesus during the Galilean ministry" (1997, 9). For some the miracle is about

the laws of gravity with the implication that Jesus' body was not subject to the normal conditions of human bodies and therefore he could wander on water. Others see the miracle as a change in the composition of the water, which in that case could support Jesus' body. Whichever way, as Sabourin (1975, 194) states: "...the pericope of Jesus walking on the *water* [italics ours] has sense in the Gospel context only if it is understood as relating a miraculous event which really took place". At least he is up front about miracles in stating that a belief in a personal god is a precondition for belief in these miracles (1974, 117).

The third group argues that it was no miracle, but sees the episode as a natural event which was erroneously described as a miraculous event (Madden 1997, 14-18). Explanations of the "natural" phenomena include that Jesus actually walked on logs that were in the water at that place, that he actually walked on the shore that was mistakenly interpreted as if he were walking on the water or that the water was very shallow at the specific place in the lake (see also Theissen and Merz 1998, 286).

A fourth group of scholars do not see the origin of the reports in any historical event, but regard them as having been created as a symbolic story right from the start. They differ from the first group in maintaining that it definitely was not an account about a historical event but was from the beginning created as a symbolic story (Madden 1997, 18-36).

The fifth group, which Madden identifies with, is in our view only a special case of the former group, namely, those who see the story of the walking on the sea as a displaced resurrection narrative (1997, 36-40). Since Bultmann this has been a popular option which is still shared by scholars such as Theissen and Merz (1998, 303) who think that the "miraculous walking on the *water* [italics ours] is described with motifs which could come from an Easter story". The historical process imagined in this explanation is that "an originally postresurrectional narrative has been transposed to the Galilean ministry" (Madden 1997, 139) of Jesus.

On a higher level of analysis these interpretations all share a very basic assumption, namely, a fixed register of what could count as historical events or what could have happened. They, however, follow two different strategies of dealing with this assumption about reality.

The one strategy, apparent in group two, accepts that besides natural events and phenomena which all people know and can recognize (a fixed register of reality), supernatural events which can be seen by all, take place in the world—a very definite ontological notion of how the world works.

The historical events behind the reports, therefore, were *supernatural events* which, in this view, are just like natural events, visible and photographable, should a camera be available. The register of reality which controls this interpretation states that only objectively visible events constitute reality. It can, however, be supplemented by visible, supernatural events—especially if the category of supernatural events is accepted for the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, texts about a figure walking on the Sea of Galilee must have been a report about actual events in time and space.

The other strategy is to say that because these reports do not fit our register of reality or what could have happened, the options simply are (1) narrative creations or (2) mistaken reports about another actual event.

(1) The first option is that the “event” which led to the reports was an instance of narration or literary activity. In other words, it is the result of nothing more than a storytelling event (which is a cultural activity). Crossan, a contemporary example of the fourth group, says about the nature miracles (of which “walking on water” is an instance): “Those stories were not concerned with control over nature before Jesus’ death or with entranced apparitions after it; rather they were quite dramatic and symbolic narratives about power and authority in the earliest Christian communities” (1994, 186 and see 1991, 404-406). This is clearly also the strategy of the fifth group. What is significant is that the creation of symbolic stories is postulated as the origin of the reports without considering the possibility that these could have been reports about historical cultural events.

The implicit assumption of the fourth and fifth groups is also that people cannot actually walk on water, but that this was Jesus’ early followers’ special way of telling a story or parable about authority within their group. This assumption is implicit in the judgment of the Jesus Seminar mentioned above. In their view, walking on the water “is an epiphany story”—meaning, a story about the appearance of a god or other heavenly being, like an angel, because such events cannot actually take place, but are told in order to convey something about their authority structures.

Regarding the first group, the question is whether they do not also have a tacit understanding of the historical events while not commenting about them. Do they not simply assume the historicity of the described event? Put differently, will the “symbolic features” remain intact under different constructions of the historicity of the event? What is clear even from the identified symbolic meanings is that none of them assume that it was a

cultural event of some kind (see further below). What is significant, therefore, is not that the reports can allegedly be engaged merely in source and literary analyses, but that it is done with reports which can potentially be seen as reports about a historical cultural event but without recognizing that.

(2) The second option (mistaken reports) is well illustrated in the arguments of the third group. Such reports are about actual, visible events which could have been photographed, if a camera were available. The historical event consisted of disciples who saw Jesus walking but mistakenly thought he was walking on the water while actually he was walking on some other surface (logs, stones or a shallow part of the lake). They read the texts as if they are reporting about a natural event of Jesus walking (on objects) on the water. Underlying this view is still the fixed register of reality according to which people cannot actually walk on water and therefore the reports refer to other actual visible events which were only wrongfully reported.

None of the accounts entertain the idea that the stories were not about such an event at all but about a cultural event from a different cultural system.

## 2.2 *Jesus' walking on the sea as a cultural event*

Malina (1999, 356) draws attention to the fact that none of these interpretive positions treat the texts as reports about a possible *cultural event*. He shows that the “Gospel depictions of Jesus walking on the sea have all the hallmarks of a report of an ASC experience”. They can very appropriately be read as culturally plausible descriptions of ASC (alternate state of consciousness) experiences of the disciples.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it makes

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2 Following Ludwig (1968, 69-70), ASC's can be defined with an umbrella term as “...those mental states, induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognised subjectively by the individual himself [or herself] (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation, in terms of subjective experience or psychological functioning, from certain general norms as determined by the subjective experience and psychological functioning of that individual during alert, waking consciousness”. In a study of the social and cultural patterning of ASC's, it was found that such states exist in religious contexts in 90% of the sample of 488 societies. In other words, in a very large percentage of human societies for which data is available, ASC's manifest themselves regularly within religious rituals (see Bourguignon 1979, 245). This model has, for example, already been applied to the

perfect cultural sense to read these reports as reports of ASC experiences of Jesus' disciples as actual cultural events of some sort in time and space.

The conditions were conducive for ASC experiences: it was nighttime and a sudden storm arose on the Sea of Galilee; the disciples were exhausted because of the wind and the waves, they were sleep-deprived and were terrified. Their visions contained somatic, visual and auditory elements: Jesus lost his "gravity determined, land bound limitations" which enabled him to walk on the sea in their vision; in addition Matthew (14:28-30) reports that Peter had "an in-vision experience of altered physical bearing" (Malina 1999, 367).

Two additional conditions in their cultural system provided the framework within which such visions, as cultural events, would have made sense to them.

The first is that Jesus did not walk on the "water" (H<sup>2</sup>O) but on the "sea" (Mt 14:25-26, Mk 6:48, John 6:19), which was essentially different from water. Natural elements for us, such as the wind and the sea, were person-like entities for ancient people, or put differently, they contained non-visible person-like forces, powers or spirits. "The Greco-Romans identified the 'living' sea with the important deity Poseidon/Neptune (Semites called this deity: Tiamat or Tehom)" (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 128). Therefore, to walk on the sea is to trample on the being which can engulf people with its waves and swallow them in its deep. As Malina (1999, 359) says, for Jesus to walk on the sea "is evidence of his place in the hierarchy of cosmic powers".

Secondly, stories about gods and heroes who walked on the sea are not unknown in the ancient world. Poseidon/Neptune traveled the sea on a horse-drawn chariot while the Israelite God also walked across the sea as well as trampling it (Cotter 1998, 148-150). The prophet Habakkuk (3:15) says about Yahweh: "You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters".

The stories about Israelite heroes who could part water are well known (Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha come to mind). Walking on the sea was not associated with any other hero but remained the prerogative of Yahweh. There are, however, a number of heroes in the Greco-Roman literature who

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transfiguration scene (Pilch 1995), Jesus' resurrection appearances (Pilch 1998) and Paul's conversion experience (Pilch 2002).

were associated with sea-walking while the idea is also found in literature on dream interpretation (Cotter 1998, 160-163).

These cultural notions made up the symbolic universe within which they could express their experiences—which could well have been visionary (ASC) experiences. In our view, when read together with all the other visionary and other ASC experiences and events ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth, such as the healings, exorcisms, visionary and spirit possession experiences, baptism accounts, appearance stories and the like, this could well have been an instance of an expression of a definite cultural experience or event by the disciples. It is, however, not the correctness of this specific suggestion which is of most importance but its introduction of the category of **cultural events** which has great significance for reflection about the historicity of many of the events described in the gospels.

### **3. Rethinking *Historicity* in Jesus Research: Cultural Events as Historical Events**

While admitting that the real past is gone forever and only available as imaginative constructions, the task of the historian remains “to establish as firmly as possible events and states of affairs in the past; and to find the most appropriate words in which to relate and describe—that is, to communicate—these findings to other people” (Stanford 1986, 72). In doing that, a basic principle remains that “*you do not know it if you cannot show it*” (Miller 1999, 35). Sufficient, reliable evidence is a prerequisite for historiography and any claim about historicity. But what is sufficient, reliable evidence and how does a historian establish the states of affairs in the past? What can possibly count as a historical event and thus constitute historicity?

In order to answer these questions it is necessary to look at some developments in historiography over the last few decades which show that it is no longer possible to decide about the historicity of events in Jesus’ life without a recognition of the reality of multiple cultural constructions and engaging in cross-cultural interpretation. In the process four general historiographical principles will be formulated.

#### *3.1 The new historiography: historicity and what actually happened*

Perhaps the most important insight in historiography over the last few decades includes that part of the question whether evidence is sufficient and

reliable, is the question about the significance thereof. Stanford (1986, 78, 81) says that most historians nowadays agree that the historian “must establish the original meaning of the documents” because “questions of context, significance and meaning” can make all the difference in knowledge about a historical event. This is so because as anthropologists have demonstrated, different cultures have their own “absolute presuppositions” about the world. For historians it implies that they also have to determine whether the evidence was properly understood: “in order to understand what has occurred” the historian “must grasp the absolute presuppositions, the unspoken assumptions, of the society under review” (1986, 93). Iggers indicates that the emergence of “the new cultural history” which developed over the last two decades of the previous century, really introduced a new paradigm in historiography (see Craffert 1991, 124-128 for a discussion of these developments). Historians are “concerned not with explanation but with ‘explication,’ the attempt to reconstruct the significance of the social expressions that serve as its texts” (Iggers 1997, 14). What this concretely means is that in the evaluation of documentary sources, “before anything else can be achieved, the historian must try to enter the mental world of those who created the sources” (Tosh 1984, 116).

It is necessary to appreciate what the sources are about, to begin with. From this perspective, implied in the question *whether it actually happened* is the question about *what actually happened* or *what is claimed to have happened?* What does the *it* stand for? If the second question is not asked with equal seriousness, the first cannot be answered with any confidence. These questions mutually influence one another. The answer to the last determines how the former is answered and even when properly understood, the question remains whether evidence is authentic and reliable or simply fictitious. In order to know whether something has happened with or to a specific historical figure is a matter of both sufficient, reliable evidence and of knowing what it is evidence for. Knowing what has happened or what could have happened is a complex matter exactly because cultures have different absolute presuppositions. Historicity and what has happened implies much more than multiple, independent witnesses, namely also whether they have been investigated for their reality value.

Historiography in general and NT historiography in particular has been part of an ethnocentric way of thinking about “the other” which has a very long history in Western thinking. Bernstein (1991, 306) shows that it is caught in an ontological predicament which has haunted it for centuries,

“where ontology never gets beyond the problematic of ‘the Same and the Other’ and always seeks to show how the other can be mastered, absorbed, reduced to the same”. It can be called the *fallacy of ontological monism*. Within such a framework other world-views, cultural realities or absolute presuppositions are disallowed the ontological status of “reality” and everything which does not fit the own ontology is regarded as mythical or not real or simply subsumed under the umbrella of the own. It is only under such research assumptions that it can be claimed that historians insist “on looking every report in the face and judging its reliability independently of theoretical possibilities” (Funk 1996, 60-61). What the foregoing overview shows is that the current debate is compromised by a long history of ethnocentric Western thinking about “the other” in which the reality of possible cultural events does not even feature.

When the question of historicity is co-determined by the question about what has happened, the issue becomes exponentially more complex than simply looking each report in the face and judging its reliability. In fact, then, it is irresponsible to offer a proposal about the historicity of an event without explicitly dealing with the issues of context, meaning and significance—or, without exploring the cultural options about such reports.

The first historiographical principle can thus be formulated in the following way: *the historian must first and foremost grasp the absolute presuppositions and unspoken assumptions of how life was experienced and understood by the subjects*. Opposed to the acceptance of a fixed register of reality, this implies the acceptance of multiple realities and radical pluralism.

### 3.2 *Multiple realities and radical pluralism*

The new historiography is part of the intellectual movement or new consciousness in Western thinking which is broadly speaking known as post modernism. It is, on the one hand, characterized by a reaction against ontological monism and, on the other hand, a defence of multiple world-views.

It rejects the notion of ontological monism which maintains that “the other” can be mastered, absorbed or reduced to the same. A feature common to thinkers in the postmodern movement is “a willingness to emphasize the importance of the local and the contingent, a desire to underline the extent to which our own concepts and attitudes have been shaped by particular

historical circumstances, and a corresponding dislike—amounting almost to hatred in the case of Wittgenstein—of all overarching theories and singular schemes of explanation” (Skinner 1985, 12).

It results in a cry for a hermeneutic (interpretive) approach in the human sciences in general and historiography in particular to do justice to the meaning, significance and context of the people involved (see also Stanford 1986, 78).

On the other hand, it accepts that each world-view is an expression of reality and therefore, that more than one world-view or view of reality is valid. Strenuous effort is required of a Western scientist, Laughlin, McManus and d’Aquili (1990, 226) point out, “to realize that his [or her] concrete view of reality is merely a construct”. The critical, culturally sensitive, scholar can be fully committed to a specific modern scientific world-view but views the world differently in accepting that there are multiple valid world-views or cultural realities. In other words, it explicitly opts for what Bernstein (1991, 336) calls “engaged fallibilistic pluralism”:

For it means taking our own fallibility seriously—resolving that, however much we are committed to our own style of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other. It means being vigilant against the dual temptations of simply dismissing what others are saying by falling back on one of those standard defensive ploys where we condemn it as obscure, woolly, or trivial, or thinking we can always easily translate what is alien into our own entrenched vocabularies.

Cultural events and realities, the own and others’, are embedded in specific cultural systems. The second principle for historical Jesus research can now be formulated: *as historians it is necessary to deal with events and phenomena which are real for the participants but which might be absent from the register of “reality” of the historians themselves*. This can be illustrated with one example relevant for this study, namely, visionary experiences.

Much of ethnographic literature amply demonstrates that people in most societies operate psychologically by accepting ASC experiences (such as, visions, dreams and possession) as meaningful and normal human experiences (thus as everyday reality) for obtaining knowledge about the world (see e.g. Bourguignon 1979, 245; Craffert 2002). Such people, Laughlin, McManus and d’Aquili (1990, 155) say, “experience *polyphasic consciousness*, and consequently their cognized view of self constitutes a

polyphasic integration”. Such experiences are very real for the participants: the deities encountered are “deities-out-there” and the worlds visited are “worlds-out-there” and the journeys undertaken are with a “real” soul or “real body”, as the case may be (see James [1902] 1994, 75; Laughlin, et al. 1990, 132, 270). This is opposed to most Western (North American and Western European) people whom they typify as subject to *monophasic consciousness*: the only *real world* experiences are those unfolding in the sensorium during the normal *waking* phase.

But cultural events and realities are more complex than this.

### 3.3 *Hard and soft cultural events and phenomena*

When confronted with human affairs, it is important to realize, as Searle (1995, 1) shows, that large portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, “are only facts by human agreement”. He calls them *social facts* or *socially created reality* or *institutional facts* (they will be called *cultural reality* in this study) which are ontologically real but they exist only within human institutions. These culturally real things (events and phenomena) exist for us and for all other people on the planet—what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966, 37) call the “reality of everyday life” which “is taken for granted *as reality*”. Examples include things like money, property, government and marriages but also experiences of consciousness such as soul flights or demon possession. These things are “objective” facts in the sense that they are not a matter of your or my preferences, evaluations or attitudes, but are dependent on human institutions for their existence. In short, culture is real without being a thing out there (see Peacock 1986, 1-20).

Cultural realities, such as the piece of paper in your pocket which is a ten dollar bill, Searle (1995, 1-3, 7-13) explains, are different from “brute” facts, such as the fact that Mount Everest has snow and ice near the summit which is totally independent of any human opinion. In order to show that cultural realities can be objective (based on the intersubjective agreement of a group of people), and still depend on human institutions and the role of language to be objective, he makes three useful distinctions.

The first is that between objective and subjective distinctions in an epistemic sense. An epistemic subjective judgment such as, “Rembrandt is a better artist than Rubens” can be contrasted with an epistemic objective judgment, such as “Rembrandt lived in Amsterdam during the year 1632”

which is true or false independent of anybody's attitudes or feelings. From the perspective of critical historiography, the latter (if true) constitutes an objective fact. The second distinction is between ontologically subjective facts, such as pain which is dependent on a sense perception and an ontologically objective entity, such as a mountain of which the existence is independent of any perceiver or mental state. Judgments about such ontologically objective entities can be epistemically subjective ("this mountain is more beautiful than that one") while epistemically objective statements can be made about ontologically subjective entities ("I have a pain in my back" can be a report about an epistemically objective fact which does not depend on outside observers). The third distinction is between intrinsic and observer-relative features of the world. An intrinsic feature of objects is that they have a certain mass and chemical composition independent of any observer while observer-relative features do not add any new material objects to reality but add epistemically objective features. An object with a certain mass and chemical composition (independent of any observer) can be a screwdriver, which is an observer-relative judgment (but this ontologically subjective judgment can be more than a personal opinion; it can depend on intersubjective approval and thus be culturally real). These three distinctions cut across each other but together they provide the conceptual tools for understanding the ontological status of cultural realities.

It should be noted that cultural realities cannot be captured and described in the language of physics and chemistry. Searle (1995, 3) explains this with the example of buying a beer in a restaurant in Paris: "There is no physical-chemical description adequate to define 'restaurant,' 'waiter,' 'sentence of French,' 'money,' or even 'chair' and 'table,' even though all restaurants, sentences of French, money, and chairs and tables are physical phenomena". But each of these are cultural realities which make up that part of human life which is real but not material or physical. Just as paying a restaurant bill with a piece of paper is a "real event" which consists of much more than the observable actions of the participants, so too an exorcism, demon possession or heavenly journey can be a real cultural event consisting of much more than the observable actions within a particular cultural system.

The distinction between observer dependent and independent features also apply to social personages—some features are just not ontologically objective and therefore a distinction can be made between "hard" and "soft" biographical features.

Controlling the elements, experiencing spirit possession, controlling and commanding spirits, *miraculous* healings, special births and the like, are stories which make sense in many traditional cultural systems and particularly in a shamanic world-view. These can all be considered soft biographical features. Hard biographical information refers to the when, where and what of a social personage such as details of place and time of birth and death, parents, family members and friends, place of residence, occupation and, in so far as they can be determined, important specific events in a person's life which are observer independent. In a literate and bureaucratic society such information can normally be obtained by any interested party from documents such as birth-, christening- and death certificates, from educational reports and other documentary databases. Provided that a full record of data is available and collected, the same picture of hard biographical information can be drawn by any independent researcher by comparing sources, determining the most authentic and weeding out the corrupted documents.

The most important implication following from this is that events or phenomena can be real without being "out there". Of the events reported in the gospels and ascribed to the life of Jesus, a very large part consists of *cultural events* which are being experienced and which belonged to their specific cultural system (they, therefore, are objectively there without being ontologically objective—they cannot be photographed or analyzed by physical or chemical analyses). Treating such events and phenomena as if they belong to the category of hard biographical data is an instance of what is called the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*. An example pertinent to this study is ASC experiences.

The third historiographical principle for historical Jesus research can now be formulated: *historians have to deal with both hard and soft biographical information and the nature of the latter events and phenomena is that they are not objectively observable but still real.*

### *3.4 Cultural events and phenomena require cross-cultural interpretation*

The admittance of multiple realities and the avoidance of ethnocentrism constitutes a cross-cultural interpretive setting in which two worlds have to be taken into account. An adequate cross-cultural interpretation is always comparative in that understanding has to take place in two worlds at once—that of the interpreter and that of the subjects. As Charles Taylor (1985, 129)

reminds us, “it will frequently be the case that we cannot understand another society until we have understood ourselves better as well”. Basically, “all social science is comparative” (Lipset 1968, 33 and see Cohn 1980, 216) and no serious question about the contemporary world or human activities—past and present—can be asked without receiving historical answers (see also Taylor 1977, 130; Abrams 1982, 1-2).

Pressing as far as possible towards making sense of the subjects’ point of view is not the same as saying that the interpreter should adopt their point of view. Turning native is like swallowing the propaganda which created the interpretive problem in the first place; it not only amplifies an existing problem in that it adds one more subject to be understood by outsiders, it also rules out the possibility of showing cultural beliefs or practices as wrong, confused or deluded (Taylor 1985, 123).

Making sense of the subjects’ viewpoint is therefore not the same as saying that their viewpoint makes sense. What is also needed in cross-cultural interpretation, Bernstein (1991, 313) points out, is “the need to make critical discriminations and judgments” because not “all forms of otherness and difference are to be celebrated”.

Therefore, the fourth principle reads like this: *historians involved with material from alien cultures have to learn to live in two worlds at once and have to realize that each event or phenomenon can be viewed from two different perspectives*. The plain and simple implication of this is that the question of the historicity of events in a cross-cultural perspective becomes a matter of cultural dialogue, negotiation and criticism.

In fact, from a cross-cultural perspective the traditional notion of *historicity* or “what has actually happened”, becomes highly complex, not to say problematic. With the disappearance of a singular “reality” against which a “reality check” can be performed in order to establish “what actually happened”, it is suggested that there will always be at least two different answers to these questions.

A visitation by an ancestor or a heavenly being is a cultural event within a specific cultural system but from a cross-cultural perspective, the same event or phenomenon (“what actually happened”) can be viewed as an ASC experience. The implication of this discussion is that the question of the “historicity” of events or phenomena has become very complex. It hinges on the “it” in the question: “did **it** actually happen”? If the “it” (e.g. a vision) is taken in its ancient setting, the answer can be, yes, it actually happened! But it can also be taken in a comparative setting (for example, as an ASC

experience), and the answer can also be, yes, it actually happened! If the “it” is taken in a sense of misplaced concreteness—as a reference to a *supernatural event*, the answer should be no, as no such an event is being reported!

### *3.5 Rethinking the historicity of gospel reports about Jesus’ walking on the sea*

As indicated in the overview above, much of current scholarship either does not consider cultural events relevant for discussion in this case or simply assumes that the reports were either about objective, observable supernatural events or simply made-up narratives about some other aspect (such as authority) in society. Each of these “looking the sources in the face” excludes the possibility of seeing a cultural but real event, because the register of reality adopted does not allow such events.

As in any other setting, a distinction can be made between observer dependent and observer independent events and phenomena in the ancient first-century cultural system. Visionary experiences belonged to the observer dependent or soft biographical information side. Such events or phenomena can be viewed differently from a cross-cultural perspective, namely, as ASC experiences. Therefore, the question of the historicity can be answered in two different ways. If it was indeed a visionary experience by the disciples (which is very probable), they firmly experienced and believed that Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee. Based on the kind of experience, plus their cultural assumptions about such events (“lens shapes image”), they experienced and firmly believed they saw him walking on the Sea of Galilee and, therefore, walking on the water. As a cultural event duly experienced by the disciples that Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee, it probably contained all the symbolic meaning of Jesus' position within the hierarchy of powers who could trample the sea monsters. From this point of view it has to be admitted that there could have been a cultural event (a visionary experience) in which the disciples became convinced that Jesus walked on the water. When treated in a culturally sensitive manner, it can indeed be seen as going back to a plausible “event” (a cultural event) in the life of Jesus in Galilee: a visionary experience by his disciples which had an impact on their lives. Historically, it was a cultural event experienced within the parameters of their cultural system: yes, as a cultural event “it” could

have happened! The story was told within the setting of a polyphasic cultural system which accepts such events as part of reality.

From a cross-cultural perspective such an event can be described as an ASC experience in which the disciples encountered culturally defined beings (sea deities) and culturally defined activities (deities and heroes could walk on the sea and undertake bodily journeys). But from this perspective not all sorts of otherness are to be applauded. Soft biographical information need not be taken as if it were hard biographical information; ontologically subjective experiences need not be taken as evidence for ontologically objective events. Just as it is no longer necessary to think that all ancient babies were actually conceived as seed-babies deposited in receptive containers, an ASC experience within such a cultural setting as that of the first-century Mediterranean world need not be read as a report about someone actually walking on H<sup>2</sup>O on the Sea of Galilee. A culturally sensitive reading does not exclude cross-cultural dialogue and criticism.

It has been suggested above that in the absence of reflection about the nature and reality of cultural events, the research tradition is compromised by its ethnocentric way of looking at historical events—because of the reality register applied, cultural events are by definition excluded from being considered real historical events. Madden (1997, 40) illustrates this in his argument that “it is unlikely that the narrative recounts an historical event which took place during the Galilean ministry of Jesus” without offering a discussion of the range of plausible “historical events” in that setting.

Crossan (2003, 302) suggests that reading this episode as an embedded parable (a “fictional story with a theological punch”) is just as culturally sensitive a solution as reading it as a cultural event (an entranced vision by the disciples). Are these historical explanations really equally valid? Why not simply opt for storytelling or symbolic narratives as the historical ground for these reports?

In our view the question, however, is not whether it can be read as a literary creation or symbolic story but whether that is the best option. Members of the Jesus Seminar (Funk 1996, 60; Miller 1999, 39) often emphasize that possibility should not be confused with plausibility—the question should not be whether it is possible, but if it is plausible. More to the point, is it plausible to read the reports as a symbolic story if the option exists to understand it as a report about a cultural event? More pertinently, is it historiographically responsible to read it in that way if the historical possibility that it could have been a report about a cultural event has not

even been considered? In the absence of reflection about the historicity of cultural events, is it good enough to read it simply as if it were a symbolic story? Asked differently, if our ethnocentric lenses exclude most cultural options from their time, is it responsible historiography to fall back onto our own way of seeing the world within which symbolic stories can be told about any topic? Cultural sensitivity not only invites all sorts of possibilities, but also makes some possibilities plausible—especially when considered within the setting of cultural realities.

Little has been said about the claim that the reports could indeed have been about a supernatural intervention and event. The ethical and theological objections against such a viewpoint have been discussed elsewhere and will not be repeated (see Craffert 2003, 365-369). The historiographical reaction would be that if the only evidence for a “supernatural event” is the soft biographical information contained in texts that are filled with other cultural events, it need not be taken as reliable evidence for such an event. What is clear is that claims about such an event share the same reality register as those who deny the reality of the event, namely, that it is a report about an objective, observable event in history; in other words, as an observer independent event.

The point can be argued the other way round. It is clear that in terms of the distinction between hard and soft biographical data, which exist in all cultural systems, that there never was any hard biographical evidence for Jesus’ walking on the water. The only evidence is of the soft biographical nature—that is, evidence from observer dependent reports about a real cultural event by the disciples. Unless the reports are misread for their cultural nature as if they were conveying hard biographical data, there is no evidence to claim that Jesus of Nazareth actually walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee. For this reason the position that it is an actual instance of a report about a supernatural event, need not be seriously entertained.

#### **4. Was Jesus Literate?**

With regard to Jesus walking on the sea, the contemporary reader is immediately confronted with strangeness, and a number of interpretive strategies must instantly be engaged to make sense of the report. With the information that Jesus read a text in a congregational context no such interpretive strategies seem necessary: it is something familiar—at least an event that one is comfortable with! At first sight the question whether Jesus

could read and write belongs to the category of hard biographical data. In fact, that is exactly how the question is treated in current scholarship. Since there is a text which states that Jesus could read (according to Luke 4:16 he went into the synagogue on the sabbath “and he stood up to read”) and at least two texts that he could write (John 7:15; 8:6), many scholars simply assume that Jesus was literate. Schnackenburg, for example, is adamant that Jesus could read and write. His argument is that Jesus “had doubtless learnt to do so, like most Jewish boys, at an early age”. It is the minority who dissent, proposing that Jesus probably could not read and write, such as Funk (1996, 158), Crossan (1994, 25-26) and the Jesus Seminar (1993, 27).

Because Jesus’ literacy is approached as supposedly hard biographical data, the question (whether he was literate or not) is reduced to a simple yes/no, and the choice (especially when “yes”) substantiated by means of an itemizing of references to “schools”, “education” and “teaching”. This reductionist approach ignores the hermeneutical rule that all these concepts must be placed in cultural meaning systems *before* one can employ them as analytical categories.

We want to argue exactly the opposite. Such reports (and implied “underlying” events) need the same vigilance with regard to ethnocentrism, and therefore a dedication to cross-cultural work and cultural sensitivity, as argued above.

#### *4.1 Jesus, schooling and literacy in current scholarship*

In general, references to literacy in antiquity reflect fairly unrealistic understandings of literacy, with little appreciation of the conceptual complications involved when studying literacy and, most conspicuously, ignorance of sociohistorical context. For the *purposes of this article* we use the term literacy, like most NT scholars, anachronistically, in the vague and generalized sense of extensive skill at reading and writing texts. However, literacy, like orality, can only be defined within a context. More than familiarity with reading and writing, literacy is about an ideologically laden social activity which is part of a cultural system (Graff 1985; 1987; Botha 1991; 2004). Not only should literacy be described in its various stages, but also in relation to various activities.

We propose that literacy was of little concern to most Galileans (and most Judeans as well) in the first-century world. No doubt schooling was practised, and various teachers were active but first-century education,

teachers and teaching served purposes relative to Jewish peasant communities to whom modern concerns were unknown and irrelevant. Consequently, when one comes across a reference to reading (or writing), *appropriate, cultural-historical* scenarios with which to *conceptualize* “literacy” in the world of Jesus is crucial.

Meier (1991, 277-278) has developed an extensive argument that Jesus was literate:

To sum up: individual texts from the Gospels prove very little about the literacy of Jesus. Instead, it is an indirect argument from converging lines of probability that inclines us to think that Jesus was in fact literate. ... [S]ometime during his childhood or early adulthood, Jesus was taught how to read and expound the Hebrew Scriptures. This most likely happened...in the synagogue at Nazareth.

Meier at least acknowledges that “formal education” at the time was at a low level, and one therefore has to allow for “a high degree of natural talent—perhaps even genius” on Jesus’ side to compensate (278). Meier, also, is aware that in antiquity writing “was a professional skill and was not necessarily learned along with reading” (272). Consequently, he admits that it is plausible that a “rudimentary ‘craftsman’s literacy’” could apply to Jesus (273). But Jesus was no ordinary peasant (278), and, emphasizes Meier, Jesus’ *context* was one of high interest (“intense and profound”, 276) in formal education, especially in reading biblical Hebrew.

The “lines of probability” Meier relies on for this conclusion are certain general considerations about first-century Palestinian Judaism, specifically the “pivotal importance attributed to [the canon of sacred Scripture]...by devout Jews” (275). Because of the existence of a written sacred text it follows, for Meier, that the ability to read and expound was held in high esteem, and therefore to “be able to read and explain the Scriptures was a revered goal for religiously minded Jews. Hence literacy held special importance for the Jewish community” (275).

Meier cites archaeological and literary data to support his contention of this “special importance”, namely the commonly found inscriptions on ordinary vessels and instruments (e g, pitchers and arrows) and a number of literary references supposedly suggesting wide diffusion of literacy among Palestinian Jews. This once more proves the point that it is interpretation that makes “data” into evidence. Writing on ordinary vessels is not an indication of extensive schooling, or even widespread literacy; besides its

use for identification, such writing had mostly apotropaic and other magical functions. Warner (1980, 81-82) reminds us that the person who wrote “belonging to so-and-so” on a jar handle could not necessarily read what was written, or could write slightly more complex inscriptions, or could both read and write much longer inscriptions. Likewise, the person who read the same “belonging to so-and-so” could write it too, or could not write it, or could both read and write longer passages. Meier furthermore refers to (a) 1 Macc 1:56-57: “The books of the law which they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Where the book of the covenant was found in the possession of any one...the decree of the king condemned him to death”—which shows rather how remarkable the occurrence of a book was (and tells us *nothing* about “private copies” of ancient “Bibles”). Similarly the reference to (b) Josephus *Contra Apionem* 2.204 reveals nothing about formal education or widespread literacy; there is not the slightest indication of a public institution for education at all. The reference is part of an invitation to the theocratic constitution of the Jews, and Josephus paints a picture of (*fictive!*) Jewish unanimity and lack of transgressors, and he must claim that children be raised as *Jewish* in order to make his argument plausible. (c) The abcedaries from Murabba‘at (Milik 1961, 90-92, 175; Benoit, Milik and de Vaux 1961, nos.10, 11, 73, 78-80) and Herodium (Foerster 1993, 621) prove nothing about widespread scribal literacy (acknowledged by Meier 1991, 275). These abcedaries are evidence that *some* persons practised their “letters”, nothing else.

Meier believes that synagogues provided “elementary” education, particularly the reading and exposition of Scripture (*à la* rabbinic schools) and that Jesus attended the “local” synagogue school in Nazareth (277). This is presented as the strongest argument: Jesus probably received an education in the synagogue in Nazareth. Similarly, Townsend (1992, 316) is confident that “Jewish boys learned to read well enough to take part in synagogue services”, referring to Luke 4:16-20 and Josephus *Contra Apionem* 1.61.

Both texts are irrelevant to his claim. From Luke 4 we can conclude that Luke thought Jesus could read and not what “Jewish boys” were taught, and the text in Josephus is a boast about the remarkableness of “our mode of life” (περὶ τὸν βίον ἡμῶν ἰδιότητος), among which that Jews teach their children (and no one else), so it is understandable that their way of life remained largely unknown to the outside world (1.68).

The evidence for “elementary” schooling in first-century Palestine is *extremely* thin, based, mainly, on a fundamentalistic reading of three

*Talmudic* passages. Descriptions of first-century elementary “schools” represent, quite simply, *bad* history with regard to the evidence for first-century education (Botha 1999). Meier (1991, 271) quite correctly describes such studies as producing a “‘homogenized’ picture” of Jewish education by means of an uncritical, literalistic and anachronistic use of sources, but then, surprisingly, goes ahead and does the same!

#### 4.2 *Jesus’ peasant world*

The question about Jesus’ supposed literacy should not start with statements in Talmudic literature dealing with “schools” but with a realistic understanding of the peasant world of first-century Galilee.

Let us use as our model of the actor in these ancient villages we are talking about not a twenty-first century university graduate living in an industrialized society, but rather the cautious peasant who approached the social and economic transactions of daily life as part of a zero-sum game. A view of the “bad life” and a precarious, marginal existence taught peasants to value survival and security over profit and risk-taking.<sup>3</sup> Literacy—if an issue at all—was a means of protection against, rather than advancement in, a hostile world. For the peasant, to estimate the *possible* “opportunities” provided by schooling, and then to weigh that against *known* realities would be foolishness. To understand peasant strategies with regard to the hiring of teachers, or the building of a school, we must keep in mind the distinction between the optimizing profit-maker and the rational-actor peasant. That is,

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3 Responding to a romantic tendency to idealize peasant culture and the mystical view of certainty and dependability (the “good life”) supposedly characterising peasant values, anthropologists argue that peasants see the world as generally threatening, and they talk of the peasant view of the “bad life” (Bailey 1971, esp. 313-316). On the social organisation and value system of traditional peasant communities: Redfield (1947); Fuller (1961); Foster (1965; 1973, 1-8, 25-41); Alavi (1968); Meillassoux (1973); Shanin (1973a; 1973b); Rosen (1975, 5-16); Gilmore (1980). Studies of peasants in the Mediterranean world of antiquity: Finley (1985, chaps 2, 4); Applebaum (1976); Frayn (1979); Evans (1980a; 1980b); Foxhall (1990); Tate (1997). With regard to ‘limited good’ as a characteristic of how peasants understand the way the world works, see Foster (1965; 1973, 35-41) and Malina (1993, 90-116). Informative historical studies on education among various peasantries: Eklof (1981; 1986); Hansen (1961, 108-116); and Goitein (1971, 171-239—on medieval (Alexandrian) Jewish communities). For a discussion of peasant social organisation relating to Palestine in the time of Jesus, see the brief comments by Hanson & Oakman (1998, 7-8).

peasants tend to have a very narrow definition of what is useful, they judge according to a distinct, time-proven set of doctrines.

To measure deferred income against immediate costs is simply not sensible to traditional peasant values. Malina (1996, xiv) illustrates the value like this: “better a weak old horse today than the promise of a wonderful strong horse in the distant future”. To calculate the relative pull of schooling against the push of the household needs, cottage industry, or farm reflects how we might act as “optimizing” profit-makers, not how the peasant family actually utilized its resources, set its priorities, allocated its energies, protected its foundations, and maintained its equilibrium.

For an average family to send a child to school meant not only paying fees but partly dispensing with the child’s labour (cf. Harris 1983:99), a not unimportant consideration since it typically “took three to four years to learn to read, thanks to the mechanical technique” (Marrou 1984, 188). From the child’s point of view, “exposure to the adult world of work must have arrived quickly in the lives of the majority. ... At the least, the constraints imposed on children by the demands of labour and the kinds of work they did meant that their futures were generally fixed from very early stages of their development” (Bradley 1985, 326-327).

Peasant pedagogy is based on a philosophy of survival, an adaptive strategy in a harsh, often hostile, and demanding world. How *sensible* would it have been for the peasant family to expend long hours on literacy for a son? How many scrolls did they own? How often did the need (or even occasion) for reading occur? How many scrolls did the local synagogue, assuming there was such an institute in every village, contain? Supposing the local synagogue owned a few scrolls, how many and how often would they be accessed? By whom would they be read? Completely illiterate and minimally functionally literate people are capable of recognizing a large number of letter groupings, such as names and warnings (Doob 1966). This is the level of “literacy” of first-century Palestinian society, and “formal” education had little to do with promoting any kind of literacy.

It should be clear that every single claim about Jesus’ literacy without reference to the cultural realities making up his peasant world is suspect in terms of cultural sensitivity. In terms of formal education, the need at the time could only have been for basic numeracy, the ability to make lists and to identify initials and familiar names. To be Jewish *and* literate are demands of a different time and not of the first century.

### 4.3 Literacies as cultural events

The temptation is to think that writing is an objectively given; but it is not. Writing is a *technology*, a socio-cultural and historically constructed phenomenon.

A more useful approach is that of Lucretia Yaghjian (1996) in her overview of ancient reading. She introduces her study with the important remark that “the difference between ancient and modern understandings of the phenomenon of reading itself has not always been sufficiently recognized” (Yaghjian 1996, 206). “Reading”, she emphasizes, “is a cultural activity that is practiced by readers, and readers always read in a context” (208) and towards that end she distinguishes between:

- auraliterate reading (hearing something read or receiving reading aurally); the sense of “reading” in 2 Cor 1:13 and Eph 3:4.
- oraliterate reading (recitation or recall of a memorized text). This is reading orally performed but given some textual content. It is “used in the NT as a defensive strategy for maintaining community honor and interpretive authority *vis-à-vis* other (typically antagonistic) groups” (208).
- oculiterate reading (linguistic decoding by eye from a written text). According to her, this is exemplified in two scenes by Luke, Jesus in the synagogue (Luke 4:16ff) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27ff). Oculiterate reading/readers “...provide cultural legitimation for the marginalized NT communities and their leaders, placing the Christian movement within the authoritative Jewish reading tradition and within literate Hellenistic culture” (208-209).
- scribaliterate reading (reading for technical, professional or religious purposes). This would be exemplified by professional scribes such as Matthew and Luke.
- illiterate/illiteracy. These terms are often used “freighted with an ethnocentric twentieth-century stigma inappropriate to first-century Mediterranean readers” (209). What we call illiterate may have been, in antiquity, oraliterate or auraliterate: to have been ἀγράμματος (as Peter and John are described in Acts 4:13) is not a stigma but a technical, a socially descriptive term.
- literate/literacy. These terms are used by modern scholars to indicate oculiterate and scribaliterate readers of antiquity (209).

At least, with her schema, we move away from the simplistic (ethnocentric) definition and understanding of literacy common in NT scholarship. Yet, one cannot help but notice the use of concepts such as “reading proficiency”, “authoritative reading tradition” (Jewish tradition) or “literate Hellenistic culture”. Despite her outstanding efforts, Yaghjian’s overview is not yet a scenario with which to “read” references to reading in the NT. This is illustrated by Yaghjian’s (1996, 218-221) discussion of “ancient Jewish reading practice and pedagogy”. Making use of Shmuel Safrai’s work, she too argues that Jesus “was a product of an ‘education-centered society’” (220). She emphasizes that “literate reading of Torah and other holy books was integral to community formation and self-understanding” (221). In the discussion a number of concepts (such as *education*, *book reading*) are enumerated—the meanings of which need to be established in the first place!

A sharp line must be drawn between basic reading/writing ability and literacy (as exemplified by, e.g., habitual book-reading). In antiquity learning to read was mostly rote recitation of familiar texts, and, when not, usually involved the service of a professional (or dedicated) reader (e.g., Pliny *Ep.* 9.34; see Harris 1989, 35-36, 225-233; Woolf 1994; Markus 2000; Starr 1991; Chaytor 1991; Hanson 1991; Clarke 1984; Hadas 1954, 60-64). Learning to read is not the same as learning from reading. Typical ancient literacy was at its best crude literacy: rote recitation and the ability to sign one’s name. Reading in antiquity was physically very demanding (Kenyon 1951, 67-70; Achtemeier 1990, 17; Small 1997, 19-25).

Writing, one would suspect Yaghjian should have realized, could have many functions, and a book can be extremely important without being read. Though more nuanced (than conventional approaches) Yaghjian neglects cross-cultural comparative information and historical realities. Consequently, her classification of Jesus’ reading as oculiterate is probably misplaced. The crucial point is that literacy is not a single activity practised in various ways, but (like walking on water) a constructed, cultural activity, interwoven with historical and social phenomena.

In the next sections we will develop two possible cultural events that can be related to Luke 4:16.

#### 4.4 *An awesome Jesus*

The historical Jesus could not read or write, but there is an association with reading which can plausibly be ascribed to him, and interestingly, there are some hints in Luke pointing to exactly such a possibility.

There are many uses a written text can have besides conveying information, and a supposed act of reading may have symbolic or non-documentary aspects far exceeding or even excluding the representation of textual markings. The magical aspects related to the techniques of reading and writing, though quite unfamiliar to us, were an important element of ancient communication technologies (Speyer 1995; Judge 1987; Frankfurter 1994; cf. Barton 1997, 133-156; Holbek 1989).

Luke certainly could have had in mind such associations when he depicted Jesus as “reading” Scripture. Judeans did practise divination with their scroll of the Law, “to inquire into those matters about which the gentiles consulted the likenesses of their images” (1 Macc 3:48), or to get a watchword by looking into the holy book (2 Macc 8:23).

Foley (2001) reports of a type of reading event he came across while investigating oral traditions among Tibetan villages, where, what he calls a “paper bard” eloquently performs a “text” from a completely *blank* piece of paper. Both the paper-singer (who is illiterate) and audience describe such events as “reading”. The crucial aspect is the acknowledgement by the audience that the performer has authority, and that there is a message to be presented.

This kind of *magical* reading event is not inappropriate to the Lukan report. The immediately preceding event according to Luke is the “testing” in the wilderness, an event loaded with magical and divine motifs (cf. Garrett 1989, 38-43). Note Jesus’ ability to “walk through the middle of the crowd” (4:30) and the questions surrounding healing (4:23, 27). And, is it not by means of uneducated men (ἄνθρωποι ἀγράμματοι) that a notable sign becomes manifest (Acts 4:13-16)? In Luke’s view, Jesus reading is in any case proof of Jesus’ authority, meaning his power and not his ability to identify marks on the pages of a book.

#### 4.5 *Jesus the performer*

A number of scholars emphasize the role of the synagogue in Luke-Acts; Bovon (2002, 153) even claims that Luke is “describing in detailed fashion a synagogue service on the Sabbath” (relying on Busse 1978, 107-112). Close

scrutiny of Luke 4:16-20 is informative. Nothing is said about Jesus actually reading. He stood up to read (ἀνέστη ἀναγνῶναι), but all the Lukan Jesus does is to *find* “the place where it was written...”. Luke emphasizes that Jesus himself unfolded (ἀναπτύξας) and folded up (πτύξας) the scroll. Both actions (coiling and uncoiling a scroll) are considerable feats<sup>4</sup>—well known to Luke and those among his audience familiar with scrolls. Luke shows an “expert” at work, expert at opening the scriptures (Luke 24.45). It is this expertise of the Lukan Jesus which reminds one of an interesting and underestimated aspect of “reading” scripture in Diaspora synagogues—and probably closer to the cultural scenario that Luke was familiar with than conventional depictions.

A feature of the meetings in Diaspora synagogues (which were public events) was the oral reading and exegesis of scripture. Performance of sacred stories and oral interpretations of ancient traditions made the faith of Judaism accessible to outsiders and helped to assimilate them into the communities of worship. Georgi (1986, 89-117) has argued that a loose network of oral “interpreters” developed, traveling about and offering oral recitals and expositions of texts in the Jewish communities of the Greco-Roman world. These wandering preachers probably operated both in and outside the synagogue. They employed a variety of skills and talents and the centerpiece of these performers’ repertoire was the oral performance of scripture interpretation. The synagogue ceremony itself “afforded an occasion for lively activity which was nothing short of theatrical” (Georgi 1986, 113). The historical evidence does not tell us sufficient detail, but we have ample indication that readings, especially public readings, were highly performative activities.

In a scribal culture with a heavy oral residue, public “reading” (including probably most presentations of Scripture in Diaspora synagogues) should be pictured as a performance, a highly rhetorical verbal presentation of stories and oral interpretations (cf. Ward 1990, 284; Cameron 1965; Achtemeier 1990, 15-17; Botha 1993; Schenkeveld 1992; Johnson 1994).

Once more, the point is that such a performance of a text is probably much closer to the historical realities of the NT texts than the depiction of a scholarly Jesus carefully reading from a hefty tome to a neatly arranged audience.

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4 A practised individual takes about two minutes rolling up a scroll while standing (Skeat 1981).

#### 4.6 *A literate Jesus?*

With regard to the historical Jesus we can clearly say that as a Galilean peasant the most plausible presentation of him should be that he was illiterate—particularly when seen in terms of what we understand literacy to mean. As a Galilean peasant he was at best able to recognize a few letters (meaning numbers) and construe a few names and/or inscriptional signs. What we call reading is “reading with comprehension”, an activity limited to but a few people in antiquity. Even those skilled with texts and documents did not read the way we do, as the rabbis graphically illustrate (and recall Josephus’ claim that he did not change the tiniest bit of scripture in his rewriting thereof).

Seen as a report of a cultural event, Luke 4:16 should be related to Jesus’ authoritative and demon-conquering activities. He is the son of God who can employ various techniques, including “reading”.

### **5. Concluding Remarks: Some Implications for Current Historical Jesus Research**

The past is as complex as, if not more than, the present. How we deal with “the other” in the present is a paradigm for dealing with the ancient other and, if that other is also an alien other, it is even more complex. Cross-cultural interpretation is an attempt to avoid the long history of Western thinking by means of which “the other” is subsumed within and under the known categories of the own world. Cultural sensitivity is an attempt to do justice to their singularity, meaning and context as agents in the world. And since it is no longer a secret that the NT contains not only stories about past events but also cultural stories about cultural events from a distant and alien past, it is necessary to rethink the tools and methods used for interpreting it.

Generally speaking, NT research about historicity is trapped in a discourse that connects historicity exclusively to notions about older or authentic material. The other side of the coin, namely, what the reports are about, their meaning, context and significance as cultural events is mostly absent from the debates. Therefore, with a few exceptions, questions of historicity in Jesus research are answered within a fixed structural pattern which can be described as the linear model of peeling off the inauthentic additions in order to arrive at the historical kernel. It focuses only on the one side of the coin namely verifying of evidence that something could have

happened. What anthropological research and reflection about cross-cultural interpretation suggest is that the other side of the coin, namely, what was culturally plausible, must be part of the question.

Criteria for authenticity in historical Jesus research tend to assume a simple measure of reality (that of contemporary Western groups). The crucial point is that all such “methodological” aspects are fully interrelated with *culturally* determined premises. What is “real”, “authentic” and “historical” can only be indicated with regard to specific cultural experiences and assumptions. Confusion with regard to multiple cultural realities leads to misleading criteria for historicity.

What we propose with this argument is that the historical questions under consideration cannot be answered by just reducing the data to “reliable” evidence (or even by claiming new data) but by finding *better* ways of looking at the data. It is not about the data but about how we understand it. In other words, it is not about new data but about new ways of looking at it.

Given the cultural system of the time within which polyphasic experiences were taken as real and normal, it is likely that a story such as that of Jesus walking on the sea could have been part of the experiences and beliefs of himself and his followers. Given the same cultural setting and material realities, it seems unlikely that a person from the rural and peasant background of Jesus of Nazareth would have learnt to read and or write. If historicity is about how things essentially were in a given period or life, it seems reasonable to suggest that Jesus could probably walk on the sea of Galilee when it is understood as a report about a cultural experience of his disciples but unlikely that he could read and or write.

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