Several years ago, in 1999, an international group of Jesus researchers held a symposium at Tutzing in Germany on “Jesus in new contexts.”\(^1\) The goal of this academic meeting was to debate one segment of the discussions connected with the so-called Third Quest, viz. the methodologies entailed and the knowledge gained when questions from the sphere of the social sciences (social history, sociology, cultural anthropology) are utilized in Jesus research. I believe that there is a striking difference precisely on this point between the so-called “Third Quest for the historical Jesus” and its predecessors. The man from Nazareth and the community of disciples which he founded are no longer considered in isolation, but rather in the context of the existential world of Israel, and indeed of the Mediterranean region as a whole. Previously, Jesus was interpreted in detachment from the socio-cultural conditions of his age. He was isolated in the manner of a “monad” from the world in which he lived; at best, he was located in a special “world (of Jesus)” all of his own, which was surrounded by other “worlds.” It is true that the social circumstances of the life of Jesus and of the Jesus movement have been investigated repeatedly from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, but social-historical Jesus research remained a marginal activity.\(^2\) It is only since the last third of the twentieth century that Jesus research has concentrated more strongly on contexts of the preaching, the praxis, and the general experiences of the man from Nazareth, other than those contexts which belong to the history of religions. These contexts are the politics, economy, and

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society of the period in question (i.e., roughly the first third of the first century of the Common Era), as well as the cultural and religious values, institutions, and practices in Israel, or Mediterranean culture in general, at that time.

Halvor Moxnes has spoken here of “space” and “place,” and has written an inspiring monograph which seeks to “put Jesus in his place”—the title of his book is programmatic. ³ Space does not allow me to develop my arguments with anything like the wealth of detail, the comprehensiveness, and the differentiation in Moxnes’ book; I must limit myself to some basic remarks about the political and social contexts or “places” of the preaching and the experiences of Jesus. I am afraid that all I have to offer are my own knowledge and insights about the “place” of Jesus, i.e., insights and knowledge drawn from the reading of ancient texts and modern academic secondary literature. These cannot lay claim to be an historiographical representation of “what really happened” (to use L. von Ranke’s phrase). And I am very well aware that my picture of the social and political conditions in which Jesus lived is itself an academic construction. We shall not discuss this aspect of the topic, which the theory of history shows to be fundamental, but I should like at least to mention briefly that subjective decisions are involved even in the fundamental principles of historical inquiry, which are based ultimately on personal evaluations of the available data, not on so-called objective facts. And I agree with the differentiation “between event, data, and fact” which James Dunn, following R. G. Collingwood, makes:

The historical ‘event’ belongs to the irretrievable past. All the historian has available are the ‘data’ which have come down through history—personal diaries, reminiscences of eyewitnesses, reports constructed from people who were present, perhaps some archaeological artifacts, as well as circumstantial data about climate, commercial practice, and laws of the time, and so forth. From these the historian attempts to reconstruct the ‘facts.’ The facts are not to be identified as data; they are always an interpretation of the data. ⁴

Let us take as an example the question—still an object of dispute—whether the Jesus movement arose in a social or political crisis and is

³ H. Moxnes, Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2003).