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# Trends in Study of the Synoptic Gospels

BY R. E. NIXON

**I**F you want to know what is going on at any time in Biblical studies, and probably in theology as a whole, there is rarely a better place to start than the Synoptic Gospels. In pre-critical days they were used to assert or to challenge doctrinal positions. When Biblical criticism came into its own in the nineteenth century they became the storm centre of both literary and historical criticism, and to some extent they have remained that ever since. In the hey-day of source criticism there was a great deal of scope for working out the relationship between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and the reasons why they differed from each other. In the old 'Quest for the Historical Jesus' full play could be given to the current moods of historical scepticism and theological liberalism. In the period between the wars the new discipline of form-criticism was exercised mainly in this field and more latterly the Biblical theology movement has had to take seriously the theological emphases of the first three Gospels and to treat the evangelists as, in some sense, theologians in their own right. It is of course because the whole of Christianity hangs upon our understanding of Christ that the Gospels stand at the hinge of the relationship between history and theology, between fact and faith. It is also inevitable that many of the views which scholars have held and do hold now should be dependent not so much on the evidence of the Gospels themselves as upon the general position that they hold with regard to the nature of Christianity. Hermeneutics nowadays go far beyond the rules for getting at what the writer intended in a particular passage. They involve basic philosophical presuppositions about what history is and whether it has any relevance to theology. On the whole we find that British scholars have tended to go in for textual exegesis, leaving the more radical philosophical debate to the Germans. But in recent years there has come, simultaneously with a generally more conservative approach by a great number of our scholars, (see e.g. W. Barclay, *The First Three Gospels* (1966)), a new incursion into this country of more radical thinking about the whole place of history in revelation and therefore the relationship of the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. We shall survey some of the more recent literature dealing with the Synoptic Gospels in order to see how some of these tendencies are put into practice.

## THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

It is generally true to say that scholars have by and large lost the ability to say much that is new about the relationships of the first three Gospels. There was so much painstaking work done on this up

to and after B. H. Streeter's *The Four Gospels* (1924), that it was generally taken for granted that the priority of Mark was the one assured result of a hundred years or so of Gospel criticism and that the existence of a document or documents called Q afforded the best explanation for the similarities between Matthew and Luke. Only Roman Catholics (e.g. B. C. Butler, *The Originality of St. Matthew*, 1951) were thought to challenge the former point, and a relative minority (e.g. A. M. Farrer 'On Dispensing with Q' in D. E. Nineham, *Studies in the Gospels*, 1954) fulminated without a great deal of success against the latter. In 1964 W. R. Farmer launched into these relatively untroubled waters a depth-charge in the shape of his book *The Synoptic Problem*. In this he argues with great skill that the relationship of the Gospels is best accounted for by the supposition that Mark drew upon Matthew and Luke. By now the waters of New Testament scholarship have largely subsided again, but Farmer's thesis needs a full scale refutation if it is not to be taken as a serious challenge to current critical orthodoxy. His arguments are well summarised by Hugo Meynell in *Theology* for September 1967. Meynell also recalls in this article the book of the American Pierson Parker, *The Gospel Before Mark*, written in 1953, which has never had the full attention that it deserved. He believed that an Aramaic gospel (K) consisting roughly of Mark and the material peculiar to Matthew was written in Palestine. When it reached Rome, a Greek version (Mark) was produced omitting things of little interest to Gentiles. Greek Matthew was basically a compilation of K and Q. This somewhat complex theory undoubtedly accounts for some of the evidence, but by no means for all of it. At least it is a warning against speaking too glibly of 'assured results'.

#### THE TEACHING OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

The main areas of discussion about the teaching of the first three Gospels are those of Christology and eschatology. How did Jesus understand his own person and mission, and when and in what way did he conceive of the coming of the kingdom of God? In the first instance there has been much debate about the use of the term 'Son of Man'. The most important recent book on this theme is Morna Hooker *The Son of Man in Mark* (1967). In contrast with some recent scholars who have held that this title could not have been used by Jesus of himself, Dr. Hooker finds that it signifies authority, the necessity for suffering and confidence in final vindication, that these are appropriate to the contexts where it is found in Mark and that the Markan sayings 'present us with a coherent interpretation of "the Son of man" which may well go back to Jesus himself' (p. 193). (It is interesting that in a previous book, *Jesus and the Servant* (1959) Dr. Hooker called in question the assumption that Jesus identified his mission with that of the 'Servant', and this book has had considerable influence on subsequent discussion of that title.) An American conservative scholar G. E. Ladd in *Jesus and the Kingdom* (1965) has given us the most balanced treatment of this subject that there has been in recent years. It succeeds in doing justice to both realised and futurist elements in the teaching of Jesus, though it is not concerned sufficiently

to distinguish the different emphases of the evangelists in their treatment of the kingdom sayings. This work has come under fire recently from Norman Perrin who wrote a detailed survey of the field in *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (1962). Ladd has replied to Perrin's criticisms and also given a critique of Perrin's book in *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (1968), a short but valuable book which reaches beyond the Synoptic Gospels and ties in their teaching with that of other New Testament writings.

#### ST. MARK'S GOSPEL

To begin with Mark indicates that in my judgment its priority still stands. Some of the more fancy ideas about it have not had much support in recent years. For instance Farrer's intricate patterns of typology, seen in *A Study of St. Mark* (1951), and Carrington's *The Primitive Christian Calendar* (1952) are seen to contain some valuable insights but to be highly improbable as comprehensive explanations of the form and nature of the Gospel. The most influential work of recent years in this country has undoubtedly been the *Pelican Commentary* by D. E. Nineham. The publishers rather trail their coat in the blurb for the series. 'Former commentaries have usually been of two kinds—either abstruse and academic or over-simplified, fundamentalist and out of date. These new paragraph by paragraph commentaries have been written by modern scholars who are in touch with contemporary Biblical theology and also with the needs of the average layman'. It may well be on that sort of basis that Nineham could ignore the judicious conservative scholarship of C. E. B. Cranfield's *Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary*. Nineham seeks both to follow Bultmann in his historical scepticism and R. H. Lightfoot in his emphasis on symbolism. It is, as might be expected, an able and vigorous piece of work, but if Nineham was wanting a fight, he certainly got one. In a symposium entitled *Vindications* (1966) edited by himself, Professor Anthony Hanson devoted a chapter to a slashing attack on the approach and presuppositions of Nineham as shown in his commentary. He suggested that Nineham had an unexamined assumption that '*virtually no trustworthy historical information can have survived the period of oral transmission*' (Hanson's italics). 'We have passed unconsciously,' he says, 'from the principle that not every detail in Mark's Gospel is necessarily historical to the conclusion that virtually no detail can possibly be historical' (p. 75). Nineham has replied to this charge in his essay *Et hoc genus omne* in *Christian History and Interpretation*, edited by W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule and R. R. Niebuhr (1967). The debate goes on.

Another important book dealing with Mark is that of C. F. Evans, *The Beginning of the Gospel* (1968). It consists of four lectures given at the University of Kent to a non-specialist but intelligent audience. This is essentially an *aperitif* rather than a main course and it provides an admirable introduction, by a friend and former colleague of Professor Nineham, to the sort of problems which are raised to-day in the study of Mark's Gospel. He ends with this intriguing paragraph:

'Critical studies of the gospels were responsible in the early years of this century for two dogmas which became widely current and influential

—that Mark's Gospel is an account of the beginnings of Christianity, and that Christianity is essentially a simple gospel. It now appears that these two views cannot be held together, for if Mark's Gospel represents the beginnings of things Christianity cannot possibly be simple, and if Christianity is essentially simple Mark's Gospel cannot represent its beginnings. Both dogmas are probably heresies' (p. 82).

The problems raised by form-criticism and by the Messianic secret are primarily connected with Mark rather than with the other Synoptic Gospels, and it is inevitably at the centre of the debate about history and faith to which reference will be made below.

#### ST. MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

In comparison with the other two Synoptic Gospels, Matthew has been the subject of relatively little important writing in recent years. This may well be because it is thought by most scholars to be fairly obvious what this evangelist was trying to do. He has Mark in front of him which he uses as the basis for his own work and he adds to it Q and a good deal of material which is peculiar to him. He thus contrives to present a gospel which emphasises the Davidic messiahship of Jesus, the need for an institutional Church and for patterns of ethical behaviour by those who belong to it, and the future coming of the Son of man in glory as judge. Most scholars believe that Matthew's popularity was due to the provision of something which was extremely useful to the Church because of its systematic nature but which tended to distort in some measure the nature of primitive Christianity. The problem of what Papias meant when he said that 'Matthew composed the *logia* in the Hebrew language' is generally acknowledged not yet to have been solved and with it the precise relationship of the apostle Matthew to the Gospel which came to bear his name.

There were however two works in the earlier post-war period which have had a good deal of influence, not only with reference to this Gospel but also to other areas of New Testament study. G. D. Kilpatrick in *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1946) tried to show that Matthew had a liturgical origin and purpose. While there are many points in this book which do not carry full conviction, it is of interest because of the increased tendency in recent years to see liturgical influences at work in the form of the New Testament writings. K. Stendahl in *The School of St. Matthew* (1954) was a pioneer in relating the tradition of Old Testament exegesis known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls to this process in Matthew. He held that the gospel was the product of a Christian 'school' of Bible students and was intended for use in study and instruction. A large scale study of this same field has recently been published on the basis of a Ph.D. thesis at Manchester by an American conservative scholar, R. H. Gundry. It is *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel, with Special Reference to the Messianic Hope* (1967). Gundry first proceeds to demonstrate that, while formal quotations which Matthew shares with Mark are almost purely Septuagintal, in all other strata of synoptic quotation material, formal and allusive, the text-form is very mixed. Therefore the text of Matthew's formula quotations is not distinctive in the New Testament as Stendahl and

others had supposed. The mixture of Septuagintal, Hebrew and Aramaic elements could only have had its origin in the trilingual milieu now known to have existed in first-century Palestine. The mixed text lying behind all three Gospels can best be accounted for by the hypothesis that they are based upon a body of loose notes, which the apostle Matthew would have been the obvious one of the twelve to have made, on the ministry and teaching of Jesus. (This attempt to fit the theories of Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson into the picture is important but is unlikely to win favour with the majority of scholars at the moment.) Gundry finds that the Matthaean quotations fall under easily recognisable principles. There are direct applications to Jesus as the royal Messiah, the Isaianic Servant, the Danielic Son of man, the Shepherd of Israel and as filling the role of Yahweh. In addition he is seen typologically as the greater Moses, the greater Son of David, the representative prophet, the representative Israelite and the representative righteous sufferer. He notes that all the principles are found in quotations attributed to Jesus himself and concludes that, as 'it is mathematically improbable that mere chance reading back would have resulted in representation of *all* the lines of Messianic interpretation in the reported words of Jesus' (p. 215), he himself is likely to have been the originator of this type of hermeneutic. The Matthaean quotations will continue to exercise their fascination and the publication of this important book, even if not every step in its argument is accepted, should at least put a stop to the rather superficial way in which some commentators have dismissed Matthew's approach as basically illegitimate.

Recent commentaries on Matthew in English include those by F. V. Filson (*Black's New Testament Commentaries*, 1960) which takes a standard sort of position with regard to the Gospel, by R. V. G. Tasker (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, 1961) which makes use of a good deal of able Roman Catholic work on the gospel in support of a conservative viewpoint and by J. C. Fenton (*Pelican Gospel Commentaries*, 1963) which follows in the R. H. Lightfoot and Farrer tradition bringing out a great deal of symbolism and tending to sit rather loose to the history. But the most important book has been a collection of essays by G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (ET 1963). This is not a systematic treatment of the Gospel but consists of essays on various aspects of Matthew's handling of his material. Bornkamm deals with end-expectation and Church, Barth with Matthew's understanding of the Law and Held with Matthew as interpreter of the miracle stories. Held concludes that 'if there is no tradition without interpretation the interpretation remains bound nevertheless to the tradition' (p. 297). And it is just the relationship of these two things which provide a perennial problem in our understanding of all the Gospels. Now that we have learnt to think of the evangelists as creative writers there is a good deal more work to be done in this field and especially with reference of St. Matthew's Gospel by those who are prepared to take it more seriously as a witness to the Jesus of history. Bishop John Robinson in his well known essay entitled 'The New Look on the Fourth Gospel' (*Twelve New Testament Studies*, pp. 94-106, 1962) listed five

points where presuppositions which had dominated study of John for some time were now beginning to be called in question. They were:

1. That the fourth evangelist is dependent on sources, including (normally) one or more of the Synoptic Gospels.
2. That his own background is other than that of the events and teaching he is purporting to record.
3. That he is not to be regarded, seriously, as a witness to the Jesus of history, but simply to the Christ of faith.
4. That he represents the end-term of theological development in first century Christianity.
5. That he is not himself the Apostle John nor a direct eyewitness.

*Mutatis mutandis* it may be that all the similar presuppositions about St. Matthew's Gospel will in due course be called in question as the critical pendulum swings.

### ST. LUKE'S GOSPEL

In the Paul Schubert *Festschrift, Studies in Luke-Acts* (ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn, 1968), the opening essay is one by W. C. van Unnik entitled 'Luke-Acts, a Storm Center in Contemporary Scholarship'. He explains that Luke used to be regarded simply as a historian but soon after the war German scholars began to look at the evangelists as creative writers and attention was turned to Luke and particularly to the conception of the nature of Christianity which he had in publishing Acts in addition to his Gospel. While the Germans Käsemann and Haenchen made important contributions to the debate it was the book by Hans Conzelmann *Die Mitte der Zeit* (The Middle of Time), published in 1953 and translated into English as *The Theology of St. Luke* (1960), which has had the greatest influence in this country. He holds that for Luke there were three great periods of time—the period of Israel, the period of the life of Jesus and the period of the Church. The last period was something that Luke had worked into the scheme of things due to the disappointment caused by the delay of the *parousia*. He consequently also 'historicised' the life and ministry of Jesus, making it not just the subject of the *kerygma* but an event in world history. It is by no means certain that the delay in the *parousia* was the reason for the introduction of a historical element into the understanding of the ministry of Jesus nor that Luke was the first of the evangelists to have any idea that he was writing what might be called history. Again the fact that we can check Luke-Acts at numbers of places against literary sources and archaeological discovery suggests that the sceptical view of its historical value is not justified.

Criticism of Conzelmann has come in two recent works. H. Flender in *St. Luke Theologian of Redemptive History* (ET 1967) suggests that Conzelmann has been too selective in his treatment of the evidence. He concludes that Luke 'discovers a *via media* between the gnostic denial and the early catholic canonisation of history. His solution is to give simultaneous expression to the supernatural mystery and the earthly visibility of Christ and his history' (p. 167). Daniel Fuller in *Easter Faith and History* (British edn. 1968) concludes an important historical study of the various attitudes adopted recently to the

themes of his title with an assessment of Luke's historical purpose. He supports Cullmann in holding that Luke was right in believing that the subsequent redemptive history of the church was the outworking and fulfilment of the resurrection and ascension of Christ rather than being caused by the delay of the *parousia*.

C. K. Barrett's *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (1961) provides a brief but penetrating discussion of tendencies visible in Lucan scholarship up to that date, though the major part of it is devoted to Acts. There is a valuable little book by Bo Reicke, *The Gospel of Luke* (ET 1965), which deals with the basic features and ideas of the Gospel without direct reference to Conzelmann. Three recent commentaries also call for mention. G. B. Caird contributed on St. Luke to the *Pelican Gospel Commentaries* (1963). This is a good exposition of the text but has relatively little reference to critical problems and Conzelmann's name does not occur in the index. The outstanding recent commentary is undoubtedly that of E. Earle Ellis in *The Century Bible New Edition* (1966). Yet another American conservative scholar, he has spent a good deal of time studying on the continent and he is well at home with the recent literature on the gospel. His work is full of useful insights into the theology of Luke but he is able also to appreciate his reliability as a historian. Finally there is the commentary by the Roman Catholic Wilfred J. Harrington (1968). Though this lacks any special distinction it is an interesting example of the way in which much modern Roman Catholic Biblical scholarship is on the same wavelength as that of Protestants. The RSV text is printed as the basis for the commentary, as is the case with that of Ellis.

#### THE BASIC ISSUE

The basic issue is of course the relationship of history and faith. Many continental theologians have denied that history is relevant to faith at all. On the dust-jacket of Gunther Bornkamm's influential book *Jesus of Nazareth* the assertion is made that 'certainly faith cannot and should not be dependent on the change and uncertainty of historical research'. This position is being adopted by more scholars in Britain to-day also. Unlike the liberals of a generation or two ago they wish to keep the Christian faith. Just as in the scientific field the advance of discovery has left an ever-diminishing place for the 'God of the gaps', so in the Synoptic field the doubt cast upon much of the narrative and even upon some of the key events has left a historical revelation very much less history and so an inadequate foundation for Christianity. The 'God of the gaps' dilemma is countered either by obscurantism in denying the discoveries of science or by the principle of complementarity, showing that the scientific explanation is only a partial one and that God comes into the whole process everywhere. The problem of the evangelical narratives can be countered either by stating that history is largely irrelevant or by trying to demonstrate that we have a good deal more reliable history than is often allowed.

*What do we know about Jesus?* is the pertinent title of a small but important book by Otto Betz, (ET 1968). He makes use of the Dead



Sea Scrolls and other writings of late Judaism to show that there is a good deal more that we know about Jesus than we have often supposed. 'The earthly Jesus and the Christ of the *kerygma* must always be seen together. . . . Without the historical Jesus the Christ of the Church is hollow, a radiant shell, a mythical hero without historical weight. . . . The church of Jesus has no cause to fear the question of the historical Jesus. For its confession that Jesus is the Christ is faithful both to the intention of Jesus and to the action of God: Jesus' messianic claim was confirmed by God when in the resurrection he created him Son and King of the end-time. True this is an article of faith—and the church has to preach articles of faith. But it is not conjured up out of nothing; it is based on history' (pp. 113f.). Dealing with a similar problem in *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (1967), C. K. Barrett emphasises particularly what he regards as mistaken views of Jesus about his person and mission but concludes that 'by being mistaken in detail, Jesus was more effectively shown to be right in all that really mattered than he could have been by small scale accuracy' (p. 108). Yet he is not making a really radical attack upon the history, for he can speak of the fact of the resurrection and in another instance state that 'the evangelists and their predecessors were not so much falsifying the earlier tradition as defining what had not previously been defined' (p. 102).

The reference to the predecessors of the evangelists is a reminder of the vital role that form-criticism still plays in the debate about the reliability of the Gospel tradition. It would be a mistake to think that its influence must necessarily be negative. *The Gospels and the Jesus of History* (ET 1968) by Xavier Leon-Dufour is an important and constructive Roman Catholic contribution to the debate. He concludes that 'there is a living and indestructible link between the tradition of the infant Church and the course of events which made up the earthly existence of Jesus of Nazareth—a kind of ebb and flow between the *kerygma* which the Christian believes and the life of Jesus before Easter day. The *kerygma* which is accepted by faith derives from Jesus, and the full meaning of his life can be known only through the "pattern of apostolic preaching"' (p. 275). One of the factors that has made for a movement in a more conservative direction has been the work of the Scandinavian scholars on the written transmission of material in rabbinic Judaism—H. Riesefeld, *The Gospel Tradition and Its Beginnings* (1957); B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (1961), *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (1964). Another has been the discoveries at Qumran and elsewhere. A great deal of literature has poured forth on this subject in the last generation and much has already evaporated like the waters of the Jordan in the Dead Sea. In *The Scrolls and Christianity* (1969) the editor, Matthew Black, concludes an important set of essays by saying that 'there seems little doubt that the case has been made out that it is from this side of Judaism — an Essene-type Judaism — that Christianity sprang. . . . Direct dependence, however, has nowhere been conclusively demonstrated: what we encounter is a stream of common (mainly Old Testament-inspired) tradition and interpretation—a common midrashic source—with, nevertheless, at the same time

yawning chasms of difference and contradiction' (p. 106). So we find much more material to provide a convincing setting for the life and ministry of Jesus and also for that of John the Baptist who seems to be nearer to the nonconformist Judaism represented at Qumran. The most recent books in English joining in 'the quest of the historical John' have been those by C. H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (1964) and W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (1968). The latter, after a critical examination of the treatment of John in the different Gospel sources, concludes (his italics): '*The conviction that John is "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ", and all of the Christian elaborations of it, are but the theological expression of a historical fact, that through John's mediation Jesus perceived the nearness of the kingdom and his own relation to its coming.*' As each evangelist has developed this tradition in the light of urgent contemporary needs, he has done so in faithfulness to Jesus' basic conception, treating John, in a manifold of ways, as the one through whom the eschatological event centred in Jesus Christ is proclaimed to be "at hand" to those for whom it continues to appear indefinitely remote' (p. 113).

#### CONCLUSION

It is hazardous to predict where Synoptic studies are leading but one or two suggestions might be made. The fact that more able conservative Evangelical and Roman Catholic writers are now engaged in the debate should mean that the historical data must be taken more seriously than they have often been in the past. More work needs to be done on the criteria for historicity, along the lines of H. E. W. Turner's short but weighty book *Historicity and the Gospels* (1963). The philosophical issues must be fought out thoroughly in relationship to the actual text of the Gospels and here D. P. Fuller's *Easter Faith and History* (British edn. 1968) points the way, because it gives a historical survey of various approaches to the problem and the sort of philosophies from which they spring. The emphasis on the evangelists as creative minds shaping the material will probably continue and with it a more positive approach to the life of the early Church as it is revealed through form-criticism, as for instance in C. F. D. Moule's excellent book *The Birth of the New Testament* (1962). Perhaps it will be the turn of Matthew to have more of the limelight and it may be that the Papias tradition about the apostle will come in for a good deal more consideration. It is to be hoped that the emphasis on the evangelists as theologians will not lead to too fanciful a growth of typology because if this balloon bursts we may return rather sharply to a more arid historical approach.

In conclusion I cannot do better than quote C. F. D. Moule in his significant book *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (1967):

And it seems to me that we stand today once more at the parting of the ways. Recent theological writing has tended to dismiss the importance of history in favour of the transcendental call to decision; or alternatively, to dismiss the transcendent in favour of such history as can be confined within the categories of purely human comprehension. But I cannot see how a serious student of Christian origins can concur with either. It seems to me to be at once the most striking and the

most disquieting character of the Gospels that they steadily refuse to be settled in either direction. On the one hand, the old Liberal Protestant way of stripping off the transcendental and rendering the Gospels rationalistically intelligible is widely agreed to have proved to be a *cul de sac*; and its repetition by those who try to present Christian doctrine without transcendence has no advantage over it, as far as I can see, except a more modern sound. On the other hand, a Gospel which cares only for the apostolic proclamation and denies that it either can or should be tested for its historical antecedents, is really only a thinly veiled gnosticism or docetism and, however much it may continue to move by a borrowed momentum, will prove ultimately to be no Gospel (pp. 8of.).

Fuller surveys of literature on the three Gospels may be found in recent issues of the *Expository Times*, August 1968 St. Mark (R. S. Barbour), October 1968 St. Luke (I. H. Marshall), February 1969 St. Matthew (R. P. Martin).