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THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

by J. NEVILLE BIRDSALL

THIS paper was originally given as a lecture to a conference of teachers of Religious Knowledge in Leicestershire. Dr. Birdsall is Lecturer in Theology in the University of Birmingham, and was Tyndale New Testament Lecturer in 1960. He is best known for his specialist studies in the text of the New Testament, but in this review of recent trends he deals with wider issues. The Editor notes that the tradition in which he himself stands comes under Dr. Birdsall's critical scrutiny, but he has learned that Dr. Birdsall's criticisms are always worthy of serious attention.

THEOLOGICAL study operates about the two points of Affirmation and Criticism. These are, in Hegelian fashion, the thesis and antithesis of its being, by which new generations ever and anon come to the synthesis of a system of Christian truth. We may observe this pattern throughout the history of the Church and its doctrines: but it is only in recent days that we may observe the process extended to the field of Biblical study. After beginnings, by no means insignificant, in the eighteenth century, Biblical criticism as we understand the term came to full flower in nineteenth-century Germany. Since then both Old Testament and New have been subjected to the most intensive analysis and investigation: upon their component books has been brought to bear the strong revealing light of textual criticism, source analysis, historical assessment, linguistic and philological examination, form-criticism; they have been measured by the data of the history of religions and, to a lesser extent, of psychological analysis; and their unity has been tested in the erection of Biblical theologies. We may claim with confidence that no other group of writings have been so minutely examined or viewed within so broad a setting. This is perhaps since no other writings make for themselves or their subject-matter such far-reaching claims. In any case, we wish to ask what resultant synthesis is established today after the encounter of the kerygmatic affirmations with Biblical Criticism. This review is confined to the sphere of the Gospels and questions relating to the life, message, claims and significance of Jesus. It will be understood that every contribution or com-

ment in this field is in the last resort personal and that the outline thus presents my judgment of what is most significant in recent research and discussion.

I.

The most outstanding development in the criticism of the gospel material in the last fifty years has been the application of form-critical procedure. The note of historical scepticism had already been sounded in German scholarship since Wrede's work on *The Messianic Secret in Mark*¹ in 1901, which Schweitzer, in his more famous but not more important study,² characterized as "thorough-going scepticism." Wrede claims that the Messianic Secret is a literary stratagem, a figment of the Evangelist whereby he may introduce into his account the unhistorical Messianic claims of Jesus. The divine figure of the Son of God has been superimposed upon the historical figure of an ethical teacher. This note was repeated by a number of German scholars before the first World War, and although it may be a gross over-simplification to imply that it was taken up by all scholars without exception, certainly the whole tone of German criticism of the Gospels tended to emphasize the creative activity of the earliest Evangelist rather than any transmission by him of untransformed historical material. So it was that a number of scholars almost simultaneously began to propound a new method whereby we might go beyond the work of the Gospel writers to an earlier stage in the transmission or the development of their material. Since this was derived by them from oral tradition in the churches, a procedure was needed which understood the mechanics and guiding principles of the development of oral tradition: this German critics adopted from those who had studied the orally transmitted "literature" — so to speak — of illiterate peoples and the folk-tales of all lands. This procedure is to study the individual stories and sayings of the Gospels: to establish their most primitive form and to show the development of more complex stories. The criterion by which "primitiveness" is established is always simplicity of form, and both the original form and its later development are explained and assessed in terms of the needs of the early Christian community. Stories were remembered and used — even created — to answer the needs of the Church in its cultus, in its apologetic.

¹ Wilhelm Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*, 1901.

² Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (1906); English Translation as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1910; 2nd edition, 1911; see pp. 328 ff.).

in its ethical decisions: the need which any story met is termed its *Sitz im Leben*, its place in the life of the community.

The most significant application of this method is that of Rudolf Bultmann in *The History of the Gospel Tradition*.³ We may not enter into his detailed argument, well known enough to such an audience as this. Enough to signify that in his hands form-criticism became no antidote to the historical scepticism out of which it sprang: it became the essence of scepticism. For Bultmann, the gospel material is largely appropriated or created by the early community for its own purposes, and this community is the Hellenistic church, Greek in speech and scripture, and open to many pagan influences. In the Gospels we see the influence of the Kyrios cults and the Gnostic myth of the Heavenly Man, the historical Jesus being overlaid by the honorific myths of the Hellenistic church. The ethical statements of the Gospels are taken over from pagan or Jewish sources. There are, to be sure, authentic sayings of Jesus, and Bultmann can draw a picture of Him as the prophet of the demands of God for righteousness and the coming doom. But the proportions of the influence of Jesus and of the Church in Bultmann's analysis of the Gospels may be judged from the first volume of his *Theology of the New Testament*.⁴ where twenty-two pages deal with the message of Jesus and one hundred and thirty-one with Kerygma of the early Church.

Already before the appearance of the work of Bultmann and his peers a work had appeared which, though taking a far more generous view of the material preserved in Mark, had suggested that the collection of this material into a connected whole is the work of the Evangelist alone. He received his material piecemeal and did his best to write an account by composing connective summaries of the work and journeys of Jesus to meet this need. This was the study of Karl Ludwig Schmidt entitled *The Framework of the Story of Jesus*.⁵ The conclusions are a presupposition of the form critics: and we see how this resulted in an intensified sceptical appraisal of the Gospel history and cut away the foothold from beneath any attempt at reconstruction of its actual course. There had been previously those who had explained away much of the Gospel material, but the outline had stood firm. On the "Marcan hypothesis" we had in this outline a reliable sketch of

³ *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (2nd edition, 1931).

⁴ English translation (1952); see chapters 1, 2 and 3.

⁵ *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (1919).

the story of Jesus. But now such affirmations were confronted by a criticism which removed not only pericopae and *Tendenz* but the story itself.

II.

The history of Gospel criticism since 1921 may be seen as, on the one hand, the total destruction of historical confidence and, on the other hand, various attempts to rehabilitate the affirmations of the gospels in part or in whole. The answers which we shall enumerate do not all explicitly speak of the form critics' work: but whether the work be an acknowledged answer to their contentions or whether it approaches the problems from a direction quite other to that of those scholars, the whole period is actively concerned with the questions posed by Wrede and advanced by Bultmann.

One purely philological question has considerable weight here. This is the investigation briefly termed the Aramaic approach, i.e. the research directed to discover what marks of influence and origin have been left upon the Greek of the New Testament by the Aramaic speech of Jesus and the early church. This investigation has unfortunately been marred by not a little over-enthusiasm and wildness on the part of some of its protagonists: but a sound guide is to be found in the cautious and balanced work of Dr. Matthew Black entitled *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*.⁶ In a careful review of the evidence he sees little ground for any belief in Aramaic sources in the sense of documents; but finds that, on the other hand, much of the sayings material in the gospels bears evidence of transmission in Aramaic. Again, when sayings of Jesus grouped together as, for example, in Matthew, are translated back into Aramaic it is found that they were originally grouped and worded according to Semitic poetic form with such familiar features as parallelism, rhythmic arrangement and even rhyme. Furthermore, the point of the sayings of Jesus has sometimes been missed in translation, in other cases interpretation has played its part, and in places sheer error may be discerned. The proportion of such cases of erroneous transmission is not high: but their presence emphasizes that the Greek-speaking churches' place in the tradition is that of preserving, albeit in slightly corrupt form, the traditions of Jesus' teaching, rather than that of creating it.

If then sayings-sources in Aramaic underlie our Greek gospel record of the teaching of Jesus, at what point do these sources

⁶ Second edition, 1953.

arise in the history of Jesus and the early Church? How far back do they reach? Here we may invoke the fact that Jesus was evidently treated by his contemporaries as a rabbi and according to the evidence of the Talmud itself, gathered about Himself disciples. There is, therefore, the highest probability that He taught His disciples, using the rhythms, rhymes and parallelisms as a mnemonic device, so that His teaching was remembered in Aramaic-speaking circles with that exactness which marks the oral tradition of the East. It is not surprising that it should be a Scandinavian who has laid stress on this fact — Harald Riesenfeld in his lecture *Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings*.⁷ He urges that in the light of the transmission of teaching in the Rabbinical schools, we must place a high estimate of reliability upon the Gospel tradition. That this does not imply a transmission free from all accretion, reapplication or reinterpretation all will realize who know either recent Scandinavian work on the Old Testament or the preservation of the teaching of the rabbis in the Talmud. But as in the case of both these fields, the disciplines of scholarship enable us to classify the strata and to attain to the original stratum of the material. So we may seek the original *Sitz im Leben* of the teaching of Jesus in the ministry and purpose of Jesus rather than in any need or purpose of the early Church.

Amongst those who have attempted this task we may name two outstanding scholars whose work is not only an outstanding contribution to the course of research but is also accessible to an English audience. These are Joachim Jeremias in his work *The Parables of Jesus*⁸ and the late William Manson in his book *Jesus the Messiah*.⁹ Jeremias's work falls into two main sections, the first of which deals with the "Return to Jesus from the Primitive Church": this seeks to set the tradition free from the accretions of allegory, hortatory application and other corrupting features. The second sets the parables in the setting of the ministry of Jesus; they are "parables of the Kingdom" (the debt to Dodd's work is acknowledged) which announce to men the coming crisis, the demand and, underlying it all, the grace of God. We give as an example of Jeremias's work and as of great

⁷ *Studie Evangelica*, Papers presented to the International Congress on the Four Gospels in 1957 held at Christchurch, Oxford, 1957 (1959), pp. 43-65. Also published separately in Oxford. See review in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, Jan.-March, 1959; see also p. 49 of this issue.

⁸ English translation of the 3rd edition (1954).

⁹ 1943.

interest in itself, his treatment of the *crux interpretum* of Mark 4:11 f., where in the Greek the purpose of the parables is declared to be to hide the "mystery" of the Kingdom of God from those "outside". In his elucidation, Jeremias starts from the text of the citation of Isaiah 6:9 f. This differs widely from both the LXX and from the Hebrew but is found to agree closely with the Targum and Peshitta. It stands then in the Aramaic tradition, in which the word translated in the English as "lest haply" may also signify "unless"; in rabbinical discussion of the passage the Aramaic is actually taken in this way. The words of Isaiah when quoted by Jesus were then not threat of doom but a promise and a hope. Jeremias takes the Greek words μυστήριον and παραβολή as variant translations of the Aramaic *mathlâ* (Heb. *mashal*, proverb, riddle, simile, puzzling saying). The whole then means: "To you is given the secret of the Kingdom but to those outside everything happens in riddles (i.e. is a complete puzzle). They are like the people spoken of by Isaiah in his terrible words of doom *unless* they should repent and God forgive them".

William Manson in the preface to his book acknowledges his debt to Rudolf Bultmann, from whom however he differs basically in his view of historical probability: he cannot accept that the images and ideas which represent in the tradition the person and work of Jesus were the Church's creation rather than His own. He accordingly studies the gospel traditions under the categories of Bultmann and shows conclusively how they all coinhere in the received tradition of His ministry. For example, prophetic and apocalyptic utterances which Bultmann and other form critics tend to regard as formulations of the Church are shown to be closely linked with that note of crisis and coming judgment which Bultmann himself sees as the message of Jesus. Or again, Matt. 11: 25-30 (Luke 10: 21-22), which has been suspect to more than the form critics as a late formulation in view of its "advanced" terminology and other features, is examined by Manson and is shown to have close links with the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament and to be in close harmony with the claims of Jesus as seen throughout the tradition in all its varied strands.

Nor must we omit reference to the significance of the work of C. H. Dodd whose studies of the primitive Christian theology provide an implicit ratification of the historical trustworthiness of much of our gospel tradition. Dodd's early work on *The Apostolic Preaching*¹⁰ presents firstly proof of the existence of a

¹⁰ *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (1936).

primitive theology which the highlights of the New Testament do little more than enhance; this Kerygma, as we have come to call it, is found even in parts of Acts traceable to Aramaic sources. It is largely based on the exegesis of a number of Old Testament passages to which Dodd has devoted further study in his more recent book *According to the Scriptures*. The early Church possessed then *ab initio* a clearly defined theology of fulfilment, judgment and salvation. Whence has it derived it? Dodd himself is inclined to find the answer to this question in Jesus Himself. And in his earlier work *The Parables of the Kingdom*¹¹ he has studied the primary source for our knowledge of the theology of Jesus and finds there the key-themes of fulfilment, judgment and redemption centered in Jesus' own Person and Work.

Dodd's analysis of the Kerygma has provided another proof of the reliability of the tradition. The Gospels are evidently expanded presentations of the Kerygma: in them this is furnished with its historical reference. But if the early Church had read back its theology into the history, or created its history on theological foundations, we should find every element of the Kerygma furnished with some, correlative in the tradition. We find that in fact this is not so, since two elements which are of central importance in the early preaching, namely the Coming of the Spirit and the Second Coming of Jesus, find, in the Synoptic tradition at least, only such mention as is natural at a time when these things were but promises made by Him. We may then argue that what we know of primitive doctrine demonstrates the substantial reliability of our present record of the words and works of Jesus out of which it sprang.

III.

We may sum up then by saying that the post-Bultmannic gospel criticism presents in synthesis a view of the Synoptic Gospels as a record of the teaching and mighty works of Jesus on which we may repose confidence; but by no means may we repose such confidence in the so-called Marcan outline. In fact a certain school of approach to the study of Mark goes so far as to doubt whether even Mark intended his outline to be understood as such and seeks to discover, with indifferent success, symbolic or it may be liturgical patterns behind the gospel.¹² But this essential doubt may give us reason to remain unconvinced by

¹¹ 1935.

¹² See for example Austin Farrer, *A Study in Saint Mark* (1951), and Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Calendar* (1952).

the learned studies in the gospel of the late T. W. Manson. Both his early work on *The Teaching of Jesus*¹³ and his final word in *The Servant-Messiah*¹⁴ largely depend in their analysis on the Marcan hypothesis. The latter seeks to present Jesus in the context of His time and the political issues of His day. In so doing, little reference is made to the theological declarations which are so central in the studies which we have here passed in review and which represent in our view so signal an advance in our understanding and estimate of the gospel material. We are, in fact, given a picture of Jesus which differs but little from those of Josephus and the Talmud to which the author himself refers in his opening paragraphs. There is no stress laid on the eschatology or of the personal claims of Jesus, which, by dint of Manson's theory of the meaning of "Son of Man," are made to refer to a scheme of salvation largely ethical in content. While it may be that this aspect of work and message of Jesus is complementary to that rehabilitation of gospel mythology of which we have spoken, and even that the eccentric erudition of Robert Eisler¹⁵ has something to contribute to our understanding of the gospel history, it is surely erroneous to stress this aspect alone as Manson tends to do.

Those who, like Schweitzer, weigh "thorough-going scepticism" and find it wanting can take no refuge in such lives of Jesus in which He figures in one way or another in the political melée of His times. They are rather flung willy-nilly into Schweitzer's alternative of "thorough-going eschatology" which finds in ways of thought quite alien to our own the thought-world and motivation of Jesus. It is no accident that those who have passed adverse judgment upon form criticism in our day have become concerned with the eschatological message of Jesus. At first we find a tendency (as for instance in the early work of Dodd on the parables) to demythologize this message or to interpret it in accord with our own philosophy; but more recent study has provided the corrective to this and in such an essay as W. G. Kümmel's *Promise and Fulfilment*¹⁶ we find it acknowledged that Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom contains not only the assurance of its present inception in His ministry but also the hope of its future consummation in glory. It is furthermore significant in

¹³ *The Teaching of Jesus* (1931).

¹⁴ 1952.

¹⁵ *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist* (1931).

¹⁶ English translation, 1957 (from 3rd edition, 1956).

this regard that a recent study by G. R. Beasley-Murray¹⁷ has disposed of the time-honoured "Little Apocalypse Theory" of Mark 13, showing it to have its origins in apologetic rather than in critical consideration, and proceeding to show its unity of thought with the message of Jesus as we elsewhere in the gospels ascertain it. We find then a message of the Kingdom coming and soon to come in its fulness.

Similarly, our understanding of the term "Son of Man" has increased and stresses the superlatively theological nature of this phrase. It has been customary for some time, at least amongst English scholars, to dismiss as unreliable the evidence of the so-called Ethiopic Enoch for the meaning of "Son of Man" in the Gospels and the early Church, because of the uncertainties of its date and the possibility of its interpolation in the Christian interest. There is now little ground for such a contention and dismissal since the work of the Swedish Semitist Erik Sjöberg on *The Son of Man in Ethiopic Enoch*,¹⁸ a book which has received singularly little notice in English circles. He provides telling proof that we have in this book a monument of pre-Christian Judaism and that none of the passages previously charged as interpolations can reasonably be taken as such. It is then of the highest significance for knowledge of what were the connotations of the term in at least some Jewish circles of Jesus' time. It indicates a figure pre-existent or at least predestinate, hidden till a time appointed by God, manifested in the time of judgment, himself the fore-ordained judge and at length declared to be incarnate in or identical with the prophet Enoch himself. If this as well as the future Kingdom be understood in the message of Jesus, that message is seen as frankly theological, supernatural and even in all probability personal. So still, in Schweitzer's words, He comes to us as one unknown.

IV.

There remains one last historical question. Why did the early Church preserve such a tradition in which the central feature is such a message and such claims about a figure whose most secure historical datum is that He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried? The tradition goes on to give its own answer that on the third day He rose again from the dead. This was not a statement simply expressive of the value which they placed upon their encounter with Jesus. There are some

¹⁷ *Jesus and the Future* (1954).

¹⁸ *Der Menschensohn im aethiopischen Henochsbuch* (1946).

formal indications that these accounts are unlike any other stories of a supernatural kind, and taking this together with the undoubted impetus which these alleged experiences gave to the once craven twelve we may even claim that the Resurrection stories are amongst the best attested incidents in the Gospels. The formal criteria have been studied by C. H. Dodd in an essay in memory of R. H. Lightfoot.¹⁹ Here he examines all the accounts of the Resurrection and demonstrates that they possess a unique form of their own, and moreover that certain stories in the pre-Resurrection narratives which some scholars have claimed to be misplaced Resurrection stories (e.g. the Lucan call of Peter and the transfiguration) do not in fact possess these features. This is highly suggestive of the historical credibility of these accounts. On the other hand the story of the empty tomb is quite clearly secondary in the tradition, as a number of scholars have pointed out. Is it thereby marked as unhistorical? Stauffer²⁰ points out that the story of an empty tomb is not only known to Biblical tradition but also in Jewish lore; the fact is the same although the explanation differs according to the standpoint of the recipient of the tradition. It would appear that in both these matters connected with the Resurrection we have material which by its very nature will not allow us to examine it simply as an historical fact. It is a matter to which, like the messianic claims of Jesus, the originators of New Testament tradition bear witness. To make the step which accepts the accounts as factually true is not a question of mere historical research but an axiological and existential judgment bound up with one's attitude to the claims already presented in the earlier parts of the gospel story for the supernatural eschatological Jesus as the record critically examined shows Him to have claimed to be. We may argue the plausibilities and they are indeed very strong, but in the last resort it is only the man who adds, "Last of all He appeared to me also," who will take the leap from possibility to assertion, that He is risen. Indeed we must confess that it was from this assertion that the whole tradition springs; it was because of this conviction of the eternal significance of Jesus and its demonstration in His rising again that men spoke and later wrote of the history of Jesus in the days of His ministry. So even when most strenuously studied

¹⁹ *Studies in the Gospels*, edited by D. E. Nineham (1955), pp. 9-35, "The Appearances of the Risen Christ: An Essay in Form-Criticism of the Gospels".

²⁰ Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus—Gestalt und Geschichte* (1957), pp. 108-111.

as literary monuments, the Gospels present their challenge to us : Schweitzer was led to acknowledge the royal claims of the One who comes to us as One unknown²¹ and the sceptical Bultmann himself declares that through Jesus' message man finds his true history.²² And it may be argued that we shall not finish the quest of the historical Jesus until we acknowledge the truth of His strange and stupendous claims.

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²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 401.

²² *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 26.