Is there a Scriptural Approach to the Knowledge of Christ?

(An analysis of the validity of our knowledge of Christ from the Sacred Scripture)

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The scope and function of this paper are to examine the validity of our knowledge of Christ through the Sacred Scripture, and to examine its reliability in the Bible. Whereas for Christians in general the Bible is the authentic source of their knowledge about Christ,[1] because of its very nature as the inspired Word of God, there can be a legitimate question raised against the use and the method we employ in our Christological discussions based on the Bible. The problem has become all the more poignant in these last decades when a great deal of discussion is going on regarding the historical reliability of the Gospel materials on the one hand and the method and technique of Biblical Christology on the other. It is these points that I would like to analyse in the following pages.

It has become almost commonplace to quote passages from R. Bultmann whenever there is a discussion on the knowability of the historical Jesus from the New Testament. In the opening sentences of his *Theology of the New Testament*, Bultmann writes: 'The message of Jesus is a presupposition of the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself.'[2] A more clear denunciation of the knowability of the historical Jesus is had when Bultmann states: 'I do think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either; and the sources do not exist.'[3] According to many of this school of thought, research on the historical Jesus is both

[1] Apart from the N.T. sources, we have only very scanty testimonies about him elsewhere: Pliny, Tacitus, Flavius Josephus, the Talmud—from these hardly anything can be derived beyond the sheer fact of his existence.

[2] R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, London, 1959,[3] Vol. I, p. 3.

[3] R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, London and New York, 1935.

hopeless and irrelevant—hopeless because we can never get to know him, irrelevant because it makes no sense for us and for our faith whether or not Jesus is the son of Joseph, whether he was born in 7 B.C., or A.D. 6, whether at that particular time a star appeared in the sky to direct the Magi to the manger and a census was taken in Palestine, whether or not Jesus performed miracles, whether his ministry lasted one or four years, whether he died at the age of 30 or 32, whether or not his tomb was empty on Easter morning. It is irrelevant, they say, whether the words of the Gospels go back to Jesus of Nazareth or only back to the creative genius of the primitive Church.[4]

This all too-negative attitude has had its starting-point in the attempt of Hermann Samuel Reimarus who was the first to point out that the Jesus of history and the Christ preached by the Church are not the same.[5] Since then, the problem has assumed significant proportions and radical stands were taken by such men as Martin Kähler [6] and Albert Schweitzer [7] till it got its fascinating development in the works of Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann.[8]

The result of these investigations was a total denial of the objective and historical truth of the Gospel narratives. The different literary forms of the Gospels were explained as created by the early Christian community on the basis of the laws of mass-psychology, a phenomenon we see in all ancient primitive religions.

The Christian community believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. This faith created a message about Jesus for the sole purpose of helping them achieve an authentic understanding of themselves before God. What is important, therefore, is not the historical Jesus and the mythological language used by the early Church to explain the eschatological act of God in Jesus Christ, but that we should turn our attention to the *kerygma* of the early Church with its existential significance for us today. Here we note that the centre of gravity for the Faith is not the past, but the present; the point of interest is not the 'Jesus of history' who was almost shrouded, but the 'Christ of faith' whose words and deeds were created by the early Church to meet every

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[4] E. Stauffer, 'The Relevance of the Historical Jesus' in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ*, ed. by C. E. Braaten and R. A. Harrisville, New York-Nashville, 1964, p. 43.

[5] Cf. J. Jeremias, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus*, Philadelphia, 1964, pp. 3 ff.

[6] *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, Philadelphia, 1964 (*Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus*, Leipzig, 1892).

[7] *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A critical study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, London, 1910 (*Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, Tübingen, 1906).

[8] In 1919 M. Dibelius *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* and in 1921 R. Bultmann wrote *Die Geschichte des synoptischen Tradition.* Since then these two works have greatly influenced the Gospel studies.

human need. In preaching and in the cult offered to Christ a new picture of Jesus resulted; needs of apologists and polemicists, needs to substantiate such and such a narrative from the Scripture, teaching needs, propaganda needs, all helped to produce a completely different picture of Jesus in the Gospels.

I do not intend to go into an evaluation and criticism of this approach to the Gospels. The merits and demerits of this new approach are too well known.[9] One point has become increasingly clear. This new approach in Gospel research has given certain important guide-lines in our understanding of the Gospels and the traditional method of use we make of them cannot any more stand the challenge of the conclusions arrived at by scientific researches. As a result, it is our duty to make a reappraisal of our traditional approach to the knowledge of Christ from the Gospels and to have this knowledge of ours rest on more reasonable and reliable grounds.

The Failure of an Apologetic Approach to Knowledge of Christ

The traditional methods of Christian apologetics have proved unsatisfactory because of the new understanding about the Bible as the concrete expression of the faith and life of Israel and the Church. Formerly, authors tried to establish that the Gospels are strict history through which a genuine knowledge about Christ was supposed to derive.[10] It was argued that, since the Evangelists have a first-hand knowledge of the facts and no other motive for deceiving others, everything we read in the Gospels really happened so. Thus assuming the historicity of the Gospels as proved, the apologists proceeded to demonstrate that Christ is a divine legate. This was done first of all by showing that Jesus really did claim to be the Messiah and Son of God and that he proved his claims by his own prophecies about the future, his miracles and especially his resurrection from the dead, the miracle *par excellence*. Since God alone is the principal cause of miracles, the fact that Jesus performed them was forwarded as sufficient proof to establish the divinity of Jesus. It has also been the custom to prove the Messiahship of Jesus Christ from Old Testament prophecies, as if the prophets of the Old Testament foretold centuries in advance the person and mission of the Messiah with photographic accuracy. This historicist apologetic relying on the principles of scientific history and logical reasoning proved itself ineffective precisely because academic history cannot be the final judge of truth and falsehood in matters of religion. Since the Gospels reflect the faith and convictions of the early Church, they cannot be used without qualification. Therefore, a pure historical method conceived, according to the norms of a historico-critical approach, is not fully competent to

[9] Cf. note 5 above and the bibliography given there on pp. 1-2.
[10] A. Dulles, *Apologetics and the Biblical Christ*, London, 1963, pp. 15 ff. A. Richardson, *Christian Apologetics*, London, 1960.

reconstruct the life and doctrine of Jesus. It cannot by itself establish any solid and indisputable version of the words and deeds of the real Jesus, and much less can it give an objective knowledge about Jesus Christ.

Are we then to abandon all our attempts to know Christ from the Bible? Do we have some data and criteria in the Gospels which help us and guide us in our efforts to understand the biblical Christ? Granting that the Gospels are confessional documents and that we have there the faith of the early Christians which read back into the earthly ministry of Jesus, his divinity and Messiahship, are we justified in trying to find out certain basic principles from which to reconstruct an objective knowledge of Christ?

The Reliability of the Traditions about Jesus

We do not intend to take issue with the post-Bultmannians who, using literary methods of Form Criticism which Bultmann developed, seek to advance from a knowledge of the religion of the early Christians to a knowledge of the historical Jesus himself.[11] This development cannot but be welcomed by all who believe in traditional Christianity. It should make people ask whether there was not a fundamental error in drawing a distinction between the 'historical Jesus' and the 'Christ of faith'. The natural outcome of these reappraisals is a growing awareness of the existence of certain basic guide-lines in the Gospels themselves, which lead us to a certain genuine knowledge about the 'Jesus of history'. In other words, the *Gemeindetheologie,* to which the Form-Critics credit the Gospel narratives, is not an impenetrable block between us and the historical Jesus.[12] The *Gemeinde* in which the tradition about Jesus lived and grew was not a faceless crowd, but an ordered community established and directed under the guidance of the apostles who were eyewitnesses to the person and ministry of the historical Jesus (cf. Acts 2:42). We now come to one of the most important points regarding the reliability of the Gospel narratives: the role of the apostles as eyewitnesses.

The Acts of the Apostles provide us with important passages where the reliability of the apostolic preaching is derived from the witnessing role of the apostles. The testimony of Peter in this regard is the most emphatic. When he preached to Cornelius, he narrated the facts of Jesus' public life, passion and resurrection, adding: 'and we are those witnesses—we have eaten and drunk with him after his resurrection from the dead' (cf. Acts 10:37–41). The *Conditio sine qua non* of an apostle is that he must be someone 'who has been with us the whole time that the

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[11] Cf. J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (studies in Biblical Theology 25), London, 1959, pp. 9 ff.

[12] E. F. Harrison, '*Gemeindetheologie:* The bane of Gospel criticism' in *Jesus of Nazareth, Saviour and Lord,* ed. by C. F. H. Henry, London, 1966, pp. 157–174.

Lord Jesus was travelling round with us, someone who was with us right from the time when John was baptizing until the day when he was taken up from us—and he can act with us as witness to his resurrection' (Acts 1:21-22; cf. 2:32; 3:15; 5:32). As eyewitnesses they refer to him not as 'Lord' or 'Saviour' but as 'Jesus' or 'Jesus of Nazareth' (Acts 2:22; 3:6; 4:10; 6:14; 10:38), the man whom God attested to the Jews by means of mighty works and wonders and signs, a reference to the life of Jesus on earth, before Easter. The principle and quality of apostolic eyewitnessing is present also in St. John (John 19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:1-2; 4:14 and c). Paul justifies his apostleship on the score that he has seen Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 9:1).

In fact, the very scope of the apostolic mission was to bear witness to Christ as it is clearly put in the Words of Christ himself (cf. Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8). It was these eyewitnesses who had the right and obligation to keep intact the genuine tradition about Jesus against the onslaught of new ideas and new 'Gospels' propagated in the name of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 1:6-7; 2 Cor. 11:4; 2 Thess. 2:2; 3:6). There were many (untrustworthy) traditions that were spread in the early Church, clear examples of which we have in the apocryphal Gospels.

According to the New Testament, the concept of 'witness' means more than the element of mere 'objective' reporting. To 'bear witness' means rather an inspired act of preaching and confessing. The Spirit of Truth, whom Jesus was to send from the Father, would give testimony to him and 'you too bear witness because you have been with me from the outset' (John 15:26-27). The apostles' testimony to Christ will be made one with the Spirit's testimony to Christ. The Spirit of Truth will be with the disciples and remain with them (John 14:17b), 'teaching them all things' and 'bringing all things to mind' (John 14:26), and leading them into all truth (John 16:13). Thus, according to John, the Spirit along with the apostolic witness of the life of Jesus is a guarantee of the integrity of the tradition about Jesus. The Spirit keeps alive the 'memory' of Jesus and leads the apostles to a fuller understanding of Jesus and his message.[13]

However, the work of the Spirit is itself the continuation of the work of the historical Jesus, for it is the glorified Lord himself who sends him (John 15:26; 16:8; Luke 24:49; Acts 2:33) and his work is that of 'guidance' (John 16:13), that is, the function of disclosing and explaining the truth and the mystery of the historical Jesus (John 15:26; 16:14). Thus it is only the Spirit that equips the eyewitnesses fully for their task of giving testimony in which we hear the Spirit of God giving inspiration and interpretation, as he is indissolubly united to the glorified Lord.

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[13] F. Mussner, 'The historical Jesus and the Christ of faith' in *Dogmatic v. Biblical Theology*, ed. by H. Vorgrimler, Baltimore, 1964, pp. 197 ff.

In the sermon of Peter (Acts 5:32) 'we . . . and the Holy Spirit' are named in one breath as witnesses of the events. Hence the apostolic witnessing has a twofold quality: first they were 'together with Jesus from the outset' (John 15:27), secondly they had the Advocate whom the glorified Lord sent them. As the New Testament interprets it, the 'witnessing of the apostles' means to make an assertion in public about past events as guided by the Holy Spirit. The apostolic witnesses are therefore the legitimate and ultimate guarantee of the oneness and continuity of the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus.

The words 'witness', 'testimony' and 'giving testimony' come from the language of the law-courts. Witnesses are summoned to testify to actual facts which they 'witnessed'. If the apostles are designated as witnesses of the historical life of Jesus, the logic conclusion demands that they bore witness to historical facts. Special importance is given to their testimony to the apparitions, and thereby to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In some places, the appeal of the eyewitness is restricted only to the resurrection of Jesus (cf. Acts 2:32; 3:15; 4:33), because the resurrection was the climax of the Christ event wherein the whole meaning of Christ was made manifest. In this sense Paul is called an eyewitness (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8). It is worth noting that the references to the eyewitnesses in the Acts of the Apostles have always the plural form: *we* are the 'witnesses'. This may stem partly from the Old Testament and Jewish idea that an assertion is valid only when it has at least two witnesses (Deut. 19:15; Joshua 18:17). It also refers to the fact that the tradition presented by the apostolic preaching was unanimous (cf. 1 Cor. 15:15).

In this connection it is useful to make a reference to the meaning of the technical terms of apostolic tradition: *paralambanō* and *paradidōmi,* occurring especially in the Pauline writings (1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:2). Having their background in the Jewish world, especially in Rabbinic Judaism (*qibbel* and *masar*) these words stand for the validity and infallibility of the two objective tradition meanings 'to receive in a fixed form the chain of Christian tradition and to hand it over to posterity without adulterating it' by 'some secondhand, empty, rational philosophy based on the principles of this world instead of on Christ' (Col. 2:8).[14] The object of this tradition is not a set doctrine. It is the religious certainty of a historical event, as Paul clearly states in 1 Cor. 11:23–26 and 15:3–5. Only in this light can we explain the claim to validity to the exclusion of any possible mistake which is raised on behalf of what those addressed have received from Paul (Gal. 1:9 f; 1 Thess. 2:13).

The authenticity of the oral traditions about Jesus, especially of his teaching, has been convincingly brought out in recent studies

[14] Cf. *Theological Dictionary of the N.T.* art. 'paralambanō' and 'paradidōmi'.

by Swedish theologians of the University of Uppsala. In 1957, Prof. H. Riesenfeld, in a paper entitled 'The Gospel Tradition and Its Beginnings: a Study in the Limits of Formgeschichte',[15] emphasized that the Gospel tradition took shape inside a community whose life was dominated by worship rather than instruction and that in the 'handing down' of the tradition about Jesus there were also analogies to be found in the origins of the Mishnah, especially in the section entitled 'The Traditions of the Fathers' (Pirke Aboth), in which the teaching given orally by rabbis is presented as having been handed down by God himself on Mount Sinai. In almost the same manner the apostles and disciples of Jesus handed down his words and their veneration for him would have ensured that the teachings were passed on substantially unchanged. We know that the 'teaching of the apostles' (Acts 5:42) was given at the service known as the 'breaking of bread'. In this liturgical ceremony, it would have been only natural for the preacher to relate not merely the sayings but also the deeds of Jesus. Thus the Gospel of Jesus Christ which was preached there would have included the Good News about him, as well as the Good News which stemmed from him in person.

The importance of tradition and the method of its transmission were further elaborated by Birger Gerhardsson in his book, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Tradition in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*.[16] According to the author, Jesus' ministry was carried out in a Jewish setting and there is a striking parallel between the formation of the Gospels and the Mishnah and Talmud. Both took shape gradually as oral teaching, both were based on the Old Testament, and both were set down in writing, in a definite form, only after many years. From this similarity of the teaching method Gerhardsson concludes that herein we have proof of the authenticity of the traditions about Jesus. The disciples were committed to transmission rather than to alteration of the message of Christ. As Gerhardsson says, 'It is unrealistic to suppose that forgetfulness and the exercise of a pious imagination had too much hand in transforming the authentic memories beyond all recognition in the course of a few short decades.'

In spite of the fact that this thesis has some defects in its not being able to account for the dynamic nature of the early Church in understanding and adapting the message of Jesus to the varying environments, there is an important point which strikes at the very roots of the *Gemeindetheologie*. In the light of this explanation we can better understand the Jewishness of many of the sayings of Jesus and of the controversy with the

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[15] Printed in *Studia Evangelica, Texte and Untersuchungen* 73, Berlin, 1959, pp. 43–65.

[16] Lund, Sweden, 1961.

theology of the Pharisees revealed in many of Jesus' parables.[17] Moreover, this accounts for the original Palestinian character of many of the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. We also note that sayings are often strung together merely on the basis of a common catchword, without any inner links being perceptible. As R. Schnackenburg has said, 'It is precisely in the fact that many rough edges are not smoothed out that we see how tied the Evangelists were to the data of tradition'. Here we note how the apostolic tradition about Jesus was scrupulously faithful to the voice of Jesus. Too great reverence was felt for the words of the Master. The desire to collect the exhortatory sayings of Jesus, as appears primarily in that stratum of tradition known as 'Q' in Exegesis, can only be explained satisfactorily, if Jesus of Nazareth was recognized as a Jewish teacher of wisdom. However, this material functioned first and foremost not merely as a collection of wise sayings alongside other traditions of the Jewish teachers, but in place of another tradition, namely, the Jewish rabbinical 'Tradition of the Fathers'. It is also to be pointed out that it is the very interest in the historical Jesus that forced the early Church to gather together these sayings of Jesus.

The Prologue to the Third Gospel (Luke 1:1–4)

It is against the background of these considerations that we have the reliability of the Gospel traditions as it is *ex professo* proposed by Luke in the very beginning of his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). Instead of a discussion whether or not the author succeeded in attaining his avowed ideal, it is worthwhile to note that in the foreword Luke falls in line with the pattern of prologues widely used by the Hellenistic authors.[18] What Luke wanted to do was to show 'the reliability of the oral instruction' Theophilus has received. To this effect, he carefully investigated the 'accounts of the events which were accomplished among them' and as a result, he wrote an orderly account of it. He claims thereby historical accuracy for his narratives, and bases his claim on the accounts of the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Gospel.

The whole argument is based on one point: though Luke was not an eyewitness, he gathered the original data handed down by the apostles, for he knew that there was every chance of distortion by interested parties (cf. Gal. 1:6-7), who wanted to preach another Christ, if possible (2 Cor. 11:4). To be sure, this does

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[17] 'The parables are perhaps the most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels. Certainly there is no part of the Gospel record which has for the reader a clearer ring of authenticity.' C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fontana books, 1961, p. 13. J. Jeremias calls the parables 'a piece of bedrock of tradition'.

[18] Cf. J. Wijngaards, 'St. Luke's prologue in the light of modern research', *Clergy Monthly* 31 (1967), 172–179; 251–258.

not mean that Luke wished to narrate the bare facts in their chronological sequence or that he succeeded in the attempt to write a first-class biography of Jesus. Comparing the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark with that of Luke, we see that like the other Evangelists, he had recourse to the literary forms characteristic of the Gospels. Both in the Infancy Narrative and in the rest of the Gospel he adopted stylistic means to bring out the message of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ.[19] At the same time, Luke is convinced of the substantial historicity of the accounts presented in his Gospel. It is not without reason that he refers to the 'decree from Caesar Augustus' when he begins to narrate the story of Jesus' birth.

Is Our Knowledge of Christ from the Gospels Unambiguous?

There is still another question. Is the knowledge about the life and ministry of Jesus, derived from the Gospels understood as reliable sources from the eyewitnesses, unambiguous in itself? Is it the only knowledge we have about Jesus? To be sure, the life of Jesus can be expounded otherwise than is done in Gospels and the New Testament in general. That the knowledge about Jesus was not at all unambiguous even in the days of the historical Jesus is clear from the Gospels themselves. We see, for example, from Mark 6:14–16 and 8:27 ff., that Jesus' contemporaries were by no means in agreement in their verdict upon him. For some he was John the Baptist risen again, for others Elijah returned to life, while others again said: 'He is a prophet like one of the prophets' (Mark 6:15).

In the narrower circle of the disciples the situation seemed better. They could see him more or less as the Messiah. Peter, in the name of all, makes the profession of faith: 'Thou art the Messiah' (Mark 8:29). But soon we see the scene changing. When Jesus tried to initiate this circle into the mystery of his passion, Peter revolted against it (Mark 8:32; 16:22). Apparently, the mystery of the passion did not fit into his picture of the Messiah. He had certainly misinterpreted Jesus' previous work, drawn false conclusions from it, linked other expectations to it. Such a misinterpretation we see again in Luke 19:11. Those who followed Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem thought the 'Kingdom of God would soon appear because he was near to Jerusalem'. They misunderstood the very purpose of his journey to Jerusalem and attached false hopes to it. Many understood his solemn entry into Jerusalem in the very same way. After the miraculous multiplication of the bread by the lake of Galilee, Jesus had to withdraw from the people because they had misunderstood his 'sign' (John 6:15).

Jesus' Messianic activity was, therefore, open to misunderstanding. In fact, it was misunderstood even in the narrowest circle

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[19] A good example of this approach is the 'Travel Story' (Luke 9:51—18:14).

of his disciples. His friendly contacts with tax-collectors and sinners were not only misunderstood, they were sharply criticized (Mark 2:15; Luke 5:29 f; 7:39; 15:1; 19:7). His own interpretation of the concept of 'Son of Man' in the light of Isaiah's prophecy about the Servant of the Lord remained unintelligible, because it did not conform to the Jewish notion of the Messiah. According to many, it appeared that he died 'without having redeemed Israel' (Luke 24:21).

But we have also to take into account another important fact attested by the Gospels. During his public ministry Jesus allowed his apostles and disciples to have a personal experience with him. He selected them carefully and prepared them by long training to receive this personal communication. To them, he disclosed his relationship to the Father and the mysteries of his person. It is after this that he designated them as the witnesses and heralds of these mysteries (John 15:27). In the light of the resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit they were brought to a fuller awareness of what they had already experienced. They tried to make others know and experience the meaning of the person and mission of Jesus Christ.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter attempted this mission and the life and theology of the early apostolic Church is proof of its genuine concern for a true knowledge of Jesus Christ. What we have in 'canonical' Gospels is the authentic witnessing of this understanding of the early Church. However, together with this there arose also another attempt at understanding Jesus, the record of which has been preserved for us in the apocryphal Gospels. This shows that some people by no means were ready to accept the explanation of the life and message of Jesus which was given in the Gospels later to be declared canonical. The apocryphal Gospels, it would seem, had a different interest in the historical Jesus. However, the Church decided in favour of the four canonical Gospels, because the 'canonical' tradition and interpretation of the life of Jesus seemed the correct one, and this was so because the interpretation of the history of Jesus given in the canonical Gospels seemed to be the apostolic one. It should be noted that the Church recognized two Gospels as canonical which from the start were attributed to authors who were not apostles. Thereby the Church declared that in them was contained true apostolic tradition about Jesus and hence therein the history of Jesus is correctly attested and interpreted. And now on the basis of the form-critical study it is made clear that all these four Gospels have their origin and point of departure from the apostolic preaching. This is itself sufficient proof that we can arrive at an objective and to that extent unambiguous knowledge about the historical Christ from the Gospels.

Is it then the most genuine knowledge about Jesus that we can have? Can we be sure that the picture of Jesus proposed in the Gospels is not a mere projection of some human religious ideal? Here we must note that in matters of personal attestation, we cannot have an accepted criteriology. The norms of reliability have never been set forth so precisely as those for factual reporting. Nevertheless, the unity and uniformity of the New Testament picture of Jesus, the conviction and firmness with which the New Testament faith about Jesus is proclaimed, the complete novelty and originality of this doctrine, all these point to the reliability of their reporting. Moreover, we have to take into account the complete metamorphosis the apostles underwent as the result of the resurrection and descent of the Holy Spirit and that power still continues to inspire the readers of the Gospels. The picture of Jesus that is drawn by the Evangelists is so unique and original and it is convincing proof of the reliability and authenticity of the Gospel traditions. It would be too much to expect that the early Christians invented this new theology.

Mention should also be made of recent developments that have taken place in understanding the meaning of 'history' and its bearing on the historical character of the Gospels. The nineteenth century concept of 'history' as a recording of facts, which one scrupulously refrains from interpreting, has given way to a new approach to the meaning of history. It is now generally admitted that there is no history in which the historian does not somehow interpret the facts which he records. To say the least, his selection of the facts which he considers worth recording and his omission of others involve a value judgement he gives to them, which is itself an interpretation. The now prevalent concept of history has been well expressed by C. H. Dodd: 'Historical writing is not merely a record of occurrences as such. It is, at least implicitly, a record of the interest and meaning they bore for those who took part in them, or were affected by them . . . Thus the events which make up history are relative to the human mind which is active in those events . . . We might indeed say that an historical "event" is an occurrence plus the interest and meaning which the occurrence possessed for the people involved in it, and by which the record is determined.'[20]

According to this view of history, the task of marshalling facts to be chronicled is an essential part of the historian's function. This selection and interpretation presupposes some criterion of judgement. The very choice of sources will be governed by the type of history to be written—cultural, political, economic or religious. The historian's work will ultimately be judged by the correctness of his interpretation of the evidence he has unearthed. To be sure, interpreting data does not mean falsifying them; it

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[20] C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*, London, 1938, p. 37; cf. E. Dinkler, *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East*, New Haven, London, 1955; A. W. Mosely, 'Historical reporting in the Ancient World', *N.T.S.*, 12 (1965), 10–26; J. M. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 66–72.

does mean, however, that the historian is presenting his interpretation as the one which gives true meaning.

It follows, therefore, that the picture of Jesus in the Gospels is to a great extent conditioned by the culture and mentality of the first century Church and by the individual characteristics of the Evangelists. To that extent our knowledge of Christ is limited and ambiguous. But could we expect anything more in the case of a historical revelation limited as it is by time and space ? The very fact that God wants to save mankind through a historical process, in the course of which the Christ event takes place, is itself sufficient indication of the limitation of our knowledge of Christ. As a result, Jesus still remains the hidden one, ' the one standing among us—but unknown to us ' (John 1:26). The apostles and the early Church, inspired by the special charism of the Holy Spirit, have tried their best to give us a genuine picture of Jesus Christ with his salvific message for mankind. But it will now be our task to try to understand him more and more so that we get to know him and his message for our own times. This is not to reduce him to an atemporal myth ; rather, we start from the historical and penetrate into his mystery as the historical and the eschatological manifestation of God for ' Jesus Christ is the same today, as he was yesterday and as he will be for ever ' (Heb. 13:8).

Knowing Jesus Christ as the Centre of Salvation History

The problem and solution of knowing Jesus Christ from the Sacred Scripture are not to be restricted to a consideration of the authenticity and reliability of the Gospel traditions. The role and significance of Jesus Christ extend far beyond the New Testament. Therefore, an understanding of his cosmic role in the general structure of the biblical history is indispensable for a comprehensive approach to the knowledge of Christ we derive from the Bible as a whole.

Paul gives the historical event of Jesus Christ cataclysmic importance. He says, ' But when the appointed time came, God sent his son, born of a woman, born a subject to the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as sons ' (Gal. 4:4-5). According to the New Testament, the coming of Christ effects the termination of an old world order and the inauguration of a new and triumphant world order. Paul explains this to the Athenians as the end of the ' time of ignorance God had winked at, now commanding all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he has appointed ' (Acts 17:30-31). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews explains the revelation in Jesus Christ as the climax of a historical process of God's self-revelation.

The biblical understanding of Christ's role at the centre of salvation history is gaining momentum during these years.[21] Many authors are trying to show the significance to Christ's coming as an event that stands at the very centre of salvation history and illumines the whole historical process. Thus W. Pannenberg, the leader of what is known as the Pannenberg circle, explains his whole theology as a historical understanding at the centre of which there is the resurrection of Jesus. History, according to him, is reality in its totality. Moreover, the resurrection is not just a 'big miracle', rather it is the goal and the end of the process of the world history. 'Jesus of Nazareth is the final revelation of God because the end of history appeared in him. It did so both in his eschatological message and in his resurrection from the dead. However, he can be understood to be God's final revelation only in connection with the whole history as mediated by the history of Israel. He is God's revelation in the fact that all history receives its due light from him.'[22] The prophets of Israel envisaged the future of Israel as an age in which not only Israel but also the Gentiles would recognize Yahweh's exclusive divinity through his future deeds. It was this promise that was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth through the early Christian mission when not only Jews but also Gentiles recognized the revelation of the one true God in Jesus. Thus God's demonstration of himself through the ministry and the history of Jesus of Nazareth is that final revelation of God which is to be acknowledged through faith by all peoples. One can understand the history of Jesus only if one sees clearly the future salvation of mankind as having already appeared in and with him and as having been made accessible through him.[23] 'Consequently theology may not and must not withdraw from the world to an exclusive supernatural realm accessible only by that suspect "decision" of faith, but must understand Jesus in the context of the world and understand all things from Jesus and to him. Then theology will understand the world as God's world, history as the field of his action, and Jesus as his revelation'.[24]

O. Cullmann had long ago established the unique character of the Christ event at the mid-point of the salvation history on the basis of the principle of representation, taking the entire process of the salvation history as a Christ-line.[25] The same view has been more thoroughly proposed in his recent study *Das Heil als*

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[21] Cf. H. Berkhof, *Christ, the Meaning of History*, Richmond, 1966, pp. 61–70; A. Köberle, 'Jesus Christ, the centre of history' in *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 61–70; K. S. Kantzer, 'The Christ-revelation as act and interpretation', *ibid.*, pp. 241–264.

[22] W. Pannenberg, 'The revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth' in *New Frontiers in Theology*, Vol. III, New York, Evanston, 1967, p. 125.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[25] Cf. C. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, London, 1962 (revised ed.), pp. 121 ff.

Geschichte[26] where he discusses at length the approaches to salvation history that show themselves among various authors.[27] Explaining the salvation history theme of John's Gospel, he writes: 'It is characteristic of salvation history in the New Testament that, on the one hand, the various epochs follow one another, but, on the other hand, that all are bound together among themselves by their orientation towards Christ, the mid-point of salvation history, who supplies this history with its meaning and sums up the epochs of salvation history in himself.'[28]

The Christ-event at the mid-point is illuminated by the O.T. preparation, after this preparation has first received its light from the very mid-point. Thus the death and resurrection of Christ enable the believer to see in the history of Israel the preparation for Jesus, the Crucified and Risen One. Even the time before the creation is regarded entirely from the position of Christ; it is the time in which, in the counsel of God, Christ is already fore-ordained as Mediator before the foundation of the world (John 17:24; 1 Pet. 1:20); he is the Mediator in the creation itself (John 1:1; Heb. 1:2, 10 ff.; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16).[29]

D. Bonhoeffer, for whom there can be no isolation of the so-called historical Jesus from the Christ who is present now, explains the role of Christ as the centre of history in so far as he is the centre of our existence. At the same time, according to him, any attempt to give a philosophical vindication of this fact must be rejected. There can be no question of demonstrating Christ as the consummation and the centre of religious and secular history. Moreover, in a history which lives between promise and fulfilment, the promise of a Messiah is alive everywhere in that history. He is even the mediator of History.[30]

Faith or Knowledge?

In the foregoing pages I have tried to delineate some guiding principles which I think important in solving the problem of knowing Christ through the Scriptures. It seems, however, that the question still remains: Is there a Scriptural approach to the knowledge of Christ? In other words, does the specific nature of the Bible as a document of faith somehow qualify the knowledge we get therefrom? Does not faith, which is the presupposition of our historical and scientific investigation, also influence the latter that in the last analysis we fall back upon our own faith as our greatest knowledge of Christ? If so, what do we have about Christ, Faith *or* Knowledge, or both Faith *and* Knowledge?

In answering these questions we have to admit that the greatest truth of our Christian commitment, the Resurrection, from

[26] English translation *Salvation in History*, New York and Evanston, 1967.
[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 28–64.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 285.
[29] *Christ and Time*, p. 108.
[30] D. Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Centre*, New York, 1966, pp. 62–66.

which all our Christian knowledge flows, is not something that can be historically proved and therefore the *knowledge* we get about this event is subordinated to the faith which should guide us in our investigation. The same is true of the whole biblical narrative, whether it is the Gospels explaining the person and ministry of Jesus or the entire Bible showing itself oriented to Jesus Christ as the centre of the history of salvation. Our knowledge of Christ is essentially *fides quaerens intellectum.* Our investigation should start from faith and aim at a faith that understands and a knowledge that is rooted in faith. It shows on the one hand the specific nature of religious knowledge and on the other, the limitations such a knowledge involves. We can never treat the Bible as a technical history in the same way as we can by no means take the attitude of a profane historian in our biblical researches.

The Gospels, the most important source of our knowledge of Christ, are historical and Christological documents, and it is important to keep in mind this twofold nature of the Gospels. It is through the historical that we arrive at the Christological message they convey. The Gospels witness both to the divine and the human aspects of Jesus Christ. He is firmly rooted in time and space, in history, yet is above and beyond history. He is an historical figure in Palestine during the reign of Tiberius Caesar; he suffered under Pontius Pilate. But from age to age he always remains the Person from whom each man in turn must receive the revelation and grace of God.

The peculiar quality of the Gospels as literary documents is that they attest to this double character of Jesus Christ. Inasmuch as Jesus Christ belongs to history, he may be known through the methods of history. Inasmuch as he is beyond history, we can come to know him only through faith in the revelation which is erected upon the historical basis of his life, death and resurrection.

Jesus told his disciples, 'No one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt. 11:37). It is so with regard to our knowledge of Christ, because it is not the conclusion of a syllogism nor is it the result of high academic discussions, 'for it is not flesh and blood that reveal this us, but our Father in heaven' (cf. Matt. 16:17), and this knowledge of the Father and the Son is the source of our eternal life, as Jesus Christ himself has promised us: 'And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3).