

## FORM CRITICISM AND PHILOLOGICAL STUDIES

MANY THEOLOGICAL students in this country woke up rather suddenly late in the day, to find standing over them a reproachful figure called (misleadingly) Form Criticism. Unless they read German, they mostly began to make its acquaintance through reading B. S. Easton,<sup>1</sup> Vincent Taylor,<sup>2</sup> R. H. Lightfoot,<sup>3</sup> or a translation of M. Dibelius<sup>4</sup> in the 'twenties or 'thirties. Until then, they would mostly have thought that the foundations of their critical reading of the Gospels were duly laid as soon as they had read their Burkitt and Streeter (for themselves or by proxy) and could recite the reasons for believing in the priority of Mark and the existence of Q, M, and L and were able, perhaps, to discuss Proto-Luke. All these symbols or terms stood for theories about written sources behind the existing Gospels, and upon written sources their critical attention was almost exclusively focused. The result, at least for the less thoughtful and more credulous, was inevitably an unexamined—indeed, almost unconscious—assumption that the Evangelists were rather like modern compilers, sitting at desks covered with their predecessors' work, and piecing together bits of documents. In short, a conception of the Gospels as written documents dominated the scene.

But outside this country thought had long been moving in a rather different direction. The new impetus seems to have come at first from work on folklore, especially in the Old Testament, by scholars in Scandinavia and Germany, who claimed attention for the investigation of the laws of oral transmission. What actually happens, they asked, to stories when they are passed from mouth to mouth in an unliterary community? Gradually, at least two important principles formulated themselves in reply. First, that, by examining a sufficiently wide range of examples, one might become familiar enough with the standard 'shapes' or 'forms' assumed by stories in successive stages of transmission to be able, with some degree of accuracy, to strip the latest form of a given story down, by a kind of onion-peeling process, to its most primitive, original shape. And secondly, that it is a mistake to treat the sort of written documents which are now under discussion as though they were 'literary', since the collective influence of communities was generally more important than any one individual in shaping a story, and even in moulding a whole document. Attention came thus to be focused on living communities, with fluid traditions assuming a protean series of forms, rather than on a thin stream of documentary transmission.

From this conclusion—still pursuing for a moment its application to Old Testament research—it was easy to develop the modern Scandinavian tendency to question sharply the Graf-Wellhausen type of documentary theory of the origin of the foldings and faults in that complex massif, the Pentateuch, and to look instead to a more or less tenacious memory, often of groups rather than individuals, and to the subtle blending and fusion of living streams of oral tradition.<sup>5</sup>

But meanwhile it had quickly become apparent to Continental scholars that the same technique was of front-rank importance also for New Testament

studies, especially in the Gospels. Are not the Gospels composed largely of distinct units or sections ('pericopae' as they are called), mostly comprising brief stories or anecdotes? And are not these eminently amenable to the same treatment as had begun to be applied to the Old Testament? In fact, by comparing and contrasting parallel units in the synoptic Gospels, one might sometimes actually catch a story in transit, so to speak, and mark the stages of growth or modification as it passed from mouth to mouth and was told to different audiences.<sup>6</sup> Thus (to take one stock example) it came to be widely held that the interpretation of the parable of the sower reflected the adaptation, by Christian preachers and teachers, of a story originally told by Jesus in a different setting and for a different purpose. Jesus Himself meant that, despite all wastage and hindrance, the kingdom of God was already showing a good yield; it was the early Church which turned the story into an allegory of different sorts of response to the Gospel, and which perhaps successively modified the hard saying about the *mystery* of the kingdom of God (that is, the presence of Jesus and the meaning of his mission) until it came to speak of the *mysteria* (plural), i.e. the secret allegorical interpretation of the parables so as to apply to a contemporary situation. The present writer has serious doubts about this particular example, but he quotes it because it is well known.

In order to put the study on something like a scientific basis, one obvious preliminary was to classify the different types of unit according to their shapes. Stories whose chief point was a miracle tended to take one shape—namely, sick man, failure of others to cure him, success of Jesus, astonishment of on-lookers. Stories leading up to an epigram or pithy saying as their climax took another shape: opponents come to try to trip up the Master, he gives a clever reply, they go away baffled, the common people are delighted. Gradually, this preliminary classification gave to the devotees of this research the German name of *Die formgeschichtliche Schule*, the school of thought concerned with the history of 'forms', which somehow came to be represented by the slipshod and inexact English term 'form criticism'.

But it must be confessed that even the German term is not particularly apt, because the classification of 'forms' often breaks down and, at best, is of secondary importance. What is significant is the variation in the context of a given section in different Gospels, since this may well betray a change of audience or a fresh application. Prominent, therefore, in the technique was the attention given to the *context* of a pericope or unit in a given form—not its literary context in the Gospel where we read it, but the context in which it may have been uttered at a given stage. Just as Scandinavian studies of the psalms had paid close attention to their setting in communal worship, so the setting of these New Testament sections—whether in worship, in debate, or in instruction—became important. Some scholar<sup>7</sup> seems to have coined the not very good German term *Sitz im Leben*, setting-in-the-life, to denote this context, and *Sitz im Leben* has become a constant cliché. In the example alluded to just now, the original *Sitz im Leben Jesu* (setting in the life of Jesus) of the story of the sower will have been a situation in which Jesus wanted to emphasize the impressive yield of the kingdom of God despite all hindrances; but one *Sitz im Leben der alten Kirche* (setting in the life of the early Church) might be a time of persecution, when the shallowly rooted were apostatizing, and when the

worldly were smothered in the weeds and thorns of money-making; and another might be the stage when esoteric teaching, perhaps in allegorical form, was reserved for the few who were 'within'. More and more it became the fashion to assume that, in order to explain a section of the Gospel, some given setting in the community must be postulated. On this showing, the story of the coin in the fish's mouth reflected the controversy about whether Jewish Christians need continue to pay the Temple tax; the reverberations of the legalistic controversies and the Gentile mission were to be heard in the sayings about Jesus fulfilling the Law or (as the case might be) superseding it; and so forth. The claim, in short, was that the Gospels were the deposit of Christian community life—a sociological phenomenon, rather than the work of individuals preserving the words and deeds of an individual.

From this it was but a step to the conclusion that the needs and the debates of the Christian communities had actually created much of the Gospel material, virtually *ex nihilo*, that they cared little for preserving historical traditions as such, and least of all for details of merely biographical or private interest, and that the factors in shaping the Gospels were the demands of Christian evangelism, teaching, worship, and apologetic. 'In the beginning was the sermon'<sup>8</sup>; and the sermon—*kerygma*, 'proclamation'—is certainly not biography.

British scholarship, having eventually awoken to what was going on, received it with, for the most part, characteristic caution, though R. H. Lightfoot<sup>9</sup> and J. M. Creed<sup>10</sup> gave the method a warmer welcome than many, and Bishop Rawlinson's commentary on Mark was distinctly influenced by it.<sup>11</sup> The conservatives reacted vigorously against it, regarding it as destructive and dangerous. Dr Vincent Taylor<sup>12</sup> in England and Dr B. S. Easton<sup>13</sup> in America are good representatives of a balanced and careful attitude, in their sympathetic understanding, but also trenchant criticisms of some of the less well-founded conclusions of form criticism.

What has chiefly come from this—to cut a long and complicated story down to a short and grossly over-simplified form—is the wide recognition in this country of the fact that oral transmission and the interests and circumstances of the Christian communities did play a very important part in shaping the Gospel material. At the same time, however, there is a widespread refusal to conclude from this that there is none of it which owes its survival simply to its being true and historical, or that everything has been distorted out of its original shape into a shape dictated by the interests and beliefs of the later Church. It is, to venture a probably rash analogy, as though the discovery of the fluid flywheel had at first thrown doubt on the existence of any direct, rigid transmission at all, until someone had the sanity to take up the floor-boards and have a look. From many quarters has come, in particular, the reminder that, after all, the interests reflected in at least the Synoptic Gospels are definitely distinguishable from those reflected in, say, the Pauline epistles. If the Synoptic Gospels were really only the expression of *Gemeindetheologie*—the theological interests of the community—how is it that they contain so little about the Holy Spirit and so much about the Son of Man (to take only two instances of marked changes in emphasis)?<sup>14</sup>

Among controversial points in the discussion at the present moment in England are the two following. First, Dr C. H. Dodd's study of the framework

of Mark<sup>15</sup> has been called in question,<sup>16</sup> and a burning issue is whether or not a real chronological sequence can be found in the Gospels at all: was 'Caesarea Philippi' really a watershed? And secondly, there is the question whether the Evangelists are to be regarded after all as themselves creative artists, carefully selecting and arranging their material and deliberately 'saying something'; or whether they are mere compilers of traditions, or mere repositories of community lore. Some scholars today would not accept the implications of Dibelius' words:<sup>17</sup> 'The company of unlettered people which expected the end of the world any day had neither the capacity nor the inclination for the production of books, and we must not predicate a true literary activity in the Christian Church of the first two or three decades. . . .' They would distinguish creative artistry from literary activity and would be ready to recognize the former even in a period of breathless expectation and in a community which was a stranger to anything like literary elaboration. In short, attention is returning in some measure to the Evangelists, as themselves individually contributing to the arrangement and shape of their Gospels.<sup>18</sup>

But what are the instruments employed in the dissecting rooms (if one may use the analogy without disrespect) of the form critics? They are essentially the same as were, and still are, used by the literary critics: linguistic instruments. The meaning, origin, use and distribution of the words in a particular writer's vocabulary are still looked to for a clue to his sources, whether written or oral. Thus, critics who impugn the originality of the allegorization of the parable of the sower (to revert once more to our stock example) observe that 'its vocabulary includes . . . seven words which are not proper to the Synoptic record';<sup>19</sup> and if these words can be shown to belong to subjects current in the primitive Church but not in the Judaism of the Lord's ministry, obviously an important clue may have been found. Again, there are parts of the Gospels which, although written in Greek, show such a high proportion of idioms and syntax which are more at home in a Semitic language, that the presumption is either that the writer is deliberately copying Semitic style (as a modern religious writer might attempt a 'King James' passage) or that he is using a source which was originally in a Semitic language. In any case, changes of style, vocabulary, and ideas may be a clue to the fact that we are dealing with a composite piece, even when the origin and nature of its components may still escape us.

But if the instruments are essentially the same as criticism has always used, the last thirty years or so have sharpened and improved them considerably. At the turn of the century, the great flood of secular papyri from Egypt enabled such scholars as Deissmann, J. H. Moulton, and G. Milligan to show how close the New Testament was to real life, and to remove a large number of words from the list of the exclusively biblical, and a considerable number also from the catalogue of the exclusively Semitic. But it is generally recognized that their case tended to be pressed rather too far, and that the Greek bible in fact still retains a considerable distinctiveness of language and idiom.

Simultaneously, our understanding of the actual meaning of biblical words has been increased by the study of the papyri, the inscriptions, and other sources. Foremost in honour in this field must be named the veteran scholar Walter Bauer, whose monumental *Wörterbuch* is now reaching its fifth edition, the fourth<sup>20</sup> having been translated and further edited by the late Dr W. F.

Arndt and Dr F. W. Gingrich.<sup>21</sup> Bauer's introduction to his fourth edition, published separately, is happily incorporated in Arndt and Gingrich, and supplies a wealth of information about the state of these studies at the beginning of the present decade.

Much attention is also being devoted to the comparative study of New Testament language and idiom as between different parts of the New Testament itself. By careful comparison of the idioms of the Pauline epistles—to take one instance—conclusions have gradually been reached as to the articulation and emphases of his sentences.<sup>22</sup> More data are, at the same time, thus available for the solving of problems of authorship, although it must be confessed that even after such magisterial studies as those of Dr Mitton<sup>23</sup> and Dr Percy<sup>24</sup>, on opposite sides, the problem of Ephesians still remains, in the eyes of some, unsolved.

New Testament textual research has gone forward with overwhelming intensity—witness the successive editions by Erwin Nestle, the impending British and Foreign Bible Society edition, and the great critical edition begun under the late S. C. E. Legg and now continued on an international scale with America playing a leading part; not to mention innumerable monographs and articles. Scientific aids, such as ultra-violet inspection, have increased the accuracy of our detection in faintly written MSS. The techniques of textual criticism are becoming more varied, and there are various schools of thought; while the sheer quantity of the MSS available makes the editing of Classical texts seem almost child's play beside the size and complexity of the New Testament apparatus. Incidentally, the more exactly textual research establishes the original readings, the greater will be the precision with which a given author's style may be examined; though it must be remembered that we still do not know much about the extent to which—say—St Paul's epistles were dictated verbatim, freely spoken and freely reproduced in the amanuensis's own style, or actually written by the apostle himself.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, a major factor in linking together the theological and linguistic aspects of New Testament studies has been the truly magnificent *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, initiated in 1933 by the late Dr Gerhard Kittel and continued under the direction of Dr Gerhard Friedrich. At the time of writing, instalments have reached Vol. VI, fascicle 9 (roughly the 5,580th page!), bringing us to *πορεύομαι*. It is only a pity that so comparatively little of this vast thesaurus has been made available so far in English.<sup>26</sup>

All in all, students of the New Testament today are very considerably better equipped linguistically and textually than their predecessors, and their eyes have been opened as never before to the importance of the traditions, the life, and the worship of the communities in which the writings took shape. (A good popular presentation of this viewpoint is in H. G. G. Herklots's *A Fresh Approach to the New Testament* (S.C.M., 1950).) What is needed now is a great deal of level-headedness and sanctified commonsense. The critic who neither adheres blindly to outmoded conceptions of literary transmission, nor falls over backwards in his efforts to be fair to scepticism about the historical value of any of the traditions, will find himself possessed of sufficient data for constructive advance in the understanding of the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel before the Gospels* (Allen & Unwin, about 1928).

<sup>2</sup> *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (Macmillan, 1933).

<sup>3</sup> *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (Bampton Lectures, Hodder & Stoughton, 1935).

<sup>4</sup> M. Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Tübingen, 1919), tr. as *From Tradition to Gospel* (Nicholson & Watson, 1934). For misleading features of this version, see J. M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark* (S.C.M., 1957), p.13n.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, ed. H. H. Rowley (Oxford, 1951), pp.xxvii. ff, 48ff.

<sup>6</sup> See C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1935); J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (English tr., S.C.M., 1954).

<sup>7</sup> R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*<sup>2</sup> (Göttingen, 1931), p.6, attributes it to Gunkel.

<sup>8</sup> E. Fascher, quoted by V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, p.12.

<sup>9</sup> *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*, the Bampton Lectures already alluded to.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. in his commentary on Luke (Macmillan, 1930).

<sup>11</sup> In the Westminster Commentary (Methuen, 1925).

<sup>12</sup> *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, already alluded to.

<sup>13</sup> *The Gospel before the Gospels*, already alluded to.

<sup>14</sup> Professor H. Riesenfeld of Uppsala (in a recent address at Oxford, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings*, Mowbray, 1957) is prepared to believe that much of the tradition about the words and deeds of Jesus was actually committed to memory during his ministry.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Framework of the Gospel Narrative' in *E.T.*, xliii.9 (June 1932), reprinted in *New Testament Studies* (Manchester University Press, 1952).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., D. E. Nineham in *Studies in the Gospels* (ed. D. E. Nineham, Blackwell, 1955).

<sup>17</sup> *From Tradition to Gospel*, p.9.

<sup>18</sup> Dr. A. Farrer carries this to what some may think are fanciful extremes (see his *A Study in St Mark*, Dacre Press, 1951, and *St Matthew and St Mark*, Dacre Press, 1954).

<sup>19</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*<sup>3</sup> (London, 1942), pp.13f.

<sup>20</sup> *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (Töpelmann, 1952).

<sup>21</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge and Chicago, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> E.g. P. Schubert, 'The Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings' (*Z.N.T.W.*, Beiheft 20, 1939).

<sup>23</sup> C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Oxford, 1951).

<sup>24</sup> E. Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe* (Lund, 1946).

<sup>25</sup> See O. Roller, *Das Formular der paulinischen Briefe* (Stuttgart, 1933); J. A. Eschlinan in *Revue Biblique* liii (April 1946), pp.185ff; and for criticisms, E. Percy, op. cit., p.10n.

<sup>26</sup> At least the following articles are, however, available: translated by the late J. R. Coates (A. & C. Black), 'Love', 'The Church', 'Sin', 'Righteousness', 'Gnosis', 'Apostleship'; and by various translators (S.C.M.) 'The Servant' of God' (Black), 'Basileia' and 'Lord.'