

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Jesus Christ Yesterday: The Historical Basis of the Christian Faith*

E.C. Blackman

[p.118]

In our study of the gospels it is time that reconstruction of the life of Jesus, and not simply of the kerygma of the Church, was taken in hand seriously again. The recent lives by Stauffer¹ and Bornkamm² are significant. It was perhaps inevitable, during the period when form criticism was perfecting its method and justifying its critical presuppositions, that the obligation to compose a life of Jesus should have less attention drawn to it.³ But now surely we should be prepared to assert that the gospels have been treated long enough as theological productions of the early Church; they should now be handled again as historical sources, even though certain elements in them may have to be labelled "kerygmatic" or "mythological."

The historical element needs re-emphasizing if the total message of the gospel is to be understood and respected, and if legitimate historical criticism is not to become indistinguishable from scepticism. Historical criticism is continually necessary, and without it the existence of a theological faculty is hardly justifiable. The accuracy of many details in the gospel story will continue to be questioned. The difference between the mentality of the first Christians and that of the modern reader in this matter of historical judgment is patent in every chapter, and need not be minimized. But negative judgments on specific passages need not imply scepticism about the basic historical factuality of the gospel narrative. It is advisable to be more positive in affirming this basic historicity—more positive than form criticism on the whole has been.

Form criticism has established itself as a method in gospel study. Its conception of the *Sitz im Leben* is illuminating, and is one way in which the supra-historical concerns in the Christian tradition may be indicated. But it must not be allowed to divert attention from that large element in the gospels which in *Sitz in Leben Jesu*, and not simply *Sitz im Leben der*

[p.119]

ältesten Kirche! It is this element to which this paper is calling attention. We may agree with R. H. Lightfoot that "the historical material is being used for a theological purpose."⁴ Yes, but

* This article incorporates a large part of the author's inaugural lecture as Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis in Emmanuel College, Toronto. It is expected that more material on the same theme will appear in a sequel at a later date [online at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jesus-2_blackman.pdf].

¹ *Jesus: Gestalt and Geschichte* (Berne: Francke, 1957); E.T., *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Knopf, 1960).

² *Jesus von Nazareth* (3rd ed., Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1959); E.T., *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1960).

³ Note Bornkamm's opening sentence: "No one is any longer in the position to write a life of Jesus" (E.T., p. 13). See also p. 53: "The nature of the sources does not permit us to paint a biographical picture of the life of Jesus against the background of the history of his people and his age. Nevertheless, what these sources do yield as regards the historical facts concerning the personality and career of Jesus is not negligible, and demands careful attention." E. J. Goodspeed will have none of such hesitation; see the Preface to his *Life of Jesus* (New York: Harper, 1950).

⁴ *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 16. Lightfoot is more prepared than some form critics to allow for the historical element. But note the following (p. 47): "He [Mark] is not interested in the Lord's biography as such: he is only interested in it insofar as the traditions help him to set forth what he

it is that historical material, not the theological purpose, which now needs to have the floodlight turned on it. Even Bornkamm admits that our task is to find the history in the kerygma. Kerygma and history are inextricable in the gospel narrative, and mutually imply one another. Bornkamm goes so far as to affirm that the gospels, though different from ordinary historical writings, "bring before our eyes the historical person of Jesus with the utmost vividness."⁵ The essential history must be re-affirmed. Not to do so is to provide a basis for a new Gnosticism and Docetism. The rooting in actual events is inescapable if we are dealing with the Christian gospel; and the significance of the historical may not be ignored or minimized. However baffling the problem thereby created for philosophic explication, as the development of Christian theology bears witness, it is vital to assert that the eternal God *entered time*; that the second person of the Trinity *became man*, a particular man, a Jew in fact. There can be no Christ of faith without a Jesus of history; no kerygma to proclaim as good news apart from concrete events of the ministry and passion of Jesus of Nazareth. It ought to be realized more than it is by Christian apologists and dogmatic theologians that though the truth of the gospel cannot be substantiated by historical evidence, the historical basis of Christian affirmations must be constantly kept in view. If there should arise genuine doubt concerning the historicity of the original events proclaimed as saving events in the New Testament, then the gospel itself is disproved.⁶

If the original proclamation that Jesus is present Messiah, and that in him the end of history has taken place, is to be made believable, the historical framework must be indicated; otherwise Jesus remains no more than a Messianic hope or ideal. Now the Christian faith is not based on an ideal,

[p.120]

but on an ideal realized, in actual events. The very first proclamation was fully aware of this, and spoke of historical events leading up to the Resurrection (Act 2:22-24).

Before proceeding to discuss this in more detail the challenge arising out of Rudolph Bultmann's exposition of the New Testament must be briefly considered. No New Testament scholar has done more than Bultmann to maintain the relevance of New Testament presuppositions to the current intellectual debate, and to the whole of man's thought about himself. We must however pronounce his theology in the last resort unsatisfactory, because it remains insensitive to the significance of history. The possibility of eternal truth—the

understands to be the Gospel... The evangelist has incidentally given us some most precious traits of the Jesus of History... because he is still comparatively close to the actual facts. But we shall best understand his book if we regard both it and the little sections by means of which it is so largely built up, as an illustration, exposition and demonstration of the Church's gospel."

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 24. Bornkamm fully admits that the gospels, for all their limitations as historical documents, do yield valuable information about Jesus as a historical figure, who made his mark on his environment and so impressed men that they could not ignore him but had to take up a definite attitude to him. He was a man of his age and yet apart from it. This was his unique "authority" (Mark 1:22), which must be accepted as a characteristic of the historical Jesus as he stood before his contemporaries, even though its full significance carries us beyond the purely historical (cf. pp. 53ff.).

⁶ See T. A. Roberts' acute study, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London: SPCK, 1960), especially the section on "The Historical Element in Christianity," where he writes: "Although the truth of the statement, that 'in Jesus God was reconciling the world unto himself,' is not directly entailed by the truth of the historical statements about the life and ministry of Jesus, nevertheless there is some relation between them, and it is surely this relation which has become at once both the ground of the claim that Christianity is a uniquely historical religion and the source of confusion about the legitimate appeal to history which it makes" (p. 144; italics mine).

transcendent God—being at all involved in historical events is unthinkable for Bultmann. It would mean involvement in the morass of relativism, where no firm standing ground, *i.e.*, no absolute truth or authority, is available. In recoil from this, Bultmann risks denying the distinctive paradox of Christianity, that of the Word made flesh, the eternal in time. He does not argue for eternal truths of reason against contingent truths of history, but for divine, authoritative truth in the biblical sense—access to God as supreme Lord of man, in relation to whom alone man has truth, security and what Bultmann calls *Existenz*, *i.e.*, status as a free person who is more than a product of evolution, a mere fleeting appearance on stream of history.

Bultmann is concerned about a real issue here, and stands out as an opposite extreme from existentialists of the Sartre school. Is man a mere occurrence, he asks, or a true person? Is man simply a specimen of a genus (like animals) or a real individual? The achievement of personality in this sense depends on being brought into this awareness of God, which the Christian gospel is intended to make possible (and which is actually made possible by the function of *preaching*). But being thus confronted with God—or, rather, knowing God as one who quickens man to the status of personal being—does not in Bultmann's experience bring in any consideration of history or time. Historical events are transient and really meaningless, irrelevant as far as man's true existence is concerned. Man achieves true existence *in relation to God*. Thus Bultmann refuses to take history seriously in order *to take God seriously*, and like a typical German makes an "Either-Or" of it! We should reject this "Either-Or," and turn it into a "Both-And." We must think of God and man, not in the indeterminate way in which Bultmann seems to (it is difficult to see what colour and content the divine-human encounter has for him), but maintaining the paradox that God came so close to man in Christ as actually to be *in history and in flesh*.⁷

Bultmann speaks of man's historicity, meaning thereby man's involvement

[p.121]

in a present which is determined by its past and is responsible for its future. This is part of the radical Christian understanding of human nature. Christianity also enables man to attain the freedom he needs, but cannot bestow upon himself, by its proclamation of the grace of God. Man thus becomes a new man, no longer fettered by his past (the "old" man, in the grip of sin). This is the individual application of the message about Christ as the eschatological event, *i.e.*, the divine action setting an end to the "old" world.⁸ A correct approach to the problem of the life of Christ and his participation in human experience would appear to be made possible on these assumptions. But Bultmann disappoints us again; he leaves Christ exclusively on the Godward side of reality, and does not conceive of his truly entering the human sphere.

⁷ Cf. J.McIntyre, *The Christian Doctrine of History* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), p. 79f., where the incarnation is described as God's indetermination of himself with history, and we are warned against conceiving the saving acts of God as mere interventions, as series of points as it were on the line of temporal sequence, after which God completely withdraws and leaves the world to carry on its course. "Once the Incarnation has taken place there is no question of God stepping out of history, or of His contracting out of this once-for-all identification."

⁸ Cf. *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1957) pp. 149-151. "The radical understanding of the historicity of man has appeared in Christianity.... Real autobiography arose for the first time within Christianity. From this origin the understanding of the human being as historical became effective in the west, and it remained vivid even when it was divorced from Christian faith and secularised as in the modern philosophy of existence which finds its extreme form in Sartre" (p. 149).

The eschatological event... is not to be understood as a dramatic cosmic catastrophe, but as happening within history, beginning with the appearance of Jesus Christ, and in continuity with this occurring again and again in history, but *not as the kind of historical development which can be confirmed by any historian*. It becomes an event repeatedly in preaching and faith. Jesus Christ is the eschatological event, not as an established fact of past time but as repeatedly present, as addressing you and me here and now in preaching.⁹

In this passage the words from "beginning with" seem to dissolve away what truth there was in the statement that Christ is "within history." How much—or how little—does this "within" imply? Hardly enough to tally with New Testament testimony about the reality of Christ's human life.¹⁰ Certainly Bultmann is trying to be serious about God's action in Christ for man's redemption (in Bultmann's terms, man's freedom from his past). But this God is apparently not one who really makes contact with the human sphere. There is an implicit docetism in Bultmann's statement.¹¹ He can bring himself to call Christ's coming a historical event, but will not stay to give that its proper significance; he rushes on to describe it as an eschatological or eternal event, not "in" history, but in salvation-history.

This indifference to the life of Jesus as a historical event must be pronounced out of line with the New Testament, and we must join issue with Bultmann here, even if we are prepared to allow his radical attitude to the genuineness of many of the recorded sayings of Jesus, and his view of the resurrection as an experience of the disciples rather than of Jesus himself. We

[p.122]

must affirm more particularly than Bultmann does that Christ had genuine historical experience. There is real history and much actual reminiscence in the gospel narrative underneath the theological motives and interpretation.¹²

We move on to a consideration of this basis in history and of its effect on our understanding of the gospel itself. Dr. C. H. Dodd has familiarized us with the kerygmatic and didactic traditions of the primitive Church. We may also speak of the developing liturgical tradition. All this has been much discussed in recent years. For our present purpose we are calling attention to the historical element in the thought of the first Christians. The publication of the

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151f. Italics mine.

¹⁰ While Bultmann can speak of the appearance of a determinate person in a determinate history, on the whole (and certainly in *History and Eschatology*, the Gifford Lectures which one is entitled to regard as a considered utterance), he leaves the impression of not taking Jesus' earthly existence seriously. Nor is it a sufficient defence to argue that Bultmann's understanding of history is oriented particularly to the historical understanding of existence rather than to the history of the past.

¹¹ This may be the legacy of Lessing and of the notion that eternal truths of reason have no connexion with contingent truths of history and that the realm of the absolute never impinges on the realm of the relative.

¹² Bornkamm is less negative. He can write (*op. cit.*, p. 179): "The story of Jesus does not end with his death. It begins anew with his resurrection." It is true that he adds (p. 180): "The event of Christ's resurrection from the dead, his life and his eternal reign, are things removed from historical scholarship." In general, however, he affirms more definitely than Bultmann that the gospel tradition does give access to the real, original Jesus. Although it is shot through with interpretation and adaptation to the needs of the churches, nevertheless, "*precisely in this way of transmitting and recounting, the person and work of Jesus, in their unmistakable uniqueness and distinctiveness, are shown forth with an originality which again and again far exceeds and disarms even all believing understandings and interpretations. Understood in this way, the primitive tradition of Jesus is brim full of history*" (p. 26; italics mine). Cf. note 5, above.

Gospel of Mark—to say nothing of the “many” referred to in Luke’s opening verse—requires this assumption of a historical interest among the believers. Why should it be assumed that they were devoid of such an interest, or that there was no memory of certain incidents having happened in such and such a way, and had such and such a result, during the ministry of the Lord? It need not be argued that this was a *main* interest of the early believers. But it is quite gratuitous to suppose they were insensitive to Christ’s life and death as plain historical event, as well as act of God.¹³ To admit that a full historical account cannot be given of the life and ministry of Jesus is one thing; but this is not tantamount to arguing that he was not a true historical figure.

Even if we admit that there is truth in K. L. Schmidt’s theory¹⁴ that the framework of chronological and geographical detail in Mark’s Gospel was no more than a construction of Mark’s mind, we still have the contents of the pericopae to evaluate. The question is: Is that content, whether of a particular pericope, or of the whole number in a gospel, theologically motivated, or historically? It may be both, of course. What we are concerned to argue is that there is a sufficient amount of material in the gospels which is historical, even if also capable of theological interpretation; historical in the sense of being in its present form and place in that particular gospel because it actually happened or was spoken so.

[p.123]

The general scheme of Mark is usually envisaged in terms of Jesus’ Messiahship or divine Sonship, gradually emerging from secrecy to common knowledge; and some progression is detected, with the incident at Caesarea Philippi as a kind of centre of gravity in this gospel. Does that gradual revelation in Jesus’ ministry correspond to an actual historical development, or is it, like Schmidt’s “framework,” an invention of Mark’s; in other words, is it literary and theological rather than historical?

This question has to be seriously discussed. My plea is that if we affirm the historical element to be just as probable a reason as the theological, this may be taken as a serious answer. But of course it has to be argued; *a priori* assertion is not enough; *a posteriori* evidence has to be produced.¹⁵ The answer cannot be given as readily as it might have been, say, in 1900, when the two assured results of source criticism seemed to be that at least Mark and the sayings source Q were a reliable basis for reconstructing a modern interpretation of Jesus-Mark for the historical outline and Q for the teaching.¹⁶

When we start handling the gospels critically with a view to reconstructing the life of Jesus, the problem of the “framework” posed by Schmidt, and by form criticism of which he was a

¹³ See T. W. Manson, “The life of Jesus: some tendencies in present-day research,” in W. D. Davies and D. Daube (eds.), *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1956), pp. 211-221. Cf. C. F. D. Moule in A. J. B. Higgins (ed.), *New Testament Essays* (Manchester: University Press, 1959, pp. 165-179); J. Jeremias, *Das Problem des historischen Jesus* (Stuttgart, Calwer Verlag, 1960). Bultmann’s scepticism is modified in more recent scholars who have been influenced by him. Cf. articles by Käsemann (“Das Problem des historischen Jesus,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 1954, pp. 125-153) and Fuchs (“Die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus,” *ibid.*, 1956, pp. 210-229).

¹⁴ Expounded in *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (Berlin: Trowitzsch, 1919).

¹⁵ Cf. C. H. Dodd’s reply to Schmidt, originally published in 1932 in *Expository Times* and reprinted in *New Testament Studies* (Manchester: University Press, 1953), pp. 1-11.

¹⁶ Cf. the use of Mark in F. C. Burkitt, *The Gospel History and its Transmission* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), and of Q in A. Harnack, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1908).

pioneer, has to be squarely faced. Do our reliable data consist of no more than isolated incidents and bits of the teaching of Jesus? Is there no value at all in the "frameworks" which the four evangelists have provided? Consequent upon this, certain other possibilities call with some urgency for consideration.

(a) Can we construct a better framework on our own? Every "life" of Jesus of course attempts this, whether with a conservative or a radical treatment of the gospels. But it is good if such reconstructions carry with them the realization that no modern interpretation can do better than was done in what Dodd has called "the workshop" of the first generation of Christians. Ultimately we must be humble enough to say "No" to this question; we cannot construct a better framework for ourselves, even with the aid of our increasing familiarity with the Judaism contemporary with the New Testament (e.g., that of the Qumran Community).

(b) Can we discern any historical development in the fragments of the life and teaching of Jesus? Probably we may venture a "Yes" to this, along the lines, for example, of Dodd's article referred to above (note 15).

(c) Can we discern any theological development in the fragments?

(d) Can we discern any development in Jesus' own self-consciousness? (This question is closely allied to the previous one.) In other words, is there any central regulative idea which links the units that have come down to us, and creates harmony among them? As an example we might note one which

[p.124]

has come to the fore in New Testament scholarship in this century, namely, the idea of the Kingdom of God, whether "realised" (Otto and Dodd) or "inaugurated" (J. A. T. Robinson)—or, to take earlier examples, Wrede's theory of the Messianic secret in Mark, or Schweitzer's "thoroughgoing eschatology," which he argues is really historical in the sense of being imbedded in the very purpose of Jesus and not a mere literary construction like Wrede's theory, or like the psychologizing of many modern lives.¹⁷

(e) Alternatively, is there in fact no means of inter-relating the fragmentary gospel material? In that case we should have to be content with the kerygma of the first Christian congregations after the resurrection, and with trying to elucidate that, instead of wasting time composing lives of Jesus? This is the course taken by much recent scholarship, but the aim of this paper is to erect a road-block precisely here.

(f) We may ask, finally, whether it is sufficient to speak of the impression of the personality of Jesus, his ego, his uniqueness, and so forth. This is an emphasis made not only in many of the "liberal" lives (especially in Glover's *Jesus of History*) but also most recently by Bornkamm, who speaks of the mastery with which Jesus could dominate a situation.¹⁸ He bestrode his narrow world like a Colossus. The same point has been made in a recent book by Paul

¹⁷ Cf. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (2nd ed., London: A. & C. Black, 1931), p. 335.

¹⁸ Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 58: "Every one of the scenes described in the Gospels reveals Jesus' astounding sovereignty in dealing with situations according to the kind of people he encounters."

Althaus.¹⁹ This factor may not be sufficient in itself. The more proper formulation of the question would be: How much, if anything, is there in this argument?

The radical treatment of Mark which is here considered with reference to K. L. Schmidt's views goes back at least as far as Wrede's *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (1901). There is a vehement paragraph in Schweitzer's *Quest* where he commends Wrede and protests against the way in which so many studies of the life of Jesus fill in, with imaginative guesses and psychological reconstruction of Jesus' "consciousness," what frankly gaps in Mark which ought to be recognized and left as gaps, instead of being filled in or bridged over by some modern fancy. Here we have an adumbration of Schmidt's theory of isolated pericopae; Schweitzer seems to go so far as to say there is not even a framework.

Mark knows nothing of any development in Jesus..., nothing of any conflict in the mind of Jesus between a spiritual and a popular, political Messianic ideal... Thoroughgoing scepticism and thoroughgoing eschatology are compelling theology to read the Marcan text again with simplicity of mind. The simplicity consists in dispensing with the connecting links which it has been accustomed to discover between the sections of the narrative... The material with which it has been usual to solder the sections together into a life of Jesus will not stand the temperature test. Exposed to the cold air of

[p.125]

critical scepticism it cracks; when the furnace of eschatology is heated to a certain point the solderings melt. In both cases the sections all fall apart... The eschatological solution... raises the Marcan account as it stands, with all its disconnectedness and inconsistencies, into genuine history; ... the literary solution... regards the incongruous dogmatic element as interpolated by the earliest Evangelist into the tradition.²⁰

Later he writes: "The tradition is incoherent. The reality is incoherent too, since it was only the secret Messianic self-consciousness of Jesus which created alike the events and their connexion."²¹ Summing up, we may admit that every attempt to hand on the tradition, or compose a life of Jesus, has in some way to make it coherent, or, if you like, impose an interpretative scheme upon it—from Mark in A.D. 65 to the most recent life or commentary. Marls for example (according to Wrede) set it in the frame of his theory of the Messianic secret, nineteenth-century liberalism in the setting of Jesus' concern for the outcast, etc., twentieth-century biblical theology in the overall reference to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The vindication of "the Gospels as historical documents"²² may be called the traditional British position in New Testament criticism. It was consistently exemplified in T. W. Manson's writings, which were never uncritical, and V. Taylor's commentary on Mark (1952) may be quoted as a further example, together with Moule's contribution already referred to, in the volume of New Testament essays in Manson's honour. This is not mere obscurantism and unwillingness to run the risk of being troubled by doubts. The solid point is that though the gospel writers were not historians or biographers they realized that, whatever theological

¹⁹ *The So-called Kerygma and the Historical Jesus* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), pp. 26, 74.

²⁰ Schweitzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 330, 331, 335.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

²² This of course is the title of a sound (though now forgotten) book by V. H. Stanton (3 vols., Cambridge: University Press, 1903-1920).

developments might ensue, the beginning of the good news was not theology or myth or vision or mystic drama, but a life, *i.e.*, history. Their business was to make this clear to the readers they hoped to find inside and outside the churches.²³ Being Christians and Jews (apart from Luke) they knew that theology started in history, and needs to be constantly referred back to its historic roots. The Redeemer was not an aeon, or idea, but a man—not an abstract conception like immortality or socialism or evolution, but a human being, Jesus ben Joseph of Nazareth, 7 B.C.—A.D. 30. Not Christ only, but Jesus.

The gospels as we have them contain mythology, which according to Bultmann has to be detached (at whatever risk of spoiling the pattern in which it is closely interwoven) from the essential truth of the gospel if that is to find credence in the modern world. The gospels also contain legendary accretions (e.g., the catching of the fish with the stater in its mouth [Matt. 17:21-24] or the birth stories), which according to liberals can be stripped away. But however much stripping down is done in conformity with critical presuppositions, there is a central figure at the heart of it all who is real and

[p.126]

no myth, no demigod, but the Jesus of history. The gospels, though not biographies, and though containing theology and even mythology, remain in the last analysis works dealing with history rather than with myth, speculation, or imagination.²⁴

What then may be reckoned as firm historical ground? Where do we strike the bedrock of actual event and experience, as distinct from theological reflection and missionary adaptation? Generally we may rely on the Marcan outline,²⁵ allowing to K. L. Schmidt and others that some of it may be Mark's invention, admitting also that chronology was far from being Mark's primary concern. Mark 3:6, for example, appears chronologically impossible (if the events of chapter 3 belong to a relatively early stage of Jesus' ministry), but reveals a tendency to conceive the whole course of events as a passion narrative, overshadowed by the cross, for which there are parallels outside Mark (e.g., Luke 9:51; 13:31-3; and the Johannine motif of Christ's "hour"). In spite of this, however, I value Mark's account as providing a substantial amount of real information about how the Lord's work developed. I would appeal to the fact that Matthew makes no significant alterations in the Marcan outline. Luke and John of course do, and it is not to be assumed that they are wrong and Mark always right. I accept Taylor's assessment of the historical reliability of Mark as discussed in his recent major commentary (pp. 145-149). On the other side I must express suspicion of the treatment of

²³ Mark and Matthew probably wrote for Christian readers, Luke and John for non-Christians.

²⁴ John Knox may be cited in support of this statement. He faces the intellectual difficulties of our sources with as vigorous a frankness as Bultmann, and yet insists firmly on the essential historicity, for all his admissions of uncertainty about detail. Cf. *Jesus, Lord and Christ* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 25: "We can be surer of the fact of his [Christ's] greatness than of the qualities of character in which it consisted." P. Althaus argues (*op. cit.*, pp. 25ff.) that though the gospels are not primarily historical sources they are so secondarily, and that it must be recognized that the kerygma itself points back to historical events which we must examine as the setting of divine action, and not dismiss as a hopeless quest or one which is not a proper object of theological inquiry.

²⁵ As used, e.g., by F. C. Burkitt in *The Gospel History and its Transmission*, and in one of his last books, *Jesus Christ: An Historical Outline* (London: Blackie, 1932), where he is still prepared to treat Mark not only as the source of the other Synoptics but as "a serious historical document in itself" (p. v). Goodspeed also assumes the historical reliability of Mark in his *Life of Jesus*. F. C. Grant in *The Earliest Gospel* (New York-Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943), p. 50f., regards Mark's outline as the original kerygma; the whole discussion (pp. 34-88) is based on a positive appreciation of form criticism.

Mark by Dr. A. M. Farrer, whose new theological positivism throws the door to wide open to pure fancy and pattern-weaving.²⁶

Among the things that impress me about Mark are details like Mark 4:36, 38; 14:51-2; 15:21. These have no particular point, and are to be interpreted neither as tendentious nor as products of the vivid imagination supposedly characteristic of Mark. The simplest explanation is that they were in the tradition Mark drew upon, and that they got into the tradition

[p.127]

because it happened like that on the original occasion. These details are not important and can well be omitted, as they were by the two later Synoptic writers. But they give us extra reason to believe that Mark was handling traditional material in which such details were already imbedded; in other words, we have here the element of genuine reminiscence. Mark did not invent these little touches; he is not a literary artist, like Luke. He reproduced the source before him, and these sources give signs of the original eyewitness. We should give some weight also to the consideration that there are many passages where more detail might have been expected (many paradigms, for example); the absence of detail is conspicuous, and redounds to the credit of Mark's honesty.²⁷

On the question of whether this eyewitness material or reminiscence is Petrine tradition underlying Mark, I offer no opinion. The view that Peter was Mark's authority dates from the second century, and the internal evidence is not conclusive. Some pericopae may plausibly be interpreted as derived from Peter, notably the account of the healing of his mother-in-law (1:29-31).²⁸ But there is not enough eyewitness material that is stamped with Peter's characteristics to prove that the tradition is correct.

My case does not rest, however, on the presence of eye-witness material, whether this is ascribed to Peter or to any other roving reporter among Christians of the first generation. I am appealing to the general impression of historical concern given by Mark and by the Synoptics as a whole. This may be regarded as too a priori an argument. But it strikes me as possessing a weight of its own, and as distinguishable from pure subjectivism. As Coleridge said in his famous discussion of the meaning of inspiration, it is something that "fends me." I may refer also to the opening words of the Gospel of Luke, which certainly profess historical interest and concern, greater than that of Luke's predecessors, in this matter of gospel composition. The opening verses of Luke 3 reveal a concern to relate the events of Jesus' life to their setting in world history as well as in Jewish history. This distinguishes Luke from the other evangelists, even if it does not put him in a category where comparison is possible with the great historians of antiquity. But it also shows Luke's awareness that the salvation-history concerning Jesus of Nazareth is a part of history as a whole. In this Luke is not to be completely differentiated from his fellow evangelists. All of them are conscious of being reporters of real events played out by a real historical person. For all their effort to create a

²⁶ Cf. *A Study in St. Mark* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1951), p. 7: "If we allow the evangelist to tell us his own story in his own 'theological' or 'symbolical' way, and do not interpose with premature questions based on our own ideas of historical enquiry, we may be able to discern a genuine history which is communicated to us through the symbolism and not in defiance of it."

²⁷ On all this see Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 139f.

²⁸ Even Lightfoot, following C. H. Turner, admits that "historically we stand here on firm ground" (*op. cit.*, p. 22).

conviction about that person,²⁹ and to testify to the divine power that operated through him, they are essentially reporters, not free to invent or falsify the data which the tradition of their churches presented as having happened in Galilee and Judaea a generation earlier.

© 1961 E.C. Blackman, Reproduced by kind permission of Mr Chris Blackman.

Prepared for the Web in November 2008 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

²⁹ Cf. John 20:31.