

# 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 *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

Paul Merkley

---

## The Gospels as Historical Testimony

---

---

*Theologians sometimes appear to discuss matters of history in ignorance of the understanding of history held by historians. Professor Paul Merkley of the Department of History at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, offers some judicious comments on the nature of the Gospels as historical testimony from the standpoint of a historian.*

I once attended a public debate at a University on the theme, 'The Resurrection of Jesus: Myth or reality?' The New Testament scholar on the panel (the one confessional Christian in the group of five) prefaced his theological statement with the assertion that he assumed the historical integrity of the evidences for the resurrection, but that he did not feel professionally competent (being a theologian, and not an historian, nor a philosopher of history) to explain what an historian might say about the normal tests for 'proving' historical reliability. This was, perhaps, a correct position for him to take—in the context of an academic debate. However, the philosophers on the panel took immediate advantage of the theologian's modesty, re-interpreting what he had said as a repudiation of the 'historicity' of the New Testament texts in question. 'None of the writers of the Gospels, of Acts, of the Epistles, claimed to be writing "history",' said one. 'The canons of historical science, as we know them today, were developed in the nineteenth century,' said another, 'and from this it follows that these first-century sources are not historical sources'. 'These materials are essentially "mythical", "legendary", "poetical", "protohistorical", "primitive", "naive"; but infinitely "human", "moving", "sincere",' said they all, falling over one another in their condescension. But, 'Notice the many contradictions in the stories. Notice how they fail to explain this detail, that detail . . .' 'These events' (said one) 'do not belong in history books, in the company of, say, . . .'

I knew instantly what the example was going to be. I have been through debates like this one before. I have read the current philosophers of history on this theme, and I have heard the current theologians as they wrestle with this theme; and the example is always the same: '. . . Caesar crossing the Rubicon!'

**'Crossing-the-Rubicon'**

The immediate source of this conventional employment of *Caesar-crossing-the-Rubicon* as the model of the securely founded historical fact is R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History*.<sup>1</sup> It is the one book every English-speaking student of philosophy of history has read; and on pages 213ff. *Caesar-crossing-the-Rubicon* is the centre-piece of what is for many the classic analysis of the problems of historical epistemology (that is, how we know what we know about the past.)

But there could hardly be a worse choice as the standard of reliability of historical evidence. And the fact that it has become conventional to place this event in tandem with the matter of the resurrection presents a perfect occasion for reflecting on the extent to which the matter of historical reliability has become a business of rumour rather than of actual experience.

The fact is that no one even knows where the Rubicon river is!<sup>2</sup> (In contrast, the site of the crucifixion and the gravesite of Jesus have never been really in doubt, having been pointed out continuously to visitors since the day of the events in question.)<sup>3</sup> Any one of several widely-separated streams might have been the actual frontier between Caesar's province and Italy. There are no first-hand testimonies to Caesar's having crossed the Rubicon (wherever it was). Caesar himself makes no mention in his memoirs of crossing any river. Four historians belonging to the next two or three generations do mention a Rubicon River, and claim that Caesar crossed it. They are: Velleius Paterculus (c.19 BC–c.30 AD); Plutarch (c.46–120 AD); Suetonius (75–160); and Appian (second century.) All of these evidently depended on the one published eye-witness account, that of Asinius Pollio (76 BC–c.4 AD)—which account has disappeared without a trace. No manuscript copies for any of these secondary sources is to be found earlier than several hundred years after their composition. This contrasts dramatically with the situation with respect to the New Testament documents. Reliable and nearly-complete manuscripts of the New Testament are extant from the mid-fourth century, while there are fragments of such quantity, quality and variety from as far back as the mid-second century as to make it possible for us to say that 'the interval between the dates of the original composition

<sup>1</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York, 1956.)

<sup>2</sup> For what follows see, Matthias Gelzer, *Caesar: Politician and Statesman* (Oxford, 1968), 193–4; and M. Cary, *A History of Rome* (London, 1954), 396.

<sup>3</sup> See, *inter alia*: Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament* (Princeton, 1969); and Eugene Hoade, *Guide to the Holy Land* Tenth edition, 1979 (Jerusalem, 1979.)

and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.<sup>4</sup>

Identification of the crossing of the Rubicon with the momentous and irreversible decision to seize authority over the empire is explicit in Plutarch—from whom, evidently, we get the notion of this event as the type of all momentous decisions in history:

When he came to the river Rubicon, which parts Gaul within the Alps from the rest of Italy, his thoughts began to work. Now he was just entering upon the danger, and he wavered much in his mind, when he considered the greatness of the enterprise into which he was throwing himself. He checked his course and ordered a halt, while he revolved within himself, and often changed his opinion, one way and the other, without speaking a word. This was when his purpose fluctuated most.<sup>5</sup>

Plutarch says that Caesar uttered a certain set of words in Greek before stepping towards the Rubicon; Suetonius has him speaking a rather different set of words—in Latin. Suetonius says that ‘an apparition of superhuman size and beauty was sitting on the river bank, playing a reed pipe,’ and that it was this ‘sign’ that persuaded Caesar to cross the Rubicon.<sup>6</sup> Plutarch doesn’t mention this or any other apparition. Caesar, as already noted, has nothing to say about any of this; and his is the only surviving eyewitness account. What Asinius Pollio wrote, we have no way of knowing.

(Incidentally: neither Collingwood nor any other philosopher of history I have ever read ever takes any account of the apparitions mentioned by Suetonius when ‘explaining’ what Caesar was doing—even though this is the only place in the actual documents where anybody offers a *specific* explanation for this *specific* decision! This means that they have entirely bypassed the sources in their attribution of motive for these events. They are entitled of course to dismiss this as an implausible motive for such a great deed. But when they do so they are appealing to their own philosophy and not to historical evidence.)

Now, we should be willing to accept that Caesar crossed a frontier on the way back to Rome from his province in Gaul. A

---

<sup>4</sup> Frederic Kenyon, *The Bible and Archeology* (New York, 1940), 288.

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Caesar*, 32:7.

<sup>6</sup> Suetonius, *Julius Caesar*, 32.

good date (though conjectural) is January 10, 49 BC. And there is nothing much wrong with calling this event '*Caesar-crossing-the-Rubicon.*' With that deed Caesar committed himself to civil war, and many profound consequences have followed, with which we still live. But details of the sort that would make crossing the Rubicon a part of our understanding of Caesar and of these consequences do not exist. It is fantasy to suggest, as Collingwood does, that we can re-think Caesar's thoughts on this occasion. We have no evidence for his thoughts (unless it is in the report of Suetonius, which Collingwood never acknowledges) and none for other circumstances of the occasion. But then, many colourful episodes which are confidently reported in the history-books are of this sort; and the damage that would follow from discrediting their 'historicity' would not, after all, be very serious.

But it is an altogether different sort of case with the history of the risen Christ. Unless we have eye-witness testimonies to that event, and unless we trust them, we have no right to cling to the story of the risen Christ and to the ineffable consequences that follow for our singular lives, and for all men, and for the cosmos too!

### **Two frontiers: a river and a tomb**

'Behold the hour comes, yea is come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone . . . In the world [the Greek reads, 'the cosmos'] ye have tribulation but be of good cheer; I have overcome the cosmos!' (Jn. 16:32-33) Anticipating as he could, having the perspective of the eternal God on events that, from his earthly-human perspective were yet to come!—his conquest of death, and of all the demonic realities that prevent the reconciliation of man to man, and of man to nature, and of man-and-nature to God, he announced his victory over the cosmos. His disciples did not understand. But they lived to see the day that he went unresisting to death. Others (Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus—not of the Twelve) saw his body into the tomb, and overlaid it, to cover the shame of its inevitable decay with sixty pounds of myrrh and aloes. And then, a huge rock was set to seal the tomb, and seals to seal the rock, and a guard of Roman soldiers posted, on pain of death, to prevent any and all possibility of mischief.

Now, to return to the Rubicon. No one today that I know of has invested anything in Suetonius' story about the apparition. Most of us have our minds made up about that sort of possibility, our views about the plausibility of such an occurrence being formed

by reading books whose subject matter is general religious possibility, comparative religion, psychology of religion, religious anthropology, *etc.* And in any case, I am not forced (as an historian) to declare an interest in this particular possibility, given that this story is not seconded by the story in Plutarch. So I am off the hook there.

But there is no authority and no guidance (in terms of general religious possibility) to assist me in the matter of the empty tomb. Nobody claims—least of all do Christians claim!—that the event was an instance of a general religious possibility.

The irreducibly essential notion in the case of Caesar crossing the Rubicon is a frontier of some kind; this Caesar crossed, thus initiating a civil war. Since the evidence which purports to give some character to the frontier itself (the Rubicon) is useless, we say: 'Assume it. It does not matter. Make a leap of faith! As for the apparition, that is optional: the evidence is not good.' The Rubicon is thus left standing as a *notion*—a valuable *notion*. That is all it is. But that is all, for this purpose, that we need.

But the thing at issue in the matter of the empty tomb is the empty tomb. A 'notion' like the Rubicon will not serve. The 'historicity' of the frontier itself is the thing at issue. The eye-witnesses claim that the unique Son of the unique God rose as the first (so far, the unique) member of our human race to enter into eternal life. There is no way that we could have views on the general possibilities governing the matters said to be at issue there. Hence, we are absolutely dependent on the eye-witness accounts. These witnesses have our entire faith in their hands. If they are deceived, or if they are lying to us, then (as Martin Luther put it) we are doomed.

If we see some reason not to believe these alleged eye-witnesses, we can call them liars or judge that they were deceived. But we cannot avoid the issue by saying that the 'historicity' of the matter is an optional notion.

### Testimonies to the empty tomb

But, thank God, we have eyewitness testimonies to the empty tomb. But then, when we say just that, we immediately see how circular the situation is: We *do* believe these unique things done by the unique God because we have unique human eyewitness accounts to give warrant to our belief. If we knew *a priori* that the event was probably true, we could indulge in an act of faith—like the one which keeps *Caesar-crossing-the-Rubicon* in place in the history books.

We must put out of our heads entirely the modern-scholarly chauvinism that says that the rules of historical evidence were invented in the nineteenth century. They were well established in Graeco-Roman practice centuries before the Christian era. They are clearly presumed in the statement of purpose which forms the prologue to the Gospel of Luke (i.e., Lk. 1:1-4).

There is no event, public or private, in the history of the world for which there is eyewitness testimony more compelling than that for the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning. Here are a few essentials of the case:

(1). the locale, the day, the time,—everything about the setting is identified precisely—and this is done in writing and addressed to an audience composed largely of persons alive at the time of the alleged event, and many of them within walking distance of the alleged situation.

(2). all the stories about the empty tomb and the subsequent appearances of the risen Lord are told by the alleged eyewitnesses themselves (John, Matthew), or are being reported by persons who claim to have them directly from the eyewitnesses (Peter from Mary; Mark from Peter; Luke from Peter and others; Paul from Peter and others).<sup>7</sup>

(3). the eyewitness accounts are not uniform—as follows logically from the circumstance that the different eyewitnesses arrive at different times (some go away and then return); and there is a variety of combinations of witnesses.

There is thus a variety of detail—parts of some testimonies that are difficult to reconcile with parts of others, but nothing in any testimony that flatly contradicts anything in any other testimony. The variety in content, taken together with the wide range of responses of the several characters to the same alleged events absolutely undercuts the stupid theory that the disciples got together and made the whole thing up. If they had done that, we would have an official story as tidy and as consistent in detail as the official story on the other side.

---

<sup>7</sup> This may seem short shrift for a theme upon which there stands a library of specialized academic literature. Here I accept the traditional attributions of authorship and witness behind the four Gospels as they are found in Eusebius (*History of the Early Church* II:15, III:24 and 39.) Any challenge to these traditional attributions must be strong enough to override the unanimous tradition of the early Church, for which there is documentary support too strong to admit of serious doubt. Scholarly-academic objections to these attributions, originating in the early-Nineteenth century, are various but contradictory, and none, taken singly, has won the undivided allegiance of the scholars. An outsider to the guild, without specialized investment in its dynastic-scribal rivalries, is obliged to apply Occam's razor to the question. And that test clearly favours the traditional attributions.

From those who don't like the official story from the Jewish and Roman authorities, but who cannot bring themselves to call the eyewitnesses liars or deceived, we get no end of preposterous theories. (It was dark; they went to the wrong tomb. Jesus 'swooned', recovered, wandered away. The execution itself was a charade. The authorities took the body.) People who need opportunities to exercise creative imagination in lieu of historical criticism, would be better off turning these gifts to *Caesar-crossing-the-Rubicon*, where there is no embarrassing firsthand testimony, none at all, to cramp their style.

But no one has ever done this—to my knowledge.

Why?

I think it is because we all want to believe that Caesar crossed that frontier. It seems to be required by everything that follows. Students of history who are aware of the frailty of the testimony (the silly apparition; the confusion about Caesar's alleged words; the absence of reference in Caesar's own memoirs) are content to press on and pretend not to notice. Let us just assume that the usual laws of reality require that he and his army crossed a more or less standard size stream in a more or less routine way, and that it was a frontier, and that Caesar's crossing it set in motion irreversible effects of the greatest historical importance.

But in precisely the same sense it is required that Jesus passed that frontier of which the Easter story speaks. The difference is, of course, that here (at the tomb) we cannot simply guess at or assume the means and the circumstances (as we can at the river). We are forced to face the eyewitnesses down. But many people will do anything rather than look those eyewitnesses in the eye. It is not the paucity of evidence that forces people to these hare-brained fantasies in explanation of the empty tomb. It is rather the embarrassing fullness, and the healthy variety of it.

### The Gospels as historical testimonies

The Gospels were written by persons fully respectful of the conventions governing the presentation of historical testimonies to an audience of contemporaries who would assume these conventions as they read these testimonies.<sup>8</sup> This is shown by their care in providing specific references to the best-known public events of the time. That these points of synchronism are not always as helpful to us as they were to the contemporaries is owing to the

---

<sup>8</sup> I recommend as a succinct, scholarly presentation of the facts of this case: F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Fifth edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1978.)



lack of surviving documentation from the *public* side of the record. But where such materials do exist, they bear out in every case the deliberateness of the gospel-writers in providing references to place and to time which could be tested by living contemporaries. It is impossible to miss the dogged way in which they provide for the reader's need to see these as events like other events, for which there were thousands of living eye-witnesses. Quite apart from the abundant specific references to time and locale which we can see in these texts, there must be countless specific allusions that are of necessity lost on us. It happens that we are living in an age of accelerating improvements in techniques of archaeology and unprecedented opportunities for archeological research. This work brings to light constantly new evidences of specific allusions to time, locale, and other details of realistic setting.

There can be no compromising or qualifying this matter of the historical character of the gospel accounts. It matters absolutely that the gospels are of the highest standard of historical reliability. Yet it must be noted that it amounts to dogma within the company of academic philosophy of history today that one cannot responsibly speak in the same breath of historical testimonies on this side and that side of the establishment of the modern academic discipline of history. It is simply posited that the changes in the manner and spirit of historiography that began in the age of Ranke (1795–1856) have revolutionized the way in which men judge the truth and falsity of statements made about the events of the past. This dogma is linked to that other dogma: that 'modern science' brought into the world a whole new set of qualifications for judging between true and false statements. It is this 'scientific understanding' that releases us from the control of the witnesses of past events. Marc Bloch wrote: 'We [the heirs of nineteenth-century historical science] have acquired the right of disbelief, because we understand, better than in the past, when and why we ought to disbelieve'.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the decade of the 1960s,<sup>10</sup> the pre-eminent names in this field of New Testament hermeneutics were E. Käsemann, G. Ebeling, W. Pannenberg, G. Bornkamm and James M.

<sup>9</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester, 1954), 135.

<sup>10</sup> See my article, 'New Quests for Old: One Historian's View of a Bad Bargain' *Canadian Journal of Theology* XVI: 3 and 4 (1970), 203–218. I admit to being much less familiar with the academic literature appearing on this subject since 1970. I have sampled enough of it to feel confident that, while the names of the principal scholars have changed and many new and formidable words have been coined the issues have not changed at all.

Robinson.<sup>11</sup> The principal authors in this field were all epigoni of the German theologian, Rudolf Bultmann. They start where Bultmann starts: disqualifying the gospels as historical testimonies in anything like the normal sense, insisting indeed that their authors could never have had anything like the motives of historians, since their purpose was to 'proclaim' certain meanings derived from certain absolutely unique events.

The logic runs something like this. The story the gospel-writers had to tell centred on the resurrection—an absolutely unique event. But precisely because it was absolutely unique it could not be spoken of in historical terms, since to speak of events historically means *explaining* them in terms of the class of events to which they belong. Being in the grip of the effects of their experience of the resurrection, the witnesses who told the stories which appear in the gospels, recalled everything that had happened previously as belonging already to that world beyond this world where the limitations of our natural life will be (or, in the light of the resurrection, already *are*) overcome. They could not, in these circumstances, be expected to care about 'historical' exactitude. What they wanted to convey to us was the marvellous and extraordinary transhistorical (eternal) dimension in which all of what happened really happened. Thus, what mattered was not what the eye saw (unassisted by faith) but what things really meant ('in the light of the Easter-faith').

A non-historian and a non-believer, the literary critic Frank Kermode, provides a plain man's paraphrase of these theologians' case, stripped of the jargon of the guild: the New Testament accounts are 'free narrative inventions', 'fictions inserted into a history-like record on a later consideration of what ought properly to have occurred'.<sup>12</sup>

Thus (these theologians say) the models that must be consulted before considering the stories which the gospels tell are not any of those known to historians past or present, but rather the models of mythology. Hence, the primary task of hermeneutics is 'demythologizing'.

<sup>11</sup> Convenient summaries of their arguments are in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, jr. (eds.), *New Frontiers in Theology* vol. III: *Theology as History* (New York, 1967); Carl E. Braaten, *New Directions in Theology Today* vol. II: *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia, 1966); and John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing* (London, 1960.)

<sup>12</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Deciphering the Big Book: a review of Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* [and other books], *New York Review of Books*, June 29, 1978, 39-42.

### The character of historical testimony

The first step in coming to grips with the logic of this school of hermeneutics is to recognize that it begins by assuming that a verdict has already been handed down from academic philosophy about the limits of historical knowledge. Whether or not our theologian directly alludes to the literature of academic philosophy of history, the fact is that Bultmannites and post-Bultmannites alike accept absolutely the definitions of history's authority conventionally provided in that literature. In this company, the overriding preoccupation for at least a half-century has been with the problem of the content and nature of 'historical explanation'.<sup>13</sup> Following David Hume, academic philosophers, in the British tradition have borne down doggedly on the proposition that the historian's purpose is to *explain* a series of events to which he is testifying. To do this, he must depend on generally-accredited patterns of recurrence *in nature*. His goal, as an historian, is to be believed; and, to be believed, one must be seen to be *explaining* things in terms of what we all accept to be the laws governing all occurrences of the kind in question. Historical explanation is thus (in the philosophers' vocabulary) 'nomological': that is, it proceeds by appeal to well-accredited *laws* of human and/or natural behaviour. Historical understanding is (in this view) dependent entirely on scientific understanding. The various branches of science determine the limits of possibility in life. The historian decides which combination of specific sciences is required for an adequate description of the event in question; but the authority of the science which is called into the examination of a question is absolute. It is axiomatic, in this camp, that nothing that the source says about a particular event can have the authority to contradict what science *knows* to be

<sup>13</sup> A summary of the unutterably tedious 'debate' on this, the favourite theme of contemporary academic philosophy of history, is the article: 'Historical Explanation', by Rudolph Weingartner, in P. Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, 1967), volume 4, pp. 7-12. To understand what is at stake, this article should be read in tandem with the article, 'Explanation in Science', by Jaegwon Kim, *loc. cit.*, volume 3, pp. 159-163.

Some of the prestigious texts figuring in this debate are: W. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (London, 1957.)

Carl G. Hempel and Paul Oppenheim, 'Studies in the Logic of Explanation', *Philosophy of Science*, volume 15 (1948), 135-175.

Sidney Hook (ed.), *Philosophy and History: A Symposium* (New York, 1963.)

R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946.)

Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (Oxford, 1952.)

Morton White, 'Historical Explanation', *Mind*, Volume 52 (1943).

W. H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (New York, 1958.)

possible with respect to events of the kind in question. Knowledge of what is and is not possible is the province of the science which deals with events of the kind in question; and it is this knowledge that frees us from the control of the witnesses of past events, giving us the key we need to isolate that portion (if any) of their testimonies which is historically possible.

This logic has dominated academic-philosophical discussion of 'historical explanation' since at least the eighteenth-century. Its classic expression (as already noted) is generally regarded to be by David Hume.<sup>14</sup> The possibility of recommending this procedure as Christian theology occurred later to David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874),<sup>15</sup> gaining ground steadily until it became a pillar of liberal-Protestant theology prior to the First World War.

Conscious of these reigning dogmas of academic philosophy of history (that all explanation is nomological; that the measure of all factual truth comes from the empirical sciences; and that history, which deals with particular and non-repeatable events, is least fit to yield true statements of the quality required by science); tantalized by the modernist's doctrine that the march of science gives to moderns an altogether unprecedented 'right of disbelief'; but *finally, alarmed* at the outcome for faith if the facts of the gospel are left to stand in the company of other 'merely historical' truths—the liberal theologians have insisted that the gospels do not belong in the category of historical documents at all. They are proclamations (*kerygma*) of truths too large for history to retail. The historical foundations of the events of the gospels are, at most, of marginal concern—some say irrelevant. The more pious of these scholars speak of the *kerygma* as bursting out of the bounds of historical methodology as Christ burst the bonds of death.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Sections X and XI, 'Of Miracles', in his *Enquiry of Human Understanding* (1748).

<sup>15</sup> His *Das Leben Jesu*, 1835; translated into English as, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 1848.

<sup>16</sup> A particularly sedulous application of the Bultmannian hermeneutics is R. R. Niebuhr's *Resurrection and Historical Reason* (New York, 1957). Here we are told that the gospel writers were not the least interested in 'mere facticity'—or 'happenedness' (26) (a level of reality apparently akin, but not identical to 'thrownness into existence' (55).) Another spokesman of this school tells us that we should not 'wish to fall back into the biographical approach, with its interest in chronology, topography, and psychology . . . [recognizing that we are] not in a position to lay bare the facts of history to give a clear description of what actually happened . . . Anyway that would be beside the point'. (Braaten, 69–70.) And another: '. . . the *kerygma* calls for a total encounter with the person of Jesus, in which the self is put in radical decision. Therefore it can only regard as illegitimate a scholarly career which

Were it not for the fact that this style of hermeneutics is still the dominant one in the departments of theology, one would feel bound to apologize for getting down on all fours with it, as we have done. But to speak of the premises of our Christian knowledge of history (as we are doing here) without taking into account the present state of discussion on this point among the academic theologians might seem irresponsible.

The fact remains that the authority of the gospel testimonies is necessarily vulnerable in controversy—and this *not* because there is anything lacking in their credentials as historical testimonies, but precisely because authentic historical testimony is *by nature* the most vulnerable of all kinds of authority. The present point, however, is that we cannot deal fairly with the question of the *relative* credibility of these particular testimonies if the theologians will not allow that they are even *meant to be* historical testimonies. We do not claim that the testimonies of the gospel-writers are absolutely compelling. No historical testimonies are. But there is no hope of making any case for the gospels at all if we deny that the authors even meant them to be taken seriously as historical statements.

The project of denigrating the 'historical' seriousness of the gospel-writers has its beginnings in D. F. Strauss, at a time when European scholarship was generally dazzled by the accomplishments of the new schools of academic history deriving from Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), and when no end of fantastic judgement was permitted regarding the literature and faith of the 'pre-scientific past', provided there was a generous amount of solemn talk about *myth* to fill in the great spaces of ignorance which then existed regarding the history of the ancient world. The Bultmannian phase of this exercise came long after these great spaces had begun to be filled by the discoveries of modern archaeology and philology;<sup>17</sup> by which time, however, the habit

---

becomes in the long run no more than a distracting fascination with historical details about Jesus, details which may occupy the memory, move the emotions, prod the conscience, or stimulate the intellect, but fail to put the self in radical decision' (Robinson, *A New Quest . . .*, 47.)

It should not be difficult for anyone not yet carried beyond the point of no-return by over-exposure to this sort of theological baffle-gab to see why such scholars might put little stock in anything which promises 'merely' to 'occupy the memory, move the emotions, prod the conscience [and] stimulate the intellect'!

<sup>17</sup> A valuable summary is W. F. Albright, 'Judaism, The Ancient Near East, and The Origins of Christianity', in N. F. Cantor (ed.), *Perspectives on the European Past: Conversations with Historians* (New York, 1971), Part I, pp. 38–62; or, at greater length, Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (New York, 1957), Chapter 1: 'New Horizons in History', 25–82.

of patronizing the gospels (and the Biblical texts generally) as documents of little historical value had become so deeply ingrained among the academic theologians as to seem irreversible. Not coincidentally, Rudolf Bultmann was a declared admirer of Martin Heidegger's philosophy;<sup>18</sup> Bultmann's dogmas took hold in the hour of greatest prestige of European existentialist philosophy, the school of philosophy most hostile to the case for meaning in history. At the same time, philosophy of history in the English-language universities was a province of the analytical school, which was totally preoccupied with the red-herring of 'explanation' and ruminations on the 'nomological model'. Academic historians, meanwhile, had nothing to offer to the question of the historical credentials of the gospels, having farmed-out these responsibilities to the guild of academic philosophy.

By outspending the more orthodox scholars in sheer manic energy, and depending on the low prestige of historical knowledge in academic philosophy and theology, and while the academic historians were out to lunch, the Bultmannites were able to achieve the standing of conventional truth for the notion that the New Testament documents were the very opposite of what their authors claim in every line: namely, historical documents. It was also crucial to this victory that these conclusions suited the expectations of secularism, and thus were best fitted to continue the lease of faculties of theology within the house of liberal learning.

### **The rights of historical testimony**

Here we are at the still point of the story of the prestige of history in our civilization. Our answer to the question of the historical foundation of our creed must control our answer to the question of the character of historical authority in general.

What are the rights of historical testimony *vis-à-vis* other kinds of knowledge? What is historical knowledge? How do we recognize it when we meet it? What must a testimony have to qualify as historical evidence? What do its witnesses owe to us? What do we owe to their testimonies?

It is an inescapable fact that the modern sciences have given us a fuller description of what routinely happens in the world—that is, a clearer understanding of the regular processes that underlie

---

<sup>18</sup> Wm. Nicholls, *The Pelican Guide to Theology*, Volume One (Harmondsworth, 1969), Chapter Three; 'Bultmann's Existentialist Theology', (esp. 155f.); and H. Zahrnt, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1969), (esp. 222f.)

routine happenings in the world. But it is an evasion of the challenge which history always presents to say that these accomplishments have given us a new 'right of disbelief'. The contemporaries of the writers of the gospels fully understood, for example, that virgins did not conceive and bear sons. They were not an iota more or less free than we are to disbelieve this claim with respect to the child Jesus (as it is made in *Matthew* and *Luke*.) (Is it really necessary to point out that this presumption is the basis of Joseph's behaviour in Mt. 1:18-25?) If they believed it nonetheless it was because they were persuaded of the authority of the witnesses to the life of Jesus to accept what they otherwise 'knew' to be impossible. Such a fact as this contradicted the 'facts of life', for them no less than for us. All the undoubted advance that the sciences have made in describing the processes involved in the conception of new human lives neither adds to nor subtracts from the simplicity of the issue involved. There are today devout gynaecologists who confess without reservation the dogma of the virgin birth, and there are masses of scientific illiterates who reject it.

The question is this: on what basis do we generally believe what a historical testimony tells us?

The answer is: we believe when and insofar as we have confidence in the author of the testimony.

The issue of the reliability of an historical witness is *absolutely* unrelated to whether or not the witness can *explain* what he has witnessed. The witness may or may not have an explanation for the event. We may have to supply our own explanation. Frequently we do find ourselves supplying better explanation, after the fact. But for the actual occurrence of the event we depend absolutely on testimony of people who were there—and who may be lying to us. The 'facticity' of the event owes nothing to the plausibility (to us) of any *explanation* that the alleged witness may offer. His credentials as a witness come down to these two: (a). was he there? and (b). would he lie to us (or could he have been deceived?)

There is (as already noted) a mountain of the dullest academic literature ever conceived reared on the absurd proposition that it is the daily work of historians to process received explanations of past events into newer works which embody better explanations of the same events. In truth, the work of historians is not to explain but to *tell* the past. They depend for this work upon prior tellers of the past, and ultimately upon original witnesses—who may or may not have had explanations, but who certainly had something to *tell*. Whether or not we accept what we are told

along this chain of recitations turns not on the cogency of the explanations, but on the credentials of the witnesses.

A man might lay claim to having seen a thoroughly routine event, so that nothing in his story presents any difficulties for our powers of explanation. Yet he might be lying about having seen the event. Perhaps the event never happened. The fact that the 'witness' never claims any knowledge of any possibility that violates the patterns of regularity we are accustomed to is of no help to us in judging his qualifications as a witness. These we decide on other grounds. If we are persuaded that our witness would not lie to us, we have no 'right of disbelief', deriving from our knowledge of what routinely happens in life, to interpose between his testimony and ours. If we absolutely cannot believe that there is a kind of reality in the world which could contain the alleged event that he claims to witness to, then we must reject his witness: he is deceived, or he is lying to us. If we absolutely will not accept what he says, we are interposing another kind of authority between ourselves and his alleged authority as an historical witness. But, we cannot in this case claim to be rejecting him on historical grounds. The statement that 'things like that don't occur in this world' is not an historical judgement.

Voltaire, for example, condemned Herodotus as the 'father of lies' because of the 'absurd' stories that Herodotus told about the behaviour of people in the ancient past. In particular, Herodotus' story that in ancient Babylon fathers required their daughters to serve as temple prostitutes for one night as part of an initiation rite, Voltaire rejected as 'a calumny on the human race'.<sup>19</sup>

The first principle of Voltaire's philosophy of history was that human nature is always and everywhere the same. His 'knowledge' of human behaviour ruled out acceptance of Herodotus' story. Voltaire said that this was the judgement of an historian. But it was certainly not. It was a scientific or philosophical judgement—specifically, an anthropological one.

But if we reject at one place the testimony of our alleged witness because it is 'impossible', then we have no right to regard as historical the parts of his story that do fit what we already think we know; or, if we do exercise such a 'right', we should admit that it is not historical judgement that we are using but scientific or philosophical judgement.

Here lies the difference between historical testimony and all other kinds of knowledge: *its right to contradict science and philosophy is absolutely unqualified*. But if it is sovereign on this

---

<sup>19</sup> Voltaire, *The Philosophy of History*, 1766. (New York, 1965), 151–2.



side, on the reverse side it is extremely frail. It depends entirely on the moral authority of a singular human individual who may be lying to us or who may be deceived.

The fact is that *all historical testimony is first and last proclamation* ('*Kerygma*'). It may be associated with an explanation; but that is incidental to its authority. Historical testimony amounts to statements made by persons who claim to have been witnesses, or to be faithfully retailing the testimony of witnesses. The facts they testify to cannot be tested by us: that is the only reason for our needing their testimony. If we had direct access to the facts, we could handle them with philosophic or scientific method.

All of this is contrary to the spirit of most academic-philosophical agonizing on this subject, which begins and ends with the red-herring of 'explanation'. 'Explanation' assumes dependence on what Gerhard Maier calls 'analogous classification'. But the whole point about historical recital is that it deals with unique events. There is always a limit to the possibility of 'explaining' a singular event in terms of other events of a like kind. And when it comes to judging a statement that a particular event happened in the now-unreachable past, it is entirely irrelevant what class of events it might seem to belong to. 'To be sure' says Maier, 'as long as one makes analogous classification a precondition for acceptance, much in the world of the Bible remains without foundation'. We go further: as long as one makes analogous classification a precondition for accepting *any* alleged historical testimony, one is avoiding the question of its qualification as historical fact. 'But how', says Maier, 'can the *pure* historian without further ado reject something just because it happens only once? What can be experienced and what has analogies can certainly not be declared synonymous'.<sup>20</sup> That is the issue in a nutshell. Every historical event is an event that happened only once. What we need to know is: what happened. The question is not: Do military men tend to cross rivers? but, Did Caesar cross the Rubicon?

Furthermore: contrary to popular assumption, the authority of historical testimony does not tend to vary with the distance in time between ourselves and the witnesses; nor does it necessarily increase as the number of witnesses increases. The audience is always radically at liberty to reject historical testimony—no matter how recent and no matter how numerous and consistent the witnesses may be. (Was there ever an event that had more

<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*. Translated from the German (St. Louis, 1977), 16.

witnesses than the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe? Yet books have appeared under scholarly auspices in the lifetime of hundreds of thousands of such witnesses denying the fact of the Holocaust; and they are (at this writing) selling well. Again: there never was a political administration that provided so much documentation about itself, nor had so many qualified academic historians in its employ as the Kennedy administration. Yet every month a new book appears to challenge one or more of even the most apparently secure truths about it. Will we ever be closer to understanding all the facts and the real motives behind Kennedy's actions in Cuba? Is there any *fact* with respect to Kennedy's assassination that is more secure than the *facts* respecting the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand? Isn't it irrelevant to our confidence with respect to these two events that all the witnesses of the latter have been dead for nineteen-hundred years, while thousands of the witnesses of the former are still alive? and that there are stacks upon stacks of photographic records of the former, and none at all for the latter? Those who declared themselves satisfied with regard to the facts of the Kennedy assassination do so because they consent to believe the testimonies upon which a certain story depends. Those who are not satisfied, say that the story is at vital points faulty because someone is lying to us or is himself deceived. It all comes down to the matter of confidence in our *own* ability to judge character and motive. We think we know when we are being lied to. We think we know the signs that indicate when a person is self-deceived.

No events of the Roman Age, and none for the span of several centuries either side of that Age are in the same class with these events of the birth, life, death, resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—*as historically documented events*.

How, then, do we account for the monstrous misrepresentation of this situation which passes as the 'state-of-the-art' in New Testament hermeneutics? Here we are routinely informed that the authors of the gospels could not be dealing in historical evidences, as we understand 'history' or 'evidence', for the sufficient reason that the mind of that time had not yet discovered what these things were!

There is no possibility of a middle-ground in this matter. When we encounter such double-talk as 'historicized theologoumena' (Raymond Brown), we can be quite sure we are dealing with a bad conscience.

What does it mean that Rudolf Bultmann and Eric Auerbach<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated from the German (Garden City, 1957.)

have before them the same texts, and are impelled by the same passion for truth—and that one can announce with scholarly sobriety that the authors under review (the gospel-writers) are utterly without interest in historical detail; and the other, in the same sober tone, that the detail of place, setting, characterization and so on is so massive and so obtrusive that we must concede that we are at the source of all the realistic literature of our civilization? What it means, I believe, is that the implications for us of our accepting or rejecting the authority of *the message that is conveyed* in this realistic material are so overwhelming that men are tempted to seize upon any formula that allows them to distance themselves from it—no matter how perverse.