

We may rest assured that we are entering a new age in targumic studies in which the Targums will stand beside the writings of the Apocalyptists, of the Monks of Qumran, and of the Rabbis, as traditions that influenced Christ, the Gospels and the other writers of the New Testament.

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THE PELICAN GOSPEL COMMENTARIES

The days when paper-backs merely served to provide one with the Agatha Christie somebody else had taken from the public library, are long past. While they are still cheap, they are nowadays not all who-dunnits, and though still by professional writers some are by scholars. Nor are they even the poor man's version of a great classic, but may be the first and only edition of some brand-new work. This is the case with the Pelican Gospel Commentaries published by Penguin Books Ltd., 1963.¹ They are by scholars and written deliberately and only for this series. But like the old type of paper-back they will have a wide and varied reading public, and as the subject happens to be Sacred Scripture the effect they may have is worthy of some serious consideration.

From the publisher's point of view, although they are by scholars they are meant to be popular. The discrepancy is of course a general one but in this instance it is of moment. For while the New Testament is still a popular book with a large number of people, their assumptions about it are in almost complete opposition to the conclusions generally agreed to by scholars. And though scholarly men have entered a pulpit before now, there is no indication that religious congregations are any more aware of what scholars have considered proved and long taken for granted. The blurb on the back of each volume therefore hopefully introduces the writers as 'scholars who are in touch with contemporary Biblical theology and also with the needs of the average layman' and the suggestion is that these books are going to bridge the gap.

The editorial foreword is more revealing. For it is asserted that 'the aim throughout has been to bring out the meaning the Evangelists intended to convey to their original readers' and it is this which

¹ D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*, pp. 477; J. C. Fenton, *Saint Matthew*, pp. 487; G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke*, pp. 271.

it is hoped ' will help Christian readers to a deeper and more informed appreciation of the Gospels '. To the general editor, D. E. Nineham, the crisis therefore is that the Gospel ' even by the standards of their own day . . . was popular rather than scholarly ' and yet today it is only scholars who realise the fact. Nineham is therefore well aware that in bringing out ' the meaning the Evangelists intended to convey ' he is sadly going to surprise a great many people. This will be in itself ' a sad reflection on the extent to which all denominations do so little to keep an increasingly educated laity informed about the progress of biblical study '.

As the aim is to bring out what the Evangelist intended, the ' progress of biblical study ' is especially concerned in the mind of the writers with the development of that school of study known as *Formgeschichte* for it is this which has focused so much attention on precisely this question. It is here that distinctions must be made. For although the editorial foreword is repeated in all three volumes and Nineham's preface is meant as an introduction to the whole series the three writers in fact reveal rather different attitudes to Form-Criticism and the demands that it makes. Nineham's introduction is a statement of certain basic form-critical theses, especially that the Gospels consist ' of a number of unrelated paragraphs set down one after the other with very little organic connection ' and ' essentially each one is an independent unit complete in itself, undatable except by its contents, and usually devoid of any allusion to place ' (pp. 27-8). Although this had been recognised before, ' the credit for realizing their true significance and so uncovering the prehistory of the tradition, belongs mainly to a group of scholars known as *form-critics* ' (p. 28 note). Some of their rather radical conclusions have led these critics to be somewhat undervalued in England and it is Nineham's aim to present their case sympathetically. As far as the basic criticism of forms—which gave the school its name—is concerned, Nineham has only to present what is now a commonly approved working principle among nearly all scholars and teachers of the New Testament. So his commentary follows an analytical, paragraph by paragraph, study of the Gospel continually referring to the attitude and conclusions of *formgeschichte* in the process. J. C. Fenton on the other hand is more synthetic arranging his gospel on group headings of several chapters. He does not explicitly refer to Form-Criticism and the only Form-Critic cited is Bultmann (p. 26) in a purely moral observation of neutral value in the question. But there is an underlying assumption on the inability to penetrate behind the tradition or even the meaning of his Evangelist, St Matthew, which drapes the apostolic setting and deeds and sayings of Jesus in a cloud of obscurity worthy of any form-critic.

G. B. Caird is altogether on the other wing. His method is far more synthetic and his practical application of the form-critic principles much less apparent. His assessment of the school is very much tempered: 'it is now generally agreed that the form-critics overstated their case and unduly disregarded the accepted results of earlier scholarship' (p. 22). In consequence he raises the value of 'eye-witnesses' and 'the outline of Jesus' ministry preserved by Mark' although these have been discounted by Nineham in his introduction (p. 27).

These individual differences are likewise apparent in the related question of the synoptic parallels. There is felt to be a shadow cast over this question by the former tutor of two of the writers, R. H. Lightfoot. He had tried before the war to present German form-criticism to English scholars in an acceptable manner. He himself had come to form-criticism from his own researches and reflections and was thus not a prey to the *a priori* necessity of theological and philosophical principles which did and indeed still do, dominate German form-criticism in practice. He was also able to point out what was then a serious omission in the German scholars, namely their ignoring of the part played by the Evangelist. To the pre-war form-critics the Evangelist was little more than a crazy-paving artist sticking the odd units together as they came to him from tradition. Moreover Lightfoot was an inveterate supporter of what has been called the 'cast-iron' English thesis of the priority of Mark. This had important bearings on the question of form-criticism because it meant that Matthew and Luke were primarily dependant on Mark and where they differ in parallel passages were simply imposing their own theological ideas on an already interpreted material.

All three of our writers accept the priority of Mark but with very different emphasis. To Fenton, all Matthew has done 'is to produce a second and enlarged edition of Mrk' (p. 12). He accepts the existence of another source, 'Q' with some hesitation. His general conclusion is that in Matthew 'we have an editor, an arranger of material' and the main source of it being 'an earlier Gospel (Mark)' (p. 14). This means that Matthew is not edited in the light of historical evidence of eye-witness, but on the contrary in his Gospel 'we are at one further remove still' (p. 12). Then, as Matthew is dated between 85 and 105 (p. 14) serious questions arise as to what historical value if any is to be attributed to this Gospel. Fenton replies in practice in a very *form-geschichtlich* manner by considering throughout almost entirely only what Matthew himself meant to say. Matthew's evidence is further discredited from an historical point of view by his use of the Old Testament 'to change the details of an event as they were recorded in his source in order to bring out more clearly

the correspondence to a prophecy'. This seems to carry the new *redaktionsgeschichte* of modern form-critics to rather an extreme position.

Nineham is altogether more critical and cautious. Although 'Mark' around the year 70 and perhaps in Rome had some purpose in writing—namely to meet 'some specific practical and religious need' in the church where he lived, it is wrong to seek for a single and entirely coherent master-plan which will explain all the material in terms of the Evangelist (p. 29). Therefore, while he has imposed an order of his own upon the narrative and perhaps pushed certain ideas of his own—as for example the 'secret messiahship'—a large amount of the material remains as he found it. In other words in the Gospel we have the authentic voice of a pre-Marcian tradition. This material presents Jesus as one using traditional parabolic method of teaching and Jewish-Palestinian language (p. 50) and agrees with independent material in other Evangelists. Therefore 'our basic picture of Christ is thus carried back to a point only a quarter of a century or so after his death' (p. 50) and because of the 'wonderfully retentive memory of the oriental' . . . 'we can often be virtually sure that what the tradition is offering us are the authentic deeds, and especially the authentic words of the historic Jesus' (p. 51). Hence in the commentary Nineham is continually having recourse to the critical method of 'peeling off' the layers so to speak, of the Evangelist and the Church tradition and trying to establish what was original and what was originally meant.

It is instructive that Caird for his part rarely indulges in this practice. He is at the almost opposite extreme of Fenton in assuming in practice that what we have in the Gospel is substantially what Jesus said and did. This is to some extent conditioned by his view of the accuracy of Luke 'in meticulously following his sources' (p. 29). And while it is true that one of his sources is Mark this is entirely secondary and merely augmented an already existing 'proto-Luke' document. This means that Luke's sources, Mark Q and L 'represent in all probability, the traditions guaranteed by the three influential centres of Rome, Antioch and Caesarea' (p. 28). And for Caird this makes perfectly reliable material and justifies Luke's claim to be a trustworthy historian provided 'we do not make the blunder of judging him by the canons of modern scientific historiography.

These attitudes have considerable effect on the three writers in select questions. None more clearly illustrates the differences than the matter of miracles. For Fenton as for form-critics miracles present a great difficulty. The solution of the earlier critics is that they are part of the later mythologising material and can be shown—as for example

in summary fashion by Käsemann—to be crudely explained from comparative religion. Fenton is honest enough however to say there ‘is no recoverable presentation of Christianity that is wholly without this miraculous element’ (p. 20) but ‘it can and must be admitted that as the tradition was handed on, the number and magnitude of the miracles was increased’. This gives him the loophole taken with his view of the place of Matthew in presenting his material, to make the remarkable statement that ‘it is possible for us today to believe what Matthew believed about Jesus as miracle-worker . . . without necessarily believing in the historicity of the miracles which Matthew records’ (p. 21).

Caird is again on the opposite wing. While he admits that the stories about Jesus have undergone some legendary accretion ‘sober criticism cannot get behind the gospel record to a plain, commonplace tale devoid of the miraculous and the supernatural’ (p. 29). The differences in practical application can be seen in the attitude to the Transfiguration which for Fenton has very little to be said for it as an historical event (p. 276) and he concentrates characteristically on ‘what the story meant to Matthew’. Whereas for Caird ‘the account may be accepted as literal truth’ (p. 132). Nineham occupies a middle position. He is prepared to believe that ‘what was vouchsafed to the three disciples was a glimpse of Jesus in that final state of Lordship’ (p. 234) and in general he is prepared to accept the kernel of the miracle stories as authentic even if—as in the case of the feeding of the five thousand—the kernel was not actually intended to be a miracle. In one way this safeguards Nineham from all rationalism. For example the view of the man possessed of an unclean spirit Mk. 5:5ff., as being cured of hysteria accompanied by a paroxysm which frightened the nearby swine, is a ‘rationalising version’ which assumes the old fundamentalist idea that all the details of the story have the same factual value and were all equally verified in the original incident. On his own principles Nineham agrees with Creed that ‘it is not profitable to attempt’ . . . such ways of discovering ‘what may have occurred’.

The same differences appear in the more delicate question of what Jesus actually said and thought of himself. Fenton characteristically contents himself with what Matthew says and what he thought Christ thought he was or meant. This keeps him out of such difficulties as the eschatological prophecy Mt. 24–5. Fenton is sure that ‘the earliest Christians believed that the world would end soon, and they were wrong’ (p. 402) but this does not necessarily involve Jesus’ own thought on the matter. Fenton only goes as far as to say that ‘Matthew believed that Jesus had taught that he would return in glory’ soon

(p. 379) and 'Matthew was probably right in thinking that Jesus taught this'. Nineham certainly goes deeper into the question of what Jesus himself thought as his principles allow. He concludes that probably Jesus did not have completely accurate foreknowledge in the days of his flesh. But he hastens to add 'numerous writers have shown that admission of such ignorance and even error on the part of our Lord is fully compatible with the belief in the incarnation' (p. 232). It is altogether revealing that Caird tackles the question in a wholly different way. As an Old Testament scholar he notices that the whole eschatological language is typical of the Old Testament prophets and that Jesus may have used it 'not because he thought that the world was shortly coming to an end, but because he believed that through his ministry Israel was being compelled to face a decision with eternal consequences' (p. 198).

The whole difficulty for form-critics as for their opponents is that we have no standard by which to judge authentic words except perhaps the parables. Here all three writers more or less accept the thesis of Jülicher that the parables were not originally allegories—though Nineham is prepared to admit an exception for Mk. 12:1-12 (p. 311); the allegorising was the work of the church. So all agree on 'peeling off the layers'. But Fenton as usual professes serious doubts that we can ever recover the original content or the meaning in Jesus' own mind (p. 348). Whereas Nineham methodically tries to work out the various layers of interpretation with some confidence—though less than Jeremias—of establishing the original one. Caird is as usual far more synthetic and concerns himself far less with such unravelling than giving the general moral point of the parable as a whole.

It will be seen from these select examples how different in theory and practice our three writers are. Doubtless an ordinary reader will feel more at home with the method of Caird and scholars with that of Nineham. But in these self-critical days and on a subject so vital as the New Testament a serious apprehension of what Nineham has to say especially in his introduction, should be welcomed by all.

His interpretation may be described as form-criticism with the largely unpalatable German theology replaced by empirical (or is it English?) common sense. It is perfectly true that there are other ways of looking at the New Testament than through form-criticism of the constitutive pericopae. But this analytical method is very much in vogue these days and the conclusions of form-critics about them are of some importance in any understanding. Nineham follows the detached and cautious method of Lightfoot in appraising the form-critics for their analytical work. But he also gives due weight to the

Evangelist while all the time retaining a critical confidence in the substantial authenticity of the tradition. Fenton is rather more over to the German side in a rather thorough-going *redaktionsgeschichte* which itself raises questions that our author does not discuss. It is possible that Fenton with a deceptively moralising method and avoidance of explicit reference to form-criticism may be the most easily misunderstood.

It is a serious matter of reflection that Nineham finds that Roman Catholics are the only denomination who do not accept the conclusions on the interpretative tradition, which he is so insistent are now accepted in greater or lesser degree by all scholars (p. 49). No doubt he exaggerates and one could appeal to Schnackenburg, Geiselmann, Mussner and others in the Church who certainly do accept and teach similar conclusions to Nineham himself in a similar critical appreciation of *Formgeschichte*. But it may be that in practice with a large number of Catholic readers at least in this country Nineham may be right, and he may for them very well fail in his task of bridging the gap between scholars and the public. That however is not to say that Catholics themselves would have no reason to reproach themselves as uninformed. It should be taken as a singular stroke of fortune—if nothing else—that the important and controversial issue of form-criticism is here presented popularly in such a rational and sympathetic manner. If Catholics are to take alarm at select questions, as in the unanimous verdict of the three writers that Mark is the first Gospel, or at Nineham because he thinks the ‘Lord’s brothers’ understood literally is the more natural interpretation (p. 166) or at Fenton because he interprets the words of institution as meaning Jesus ‘compares the bread . . . to his body’ (p. 418) or at Caird because he does not think the virgin birth is quite what was originally meant (p. 31); and thence to throw up the commentaries as a whole, that will be their affair. But it will be a matter of regret. The opportunity for Catholics who are not scholars offered by these books is not lightly to be missed.

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