

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

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JUST OCCASIONALLY, the student is made aware of a sudden quickening in the pace of advance of his subject. A development takes place after which he realises that though previously-held ideas need not be abandoned overnight, they can never be accepted with quite the same certainty again. Such milestones in mankind's destiny were passed in 1945 with Hiroshima and again in 1957 with the first Sputnik; a century before, in 1859, the publication both of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Boucher de Perthès' discoveries of human artifacts associated with the bones of hyenas and other sub-tropical fauna in the Somme valley marked a turning-point in the relationship between scientific and religious truths. It is now becoming clear that the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, coupled with greatly improved means of testing the veracity of sources for the study of Ancient History have opened up new perspectives for the study of Christian origins. Each in its own way, the Masada exhibition,<sup>1</sup> G. R. Driver's monumental survey of the *Judaeen Scrolls*<sup>2</sup> and the symposium entitled *Vindications*<sup>3</sup> are signs of this new age.

The Oxford Movement had come and almost gone before the emerging methods of historical study were applied to the problems of primitive Christianity. In the 1860s, however, the approach which Mommsen and Stubbs were pioneering in the study of the organisation of the Roman Empire and the development of the British Constitution respectively were becoming extended to the New Testament and the early Church. Newman's *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833) belongs to the pre-history of the writing of Church history, whereas J. B. Lightfoot's *Essay on the Ministry* published in 1869 remains one of the foundation studies of the subject. Six years earlier Ernest Renan had written his classic *Vie de Jésus*.

Renan was writing in the full tide of the European industrial revolution. His Jesus was also a man-made, historical figure. For his creator the supernatural was unreal and miracles did not happen. So, the story of Jesus became the story of a Galilean peasant who became a great prophet and died a martyr at the hands of his own people, a 'noble pioneer', a man without rival, whose religion would renew

<sup>1</sup>Held at the Festival Hall, November-December 1966. The best short account of the excavations to date are to be found either in the illustrated Catalogue of the exhibition, or in the *Observer*, coloured supplement, 20th November, 1966.

<sup>2</sup>Published by Blackwell's, Oxford, 1965.

<sup>3</sup>S.C.M. Press, 1966.

itself unceasingly from generation to generation.<sup>4</sup> 'Every successive century will proclaim that among the sons of men more have arisen greater than Jesus', he wrote.<sup>5</sup> This was in many ways a work of genius, though not perhaps of religious genius. Much the same formula applied by Renan to Jesus could equally have been applied to Abraham Lincoln or Socrates. The criticism that Renan had presented the world with 'the Christ of the Fourth Gospel without his metaphysical halo',<sup>6</sup> had some justification.

Even so, the attempt at a biography stripped of the influence of 'puerile metaphysical discussions' set the stage for the many other attempts to portray the Jesus of History that followed in the next half century. Indeed, if one accepted the Gospel of Mark as the earliest of the four gospels, could not its apparently plain historical language form the basis for an approximation of a life of Christ acceptable to a generation who had tasted popular education?

Confidence in this approach grew and perhaps is typified by Sir John Seeley's assertion early in his *Ecce Homo* that, 'No other career (than Christ's) ever had so much unity, no other biography is so simple or can so well afford to dispense with details'.<sup>7</sup> Seeley was Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, and considered that a biography in which 'no theological questions' were discussed, perfectly feasible. At the same moment the new school of Church historians associated with Harnack, by treating Patristic texts as ordinary historical documents were constructing their own pattern of the emergence of orthodox Christian doctrine. This pattern of doctrine, however, owed much to the contacts which had existed between Christianity and the philosophies of the Greco-Roman world from the time of Paul. If, it was argued, one delved deeply enough and examined critically each layer of dogmatic accretion it might be possible to arrive at the essential and original message of Christianity.

Men like Harnack who set about this task were men of missionary zeal as well as of great scholarship and erudition. They were determined to arrest the progressive drift from Christianity that they saw going on around them, and Harnack's lectures delivered to students of Berlin University in the winter of 1899-1900 had that aim in mind, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Eng. tr., *What is Christianity?*) was

<sup>4</sup>*La Vie de Jésus*, 282 (Nelson ed. Paris, 1937).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>6</sup>T. Colani in his review of Renan's work in *Revue de Théologie*, Strasbourg-Paris, 1864.

<sup>7</sup>E. Renan, *op. cit.*, 272.

<sup>8</sup>*Ecce Homo*, 20. Seeley's work was originally published in 1865, and was still being reprinted in 1916.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, Introduction.

compiled from shorthand notes taken at the lectures, and it had a huge and instantaneous success. The picture of Christ's teaching as 'something so simple that speaks to us with so much power that it cannot easily be mistaken',<sup>10</sup> and in the midst of deeds of world renunciation urging 'a brotherly union that declares war on the world's misery',<sup>11</sup> caught the idealism of the day. Morality was the basis of religion and the expounder of this theme was the most eminent Church historian in Europe.

Unfortunately, the liberals were begging more questions than they could answer, and within a few years their optimism was overtaken by events more terrible than they could possibly have foreseen. Were the Gospel-writers concerned with setting down a history or biography? What could be the importance of the person of the Saviour if the main object of human study was his teaching, or alternatively, with the Church's representation of that teaching? Only six years after Harnack's famous lectures came the reply by a young professor of Theology at the University of Strasbourg, Albert Schweitzer.

The 'living force of the Gospel' which Harnack had stressed was not its ethical quality but apocalyptic. Schweitzer criticised 'those liberals' who for half a century had been writing Lives of Jesus 'weakening the great imperious sayings of the Lord . . . that He might not come into conflict with our ethical ideals, and might tune His denial of the world with our acceptance of it'.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Jesus' ministry and teaching must be seen within the framework of Jewish eschatological hopes. Historically regarded, the Baptist, Jesus and Paul are simply the culminating manifestations of Jewish apocalyptic thought.<sup>13</sup> The kingdom Jesus preached lay in the future. It would be ushered in by some cataclysmic act of God. The ethic that he preached was therefore an *Interimsethik*. Jesus regarded himself as God's instrument in the fulfilment of His purpose, and believed that creation would end with him. Yet as he was on the cross, the world went on, and the cry of dereliction needed no further explanation. All attempt to reconstruct an historical life of Jesus must be abandoned, for eschatology had no connection with the events of history. And even if one conceded one year of active ministry, Jesus himself still 'comes to us as one unknown without a name, as of old by the lakeside he

<sup>10</sup>*What is Christianity?* (Published by Williams and Norgate, 1901), 14.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 17. The translator's note that the English edition had been prepared to forward 'the traffic of ideas' between the German and the English-speaking worlds also bespeaks what was the final effort at an Anglo-German alliance which was taking place in 1901.

<sup>12</sup>A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (3rd ed., Eng. tr. W. Montgomery, 1954), 398.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 266.

came to those who knew him not'.<sup>14</sup> Nothing was more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

The gap of nineteen centuries was proving too wide to bridge. Even without the catastrophe of the First World War it is difficult to imagine the school of Harnack prevailing. Though in Britain the historical school produced two fine exponents in T. R. Glover, *The Jesus of History* (1916) and A. C. Headlam, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* (1923) the tendency of Biblical research for the forty years after Schweitzer has been away from a quest which seemed more demonstrably futile as each new book of criticism appeared. Moreover, the Christian world of the 'twenties' and 'thirties' was a disillusioned world. 'Normalcy' was not to be had. It was a world which was ready for Karl Barth and for the Form Critics.

The point which these latter made was a valid and relevant one. The Gospels were not contemporary records or eyewitness accounts of events. They were written in different parts of the Greco-Roman world to meet the needs of Christian communities one or two generations after the Crucifixion. Though it was possible that some of Jesus' own words were preserved when the Gospels were written down, one could not establish beyond doubt which, and it was a task well nigh impossible to separate these genuine sayings from the traditions which had been growing up in the meantime in the Christian communities. Form criticism which set out with the aim of penetrating behind the Gospel tradition to the kernel of Jesus' message, ended by drawing down an impenetrable fog between that message and any would-be interpreter. As R. H. Lightfoot, its leading exponent in Britain admitted in 1935, 'It seems then that the form of the earthly no less than the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us. For all the inestimable evidence of the gospels, they yield no more than a whisper of his voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his way'.<sup>16</sup> The impasse seemed complete.

It is hardly possible to overstate the confusion into which New Testament studies were falling in the years before the Second World War. The synoptic view of events was no longer favoured or seemed possible. Learned studies in the Gospels concentrated on aspects of Jesus' teaching, such as the parables, or minutiae of textual criticism. Critics were plainly discouraged and obfuscated by the seemingly hopeless difficulties of the subject. Charles Guignebert's monumental study, *Jésus* (1933) takes 144 closely-argued pages before the existence even of Jesus is proved, and another five hundred to describe his

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 401.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 396.

<sup>16</sup>R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*, Oxford, 1935, p. 225.

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ministry of a few weeks' duration, his journey to Jerusalem as a semi-fugitive, his arrest, trial and execution. It was not on Jesus of Nazareth but on the 'Christ-myth' that the Christian Church was based.' The Gospels were the first examples of Christian hagiography."

Had this been the critics' last word, it is not easy to see how Christianity could have survived as an historical and missionary religion on a world-scale. There comes a time when, as Sir Llewellyn Woodward sadly noted, too many landmarks had been washed away for any modernisation of the externals of Christianity to avail.<sup>19</sup> Christianity would continue to have been studied as a university subject, but in an age dominated by the thought of Marx, Freud and Darwin it is difficult to see how it would continue to have retained its appeal. This, however, was not to be the case. One trouble throughout had been that while the New Testament had attracted the lifelong study of brilliant scholars it had lacked the characteristics of a growth subject. Ideas and hypotheses there were in plenty, but not the supply of new evidence on which these could be tested. Moreover, most of the Form Critics and their successors have been primarily men of the study. Their training has been that of the philologist and the literary critic. They were not really interested in history, even ancient history, let alone of participating themselves in the search on the ground for the new evidence on which historical judgements were to be based. Yet had they appreciated it, all the time evidence of a new type was being collected which would challenge their historical scepticism as thoroughly as they had challenged the confident assertions of the liberal Protestants.

In 1897 the excavators at Oxyrhynchus uncovered some leaves of a second-century papyrus book lying in close proximity to fragments of a Gospel of Matthew.<sup>20</sup> These leaves contained what purported to be sayings of Jesus to 'Judas-Thomas' or Thomas the Twin, some of which bore an obvious resemblance to passages in the Synoptic Gospels. While some eminent critics such as Guignebert expressed disappointment at the discovery from the point of view of Biblical criticism,<sup>21</sup> others, more historically-minded and more percipient pointed to the undeniable importance the new texts would have on the study of the New Testament.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, in Asia Minor, the discoveries of W. M. Ramsay were revealing for the first time the true

<sup>19</sup>Ch. Guignebert, *Jésus*, 631 pp.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 241.

<sup>21</sup>Sir Ll. Woodward, *Short Journey*, London, 1942, 217-219.

<sup>22</sup>Ed. Grenfell and Hunt, *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* i, Nos. 1 and following.

<sup>23</sup>Guignebert, op. cit., 54-55.

<sup>24</sup>Grenfell and Hunt's comment, op. cit. iv, 22.

Ed. Guignebert

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Guignebert's work on the Gospels

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Guignebert's work

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world of St. Paul. Time and again the evidence of inscription proved the veracity of the descriptions recorded in Acts of the goings and outlook of the cities in which St. Paul preached. The work of Ramsay and Deissmann between 1895 and 1914 showed even the emergence of the Form Critics that important sections of the New Testament corresponded without peradventure with historical reality—and had the ring of a contemporary source.

Ramsay tried to prove too much. Every incident in St. Luke's Gospel could not be proved to have historical basis, and though the story like that of Paul and Thecla might correspond to popular tradition in the first two centuries this did not ensure their literal truth. Moreover, it was perhaps unfortunate that most of the earlier monuments in Asia Minor concerned the life and religion of the Greek provincials. This was of course inevitable, and one can still find statues of the pagan deities lying as they fell half buried among the debris of the Greco-Roman cities.<sup>23</sup> The new evidence regarding the mystery cults practiced in the Pauline cities was seized upon avidly. Here was the real explanation of the Christian mysteries; and with great learning and ingenuity Loisy's *Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien* set out to prove it. Some truth there is in this view, and the recent discovery of a Christian place of worship immediately adjacent to a Mithraeum under the Santa Prisca in Rome underlines this, but it is now evident that without the mediation of Judaism these mystery religions had less direct effect on the formation of the Christian liturgy than once supposed. In particular, Pauline philosophy concerning 'flesh' and 'spirit', for which parallels were sought in Hellenism, is now shown by reference to the Scrolls to have been typical of the Judaism of the period.

Thus, though at the end of the Second World War the Form Critics and their followers still held the upper hand, the position of the historical school was less hopeless than it might appear. In 1947 the break-through came with the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, followed not long after by the identification among the documents from a Gnostic library found at Nag-Hammadi in Middle Egypt of a complete version of the Oxyrhynchus logia, the Gospel of Thomas. The immense importance of the Scrolls to Biblical and not least New Testament studies was immediately recognised. Thousands of articles on them have been published. Unfortunately, the journalists and controversialists got in first. Christians were accused of 'going slow' on the study of the material and hiding the results for fear that they might disprove the originality of Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Some critics blithely

<sup>23</sup>As I found myself at Hierapolis (Pammukale) in Phrygia in 1954.

<sup>24</sup>Published in 1930.

<sup>25</sup>As in Edmund Wilson's *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea*, London, 1955, p. 107—a brilliant book nonetheless.

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equated the Righteous Teacher of the Scrolls with Jesus of Nazareth, while others declared that the latter was simply a plagiarist of the Teacher. Inevitably, owing to the extremely fragmentary character of the manuscript remains from Cave iv which included more than 10,000 pieces of no less than 370 separate books, scholarly assessments of the discovery have tended to be tardy and reserved. 'Pre-conceived opinions based on incorrect premisses'<sup>26</sup> as G. R. Driver has now written, gained a long lead. The work however of Millar Burrows, Frank Moore Cross, Bo Reicke, Driver himself to mention only a few, have now been placing the Scrolls in their perspective in the field of Biblical study, and this task is continuing as experience increases of the type of evidence that the Scrolls can provide.

G. R. Driver's *The Judaean Scrolls* is a landmark in this process of sifting and clarifying the evidence. Even though his main contention that the Scrolls and the characters recorded therein relate closely to the Jewish Revolt of 66-73 is almost certainly wrong, since Q'umran itself fell to the Romans not later than 68,<sup>27</sup> his work is of immeasurable importance to New Testament studies. If the compilation of many of the Scrolls dates to the generation before the Jewish war, the Covenanters of Q'umran would still be contemporaries with the Jerusalem Church under James, and their teaching and practices would provide the means for direct comparison with that of the Gospels. Driver disentangles the purely verbal similarities between the two organizations, the product of living in the same period and in the same climate of religious ideas from more fundamental resemblances between them. Some of these, particularly the dualism of human nature found in St. Paul and the Johannine light symbolism suggest contacts between primitive Christian teaching and that of the Covenanters. At times too, the Scrolls throw light on a practice recorded in the New Testament such as when the *Genesis Apocryphon* describes an act of healing by the laying on of hands and the rebuking of an evil spirit as in Mt. ix, 18, Mk. v, 23 and Lk. iv, 39-41.<sup>28</sup> Both the Covenanters and the Jerusalem Church also were sacerdotal and indeed hierarchical communities.

Yet more important are the differences. It would even appear that when Jesus is recorded as criticising those who would 'make man for the Sabbath', or preached 'love for thine neighbour but hatred for thine enemy', he could have been aiming directly at the Covenanters,

<sup>26</sup>*The Judaean Scrolls*, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup>The point is made convincingly by Père de Vaux in his review of Driver entitled 'The Judaean Scrolls, Essenes or Zealots', *New Testament Studies* (= *NTS*, 13), 1966, 89-104.

<sup>28</sup>Driver, *op. cit.*, 460-61.

for these sentiments are to be found in the Scrolls.<sup>59</sup> Though at times the moral teaching of the latter appears to approximate to that of the New Testament, on close examination the differences are the most fundamental. The Covenanters never sought to spiritualise the Law as Jesus did. No one would have said that their yoke was a light one. What one does see is how Jesus and the Covenanters were drawn on common contemporary traditions, but from those traditions teaching a different Gospel and way of life. Both, however, belong to Palestine of the first half of the first century. There is less need now to interpose the anonymous and amorphous 'primitive community' between the New Testament and teaching of Jesus.

The historicity of the Gospel narratives has also received vindication from another and unexpected quarter. The development of Ancient History as a field of study to a certain extent independent of the Classics has led historians to read and assess the New Testament writings as historical documents.<sup>60</sup> It has been pointed out that just because Jesus' best-known contemporary, the emperor Tiberius, left behind no writings of his own, that has not prevented the historian reconstructing the events of his reign.<sup>61</sup> So, with Jesus, for the Gospel narratives offer just as promising material as the archives on which the secular history of the period has to be based. Sherwin-White's *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* follows the path pioneered by Ramsay and Deissmann<sup>62</sup> fifty years before. The conduct of the trial of Jesus, for instance, corresponds with what is now known of Jewish and Roman procedure at the time.<sup>63</sup> Details such as the trial before Pilate taking place around dawn, and Pilate yielding to the threat of the Jews that 'he would not be Caesar's friend' if he let Jesus go (Jn. xix, 12) seem also to be less improbable than previously imagined. Roman governors, as we know from other sources, were apprehensive of the Jews and extremely reluctant to become embroiled in matters of Jewish law.<sup>64</sup> As Sherwin-White states, 'The attempt to undermine the general historicity of the trials narrative by proving that specific features are demonstrably false and invented to give a certain impression breaks down in all its principal parts.'<sup>65</sup> Even Lietzmann's scholarly survey of the trial material relied on ideas of Roman criminal procedure that no longer hold good, and

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 572-73.

<sup>60</sup>Particularly A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Oxford, 1963.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 187-88.

<sup>62</sup>Notably in *Light from the Ancient East* (Eng. tr. L. R. M. Strachan, 1910).

<sup>63</sup>See A. N. Sherwin-White, 'The Trial of Christ', in *Historicity and Chronology in the New Testament*, S.P.C.K., 1965, 97-116.

<sup>64</sup>e.g. Acts, xviii, 12-16 and xxiv, 25-27. Sherwin-White, op. cit., 112-114.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 115.



Lietzmann has been followed by a whole generation of New Testament critics. On the Fourth Gospel even, one may perhaps point to Dodd's view. 'It shows contact with an original Aramaic tradition, such as must necessarily be postulated for anything which claims to go back to the beginnings of Christianity.' It is valuable 'at least for its chronological and geographical indications, and even perhaps some of the incidents described in John, such as the Cleansing of the Temple may preserve the primitive oral tradition better than the Synoptists.'<sup>37</sup> The same may also be said for the *Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps if any further evidence were needed that writers of Jewish tradition in Palestine in New Testament times wrote events as they saw them, it is provided by the grisly finds from Masada. Josephus was not an eyewitness of this last stand of the Jews against Rome in 73,<sup>39</sup> but the 'oral tradition' on which he based his final chapters of the *Jewish Wars* was remarkably accurate. Even the lots which each of the Zealot leaders were said to have cast to decide who was to be the last survivor, to commit suicide after despatching his comrades,<sup>40</sup> appear to have been found. Why should we disbelieve that Jesus really was tried before Pilate on the great paved courtyard outside the Antonia Fortress dominating the Temple area, the raised place or *Gabbatha* (Jn. xix, 14) discovered by Père Vincent in 1932, or that Luke when he said he was writing down all things 'most accurately' for his friend, Theophilus (Lk. i, 3) was merely giving him a *Sitz-im-Leben*?

It may be then, that present-day scholarship is poised for a new understanding of the Jesus of History.<sup>41</sup> It will be a different one from that compiled by the liberal Protestant school and its forerunners at the beginning of the century, different, too, from the literalist/dogmatic presentations of Roman Catholic scholarship. Each of the movements that succeeded Harnack brought a new and real insight into the primitive Church and the work of its founder. The apocalyptic emphasised by Schweitzer and by recent students of Mark was part and parcel of the Palestinian scene, and Q'umran was one of its power-houses. It is impossible to imagine anyone who was hailed as Prophet of Nazareth being uninfluenced by it. Yet it is absurd to seek to interpret Mark as a sort of exorcist's nightmare by overstressing and oversimplifying the demoniacal and eschatological elements in

<sup>37</sup>C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1963, 424 ff. See also the same author's *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 444 ff.

<sup>38</sup>See in particular, H. W. Montefiore, 'A Comparison of the Parables of the Gospel according to Thomas and of the Synoptic Gospels', *NTS*, 7, 1961, 220 ff.

<sup>39</sup>He describes the siege and capture of the fortress, *Jewish Wars*, vii, 8.

<sup>40</sup>Josephus, *Wars*, vii, 9.

<sup>41</sup>See from this point of view the interesting symposium entitled *Historicity and Chronology in the New Testament*, S.P.C.K., 1965.

the Gospel.<sup>41</sup> So too, the long interval between the Crucifixion and the writing down of traditions among dispersed Christian communities must have affected the forms which the Gospel traditions eventually took. One task indeed that awaits the Form Critics is to explore the common sources which seem to underlie both *Matthew*, *Luke* and *Thomas* and to throw light on why material in one instance serves a message of eschatology while in the other it serves that of the ascetic.

No great tradition of Biblical scholarship has been wasted, but it now seems that archaeological discoveries will provide a more permanent and accurate *Sitz-im-Leben* for the story of Jesus of Nazareth than was possible by methods of literary criticism alone. We are still confronted in the Gospels by a kerygmatic history, combining both historical and theological motives for which there is no real parallel in the Ancient World. Nonetheless, the disentanglement of the various traditions which made up the Gospel narrative has become more practicable. We now know a great deal about Palestine, its people and its ideals in the first century A.D. The way is once more open to apply those insights to an assessment of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>42</sup> This is the real importance of the work of Driver and of the new Historical School of Biblical Criticism.

<sup>41</sup>For a discussion of this aspect of the Gospel, see E. Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology*, Cambridge, 1965, Ch. i.

<sup>42</sup>See Bishop Stephen Neill's able summing up in *The Interpretation of the New Testament*, Oxford, 1964, 336-348.