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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Bultmann's Tripod

by T. Francis Glasson

Dr. Glasson, who recently retired from his post as Lecturer in New Testament at New College, London, and is now resident near Bournemouth, pays critical attention in this paper to Professor Rudolf Bultmann's interpretation of the New Testament portrayal of Jesus. Professor Bultmann attained his ninetieth birthday on 20th August, 1974, and it may seem strange to celebrate the occasion with a critique of one of the central elements in his theology; but a teacher who has always made it his aim to stimulate his students and others to radical thinking would probably not have it otherwise.

ONE of the most influential figures in the Christian thinking of the present century is Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg. He is outstanding as a theologian and as a New Testament scholar, and his concern for the communication of the Gospel to modern man was the original impulse behind his de-mythologizing campaign. In this article I am concerned with a limited area of his teaching, his approach to the Christology of the New Testament. A passage from his little book on *Primitive Christianity* will be as good as any to indicate the line he takes. In the course of a chapter entitled "Primitive Christianity as a syncretistic phenomenon" he writes:

The person of Jesus is sometimes defined in terms of Jewish and apocalyptic categories, sometimes as the 'Lord' of the cultus, as a mystery deity, sometimes again as the Gnostic redeemer, the pre-existent being from the heavenly world whose earthly body is only an outward garb.

Here are three well-defined elements: the apocalyptic teaching of Judaism, the mystery religions, and the Gnostic redeemer myth. It is the third item which Bultmann considers as the most important and we will examine these three in the reverse order.

I.

Bultmann speaks of the Gnostic redeemer myth as though there were clear evidence that a story of this kind was familiar and widespread before the New Testament period. A divine being descends from the realm of light and brings to suffering humanity, enmeshed in the material world, the knowledge (*gnōsis*) that will secure the release of his chosen ones. When however, we look for *evidence* of this story it is found to come from the Christian period; and leading authorities on the subject have urged that this redeemer figure of Gnosticism is the *result* of Christianity, not one of its *sources*. It is true that in the pre-Christian period there were certain trends of thought which were later taken up in the more formulated schemes of the second Christian century. The Dead Sea Scrolls have shown

that within Judaism itself certain circles placed an emphasis on knowledge; indeed the Old Testament tells us that mercy is better than sacrifice, and the knowledge of God preferable to burnt offerings.

But we are thinking at the moment of this personal figure called the Gnostic redeemer. Bultmann affirms that the great hymn of Philippians 2 is simply the application to Jesus of matters previously believed of this alleged figure. His mission was interpreted in the light of this earlier belief. In assessing this claim one must insist that the evidence points the other way. Consider, for instance, some words written by the late Edwyn Bevan. He asks "whether primitive Christianity and Gnosticism fitted to Jesus of Nazareth the conception of a Redeemer older than Christianity, a conception which existed originally apart from Him, or whether it was the Christian belief in Jesus which induced the Gnostics to introduce the figure of a Redeemer into a scheme which had originally been framed without one."¹ Bevan chooses the second of these alternatives and, to continue with his words: "What strikes one in this Gnostic account of the descent and re-ascension of the Redeemer is that it is just a reduplication of the Hellenistic story of the soul." According to Bevan and other authorities, the Gnostics of the church period felt they must somehow fit the figure of Jesus into their scheme of thought, and so what had previously been predicated of the individual soul was now transferred to Him. Those who disagree with this must produce pre-Christian evidence for their statements and so far they have not done so. Dr. R. M. Wilson, one of the leading authorities on Gnosticism, writes in his book, *The Gnostic Problem*:

Bultmann . . . claims that Paul interpreted the death of Christ in terms of the Gnostic myth, but does not seem to consider whether this 'Gnostic myth' in fact existed in the time of Paul.

In his valuable book *The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1861-1961*, Bishop Stephen Neill has this to say:

We must ask . . . where we encounter the Gnostic myth in the neat and simple form in which it has been summarized for us by Professor Bultmann. The surprising answer is: Nowhere at all. The myth is a synthetic product, pieced together from hints and shreds in different sources, many of them of uncertain date.

Some seventy years ago the "history-of-religion school" was flourishing and it tried to present Christianity as a syncretistic faith made up of diverse elements from a variety of sources in the ancient world. The New Testament faith was not an unfolding of something given to men in Christ; rather, Jesus was just a human prophet and it was the church which deified him, gathering around

¹ *Hellenism and Christianity* (1921), 95-100.

him all kinds of embellishments from this quarter and that. One cannot help feeling that in important respects Bultmann still belongs to this history-of-religion school. To him, the historical Jesus was a purely human eschatological preacher; the Christ of New Testament theology resulted from the process of identifying him with the Gnostic redeemer and other figures which provided the concepts needed to explain his position as the Lord of the Church's worship and faith.

II.

The second leg of Bultmann's tripod provides a further example of his addiction to the approach of the same school: Christianity as a mystery religion. It is contended that since the Jewish Christians in the earliest days had confined themselves to Jewish categories, it became necessary to employ Gentile thought-forms when the church moved into the wider world. And among the new thought-forms and usages which the Hellenistic church adopted were those of the current mystery faiths.

Now Paul was admittedly born in Tarsus, but he describes himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews, brought up in the strictest conformity with Pharisaism; and it seems wrong-headed to look in the direction of mystery religions (which an orthodox Jew would regard with abhorrence) to explain matters which can be adequately accounted for from the Jewish side. In recent years it has been increasingly seen that his teaching can be best expounded in the light of his Jewish heritage. Anyone who doubts this should consult W. D. Davies's *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*.

Some terms from the mysteries passed into common speech. Thus when Paul says in Phillippians 4 that he has "learned the secret" to be filled and to be empty, he actually uses a technical term which means "to be initiated", *mueō*, the word from which "mystery" is ultimately derived. But surely no-one would contend that this is more than a playful use of a word familiar to Paul's readers. And this is the only occurrence of the word in the New Testament. It is a striking act that the main terms of the mysteries are conspicuous by their absence from the New Testament.

The cult of the dying and rising god is sometimes referred to in this connection, as it is by Bultmann. This cult began several centuries B.C. in relation to the agricultural year; the death of winter, followed by new life in the spring and leading on to harvest, was set forth in symbolic myths associated with Osiris, Attis, and a host of others. Later there arose a deeper association with human death and immortality and it came to be believed that those who were initiated into the secret mysteries would themselves be granted a blessed immortality. Christians have known of these pagan cults

for many centuries and some have held that what men were groping for in these strange customs was at last in a sense fulfilled in the Son of God, who brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. But the attempts of the past eighty years or so to prove that Paul and the Hellenistic churches drew upon the mystery cults for their interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus go far beyond the evidence.

Mention of the dying and rising god may serve to remind us that from time to time writers come forward with the suggestion that Jesus himself is not a historical figure but just another edition of this pagan myth. Those who put out these curious theories usually rely on Sir James Frazer's work *The Golden Bough*. It is worth remembering that Frazer himself pronounced on this matter when he discovered that his researches were being misused. In book 6 of his voluminous series, on page 412, he writes: "The doubts which have been cast on the historical reality of Jesus are, in my judgment, unworthy of serious attention."

Bultmann, of course, does not give any support to wild hypotheses of this sort; and although his attitude to the details of the Gospels is sceptical and he attributes a good deal in them to the theology of the early community in form-critical style, he nevertheless finds sufficient to form the basis of his account of Jesus' teaching and ministry given in the book *Jesus and the Word*. It is rather in his handling of the development of Christian teaching in the Hellenistic milieu that he is inclined to trace the influence of the mysteries and their connection with the dying and rising gods.

Like a number of other continental interpreters he sees such influence in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 6, where baptism is set forth as a believer's sharing in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Nevertheless, in spite of plausible parallels, St. Paul's teaching can be adequately accounted for without bringing in the mystery religions at all. Moreover, as Dr. H. G. Marsh wrote in his book on *New Testament Baptism*: "No known pagan mystery taught of an initiate dying and rising with his deity after the manner suggested by Paul's words". More recently the Swiss scholar G. Wagner in his book on the problem of Romans 6 reaches the same conclusion after a thorough examination of the evidence relating to the mysteries.²

Proselyte baptism as practised in Judaism is far more important as an antecedent of Christian baptism than the various pagan rites that have often been pressed into service. David Daube, the Jewish scholar, who has written with sympathy and insight on

² *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries*, E.T. (1967).

these subjects in his *New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, points out that even the idea of death was associated in Jewish minds with proselyte baptism. His conclusion is:

The [Pauline] doctrine that baptism, as it means a rising from the dead in a moral and spiritual sense, also means a dying to the sinful world . . . has its root in Jewish teaching.

III.

Coming now to my third section, I would welcome the fact that Bultmann does not look beyond the borders of Judaism for all the sources of his Christology. And for the remaining item of the three mentioned in our opening quotation we need to consider the so-called apocalyptic Son of man. Ever since Schweitzer's notable book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, it has been a commonplace among many scholars, particularly on the continent, that there existed among the Jews a belief that a transcendent figure called the Son of man would come on the clouds of heaven to conduct the last judgment and to introduce the new world after great cosmic upheavals. This, so it is alleged, virtually replaced the prophetic view of a kingly Messiah who would reign on earth as a son of David. According to Bultmann Jesus did not regard *himself* as the Son of man; he was rather the herald of this transcendent figure. Jesus warned men of the imminent coming of these cosmic catastrophes but it was the early church which identified Jesus with the central figure of this drama.

It is alleged that the apocalyptic literature presents teaching of this type. The remarkable fact, however, is that when we consult the apocalypses we find that most of them are either silent on the subject of the Messiah, or when they mention him they depict him as a human king who is to reign on earth. The latter view has, of course, been dominant in Jewish teaching from the time of the prophets to the present day. There is one section of the book of Enoch (chapters 37-71), known as the Similitudes, which describes a Son of man as a transcendent figure who is to be associated with God in the judgment; nowhere is he described as coming with clouds, but the Enochic picture (unique among Jewish writings) is often thought to have some connection with the Son of man of the Gospels. Mention should be made of another apocalypse known as 2 Esdras, to be found in the English Apocrypha. As this in its present form comes from about A.D. 100, it cannot be used with confidence in connection with Christian origins. But it may be noted that in one place (chapter 7) the Messiah is to reign for 400 years, and in another place (chapter 13) there is a description of a man arising from the sea. If the latter is taken *literally* it is the opposite of a man descending from heaven; but it is surely to be regarded as a *symbolic* representation of the Messiah emerging from secrecy, a

familiar Jewish view. As for Daniel 7, the one like unto a son of man is interpreted in the chapter itself as a symbolic figure who stands for "the people of the saints of the Most High", just as the beasts stand for pagan empires.

It is therefore to the Similitudes of Enoch that we must give most attention, a section which, far from being typical, stands alone, as I have said, in Jewish teaching. Now, one important matter concerning this section is its date. Although the Similitudes have been widely regarded as pre-Christian, a number of scholars have for years past preferred to date them within the Christian era. Internal evidence has, in their judgment, pointed to this conclusion. I myself published in 1945 certain criticisms of R. H. Charles's pre-Christian dating of the Similitudes and I attempted to show that his arguments were far from convincing.³ Now, in 1947 something happened which has had an important bearing on this question. This was the year when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. Many caves near the Dead Sea were explored following the original discovery, and as a result thousands of fragments have come to light—some very small, others consisting of complete works—some being familiar works, and some quite new to us. The Essenes of the area, or Qumranites as some prefer to call them, had a large library and in the crisis of the war with Rome they hid their scrolls in jars within the caves of the neighbourhood, hoping that later they would return and resume their communal life and studies. They never returned. It seems they left this area in A.D. 68, and it was not until 1947 that their abandoned library came to light as the result of an Arab's search for a lost goat. One matter which concerns our present subject is the presence of many apocalypses among these Qumranite scrolls, including parts of the book of Enoch. In fact about a dozen pieces of various parts of Enoch have been discovered, and the significant fact is that not a single line of the Similitudes is among them. We have the other four parts of Enoch amply represented, chapters 1-36, 72 and onwards; but not a syllable from 37-71, the only section which has anything about the Son of man. Those people who already on other grounds rejected the pre-Christian dating cannot help feeling that this remarkable gap is not just an accident, and that as far as it goes it supports their conclusions.

This has a bearing upon the theory, so vital to Bultmann's reconstruction, that in the time of Jesus there existed a belief in an apocalyptic Son of man. One is entitled to insist that this theory has no cogent evidence to support it.

Thus the third leg of Bultmann's tripod would seem to collapse with the other two.

³ *The Second Advent: the Origin of the NT Doctrine* (1945; 3rd ed., 1963).

IV.

All this may appear to entail a somewhat negative estimate of his New Testament work but the question must be determined by the evidence. It is not enough to make pronouncements and to speak in some oracular style *quasi ex tripode*; one is entitled to ask for clear citations to support them. In regard to the three matters touched upon so briefly in this survey no satisfactory evidence has so far been produced either by Bultmann himself or those who have so eagerly followed him. If these fundamental matters prove so unsatisfactory, the scheme reared upon them collapses.

Bultmann is generally regarded as an advanced thinker, a pioneer breaking new ground; and in certain respects this is true. But in the New Testament matters we have been considering, he is virtually repeating what was said at the beginning of the century by the history-of-religion school. He appears to be impervious to the grave criticisms which this school of thought aroused at that time. Men like Loisy and Kirsopp Lake, Bousset and Reitzenstein, were brilliant scholars but they failed to win acceptance for the views they sponsored—not because these views were unpalatable, but because they were widely felt to be unsound. Bultmann is in a sense a throw-back or a survival. And while he has brought stimulus into Christian debate, he has also brought great confusion and bewilderment. The reduced Christianity with which he leaves us is far too meagre to be the basis of a world faith. The existential philosophy he offers, so slenderly attached to the historical Jesus, is something vastly different from the central realities of the Christian faith. Although he expresses himself partly in words of St. Paul and even of Luther, there is little real continuity with what has always been understood as historic Christianity. One of the central matters we miss is any sense of personal fellowship with a living Christ, a life of faith in Him as Saviour and Lord which has been the distinctive mark of Christian discipleship through the ages. No-one can miss in Paul's writings a personal bond of devotion to a living Lord. To interpret this, as Bultmann does, as St. Paul arriving at a new self-understanding, fails to do justice to the apostle's account. Who can miss the fervour of his words, "To me to live is Christ"; "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord"? So it has been through the ages. Men of very different temperament from Paul's have spoken in the same terms. "Jesu, the very thought of Thee . . ." sings St. Bernard; and Livingstone repeats those words in the original Latin as he trudges through the forests of unknown Africa.

Bultmann's philosophical presuppositions prevent him from believing in the Incarnation. It is a mental impossibility for him to regard New Testament teaching as a legitimate unfolding of

what is given to the world in Jesus. He is thus forced to turn to the strange method of finding alleged parallels in this quarter and that, and then asserting that the ultimate Christology of the New Testament was composed by a piecing together of these various oddments. In this way a human Jesus became at length regarded as a divine being and the process of apotheosis was complete. We have heard all this long, long ago. Perhaps after all it is the original presuppositions that need re-examining.

Bultmann's own disciples have in recent years embarked upon a New Quest of the Historical Jesus, expressing on this matter their disagreement with their master's verdict. Perhaps this will lead to a further process of reappraisal. Those who have always felt misgivings about the serious gaps of this very influential school will watch with interest and will hope for the recovery of other missing notes of Christian truth.

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