

In The Study

One of the most recent of the Studies in Biblical Theology has an unfortunate and misleading title.¹ It is the sub-title that gives us the content and the concern. It is: *The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and its Basis in the Biblical Tradition*. So the specific preoccupation is developed against the background and in the context of that wider mass of material within which it properly belongs. A fortunate thing indeed! For this is the kind of study where subjective impressions necessarily bulk large, and we need all the checks and balances we can get.

Basic to the Old Testament is the wilderness tradition. Dr. Mauser adopts a topical approach, for his concern is to disentangle key ideas and motifs. Pentateuchal history emphasises that it was in the wilderness that Israel was born as a nation, that the premises of her cult were established, that she received God's first and fundamental revelation, that she gained the conviction of her election. But the wilderness is seen also as the place of Israel's rebellion. So it is that the sermon which is Deuteronomy teaches, in terms of the wilderness wandering, the grace of God and the dependence and sinfulness of his people.

But in the prophets and the Psalms the desert assumes a more sinister shape. Associations with sin and darkness, suffering and death, become central, and are developed sometimes in mythological terms and sometimes with cosmic significance. Yet the darkness can become the prelude to a new dawn, and great prophets cherished the expectation of a new exodus into the wilderness, and this expectancy is preserved and heightened in the intertestamental period. It is, therefore, not surprising to find the wilderness theme appearing in I Corinthians and in Hebrews, in Matthew, Luke, and Acts. Use and interpretation are not constant and unvarying, but the indications prepare us to take seriously the emphasis which the Second Gospel may be found to reveal.

Dr. Mauser is surely right in his argument that Mark 1 : 1-13 must be treated as a coherent whole and as the prologue to the Gospel that is fundamentally determinative for what follows. Whether we can follow him entirely in his further exegesis of passages which refer to the desert is not so clear. This crucial chapter demands most careful study. The argument is complex, and many strands are subtly interwoven to produce a cord of apparent strength. Not only the sections which associate Jesus with the desert but also those which bring him to mountain and to sea are pressed into service as structurally and thematically relevant and related. These indications of withdrawal and retreat are preceded by victories over the forces of evil and are followed by the pressing of the crowds towards Jesus which makes them witnesses of his warfare. The withdrawals themselves are a return to the

¹ Ulrich W. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*. S.C.M., 12s. 6d. 1963.

scene of basic conflict. So the whole Ministry can be viewed by Mark in terms of the taking by Jesus of the Way of the Wilderness, the way of conflict and temptation. The goal is victory; but this is achieved only through suffering and death. These notes dominate the second half of the Gospel, as the way of the wilderness leads into the way of the Cross.

This is an interesting study. It approaches the Markan Gospel as a theological document with kerygmatic intention; and certainly this is sound. But in this fascinating sort of investigation and reconstruction, where exegesis is with difficulty distinguished from eisegesis and where typology ranges free, more than usually rigid demands must be made for convincing parallels and consistency. When the reader comes upon phrases such as "somewhat inconsistent" and "no strict parallel can be drawn," let him beware.

The substance of a theological dissertation mainly concerned with critically reviewing the modern discussion of a Gospel theme is not generally or inevitably a cause for wild enthusiasm. Potted summaries of major works may be expected. A familiar debate will be recapitulated without the immediacy that once gave it life. The result is likely to be another useful packet of information for the library shelf. If the example under review² stands out as something more — and it does — this is largely because of two factors. It deals with a theme that is of quite central significance in contemporary New Testament understanding. And it deals with it with a judicial discernment that really uncovers the critical issues that so often lies just beneath the surface of the discussion.

The modern debate really begins with Johannes Weiss and the *konsequente Eschatologie* that stems from him. Dr. Perrin does him full justice, and is wholly free from the long-standing and one-sided Anglo-Saxon emphasis upon Albert Schweitzer. I would suppose that Weiss always made a far greater impact so far as the continent is concerned; and certainly his work was of superior worth and has been of more enduring value. There is no going back on his contention that the teaching of Jesus on the Kingdom of God must essentially be understood against the relevant background of prophetic and apocalyptic Judaism. Every contemporary construction must start here.

But from this point on many roads present themselves. In the teaching of Jesus as the Synoptic Gospels enshrine it, the Kingdom of God is both present and future. It is to be seen, in terms of the prophetic understanding of history, as God's decisive intervention in history and human experience, but also, in subsidiary apocalyptic terms, with reference to the final state of the redeemed. It is present already in the Ministry of Jesus; it will find future consum-

² Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*. S.C.M., 30s. 1963.

mation. But is this tension temporal or existential? There is a crucial distinction here that often passes unrecognised. Jeremias and Kummel agree with Bornkamm and Fuchs as to the tension; but they differ profoundly as to its nature. The school of Bultmann follow their teacher in concluding that the sphere of the manifestation of the Kingdom is individual human existence.

Now this is the point where some absolutely rigorous thinking is demanded. Dr. Perrin writes convincingly, and in almost every case I am convinced. But here he most obviously commits himself to the school of Bultmann, and here I would still suspend judgment. Let it be granted that the teaching of Jesus offers us no guidance as to the precise manner and time of the consummation of the Kingdom. Let it be granted that the coming of the Son of Man is an image which "no more implies the literal descent of a figure from the other side of the stars than the image of the Messianic Banquet implies the setting up of trestle-tables all over the slopes of Mount Zion." Let it further be granted that we too readily think of the present-future tension in terms of chronological world history. But the hesitation remains as to whether an interpretation in terms of existential dialectic is more than a partial truth. Does it do full justice to the images — or to the Gospel? Perhaps the issue must be decided in a wider context and with broader reference than this book allows. Nevertheless, this study summarises and discusses a great deal of the material upon which decision must be based, and it is but rarely that its author dogmatizes beyond the evidence.

Letters and Papers from Prison have introduced the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to a wide audience. From these tantalisingly fragmentary jottings far-reaching conclusions have been drawn; its provocative phrases are bandied about; their meaning and implications are the topic of endless debate. And somehow it becomes easily forgotten that this captivity epistle stands at the end of a series of writings on many different subjects and from many different situations. If a young Lutheran martyr is to be fairly and realistically assessed, if indeed his final manifesto is accurately to be weighed and interpreted, then attention must be given to the whole range of his thought and development. A balanced and comprehensive investigation was urgently needed. It has now been provided.³

The eight contributors offer variations on a theme. The theme arises directly from the living heart of Bonhoeffer's concern. It can be stated in his own words: "The thing that keeps coming back to me is, what is Christianity, and indeed what is Christ, for us today?" The team, almost wholly consisting of American scholars, exposes the lines that radiate from this centre in philosophical, ethical, ecclesiological, biblical, liturgical directions, and

³ M. F. Marty (ed.), *The Place of Bonhoeffer*. S.C.M., 13s. 6d. 1963.

discusses appreciatively, critically. Outstanding among the contributions is that of Berger on sociology and ecclesiology and that of Pelikan which introduces us to the christological lectures of 1933. But a high standard is consistently maintained, even if the whole bears signs of overhasty production. It should be required reading for the airy Bonhoeffer enthusiast. It exemplifies what a symposium at its best may be.

Twelve years have passed since *The Christian Understanding of God* drew the excited comment of reviewers and made the name of Nels Ferré widely known this side of the Atlantic. Certainly that volume remains the work by which he is here best known. What is not so often realised is that the difficult but rewarding study was the fourth in a series designed to restate the essentials of the faith in truly rational terms. No accident then that the first of the series was entitled *Faith and Reason*. No accident either that a new contribution⁴ to Nelson's Library of Theology takes up and develops widely a similar theme. And not surprising that the first sentence of Dr. Ferré's preface reads: "Clarifying the relation between faith and reason seems to be my life assignment." We should be thankful for it.

This book is divided into four main sections, concerned with discussing the place and nature of reason in relation to God, man, history and nature, and the world religions. It is a reviewer's despair; for its argument is too closely knit and too coherent to be capable of summary. The passion for wholeness which animates and informs from first to last is almost a tangible thing. Faith and reason cannot be separated without denying both; for without reason faith is empty and blind, and without faith reason works in a void. Person and world cannot be separated without disaster; for the world cannot be discussed apart from the knower, and inner experience is ever bound up with out experience of the world. God alone can and must be separated, for his existence is in truth his "standing out" from all finite realities as the power for them to be.

Dr. Ferré is constantly alert and sensitive to the danger of claiming too much. He will define religion as the conviction that beyond ordinary experience there are realities which can help or harm mankind, but he will not go on to any attempt to establish religion in terms of the universally inescapable or the logically presuppositional. We cannot speak of necessity in religious knowledge—except it be from within the circle of those who have been grasped and claimed. But we can pay heed to the total ordering of experience, we can work outwards from the meaning we discern to the mystery we seek to know, we can perhaps be persuaded that the cosmic story points beyond process, and that the clue to that "beyond" is the highest which has been given to us—in Jesus as

⁴ N. F. S. Ferré, *Reason in Religion*. Nelson, 35s. 1963.

the Christ. And under the inexorable pressure of that understanding we may find as our religious ultimate "the sovereign God of love concerned with effecting the fully open and inclusive community of creative concern and satisfactory life." Critical reason, which by barring the way to irrationality and superstition exercises its iconoclastic role, interjects its cautions and raises its constant and necessary queries. But creative reason, which is the organ of faith, leads us on.

This is a weighty and moving study. It ranges far and penetrates deep. Its author takes full account of modern philosophical trends. He even seems to have a private line to Dr. Robinson, and to have answered him in advance: "Instead of using 'upward' or 'inward' we can use such a term as 'spiritward'." Does this advance the argument? Well, read on and see. The student who is at home with Dr. Ferré's earlier writings will wrest most from this one. But all who value reason and are prepared to use it will find both provocation and illumination.

In 1946 a symposium was published under the title of *The Apostolic Ministry*. It was an attempt by the anglo-catholic wing of the Church of England to restate the case for episcopacy and apostolic succession as being of the *essé* of the Church of God; but many of its more interesting emphases received little attention as controversy raged furiously over the *shaliach* conception with which, at a crucial point, the argument was underpinned. One of the most weighty contributors was Father Gabriel Hebert. Now, nearly two decades later, he looks back on this composite high church landmark, takes up his old task, and attempts to reframe his position.

The book⁵ which results is in the end almost embarrassingly disappointing. It is sub-titled *A Study of the Gospel, The Ministry and the Church-Community*, and therein is reflected both the openness of the author to the impact of recent ecumenical thought and discussion and also something of the measure of his own shift of understanding over the years. But while we look for some weighty contribution which might in places break new ground, what in fact emerges is an inconclusive study which time and time again baulks at the critical fences, and turns aside at the precise moment when the significant corollaries are to be drawn. It is all very well to confess that adequate treatment would demand that each chapter become a volume. This is disarming. It is not so clear that it is a confession that justifies.

It would not, I think, be misleading to see the substance of this work as falling under three sections. There is an initial examination of the New Testament and the immediate post-canonical period. This leads to a rapid drive through the patristic period,

⁵ A. G. Hebert, *Apostle and Bishop*. Faber & Faber, 21s. 1963.

and the Middle Ages to the Reformation. The sixteenth century hands on unsolved the twin problems of eucharistic sacrifice and ministry and priesthood, and there thus follows an investigation of these in terms of Scripture and theology. This last major section seems to me to assert only what has been said many times before, and indeed to lead us neither as clearly nor as far as some other recent discussions. The historical excursus of the second section is surely not materially open to challenge, and demands no comment. It is the first section that is most important and fundamental.

Here the method adopted is a fruitful one. The Gospels are closely and critically examined, and the real continuity between the message of Jesus and the message of the apostles is revealed. But the line can be extended, and drawn more specifically. The Gospel message has continuity with the apostolic commission; and the apostolic commission has continuity with the episcopal ministry. This is truly and wisely said. These are the terms in which the main issue must be faced and decided. It may further be accepted that at the close of the New Testament era we find apostolic delegates over groups of local churches and that in the second century we find local bishops as presidents of local churches, and that we are left with the need to come to a conclusion as to link, connection, development between these two phenomena. All this reveals the working of a shrewd and balanced mind. It is the initial promise of a book that never finds fulfilment.

Dr. Hebert has many welcome and stimulating affirmations to advance. Most of his conclusions, indeed, are standard Reformed theology. The apostolic commission involved proclamation of the Gospel, ministration of the Sacraments, pastoral and disciplinary care of the flock. In the New Testament *episkopos* nowhere denotes an office or order of the Ministry. In the second century apostolic succession is first of all in sees. The Free Church scholar will say Amen to all that. He will also be helped and heartened by the attempt to say clearly what the office of bishop should symbolise and express. Perhaps, after all, this book is really directed to Dr. Hebert's own anglo-catholic brethren. Coming from such a source it could be explosive. It asserts that non-episcopal ministries are valid ministries. But where does it really leave us in the reunion debate? I cannot say. The net is never tightly drawn, and somewhere or other the fish slips through. I wouldn't swear to it, but I think I saw it vanishing on page 65. Writes Father Hebert: "We have the fixing of the Canon and Creed and Episcopate, at about the same time. All three point directly back to the Apostolic Testimony as basic for the Church's teaching and life. The inference is that the Episcopate can claim by right the same degree of authority as the other two." Is this an "inference?" Or is it a classical example of a logical *non sequitur*?

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