

Bultmann Revisited

COLIN BROWN

TWENTY YEARS AGO there was a distinct euphoria and unmistakable feeling of optimism in Anglican Evangelical circles. It seemed that liberalism was at last on the way out and was being replaced by the Biblical Theology movement. Barth and Brunner were the big names and the majestic progress of Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* was rumoured as the portent of a new age. Admittedly Barth and Brunner were not altogether sound. They were said to be positively dangerous on some points. There was also another cloud on the horizon. The works of a man called Rudolph Bultmann were beginning to be published, and it was said that he believed that the gospels were a load of myth. But at least it seemed that things were going in the right direction, and it seemed to some only a matter of time before the demise of liberalism was complete. Then some time in the late sixties all this seemed to vanish overnight like Jonah's gourd. Barth and Brunner who had spoken so much to the generations that were living in the shadows of two world wars suddenly seemed to become men of the past. They still attracted a clientele, but the theological world had gone after Bultmann. In the post-war faculties of the German universities Bultmann's pupils had been appointed to the key teaching posts. Scientific criticism of the Bible was identified with whatever Bultmann had said or at least with whatever his pupils said that he ought to have said. What was not Bultmann was not *wissenschaftlich*.

In the fifties and sixties the Bultmann school went from strength to strength. School after school in Britain and the United States found Bultmann as their prophet. An Anglican monk once told me that he did not know what faith was until he read Bultmann. In retrospect, it seems to me now that what Bultmann seemed to do for so many was to hold out to them the possibility of radical belief combined with radical scepticism. Liberalism was far from breathing its last. It had not even gone underground. It was just that we had not noticed it.

Autobiographical Reflections

THE account that Bultmann has given of his career is colourless to the point of being drab (cf. C. W. Kegley, ed., *The Theology of Rudolph Bultmann*, 1966, xix-xxv). He was born in 1884, the son of a German pastor. He enjoyed school, particularly the study of religion, Greek, and German literature. He studied at Tübingen, Berlin and Marburg, and wrote theses on *The Style of Pauline Preaching and the Cynic-Stoic Diatribe* (1910) and *The Exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (1912). Among his teachers were Karl Müller, Hermann Gunkel, Adolf Harnack, Adolf Jülicher, Johannes Weiss and Wilhelm Herrmann. He taught successively at the universities of Breslau (1916-1920), Giessen where he succeeded Wilhelm Bousset (1920-1921), and Marburg (1921-1951). On retirement he became professor emeritus. More recently he was awarded the highest civilian decoration by the West German government, *Pour le Mérite*.

Throughout his career Bultmann has deliberately refrained from making political statements. On the other hand, he joined the Confessing Church at its founding in 1934. In the twenties he found himself alongside Barth in the Dialectical Theology movement. Fifty years on, they now appear to be strange bedfellows. At the time, however, they could make common cause in breaking with the older liberalism which regarded Christianity as a phenomenon in the history of religion and a product of cultural history. As Bultmann later wrote, 'It seemed to me that, distinguished from such a view, the new theology correctly saw that Christian faith is the answer to the Word of the transcendent God which encounters man, and that theology has to deal with this Word and the man who has been encountered by it' (*op. cit.*, xxiv). To ignore this aspect of Bultmann is to ignore the basic thrust of his thought. But in the very next breath Bultmann can also say, 'This judgment, however, has never led me to a simple condemnation of "liberal" theology; on the contrary I have endeavoured throughout my entire work to carry farther the tradition of historical-critical research as it was practised in "liberal" theology and to make our recent theological knowledge the more fruitful as a result' (*ibid.*). Bultmann's writings amply vindicate the sincerity of both aspects of this declaration of intent.

Form-Criticism

BULTMANN'S first major work was *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921, Eng. tr. 1963; both versions subsequently revised and enlarged). Together with Martin Dibelius's *Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (1919), it established form criticism as a tool and technique of gospel criticism. Bultmann did not invent form criticism, nor did

he see it as an alternative to the older literary source criticism. He saw himself as building upon foundations that had already been laid by men like Johannes Weiss, William Wrede, K. L. Schmidt, J. Wellhausen and H. Gunkel. Whereas the older critics believed that Mark was the oldest gospel and represented more or less a historical picture of Jesus (which had been embellished for didactic and apologetic purposes by Matthew, Luke and John), Bultmann maintained that Mark itself was made up of a series of disconnected individual units which had themselves been shaped, and in many cases created, by the faith of the early church. It was therefore necessary to analyse the forms in which the stories and sayings have come down in order to detect their 'life situation' (or to use Gunkel's immortal phrase *Sitz im Leben*) in the early church. This was no mere 'exercise in aesthetics nor yet simply a process of description and classification. . . . It is much rather [quoting Dibelius] "to rediscover the origin and the history of the particular units and thereby throw some light on the history of the tradition before it took literary form". The proper understanding of form-criticism rests upon the judgment that the literature in which the life of a given community, even the primitive Christian community, has taken shape, springs out of quite definite conditions and wants of life from which grows up a quite definite style and quite specific forms and categories' (*op. cit.*, 3f.).

The first part of the book dealt with 'The Tradition of the Sayings of Jesus'. Bultmann divided these sayings into two main categories: *Apothegms* and *Dominical Sayings*. *Apothegms* are 'such units as consist of sayings of Jesus set in a brief context' (*op. cit.*, 11). A typical example is the Sabbath healing of the man with the withered hand which includes the saying: 'Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' (Mark 3:4). Bultmann's brief examination concludes that, 'Its language confirms what its content suggests as probable, that its formulation took place in the early Palestinian Church' (*op. cit.*, 12). Matthew and Luke are seen as adding embellishments that are 'characteristic for the history of the tradition'. The *Dominical Sayings* fall into various categories which are again held to reflect more the circumstances of the early church than the actual ministry of Jesus himself. Among them are *Logia* or Wisdom Sayings which have affinities with Hebrew wisdom literature: e.g. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof' (Matt. 6:34); *op. cit.*, 73); 'Let the dead bury their dead' (Matt. 8:22; Luke 9:60; *op. cit.*, 77). There is a variety of *Prophetic and Apocalyptic Sayings*. Thus the sayings about the blessedness of those who are persecuted for the sake of the Son of Man (Luke 6:22f.; Matt. 5:10ff.) arise both in form and content from the event of persecution and were 'for that reason created by the Church' (*op. cit.*, 110). *Legal Sayings and Church Rules* largely put into the mouth of Jesus rules which were formulated to direct the practices of the early church. These in fact may well reflect

more the Jewish character of the Palestinian church (e.g. Matt. 12:11f.; Mark 3:4; 7:15; *op. cit.*, 130f.) than Jesus himself. It is impossible to regard Matthew 16:18f. as a genuine saying of Jesus, for this would deprive the church of 'its radically eschatological character' (*op. cit.*, 140). With regard to the 'I-Sayings' of Jesus, Bultmann remarks, 'There are no possible grounds for objecting to the idea that Jesus could have spoken in the first person about himself and his coming; that need be no more than what befits his prophetic self-consciousness. Yet as individual sayings they rouse a number of suspicions' (*op. cit.*, 153). When these suspicions have been duly examined, the sayings die the death of a thousand qualifications. The upshot is: 'The "I-Sayings" were predominantly the work of the *Hellenistic Churches*, though a beginning had already been made in the *Palestinian Church*. Here too Christian prophets filled by the Spirit spoke in the name of the ascended Lord sayings like Revelation 16:15 (*op. cit.*, 163). Whereas all the material so far discussed grew out of an Aramaic environment, there are certain *Similitudes and Similar Forms* which may have grown out of a Hellenistic environment of which the most substantial are Mark 7:20-23; Matthew 11:27, par. Luke 10:22; and Luke 21:34ff. (*op. cit.*, 166). The final test of whether a saying can be regarded as genuine is expressed as follows: 'We can only count on possessing a genuine similitude of Jesus where, on the one hand, expression is given to the contrast between Jewish morality and piety and the distinctive eschatological temper which characterised the preaching of Jesus; and where on the other hand we find no specifically Christian features' (*op. cit.*, 205).

In the second part of the book Bultmann turned to 'The Tradition of the Narrative Material'. Here he saw two main categories: *Miracle Stories and Historical Stories and Legends*. Some miracle stories occur in Apothegms, but there they are subordinated to the point of the pronouncement. By contrast the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 is 'a miracle story proper' (*op. cit.*, 209). Bultmann defines as legends 'those parts of the tradition which are not miracle stories in the proper sense, but instead of being historical in character are religious and edifying' (*op. cit.*, 244). Often history and legend merge. Sometimes the miraculous is included. But this is not necessarily so, 'as e.g. the cult legends of the Last Supper do not exhibit anything distinctively miraculous' (*op. cit.*, 245). The narratives may be 'biographical legend' or 'cult legend', depending on content. The baptism of Jesus belongs to the former (*op. cit.*, 247). Other legends are the temptation, the triumphal entry, the passion narrative and the Lord's Supper.

The third and final part of the book dealt with 'The editing of the Traditional Material' by the various evangelists into the form in which we have it. The collection of material began in the primitive Palestinian Church. It was prompted by apologetic and polemic considerations (*op. cit.*, 368). Mark's Gospel was a new literary type (*op. cit.*,

369). It was the product of the Hellenistic church taking over Palestinian material and shaping it into a gospel. But it is not really a biography. The Christ that was originally preached in the Hellenistic church was 'not the historic Jesus, but the Christ of the faith and the cult' (*op. cit.*, 370). The gospels were written to meet a later need and interest.

Jesus

THE History of the Synoptic Tradition leaves the impression that, while much can be known about the early church, very little can be known about Jesus himself. This impression was strengthened five years later when Bultmann published his little book on *Jesus* (1926, Eng. tr. *Jesus and the Word*, 1935). In the meantime, Bultmann had formed a friendship with his Marburg colleague, the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger. And already the book on *Jesus* showed traces of existentialism in the way it reinterpreted the significance of Jesus.

Jesus is therefore the bearer of the word, and in the word he assures man of the forgiveness of God. . . . But if we return to the real significance of 'word', implying as it does a relationship between speaker and hearer, then the word can become an event to the hearer, because it brings him into this relationship. But this presupposes ultimately a wholly different conception of man, namely that the possibilities for man and humanity are not marked out from the beginning and determined in the concrete situation by character or circumstances; rather, that they stand open, that in every concrete situation new possibilities appear, that human life throughout is characterised by successive decisions. Man is constrained to decision by the word which brings a new element into his situation, and the word therefore become to him an event; for it to become an event, the hearer is essential.

Therefore the attestation of the truth of the word lies wholly in what takes place between word and hearer. This can be called subjective only by him who either has not understood or has not taken seriously the meaning of 'word'. Whoever understands it and takes it seriously knows that there is no other possibility of God's forgiveness becoming real for man than the word. In the word, and not otherwise, does Jesus bring forgiveness. Whether his word is truth, whether he is sent from God—that is the decision to which the hearer is constrained, and the word of Jesus remains: 'Blessed is he who finds no cause of offence in me' (*op. cit.*, 217ff.).

The first half of the last paragraph has a distinct heads-I-win-tails-you-lose air about it. But our purpose at this stage is not to quibble with the details of the argument, but to discern its main thrust. Bultmann has not eliminated God; he has reinterpreted him in an existentialist concept of existence. The truth of the gospel is not known as an object. It can only be apprehended subjectively (which is a very

different thing from saying that it is merely subjective). It is mediated by the word which brings with it the possibility of both knowing God and living in a new way. Thus hearing and receiving the word has the character of an event.

The Demythologised Gospel

THE thought of Karl Barth has developed along a zigzag path. Each decade he has cast his thought in a certain mould, only to crack the mould in the next. By contrast Bultmann's thought has been cumulative. To his form criticism he added existentialism in the mid-twenties, and to them both he added demythologisation in 1941. Though later supplemented by his Yale lectures on *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (1951), the classical text remains the programmatic essay on 'New Testament and Mythology' (*Kerygma and Myth*, one volume edition 1972, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch, 1-44).

Again Bultmann parted company with the older liberals only to restate their position in a far more radical way. Whereas they had held that some elements in the gospel story (such as the virgin birth, the magi and the empty tomb) had been mythical, Bultmann now maintained that the whole thought-world of the New Testament was mythical. The alleged three-decker universe of heaven, earth and hell, angels and demons, divine interventions, the heavenly redeemer, salvation, resurrection and judgment—in short, the entire conceptuality and language of the New Testament was drawn from the world of mythology. In particular, it was drawn from two sources: Jewish apocalyptic with its myth of the imminent end of the world, the present age and the age to come, and the messiah; and Hellenistic Gnosticism with its cosmic dualism of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, redemption and the heavenly redeemer (*op. cit.*, 1f., 6, 15f.). But the mythological view of the world is obsolete in view of modern science which admits of no such divine interventions and explains what hitherto was regarded as supernatural in terms of chemistry, physics and psychology (*op. cit.*, 3-8). Nevertheless, myth has a real value—not as presenting an objective picture of the world 'but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. . . . Myth is an expression of man's conviction that the origin and purpose of the world in which he lives are to be sought not within it but beyond it—that is, beyond the realm of known and tangible reality—and that this realm is perpetually dominated and menaced by those mysterious powers which are its source and limit' (*op. cit.*, 10f.). Therefore, the kerygma must be demythologised, not for the sake of removing all offence but in order to let the true offence of Christianity make its impact (cf. also *op. cit.*, 183).

'The importance of the New Testament mythology lies not in its

imagery but in the understanding of existence which it enshrines. The real question is whether this understanding of existence is true. Faith claims that it is, and faith ought not to be tied down to the imagery of New Testament mythology' (*op. cit.*, 11). According to Bultmann, the New Testament itself has already begun the process, but often there are gross contradictions (*op. cit.*, 11ff.; cf. 34-43). On the one hand, Paul can shift the emphasis of his proclamation from the future expectation of the return of Christ on the clouds to the believer's present life in Christ, and John can do the same with his view of eternal life here and now and judgment already accomplished through the word which Jesus brings. On the other hand, Bultmann sees contradictions between the self-emptying of the pre-existent son (Phil. 2) and miracle narratives as proofs of his messianic claims, between the virgin birth and his pre-existence, between the doctrine of creation and the idea of 'rulers of this world' (1 Cor. 2:6ff.), the 'god of this world' (2 Cor. 4:4) and the 'elements of the world' (Gal. 4:3).

Bultmann analyses 'The Christian Interpretation of Being' in terms of 'Human Existence apart from Faith' and 'The Life of Faith'. Here the language of the New Testament is allegedly gnostic but its analysis of the human predicament is essentially existentialist. Life in this world is characterised by the flesh. Flesh is not 'the bodily or physical side of human nature, but the sphere of visible, concrete, tangible, and measurable reality, which as such is also the sphere of corruption and death' (*op. cit.*, 18; cf. *Systematic Theology*, I, 1952, 232ff.). It is characterised by care and anxiety, and by the fact that the pursuit of security makes man a slave. 'Everybody tries to hold fast to his own life and property, because he has a secret feeling that it is all slipping away from him' (*op. cit.*, 19). 'The authentic life, on the other hand, would be a life based on unseen, intangible realities. Such a life means the abandonment of all self-contrived security. This is what the New Testament means by "life after the Spirit" or "life in faith". . . . The grace of God means *the forgiveness of sin*, and brings deliverance from the bondage of the past. The old quest for visible security, the hankering after tangible realities, and the clinging to transitory objects, is sin, for by it we shut out invisible reality from our lives and refuse God's future which comes to us as a gift. But once we open our hearts to the grace of God, our sins are forgiven; we are released from the past. This is what is meant by "faith": to open ourselves freely to the future' (*op. cit.*, 19). This is not an ascetic flight from the world, but the preservation of 'a distance from the world and dealing with it in a spirit of "as if not"' (*ibid.*, cf. 1 Cor. 7:29ff.).

Bultmann analyses 'The Event of Redemption' in terms of the message of the cross and resurrection. The cross 'certainly has a mythical character as far as its objective setting is concerned' (*op. cit.*, 35). By this he means the idea of a sinless, pre-existent Son of God atoning for sin by the vicarious shedding of his blood. But this is not

essential, so far as Bultmann is concerned. What counts is 'to make the cross of Christ our own, to undergo crucifixion with him' (*op. cit.*, 36). As such, this can be an ever present reality in the sacraments. 'The abiding significance of the cross is that it is the judgment and the deliverance of man' (*op. cit.*, 37), it originated in the historic cross of Christ, but is now a 'permanent fact'. The resurrection is accorded similar treatment. The sceptic cannot be compelled to believe by miraculous proof. For on the one hand, 'the resuscitation of a corpse is incredible and the resurrection of Jesus is itself an article of faith' (*op. cit.*, 39f.). Its real significance is to be found in the new life that it brings. As in *Jesus and the Word*, the message of Jesus is not something that can be objectively proved. It is that which comes to man giving him personal liberation.

The word of preaching confronts us as the word of God. It is not for us to question its credentials. It is we who are questioned, we who are asked whether we will believe the word or reject it. But in answering this question, in accepting the word of preaching as the word of God and the death and resurrection of Christ as the eschatological event, we are given an opportunity of understanding ourselves. Faith and unbelief are never blind arbitrary decisions. They offer us the alternative between accepting or rejecting that which alone can illuminate our understanding of ourselves.

The real Easter faith is faith in the word of preaching which brings illumination. If the event of Easter Day is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord, since it was this faith which led to the apostolic preaching. The resurrection itself is not an event of past history (*op. cit.*, 41f.).

Bultmann anticipates the charge that what he is saying is a veiled form of existentialism by admitting its partial truth. He holds that Heidegger's existentialism has the same genuine insights into the structure of human existence as the New Testament (*op. cit.*, 25f.; cf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 45ff.). He does, however, make two qualifications. There is a sense in which secular existentialism is indebted to Kierkegaard, Luther and thus indirectly to the New Testament. On the other hand, secular existentialism does not recognise the extent of man's fallen existence, his incapacity to save himself, and the liberating gospel of the cross and resurrection of Christ.

John and The Theology of the New Testament

BULTMANN'S major commentary on *The Gospel of John* (1941; Eng. tr. 1971 based on the 1964 edition) is in a sense a counterpart to his work on the synoptic tradition and his understanding of myth in the New Testament. It is further complemented by his *Theology of the*

New Testament, I-II (1948-1953; Eng. tr. 1952-1955). In line with what we have seen so far, Bultmann lays down as his basic premise:

The message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself. For New Testament theology consists in the unfolding of those ideas by means of which Christian faith makes sure of its own object, basis, and consequences. But Christian faith did not exist until there was a Christian *kerygma*; i.e., a *kerygma* proclaiming Jesus Christ—specifically Jesus Christ the Crucified and Risen One—to be God's eschatological act of salvation. He was first so proclaimed in the *kerygma* of the earliest Church, not in the message of the historical Jesus, even though that Church frequently introduced into its account of Jesus' message, motifs of its own proclamation. Thus, theological thinking—the theology of the New Testament—begins with the *kerygma* of the earliest Church and not before (*Theology of the New Testament*, I, 3).

Thus Bultmann sees the theology of the NT starting with the *kerygma* and not with Jesus himself. It was developed by the Hellenistic church and then by Paul (this constitutes the subject matter of volume I). Later still it was further developed by John and the early catholic church (the theme of volume II).

John's portrait of Jesus sees him through the eyes of a gnostic. It is a Christian reinterpretation of gnosticism, breaking with the latter at certain crucial points, but nevertheless using the conceptual tools of gnosticism.

Jesus appears as in the Gnostic myth as the pre-existent Son of God whom the Father clothed with authority and sent into the world. Here, appearing as a man, he speaks the words the Father gave him and accomplishes the works which the Father commissioned him to do. In so doing, he is not 'cut off' from the Father but stands in solid and abiding unity with Him as an ambassador without fault or falsehood. He comes as the 'light', the 'truth', the 'life' by bringing through his words and works light, truth, and life and calling 'his own' to himself. In his discourses with their 'I am . . .' he reveals himself as the Ambassador; but only 'his own' understand him. . . . But his departure also belongs to his work of redemption, for by his elevation he has prepared the way for his own to the heavenly dwelling-places into which he will fetch his own. Out of Gnostic language, finally, and not, as some maintain, out of the Greek philosophical tradition comes the pre-existent Revealer's name: Logos (*Theology of the New Testament*, II, 13).

Alongside of this may be placed Bultmann's demythologised existential interpretation of John 3:20.

The statement that man in the encounter with the Revealer decides for or against him *on the basis* of his past is only a boldly paradoxical way of saying that in man's decision it becomes apparent what he really is. He does indeed reach his decision on the basis of his past, but in such a way that this decision at the same time gives the past its real meaning, that in unbelief man sets the seal on the worldliness and sinfulness of his character,

or that in faith he destroys its worldliness and sinfulness. In the decision man makes when faced with the question put to him by God, it becomes apparent, in his very act of decision, what he really is. Thus the mission of Jesus is the eschatological event in which judgment is made on all man's past. And this mission can be the eschatological event, because in it God's love restores to man the freedom which he has lost, the freedom to take possession of his own authenticity (*The Gospel of John*, 159f.).

Bultmann's Legacy

IT is all too painfully apparent that in a general survey article of this kind we cannot avoid falling into a double trap. On the one hand, the ground is so well worn that it is impossible to say anything that has not been said by someone somewhere. Indeed, after a generation of argument the theological terrain looks like a World War I battlefield with nothing but mud, wreckage, corpses and a few broken trees here and there. On the other hand, it is impossible to do justice to all that Bultmann himself has written, let alone to the countless Davids and Goliaths that have taken up arms to do battle for and against Bultmann.¹ All that can be done here is to indicate the lines along which Bultmann has something important (whether for good or ill) to say to us today.

1. *Form criticism.* Since Bultmann's day form criticism has taken a new turn and emerged as redaction criticism. It is a logical development, given the premises of form criticism. The term *Redaktionsgeschichte* (which is parallel to the German *Formgeschichte*, literally form history) was apparently coined by Wili Marxsen and means literally 'redaction history'. According to Norman Perrin, himself a leading practitioner, 'It is concerned with studying the theological motivation of an author as this is revealed in the collection, arrangement, editing, and modification of traditional material, and in the composition of new material or the creation of new forms within the traditions of early Christianity' (*What is Redaction Criticism?*, 1970, 1). It is not altogether dissimilar from the tendency criticism of F. C. Baur and the Pentateuchal criticism of Wellhausen. Indeed, Wellhausen (who pioneered form criticism in the NT) may well be the missing link between the form-critical detection of tendencies in the alleged units in the documents in the NT and those in the OT. But to guess at the pedigree of an idea is neither to refute it nor confirm it. The usefulness of both form criticism and redaction criticism as tools for understanding the NT must depend on other criteria. It is precisely here, however, that I must confess to grave personal difficulties.

¹ For a list of Bultmann's writings complete to 1965 see C. W. Kegley, *op. cit.*, 289-310; cf. W. Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, 1968, 325-328.

Earlier on we saw how for Bultmann, if a saying is to be regarded as a genuine saying of Jesus it must exhibit marked contrasts with Jewish morality and piety, possess 'the distinctive eschatological temper which characterised the preaching of Jesus', and at the same time be devoid of 'specifically Christian features' (*History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 205). In the same vein, R. H. Fuller and Norman Perrin lay down similar criteria. 'As regards the sayings of Jesus, traditio-historical criticism eliminates from the authentic sayings of Jesus those which are paralleled in the Jewish tradition on the one hand (apocalyptic and Rabbinic) and those which reflect the faith, practice and situations of the post-Easter church as we know them from outside the gospels' (R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, 1965, 18; cf. N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 1967, 42f.). Now, the desire to avoid credulity and the quest for a firm base for faith are perfectly laudable. But to insist on these criteria is like recommending someone with a sore throat to gargle twice daily with carbolic acid. For the remedy defeats its own purpose. It presupposes that Jesus could have nothing at all in common with his contemporaries, on the one hand, and with the early church, on the other. It is, moreover, an *a priori* denial. For it rules out in advance much of what the gospels attribute to Jesus even before it begins to examine what they say. To these twin criteria Fuller adds a third. Authentic sayings should be 'conceivable as developments within Palestinian Judaism' and 'use its categories, and if possible reflect the language and style of Aramaic' (*ibid.*). The first part of this third criteria seems to be at variance with what has gone before. For it insists that Jesus must have taught things in common with his background, and even denies to Jesus what Fuller readily grants to the early church—the liberty to teach something new. The second part suggests that Fuller is willing to entertain as genuine only those passages where the gospel writers or their sources made a bad job of translating the original Aramaic into Greek. Where the writer has made a good translation, he has apparently defeated his own object. For this suggests to Fuller that it was probably not an utterance of Jesus. Conversely, it may appear to the simple-minded that the retention of an Aramaic idiom is by itself no guarantee of authenticity. For it could have been devised by anyone who spoke Aramaic.

The upshot of all this is to suggest that the continued use of such criteria can only lead up a blind alley. Such criteria can be used neither to establish the authenticity of a saying nor to disestablish it. Still less therefore can they be used without more ado to locate the form of a saying, utterance or event in a particular church or stratum of Christian history. Some twenty years ago T. W. Manson wrote a contribution to the Dodd *Festschrift* on 'The Life of Jesus: Some Tendencies in Present-Day Research' (W. D. Davies and D. Daube, eds., *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, 1954, 211-221). At the time he must have seemed to many (though doubtless

not to Dodd himself) to have been swimming against the stream. In the intervening years he must have seemed to be more so. Manson argued that, 'A paragraph of Mark is not a penny the better or the worse as historical evidence for being labelled "apothegm" or "pronouncement story" or "paradigm". In fact if form criticism had been confined to this descriptive activity, it would probably have made little stir' (*op. cit.*, 212). But it got mixed up with two things: K. L. Schmidt's attack on the Marcan framework and the doctrine of the *Sitz im Leben*. In *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (1919) Schmidt had argued that Mark consisted of isolated units stuck together by editorial cement which bore little or no relation to history. To this, Manson replied that the more he studied Mark, the more he was convinced that the story presents in the main an orderly, logical development set in a framework that has as much claim to be considered reliable historical material as any anecdote incorporated in it. With regard to the *Sitz im Leben*, Manson wrote:

It is at least conceivable that one of the chief motives for preserving the stories at all, and for selecting those that were embodied in the Gospels, was just plain admiration and love for their hero. It is conceivable that he was no less interesting, for *his own sake*, to people of the first century than he is to historians in the twentieth. This makes it all the more urgent that we should be prepared to look first for a *Sitz im Leben Jesu* or a *Sitz im Leben des jüdischen Volkes*, and not resort automatically to a *Sitz im Leben der alten Kirche*, a procedure which may easily involve us in circular arguments; since the alleged modifications or inventions in the Gospels are used to define the positions of the early Church, and these positions are then used to account for the phenomena presented by the Gospels (*op. cit.*, 214).

One of the main supports upholding the framework of Bultmann's conception of the development of NT theology was the distinction between a more primitive Palestinian Christianity and a later Hellenistic Christianity. Later Bultmannians developed this into a threefold scheme: a Palestinian Jewish church, a Jewish Hellenistic church and a Hellenistic church. Each of them had their own theologies, and the degree to which any given passage or idea lent itself to such an alleged theology was used in turn to determine its own *Sitz im Leben* and ultimately its authenticity and value. The idea goes back beyond Bultmann to his teacher, Heitmüller, and the man he succeeded at Giessen, Bousset. It is basic not only to Bultmann but also to a work like F. Hahn's *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (1969). But the question may be asked, whether there was ever such a clear-cut distinction, and thus whether the dating and assessment of the various ideas attributed to the different churches and outlooks really hold. In a recent article on 'Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity: Some Critical Comments' (*New Testament Studies*, Vol. 19, 3, April 1973, 271-287), I. Howard Marshall has raised some serious questions about the whole undertaking.

Authorities on Judaism lend no substantial support to the idea that a sharp distinction can be drawn between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism. According to M. Hengel, the whole of Judaism from the middle of the third century BC must be characterised as Hellenistic Judaism (*op. cit.*, 274; cf. *Judaism and Hellenism*, Eng. tr. 1974). At the same time the Judaism of the Diaspora was by no means free from the kind of influence that has been labelled Palestinian. 'A geographical use of the terms "Palestinian" and "Hellenistic" becomes impossible' (*ibid.*). But equally no rigid cultural distinctions can be drawn. There were differences of emphasis and influence, but this cannot be made the basis of clear geographical and cultural divisions. What applied to Judaism also applied to the church. Mention in Acts 6:1 cf. 9:29) of Hebrews and Hellenistics suggests that the latter were Greek-speaking Jews in the Jerusalem church who were thus present from the beginning. By itself it does not provide the basis for positing two separate communities with their own theologies as well as language. The presence of Aramaisms in the NT is insufficient basis for assuming a theological distinction between Aramaic and Greek-speaking sections of the Jewish church (*op. cit.*, 279f.).

Moreover, the time scale required for the alleged development of many of the ideas through three phases from the first Easter to their adaptation by Paul (c. AD 50 when he wrote 1 Thessalonians) appears to be too short for the purpose. Marshall prefers to think of a continual to-and-fro of ideas from the start (*op. cit.*, 281). Similarly, we do not find two different kinds of church in the NT—the one Jewish, the other Gentile. It was the same church which preached to both Jews and Gentiles. No specifically Hellenistic Gentile Christianity can be found in the NT, and no single NT document can be labelled as basically Gentile. 'The conclusion that should be drawn is the impossibility of drawing rigid distinctions between Jewish and Gentile elements in the early church' (*op. cit.*, 283f.). If this is so, it is impossible to use alleged Jewish, Hellenistic and Gentile elements as criteria in the practice of form and redaction criticism.

Another feature of post-Bultmannian thought is the alleged willingness of the early church to treat utterances made by prophets speaking through the Spirit in the name of Jesus as if they were utterances of the historical Jesus himself (cf. N. Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?*, 78). We have already noticed Manson's comments on the early church's alleged indifference to the historical Jesus. More recently attention has been drawn to the total lack of evidence for the contention that prophets were the originators of the sayings of Jesus (cf. David Hill, 'On the Evidence for the Creative Role of Christian Prophets', *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 20, 1973-1974, 262-274; F. Neugebauer, 'Geistsprüche und Jesuslogien', *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 53, 1962, 218-228; I Howard Marshall, *TSF Bulletin*, 53 Spring 1969, 5). Prophecies in the Bible were never anonymous, but

were always ascribed to the human agent through whom they were uttered. Similarly, in Acts the names of those who had visions or spoke prophecies are always given. Whereas the historical books of the New Testament do not contain in their text the names of their authors, the revelation of the risen Christ to John is so designated in Revelation 1:1. Elsewhere in Revelation the utterances to the seven churches are specifically attributed to the Spirit (2:7,11 etc.). Moreover, not only was there a distinction made in the early church between prophets and apostles, but the latter were clearly given a higher authority. The question of the Fourth Gospel is another matter. The traditional view sees it as an essentially historical supplement to the synoptics. Today it is more commonly treated as a series of meditations based on data which is ultimately historical. Although the question of John remains crucial for a historical understanding of Jesus, in neither case could it be said that John is a series of prophetic utterances.

What then is the alternative to form criticism? It is clearly not to abandon the historical study of the New Testament altogether. To do so would be to abdicate the truth-claims of Christianity to be a historical religion which centres on what God has done in time and space in Jesus of Nazareth. In so far as these acts were historical, they are open to historical investigation. My personal view is that C. H. Dodd was on much surer ground in his critique of Schmidt, when he argued that Mark's outline represents a cross between a chronological and topical order giving 'a genuine succession of events, within which movement and development can be traced (*New Testament Studies*, 1952, 11; reprint of 'The Framework of the Gospel Narrative', *The Expository Times*, Vol. 43, 1932, 396ff.). Dodd went on to argue that this reflected a basic apostolic kerygma which can be found both in the preaching in Acts and the Pauline epistles (*The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, 1936). Although D. E. Nineham has criticised Dodd (*Studies in the Gospels*, 1957, 223-239), the substance of Dodd's case still stands in my opinion. Dodd's thesis would fit the testimony of Papias that, 'Mark, indeed, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, howbeit not in order, all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord' (*HE*, III, 39, 15). I myself would combine this with the contention that Acts is the second volume of a two-volume work, Luke-Acts, which was written as an apologetic defence of Christianity in general and Paul in particular while he awaited trial in Rome in the sixties. This presupposes the existence of earlier accounts of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4). We may well include among these accounts the gospel of Mark. Now, we cannot insist upon a lengthy time gap between the writing of Luke and Acts. It may have been a matter of days or it may have been much longer. Likewise, the argument does not demand that Mark must have been written many years previously. But it does suggest a date not later than the early sixties

and one which could be considerably earlier. In either case, the time scale is considerably shorter than the one posited by form criticism for the emergence and writing down of the alleged forms. And if the testimony of Papias and others to the connection between Mark and Peter is valid, we have good grounds for trusting the gospels with the first disciples and Jesus himself.

An attack on form criticism from another quarter has come from the Scandinavian scholars, H. Riesenfeld ('The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings', 1957, reprinted in *The Gospel Tradition*, 1970, 1-29) and B. Gerhardsson (*Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, 1961). They argue that the evangelists preserved the teaching of Jesus by memorisation in a way comparable with that of disciples of the rabbis. If this were so, the ground would be cut from beneath the form critics' feet. It is not surprising that their work has met with the most scathing denunciation from form and redaction critics (cf. N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 1967, 30ff.). It is pointed out that Gerhardsson reads back the rabbinic techniques of AD200 to the period prior to AD70. Moreover, the evangelists do show differences in their reproduction of the sayings of Jesus, and Gerhardsson himself has so far devoted relatively little space to discussion of the gospel material itself. Nevertheless, it may be replied that the differences exhibited by the evangelists are such as to bring out an aspect of a saying or event, and this is quite different from the form critical contention that sayings originated within the early church to meet a particular contemporary need and were then read back into the life of the historical Jesus. W. D. Davies who maintains a cross-bench position in this whole debate (and whom both sides have appealed to in support of their claims) concludes his assessment with the following words: 'By bringing to bear the usages of contemporary Judaism, in a fresh and comprehensive manner, on the transmission of the Gospel Tradition they have forcibly compelled the recognition of the structural parallelism between much in Primitive Christianity and Pharisaic Judaism. This means, in our judgment, that they have made it far more historically probable and reasonably credible, over against the scepticism of much form criticism, that in the Gospels we are within hearing of the authentic voice and within sight of the authentic activity of Jesus of Nazareth, however much muffled and obscured these may be by the process of transmission' (*The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, 1964, 480).

2. *The Demythologised Gospel.* Bultmann's programme of demythologisation has been no less influential than his form criticism. It is open to no less serious questioning. One of his major contentions is that the early Christian church drew on the concepts and language of gnosticism in order to express its faith in Jesus. Among many German writers it is axiomatic that this or that NT book was written in reaction to gnosticism. But in the words with which E. Yamauchi concludes

his *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Study of the Proposed Evidences* (1973), 'In the case of the New Testament texts we have no Gnostic texts which are older, and the evidences which have been adduced to prove the priority of Gnosticism over Christianity have been weighed in this study and found wanting' (186). There may be grounds for talking about an incipient gnosticism in the time of Paul and John (cf. R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament*, 1968, 48). But in the case of the heavenly redeemer, the available evidence points to the Jesus of the New Testament coming first and the gnostic redeemer being 'simply a more radical interpretation of the Christian Jesus in terms of current belief' (R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, 1958, 225; cf. J. W. Drane, 'Gnosticism and the New Testament I', *TSF Bulletin*, 68, 69, 1974, 8; E. Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, 163-169; F. F. Bruce, 'Myth and the New Testament', *TSF Bulletin*, 44, 1966, 10-15).

In *Jesus Christ and Mythology* Bultmann declared: 'The invisibility of God excludes every myth which tries to make God and his action visible; God withholds himself from view and observation. We can believe in God only in spite of experience, just as we can accept justification only in spite of conscience. Indeed, de-mythologising is a task parallel to that performed by Paul and Luther in their doctrine of justification by faith alone without the works of law. More precisely, de-mythologising is the radical application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge and thought. Like the doctrine of justification, de-mythologising destroys every longing for security. There is no difference between security based on good works and security built on objectifying knowledge' (84). It would be tempting to treat this as the rhetorical climax to a series of lectures, were it not for the fact that Bultmann takes it as integral to his position. In fact, it confuses two things: the kind of objectivity that God has on the one hand, and whether the language of the NT is actually mythological on the other. We shall take the second of these questions first.

There is no *a priori* reason why biblical writers could not make use of mythological ideas and language. A case in point is the picture of the dragon in Revelation 12 which may go back to the figure of Leviathan in the OT. But already there a degree of demythologisation had been carried out. In Job 41 the picture appears to be that of a crocodile, and perhaps the creature in Psalm 104:26 is thoroughly naturalised. But in Psalm 74:14 and Isaiah 27:1 something symbolic seems to be intended. Perhaps in such cases we are not intended to see anything more than images taken from one sphere being applied to another in order to make a point graphically, in much the same way as a recent cartoon in *The Daily Telegraph* showed President Nixon riding in a sleigh across a snowscape tossing out tape recording to appease a pursuing pack of wolves. The situation was not to be taken literally, but its symbolism expressed vividly a situation which could have been expressed otherwise more tortuously and less graphi-

cally, but one which had to use some symbolism of some sort in order to express itself at all.

There is, of course, a considerable debate as to what actually constitutes myth. Following B. Malinowski, H. Preuss, K. Kerényi and Mircea Eleade and others, Wolfhart Pannenberg sees myth as expressing 'a "primeval, greater, and more relevant reality", by contrast with the life of the present time' (*Basic Questions in Theology*, III, 1973, 4f.; cf. B. Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, 1926, 39). It is not simply the symbolic expression of something other than itself or a form of primitive explanation of the reality of experience. Its principal concern is not explanation but legitimation by reference to origins. Pannenberg goes on to point out that the NT witness to Jesus Christ cuts across a basic feature of myth. 'For it does not merely state that God *appeared* in human form, but that he became *identical* with a human being who actually lived, a historical person, and even suffered and died as that person. . . . Hellenism had legends which told of epiphanies of heavenly beings in human and other forms, but never to the point of indissoluble identity with the form they took on. It also had myths of the dying and rising again of gods, but these always referred to an event which took place within the divine sphere itself' (*op. cit.*, 71). Strictly speaking, myth does not deal with the historically unique, but the archetypal and what is valid for every age. For Pannenberg, 'the function of the mythical language remains only that of an interpretative vehicle for the significance of a historical event. The irreplaceable sign of this in the history of Christian thought is the idea of the incarnation' (*op. cit.*, 74).

We cannot speak of God without also speaking of man. For we cannot see God as he is in himself; we can only see him in relation to man. This means that we can only speak of him using human language, human schemes of thought, conceptual tools and universes of discourse. Just as any given person's everyday speech consists of words, ideas and grammars drawn from various spheres of his existence, the language of the Bible is not a homogeneous whole, but a complex of discourses, drawn from many different cultures. The point of reference in any given discourse is not to be determined simply by the surface grammar. We do not, for example, on reading the parable of the Good Samaritan infer that the story literally happened in history (although it may have been a parable drawn from life). We see it as a parable and determine its meaning through the interplay of what it says and our experience of life. Without a prior understanding of life the point of the parable would have no meaning for us. But the parable in turn helps us to focus the significance of our actions, motives and existence. It seems to me that there is a considerable existential element in Scripture. Part of the function of Scripture is not so much to convey information that we did not have before and could not otherwise get (although Scripture does this as well), but to enable us to see life in a different

perspective. At the same time, it brings us into contact with a dimension of life which we would otherwise miss. In doing this, it makes use of the thought-forms of various ages and cultures. But the reality which fills these thought-forms transcends them. Jerome wrote how Christians had taken over the day of the sun as the Lord's day, the day of the resurrection, the day on which the Sun of Righteousness has shone forth. H. Rahner has pointed out that the early church 'gave new content to this day of Helios by filling it with her own mystery of the resurrection' (*Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, 1963, 104; cf. W. Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 76). In the same way, the NT writers took the language and thought forms that are available to them from the OT and the Hellenistic world and invested them with the content of their apprehension of Christ. Two things stand out about this language. We cannot bypass it to attain some unconditioned apprehension of Christ free from all cultural conditioning. Moreover, this language was rooted in history.

In view of this, it seems to me that we cannot treat Scripture in a purely deductive manner. That is, we cannot take the pronouncements of Scripture as formal statements of absolute truth and then proceed without any reference to background knowledge and our contemporary understanding of reality to deduce a series of principles and prescriptions for our contemporary life and conduct. I know that some evangelicals give the impression that this is the correct way of going about things. But it seems to be that in practice most of us do not do this and moreover should not do this. For the pronouncements of Scripture are all time—and culturally conditioned. They relate to specific circumstances in concrete historical situations. Although they have an abiding value, they are not all equally absolute. Understanding arises out of the interplay between what is already known and what one is given to know. This applies generally not only to Scripture, but to Shakespeare, the Magna Carta or a textbook on chemistry. To understand the command 'Thou shalt not steal' involves knowing both the command and what it is to steal in the various circumstances in which this could come about. Similarly, most Christians approach the creation narratives of Genesis with some understanding of the nature of the world. The text of Genesis is understood and its truth perceived when we see how it may be applied to the world. We do not take the formal pronouncements of the text in a vacuum and then say that its meaning and truth must be whatever strikes us as the most literal interpretation. To understand the meaning and truth of the text we need to penetrate the thought-world of the author and relate it to ours. It therefore seems to me that what we can learn from men like Bultmann and Tillich is that theology involves correlation—correlating our present understanding of reality with what we receive from the Word. However, it is one thing to say that a particular writer saw things in a particular conceptual scheme and framework; it is something else to

say that this framework is obsolete and dispensable. We cannot set ourselves up over the text, as if we grasped the whole truth already and thus dispense with both its form and content. We can only get at the content through the form. Moreover, we must recognise that the text may have something to tell us that requires us to modify our existing world view. If we cannot pretend that our understanding of any text is not helped and influenced by our existing understanding of the way things are, only an invincible ignorance will compel us to say that our existing understanding of things must not be modified by what we find in a text. Understanding grows by a reciprocal process and successive approximation of our ideas to reality. What is required is not demythologisation but a sympathetic projection of ourselves into the text to understand and hear. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

This point brings us back to Bultmann's claim that demythologising is a radical application of justification by faith, and that the desire for objectifying knowledge is comparable with justification by works. To the sceptic this may look like making a virtue out of a necessity. If Bultmann is right on this point, there is at least a *prima facie* case for asking with Fritz Burri why we should stop short with the kerygma ('Entmythologisierung oder Entkerygmatisierung' in *Kerygma und Mythos*, II, 1952). 'The kerygma,' declares Burri, 'is the last vestige of mythology to which we still illogically cling' (cf. *Kerygma and Myth*, II, 130; cf. also Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth*, 1961; Richard Campbell, 'History and Bultmann's Structural Inconsistency', *Religious Studies*, 9, 1, 1973, 63-79). Bultmann's reply to this type of accusation is that, 'When we speak of God acting, we do not speak mythologically in the objectifying sense' (*Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 62). 'The thought of the action of God as an unworldly and transcendent action can be protected from misunderstanding only if it is not thought of as an action which happens between the worldly actions or events, but as happening within them' (*op. cit.*, 61). 'In faith I realise that the scientific world-view does not comprehend the whole reality of the world and of human life, but faith does not offer another general world-view which corrects science in its statements on its own level' (*op. cit.*, 65). In the last analysis, language about God is analogical. 'It is in this analogical sense that we speak of God's love and care for men, of His demands and of His wrath, of His promise and grace, and it is in this analogical sense that we call Him Father. We are not only justified in speaking thus, but we must do so, since now we are not speaking of an idea about God, but of God Himself. Thus, God's love and care, etc., are not images or symbols; these conceptions mean real experiences of God as acting here and now' (*op. cit.*, 68f.; for the present writer's views on analogy see *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 1973^a, 30ff., 176-181).

On the other hand, there is a point at which Bultmann comes close

to a good deal of Evangelical preaching, particularly that kind of preaching which stresses faith and experience at the expense of theology and history. It is exemplified in the singing of the chorus *He Lives*, particularly in the concluding lines:

You ask me how I know he lives,
He lives within my heart.

What is this but the rise of Easter faith in the hearts of the disciples? The chief difference is that for Bultmann the Christ-event is not purely subjective experience. Christ lives in the *kerygma*, received in faith. This involves a relative objectivity in the *kerygma*. Admittedly, Bultmann strenuously (and rightly) denies that God is not an object. This is a strength of faith, as his teacher Wilhelm Herrmann insisted. 'For if the relation between faith and God could be proved as the relation between subject and object in worldly situations can be proved, then He would be placed on the same level as the world, within which the demand for proof is legitimate' (*op. cit.*, 72). On the other hand, there is a kind of real objectivity which is appropriate to God.

It is at this point that Bultmann seems to combine a Kierkegaardian insight into the otherness of God (which persists in his thinking right from his *Dialectical Theology*) with an acute historical scepticism. For Kierkegaard history was the *occasion* of God's encounter with the world. Bultmann seems to go one step further. In many of the passages that we have looked at history and the things in this world appear to be the obstacle which block such an encounter. On the other hand, we have just noticed passages which speak of analogy between our life, experience and concepts, and God. It is curious the way in which both Barth and Bultmann moved from *Dialectical Theology* to a doctrine of analogy. Both use analogy, but in different ways (on Barth see C. Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 1967, 47-54). Whereas Bultmann finds that he cannot do without a doctrine of analogy, he seems to run away from its implications. One can appreciate Bultmann's strictures on an objectifying knowledge which would reduce God to an object. At the same time the historical embodiment of God's actions in history, mediated by the witness of the biblical writers, suggests not only that we must approach this reality through their witness but that—in so far as the witness is valid—there is a correspondence between their words and the reality that they testify to. To investigate the security of this witness is not to devise some kind of man-made security but to ask what is the relationship between this witness and God himself.

What can Anglicans learn from Bultmann? Some dismiss him as a dangerous infidel and shake their heads over anyone who sees any truth in him, as if they have taken the first steps down a slippery slope. Bultmann's own estimate of himself suggests that he sees himself as the twentieth-century heir of Paul and Luther, zealously defending the

church against man-made religion. Neither estimate appears to be wholly accurate. Although many passages in Bultmann contain real insights, it is questionable whether any of his critical work will be still standing in twenty-five years' time at the end of the century. On the other hand, he is a witness—albeit an ambiguous one—to the call to faith in a twentieth-century setting. His work sets a series of question marks against so much of the thinking and practice that goes on. Are not the cries 'Back to the Reformation!' and 'Back to the early church!' in danger of leading the unwary at best into an antiquarianism and at worst into a scholasticism which imagines that merely to recreate the church orders and outlooks of bygone ages is a sure-fire recipe for revival? To relapse into this way of thinking is to miss the point that the reformers and the early fathers had to fight the battles of their day and express the truth of God's Word in a way that was relevant to their generation. Bultmann also poses the question: Is not our preoccupation with the church and its structures (or in the case of the ecclesiastical politicians, preoccupation with restructuring the church) something which ultimately sidetracks us from God? And finally Bultmann provokes the question: How adequate is our understanding of the Bible and witness to its truth in the modern world? It is in posing, rather than in answering, these questions that Bultmann's real significance lies.