

The New Testament Today

JOHN B. CORSTON

THE New Testament field stretches before today's inquiring traveller like a vast prairie of erudite specialization. This article will attempt to follow some of the trails that lead in such diverse directions across the wide and varied landscape. It professes neither to provide detailed chart or tested compass, nor to furnish an inclusive catalogue of recent publications. Its purpose will be amply realized if readers are led to explore for themselves this mysteriously rich and fascinating terrain.

The bearing of the Dead Sea Scrolls on New Testament study continues to evoke widespread popular interest and profound scholarly concern. Krister Stendahl's notable symposium, *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (1957), assembled an imposing series of fourteen scholarly articles in answer to Edmund Wilson's groundless allegations that biblical interpreters were avoiding the challenge of the Scrolls. At times the writers contradict one another, and they advance tentative conclusions which have since been revealed as inconclusive. Some of the discussion has been made obsolete by more recent discoveries. But these pioneer studies of the mid-fifties have solid significance. Stendahl's own provocative introduction stresses the urgent eschatology shared by both Qumran and Christian communities as constituting genuine common ground between them. He asserts that the clearest difference between Qumran and the New Testament lies in the "degree of anticipation" which characterized the latter. Sherman E. Johnson discusses the Qumran Manual of Discipline as related to the Jerusalem church of Acts. He believes that such parallels as communal sharing, biblical interpretation and community discipline may be especially significant. He suggests that adherents of the Qumran sect, living in Jerusalem as a conventicle, separated geographically from their religious centre, may from time to time have joined the Christian church, with resultant influence on the life of their new fellowship.

Early extravagant and sensational deductions from the content and implications of the Scrolls, publicized so widely by Edmund Wilson and J. M. Allegro, cannot be supported by documentary evidence. The assumptions of Dupont-Sommer that the Galilean teacher is "an astonishing reincarnation of the Teacher of Righteousness" are simply assumptions. The inference of J. M. Allegro that the Teacher of Righteousness was crucified is simply an inference on quite inadequate grounds. It is clear that the Qumran community did not think of the Teacher as Messiah; he was not crucified; his return was to herald the Messiah's coming. It is through the profoundly wise and scholarly guidance of Millar Burrows, Frank Moore Cross and

F. F. Bruce that the true significance of the Scrolls clearly emerges. The Scrolls are then seen as enriching our understanding of Judaism in the period in which Christianity arose. It is altogether to be expected, these scholars say, that many relationships should exist between the Scrolls and the New Testament. The Church might naturally adopt Qumran phraseology and practices, just as, for example, it adopted and appropriated some of the organization and worship of the Synagogue, investing all with a new meaning in the name of Christ. It should surely therefore occasion no surprise if the ideas and language of the New Testament appear in the Scrolls also. Both Scrolls and Gospels belong to first century Palestine and may, as W. F. Albright puts it, "have drawn from a common reservoir of terminology and ideas." Indeed, the Qumran community is coming to be regarded as one of many similar Jewish groups which flourished at the beginning of the Christian era. Along with official Judaism these formed the soil in which Christianity was rooted and in which it developed.

The Nag-Hammadi documents have been largely overshadowed by the Dead Sea Scrolls. Yet these thirteen papyrus volumes, discovered in 1945 in a ruined tomb in an Egyptian cliffside by peasants, shed new light on an obscure area of early Christian history. For these are original Gnostic writings, adding measurable treasure to our previous scanty store of fragments of actual Gnostic remains. In them we may see what Gnosticism meant to a Gnostic. Much of our knowledge of Gnosticism has been derived from ecclesiastical opponents who considered it a baneful menace to the Gospel and the Church. This "hearsay" information is frequently piecemeal and tantalizingly inadequate. For example, Irenaeus refers to a "Gospel of Truth" written at Rome by Valentinus, and used by his followers. Now in the Nag-Hammadi Jung Codex, according to Dr. W. C. Van Unnik of Utrecht, we confront for the first time this long-lost Gnostic writing. It appears to be a sermon or meditation, rather than a Gospel which sets forth a life of Jesus. In it we see how the Christian faith was understood in the ferment of the second century, and "how an influential teacher preached at Rome . . . side by side with such men as Hermas and Justin Martyr." It is based on the canonical New Testament, and is a meditation on the Father's self-revelation to the Son and to mankind. Its doctrine is orthodox, except that we do not find the biblical concept of God, Creator and Father, or of human sin.

The *Gospel of Thomas*, also included among the Nag-Hammadi discoveries, has recently attracted great interest, particularly in the light of Oscar Cullmann's verdict on it as being of even greater significance than the Dead Sea Scrolls to students of the first three Gospels and their literary sources (*The Gospel According to Thomas*, translated by A. Guillaumont, H. Puech, et al., Leiden and New York, 1959). This writing has no relation to the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, long known for its fantastic stories of miraculous performances of Jesus as a child. The Nag-Hammadi Gospel of Thomas is a collection of "sayings of Jesus," over 100 in number. Some of

these are parallel to sayings of Jesus in the canonical Gospels. It is possible that in this collection we shall discover genuine words of Jesus hitherto unknown. It seems certain that this document will add to our knowledge of the development of the Gospel tradition, for in it we see how the words of Jesus were understood and interpreted within a heretical Christian sect. Most scholars consider Thomas to be a Gnostic recension or perversion of the authentic Gospel tradition. It is not a "fifth Gospel." It adds nothing to our knowledge of the life and work of Jesus, or of his death and resurrection. It does not discuss doctrine. But the views of the writer himself are quite apparent. He professes to possess esoteric knowledge, "secret words of the living Jesus." He disparages fasting, almsgiving, dietary laws, and even prayer! He asserts that all differences, even that between the sexes, must disappear. All of this has a familiar Gnostic ring, but when Thomas gives his version of parables such as the Sower, the Rich Fool, or the Leaven in the Meal the canonical Gospel tradition is unmistakably evident. The "saying of Jesus" which begins: "I took my stand in the midst of the world. . . . I found them all drunk, I found none of them athirst" is strikingly parallel to the similar saying in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. It is at least a possibility that some genuine *Agrapha* of Jesus may emerge from this collection.

R. McL. Wilson's *The Gnostic Problem* (London, 1958) presents the first full-scale study of the subject to appear in English for many years. He says little about the *Gospel of Thomas*, but he agrees with Van Unnik regarding the Valentinian origin of the *Gospel of Truth*. Dr. Wilson's particular study is the relationship between Gnosticism and Hellenistic Judaism. He concludes that Judaism was a contributory source to the origin and development of Gnosticism. It was in "the syncretistic environment of the Diaspora" that Gnosticism arose, and in the wider sense it is evident that there was a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism. But the latter is not so much a system as "a tendency of accommodation to an environment," as was Christian Gnosticism later.

Rudolf Bultmann's "demythologizing" has become widely familiar, and needs only to be stated in barest outline here. He begins with the assumption that something has to be done with the mythology of the Bible because contemporary scientific thought cannot accept the New Testament cosmology. Contemporary man is completely outside the world of Jewish eschatology and apocalyptic and demon possession and a "three-decker universe." Nor should modern man be asked to accept this mythical view of the world, because there is nothing specifically Christian in it as such. But whereas old-fashioned liberalism would eliminate the mythological, Bultmann proposes to interpret it existentially. Only as man confronts Jesus Christ as Saviour in the Kerygma will he become a present reality. The research of the historian is not the avenue of approach through which Jesus Christ is to be encountered today.

A host of critics have understandably assailed Bultmann from many angles, although there is almost universal agreement that he is completely

right in his plea that the New Testament must be translated into terms intelligible to modern man. Schniewind, Lohmeyer, Thielicke, Schumann and Austin Farrer enter into theological debate with him in H. W. Bartsch's important book *Kerygma and Myth* (London, 1957) translated by R. H. Fuller. Father L. Malevez in *The Christian Message and Myth* (London, 1958) sees Bultmann as "seeking for a position midway between faith and rationalism, between the theology of revelation and liberal theology: it is an illusory enterprise." Ian Henderson in his *Myth in the New Testament* (London, 1952) expounds Bultmann's position with sympathy and clarity. He asserts that Bultmann's reason for rejecting the mythological is that it does not do justice to the supernatural, to the eschatological fact of Jesus Christ. But he takes issue with Bultmann's unwillingness to go behind the testimony of the New Testament witnesses: "there must have been something about the actual Jesus at the time at which He was on earth to make the New Testament witnesses summon men to decide for or against Him." Burton H. Throckmorton (*The New Testament and Mythology*, Philadelphia, 1959), the most recent contender to enter the lists, finds fault with Bultmann's consistent individualism, which causes him to eliminate a large part of the very *kerygma* on which he rests his case by failing to grasp the all-important New Testament theme of *koinonia*, the fellowship of believers.

Bultmann's scepticism regarding the possibility of writing a life of the historical Jesus is the natural outcome of his unwillingness to go behind the *kerygma* to search for historical evidences of its truth. British scholars such as Vincent Taylor and C. H. Dodd have consistently refused to admit this historical vacuum, and have defended the authenticity of the fundamental outline of the life and ministry of Jesus as found in Mark and the Synoptic tradition. In his notable trilogy, *The Names of Jesus*, *The Life and Ministry of Jesus*, and *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching* (London, 1953-1958) Vincent Taylor affirms unequivocally the possibility of writing a life of Christ. He uses the Markan outline as a framework, recognizing that "it is a sketch with many gaps" and that the Markan outline is much less continuous than was formerly supposed. Nevertheless it gives "a convincing summary of the life of Jesus." The luxuriant typology of Austin Farrer describes the Gospel of Mark as the symbolic structure of a numerically minded author. The detailed "liturgicism" of Archbishop Carrington maintains that Mark was written to correspond with a very early Christian lectionary based upon the Hebrew calendar. But C. F. D. Moule, in his article, "The Intention of the Evangelists" (in *New Testament Essays, Studies in Memory of T. W. Manson*, Manchester, 1959), contends that the actual account of what happened in the ministry of Jesus is a vital element in evangelism, and that the Synoptic Gospels give such an account. The use of the Gospels in worship was primarily instructional, testifying to the conviction which early Christians shared "that their faith stood or fell with the sober facts of a story and that it was vital to maintain the unbroken tradition of these facts."

Yet the search continues for a pattern other than a biographical outline behind the present Gospel narratives. David Daube in his article, "The Earliest Structure of the Gospels" (*New Testament Studies*, 5 [October 1959]), suggests that the Passover eve discourses were the main factor which determined the earliest pattern of the Gospels. Pre-Christian parts of the Haggadah ("proclamation," "interpretation"), a small work which gives the Passover eve liturgy as this evolved and was redacted through the centuries, show that four questions were raised in the Passover eve exposition of the Exodus. The four questions in which Jesus is involved in Mark 12:1-37 represent these four types with surprising and thought-provoking fidelity. The questions are: (1) law, tribute to Caesar; (2) mockery, the widow of seven; (3) simple piety, the first commandment; (4) contradictions, the Messiah, David's son and Lord. Further, in the Haggadah the Passover eve questions are asked by four different youths; a wise son, a wicked son, a son of simple piety, and a son who does not know how to ask, and for whom the father or master himself has to open the discourse. Daube believes that this is an instance of a narrative concerning Jesus which was formulated at a Christian Passover eve celebration in the first decades after the Crucifixion. But the fact that this Christian exposition is modelled on the Passover eve liturgy does not diminish its historical value. It is the selection and grouping of the material that is primarily derived from the liturgy, and "there is no justification for doubting on this ground the happenings and sayings recorded."

George Ogg in *Novum Testamentum* (January, 1959) presents and assays the learned thesis of Mlle. A. Jaubert that the events of Holy Week involve the institution of the Last Supper on Tuesday, the arrest of Jesus late on Tuesday night, and the trial extending from Wednesday to Friday. Mlle. Jaubert maintains that Jesus and his disciples adhered to an ancient sacerdotal calendar which was also used by the writer of the *Book of Jubilees* in the second century B.C. According to this calendar the year contained 364 days, or 52 weeks. Further, every year began on the same day of the week, and every annual festival whose date was determined by a month-date always occurred on the same day of the week. In this calendar scheme Nisan 14 always fell on a Tuesday. The patristic text *Didascalia Apostolorum* is adduced by Mlle. Jaubert as evidence that this calendar arrangement was recognized in some circles in the early church. A major claim for her proposed chronology is Mlle. Jaubert's contention that the many events included within the trial of Jesus cannot be crowded into the brief interval of the second half of one night and the morning of the following day. Dr. Ogg quotes R. H. Connolly, the Oxford editor of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, who finds the Holy Week chronology of this writing to be an invention the main end of which is "to defend, or establish, the practice of a six days' fast before Easter." Dr. Ogg considers that Mlle. Jaubert has failed to show convincingly that this embodies a tradition which can be traced back to the apostolic age. Of her argument as a whole he says: "It does not appear to

provide any real resolution of the difficulties which . . . the Gospel narratives of Passion Week present."

James M. Robinson enters upon a "post-Bultmannian" encounter with the problem of the historicity of Jesus in his *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London, 1959). He aligns himself with pupils of Bultmann who have been pursuing this new "quest" since 1953, with their master's approval! Ernst Käsemann, for example, argues that something *can* be known about the historical Jesus, and that we must urgently seek to discover this and work it out "if we do not wish ultimately to find ourselves committed to a mythological Lord." But the "new quest" will not proceed forward from the point where the earlier "quest" of Schweitzer left off. Historicism is not enough, because the deeper level of "Jesus of Nazareth as he actually was" could not be comprehended by "the reconstruction of his biography by means of objective historical method." Historical Biblical scholars have all too often "absolutized" their method of objectivity into a permanent avoidance of existential encounter with history. But the historical Jesus confronts us with existential decision just as the *kerygma* does. Here, Dr. Robinson believes, lies the possibility of a synthesis between the *kerygma* and the historical Jesus. The *kerygma* in calling for a total encounter with the person of Jesus corresponds to the call for existential decision which Jesus presented to men, and thus it is evident that "the *kerygma* continues Jesus' message." For Jesus himself both looked forward to the final divine intervention and also looked back to God's act of intervention in history, on which Jesus' own ministry was based. Thus Jesus understood his own existence as based upon a historical situation which was decisively characterized by the saving intervention of God. This divine intervention causes him to act "by the finger of God." This became the Easter revelation, the saving event upon which Christianity was built.

The Fourth Gospel, so far from constituting an isolated phenomenon within primitive Christianity, is seen by Oscar Cullmann as standing in close relationship to the Qumran community, to nonconformist Judaism in general, and to the thought of Stephen and of the writer of Hebrews. Such is the argument of Dr. Cullmann in an article in French in *New Testament Studies*, 5 (April, 1959), in two studies in *The Expository Times* (October and November, 1959), and in his contribution to Stendahl's *The Scrolls and the New Testament*. Opposition to the Jerusalem temple and its worship is the common factor shared by these varied religious groups. The Fourth Gospel seems to present a type of Christianity which is different from that which we encounter either in the Synoptics or in the letters of Paul. But Johannine Christianity is no late Hellenistic development. Rather, it goes back to Palestine and is related to nonconformist Judaism as this is exemplified in the Qumran community. Similarly the type of Christianity represented by Stephen and the Hellenists originated in Palestine in nonconformist Judaism. This is why Stephen and his partisans, as distinguished from the other Christians of Jerusalem, were persecuted by the Jews. Stephen pro-

claimed that the divine presence is not bound to the temple. His associates, ejected from Jerusalem, went to Samaria to preach to those who had also rejected the temple cultus of Jerusalem. The Fourth Gospel has a particular interest in Samaria in the matter of Samaritan worship, which involves this opposition to the temple. Thus the whole conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 is concerned with the question of worship. In this discourse the Christological theme is dominant, as everywhere in the Fourth Gospel, and the final affirmation is that the divine presence, which had until now been bound to the temple of Jerusalem, is from now on visible in the person of Jesus Christ, in the word made flesh. So Christ takes the place of the Temple, and in the events of the life of Jesus the Fourth Evangelist sees this idea realized. This spiritualization of the Temple worship, says Cullmann, is exactly what the Hellenist missionaries who went to Samaria must have preached. Cullmann's highly original and significant proposition thus involves the definition of the Hellenists as a nonconformist group within Judaism, representing syncretistic tendencies. The identification of the Hellenists is, however, still a profoundly controversial question. David Noel Freedman, for instance, in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (December, 1959) suggests that they were originally the hated "Hellenizers" of early Maccabean times, which would explain the "bitter animosity" between them and the orthodox Jews which is discernible in the Fourth Gospel and in Stephen's speech. M. Simon in *St. Stephen and the Hellenists* (1958) affirms that the Hellenists were really a radical reforming "gentilistic" party within Judaism. Other interpretations are given by C. F. D. Moule in his article, "Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?" (*Expository Times*, January, 1959).

Studies in the book of Acts continue to emphasize its theological aim rather than its biographical content. It may even appear that St. Luke the historian, in the words of Alan Richardson, "has turned out to be a highly allusive and symbolical rabbinic theologian who stylizes history in order to convey his profound insight into the meaning and truth of the Gospel." In the April, 1959, issue of *Interpretation*, which is devoted to studies in Acts, Bo Reicke describes the book as "an account of what the risen Lord did for his church *through* the Apostles." The chief concerns of Acts are Christology and Ecclesiology. The Ecclesiology of Acts is related to history, and presented in the form of history, but actually means interpretation of history. But the historical narrative of Acts is invaluable as being "the only information available on the earliest development of the word and the church." Further, Luke's personal interpretation of the historical facts has supplied us with "a piece of ecclesiology which is an indispensable completion of what is taught about the church in the New Testament epistles." In the same issue Albert C. Winn, while regarding Acts as accurate history in many striking details, yet sees its primary purpose as the recording of certain first century events as they were theologically understood. Since theological interpretation is encountered everywhere in the Bible we should not be surprised to find that

this occurs in our primary record of the early church. F. F. Bruce contributes an excellent review of commentaries on Acts in English.

Alan Richardson's *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London, 1959) is described by the author as "a deliberate attempt to articulate coherently" the meaning of the New Testament as a whole. New Testament theology is "the framing of an hypothesis in the light of all available techniques of New Testament scholarship." The hypothesis which this book consistently sets forth is that "Jesus himself first suggested that revolutionary reinterpretation of the Old Testament scheme of salvation which we find in the New Testament." Only through the insight of Christian faith is a proper understanding of Christian origins or of New Testament history possible. The apostolic witness to the Lordship of Christ and to his resurrection "makes better sense of the historical evidence than any other hypothesis." The underlying unity of the New Testament is assumed throughout, and the variety of expression among the writers is perhaps not sufficiently recognized. The sixteen chapters of this book form richly rewarding theological studies on themes such as Faith and Hearing, the Holy Spirit, the Israel of God, the Apostolic and Priestly Ministry, the Theology of Baptism and the Eucharistic Theology of the New Testament. Typology sometimes leads Richardson to rather exuberant assumptions. Is Jesus' passing through Jericho really a parallel to Joshua's entrance into that city? Was the dove at Jesus' baptism really foreshadowed by the dove released from Noah's ark? Inferences of this sort recall Austin Farrer, whose typology has evidently influenced Richardson.

Did Paul the apostle to the Gentiles stand in contrast to the particularism of the Jerusalem church and of Jewish Christianity? Was the original cleavage between Jewish and Gentile Christians of such a deep-seated nature that all attempts to bridge the gap were finally destined to prove fruitless? Did Paul's rediscovery of the universalism of Jesus put him out of line with the primitive church which refused to approve his message? Johannes Munck in his *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London, 1959) asserts that the positive answers to these questions, which students of the New Testament have generally assumed, go back to Baur and the Tübingen school. Baur's thesis was that primitive Christianity was dominated by the contrast between Paul and Jerusalem. Thus the controversial passages in Paul's letters have been played up, and his opponents have been pictured as Judaizers connected with the church at Jerusalem. According to Munck no such group ever existed. But instead of asking Paul himself about Jerusalem and his opponents, his readers usually fit his own words into the picture of him that they have already formed for themselves out of secondary sources, especially Acts. Thus secondary sources are allowed to invalidate primary ones. When Paul's letters are released from this traditional exposition, which goes back to the Tübingen school, the Judaizing opponents in Galatians are seen to be Gentile Christians. There was no Judaizing in the church at Corinth, and there were no factions. The Roman church, like all the Pauline

churches, was purely Gentile Christian. In Acts the outpouring of the Holy Spirit means the salvation of Israel. No conflict existed between Jewish Christianity and Paul because "the latter felt that he himself was a Jew, that Christianity was the true Judaism, and that the Church was the true Israel." Paul makes no distinction between Judaism and Christianity, as we do. Munck's book, described on the dust cover as "a radical re-examination of the assumptions on which Pauline studies have largely been built for over a century," appears to resemble other European theological attempts to secure a painless reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity.

Among many excellent New Testament commentaries of recent appearance F. W. Beare's *Philippians* (London, 1959) evokes in a special way Canadian admiration and gratitude. Of particular interest is Dr. Beare's interpretation of the Kenoticism of the hymn in Phil. 2:5-11 in terms of "Russian spirituality." The Russian saints did not seek, as Western theologians did, to base a theory of the incarnation on this passage. Rather they held forth the ideal of the Christian life as the imitation of the Christ who in voluntary self-abasement undertook the lowliness of our humanity. This ideal of the literal imitation of Christ in his poverty and humiliation on earth permanently moulded the mentality of the Russian people, and has imposed itself even on Russian atheism.

As this survey is itself surveyed, the particular area that seems to call insistently for further exploration is the profoundly significant relationship between the history of Jesus and the faith of the earliest church. The activity of God in the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth must be the ultimate bed-rock of New Testament affirmation. The constant study of the factual reality of Jesus and his message is more than an interesting historical exercise; such study must have a constant relevance for the Christian faith unless that faith is ultimately to be defined in Docetic terms. The Kerygma in all its inclusiveness can never take the place of the historical Jesus and his message. The gospel that Jesus himself preached precedes the Kerygma that the primitive community proclaimed. The Kerygma refers back constantly from itself to the history of Jesus that precedes it. So the good news of Jesus and the faith in Jesus proclaimed by the early church cannot be separated from one another. In the first sentence of his *New Testament Theology* Bultmann says that the message of Jesus "belongs to the presuppositions of the theology of the New Testament rather than to that theology itself." But the message of Jesus can be nothing less than *the* presupposition of all the subsequent Kerygma. Herein alone can the ultimate authority of the proclamation of the Gospel find its source and its validity.