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The Problem of History in St. Mark's Gospel

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The problem of history in Mark is a hotbed of discussion among N.T. scholars, and there are four main points that have to be noted: (1) Did the incidents recorded in Mark actually happen in the life of Christ? (2) Even if these incidents are historical, are they recorded in chronological order? (3) Is the Passion narrative, being chiefly pre-Markan, to be considered in a category by itself? (4) Does St. Mark's interpretation of his material fall within the historian's competence? We shall consider our present topic chiefly in relation to these four points.

In the first instance, when we speak of historicity, we shall consider whether the incidents recorded in Mark are actual happenings in the life of Jesus or fictitious creations of the writer. For example, W. Wrede¹ in developing his 'Messianic secret' theory of Mark maintained that there is a fictitious narrative strand in Mark's Gospel in addition to the actual historical happenings sprinkled here and there, the fictitious narrative strand being doctrinally motivated to show the Messiahship of Jesus: he explains the inconsistency of 'crucified Messiah' by the 'secret Messiah' in the Gospel, an inconsistency which is finally vindicated by his triumph at the resurrection. Within five years (1906), A. Schweitzer² put forward a vehement argument to discredit Wrede's position as 'thoroughgoing scepticism' in view of his own 'thoroughgoing eschatology'.

Schweitzer³ maintains the historicity of the Gospel record by the stand he took against Wrede. He asks Wrede, 'Why should not Jesus think in terms of doctrine, and make history in action just as well as a poor evangelist can do it on paper under the pressure of the theological interests of the primitive Christianity?' Today, though the 'Messianic secret' in Mark is given a valid place, Wrede's assumption of Mark as fictitious narrative is generally set aside by scholars. Likewise they are giving due consideration to the eschatological element in Christ's ministry, but they have rejected the extreme position taken by Schweitzer.

We then come to Form-Criticism, which classified the Gospel record according to its forms, such as (a) paradigms or pronouncement stories, short stories culminating in a saying of Jesus,

¹ W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in der Evangelien*. Göttingen, 1913. 2nd Edition.

² A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. English Translation, London, 1919.

³ A. Schweitzer, *op. cit.*

and (b) *novellen* or miracle stories, which are the more broadly conceived narratives where scenes are presented in greater detail. These stories are traced back to their origin in Christian tradition, where they were developed by Christian preachers and by a special class of 'story-tellers' and which were used by Christian exorcists and healers. After Form-Criticism we reach the stage of Bultmann⁴ for whom most of the 'historical' incidents in the Gospel are of Hellenistic origin and therefore legendary. The position of Form-Criticism is that although these incidents in the Gospel record are the creation of early Christian preachers they are based on an 'inkling' of truth; such as an actual saying of Jesus or an actual incident in his life. But many N.T. scholars do not question the historical nature of these events in general.

In the second instance, when we examine the historicity of the Markan record, we have to deal with the narrative part to see if Mark keeps to an actual chronological order of the events of Christ's ministry. This aspect of the question of history is the most debated. Whether the work of the author is fictitious, as maintained by Wrede, or historical, reflecting the actual order of happenings in Christ's life, as maintained by Schweitzer, we see that both accept a definite framework or outline of Christ's ministry in the Gospel record. W. G. Scroggie⁵ divides the contents of Mark's Gospel in the following way to show a definite framework: (1) The preparation (1:1-13); (2) The ministry in Galilee (1:14-9:50); (3) The journey to Jerusalem (10:1-52); (4) Passion week (11:1-15:47); (5) The consummation (16:1-20).

Scroggie points out that sections two and four are the substance of the record, sections one and five being to introduce and conclude. The key to this plan he finds in Mark 10:45, which summarizes the chief sections two and four: section two by 'the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister', and section four by 'to give his life a ransom for many'. That Mark's Gospel maintained a historical outline of Christ's ministry, and that it could be used as the basis for writing the life history of Jesus, was long maintained, but the change-over to a new chapter in the consideration of the framework of Mark began with Karl Ludwig Schmidt⁶ (1919) who argued that the Markan order is not chronological. According to him, the Markan outline is an artificial creation of the author, and before this there existed only independent stories, or *pericopae*, which were fitted into a framework at the evangelist's own discretion. Form-Criticism took up this point and put forward the view that the existing order is the compilation of the author and not actual history.

⁴ R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition*. Göttingen, 1931.

⁵ W. G. Scroggie, *St. Mark*. Harper, London.

⁶ K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*. Berlin, 1919.

It was C. H. Dodd⁷ who in 1932 spoke out against this general opinion of the day and brought forward arguments to refute K. L. Schmidt's point of view and to re-establish the historicity of the Markan narrative. Dodd in his article, 'The Framework of the Gospel Narrative', argued that there is no such thing as 'intrinsic improbability' in finding a skeleton outline of Christ's ministry in Mark. Dodd tried to connect together the *Sammelberichte* or link summaries in the Gospel, and showed how from them an outline of Christ's ministry can be traced. This is the kerygmatic chronology of Christ's public ministry and into it the evangelist has fitted the independent topical units, or *pericopae*, preserved in the tradition of the Church, including them on the basis of their relevancy to practical life. Since this article was published in the *Expository Times* in 1932, Dodd's hypothesis had become a subject of study and considerable interest to N.T. scholars. But it was opposed by many, such as A. M. Farrer,⁸ D. E. Nineham,⁹ H. J. Cadbury,¹⁰ and J. M. Robinson.¹¹ Cadbury in his book, *The Summaries of Acts*, shows that these connecting summaries are the editorial work of the evangelist to fill in the lacuna that are left, when the attempt is made to write a continuous narrative, and so they cannot be a pre-Markan kerygmatic tradition as Dodd maintained. J. M. Robinson sets Dodd's theory aside, thinking that its basis is 'pure conjecture'. There are of course others like B. K. Ratty¹² who support Dodd's hypothesis and maintain that there was a brief summary of the Palestinian outline of Jesus' ministry. He thinks, for example, that an outline of the Galilean ministry is obtained by connecting Mark 1:14, 15, 21, 22, 39; 2:13; 3:7b-19; 4:33, 34; 6:7, 12, 13, 30 which John Mark and other ministers of the word used in their oral teaching. Into this already existing outline Mark inserted incidents collected from Peter's material and from other traditional material which seemed suitable to him. As a result, in some places the narrative lacked sequence.

From this examination we see that there is a strong desire to return to a historical outline of Christ's public ministry in the Gospel record, and this is a different approach to the traditional outline based on historical reminiscences of Christ's ministry. Though here and there the sequence is broken by wrong placing

⁷ C. H. Dodd, *The Framework of the Gospel Narrative*. Expos. Times, 1932.

⁸ A. M. Farrer, *A Study of St. Mark*. London, 1951.

⁹ D. E. Nineham, *The Order of Events in St. Mark's Gospel—an examination of Dr. Dodd's Hypothesis in Studies in the Gospels*. Edited by D. E. Nineham, Oxford, 1955.

¹⁰ H. J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Christianity*. Edited by K. Lake and Foakes Jackson.

¹¹ J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*. S.C.M., London, 1961.

¹² B. K. Ratty, *Growth and Structure of the Gospels*. Oxford, 1935. Reprinted in 1951.

of the *pericopae*, yet in general the outline is historically authentic and it is not the fictitious creation of Mark. However, a recovery of this position, after K. L. Schmidt's shattering blow, has not yet been fully made, however much it may be desired.

In the third instance we have to note the Passion narrative. Even Form-Critics like Schmidt¹³ and Dibelius¹⁴ who deny the Markan chronology yet accept that the Passion narrative is an exception to this. It is a pre-Markan narrative in circulation in written form. Mark only expanded this short Roman account of the Passion with the reminiscences of Peter. This theory is widely popularized today and many accept it. Of course this has given Dodd a spring-board for thinking of such a pre-Markan written document, and to say that what Mark did was to preface it with an account of the ministry of Christ beginning with John's baptism. Some say this is a sort of introduction for the Passion narrative, which with the account of the last journey forms nearly half of the whole record. If this is so, then half of the Gospel outline was fixed before Mark included it in his Gospel, and the outline thereby has greater value as it cannot be an artificial construction on the part of Mark, and no one can object that Mark, not being a direct disciple-apostle, was not in a position to verify the chronology. A problem does of course arise if we accept that Mark not only inserted extra material into the existing Passion narrative but also modified it. It is probable that Mark added extra material to the given outline, but very much less likely that he modified the outline. Some of the additions pointed out are 14:3-9, 12-16, 39, 59; 16:1-8 (so Dibelius); the stories connected with Peter (14:17-21, 27-31) are added by Bultmann together with 14:1, 10, 22-25. Others still add 14:32-42, 55-64; 15:16-20a, 42-47.

In the fourth instance we have to note that to consider Mark as historical does not in any way mean that he is just chronicling the events in the public ministry of Jesus. We have to allow Mark the rights of a historian to interpret the events for a purpose in view. T. H. Robinson¹⁵ truly attests in this context that a historian's 'record of facts must show a perspective in estimating the importance of events for those which followed, and be based on a philosophy of history. Judged by this standard, the Gospel of Mark must take a high place among the world's histories'. We replace here Robinson's phrase, 'a philosophy of history', with 'a theology of history' in connection with Mark's record, and it is because of this that it is truly called the 'Gospel'. When Vincent Taylor¹⁶ protests, 'Mark

¹³ Schmidt, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*. English Translation, London, 1934.

¹⁵ T. H. Robinson, *St. Mark's Life of Jesus*. S.C.M., London, 1922. Reprinted in 1954.

¹⁶ V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*. Macmillan, London, 1953.

was not seeking to write history and is not a historian', he probably means to say by history that Mark's record is not a biographical sketch of Christ's life. And as he acknowledges, it is primarily about the good news—he means it as a Gospel. But when we have noted above that Mark's work is a Gospel, this means it is in one sense a history, even if it be a history about how the good news began: it is not a fictitious creation by the author. When we talk about Mark as a 'Gospel' and simultaneously as 'history' we mean that in drawing out the theology of events, Mark did so in the order in which the historical happenings took place, and did not simply follow ideas as they unfold the truth about Christ. Comparing Mark in this regard with Matthew and Luke, Mark is on surer ground. It is said of Matthew, 'It is surely not unfair to Matthew to say that in his Gospel the narration is but a framework for the teaching of Jesus' (G. J. Paul),¹⁷ i.e. in Matthew we can rely more on the teaching of Christ that is given than on the historical significance of any event in Christ's ministry. With regard to Luke, though he sets out to write in order a historical account, giving dates and accurate contemporary references, yet when he departs from the Markan outline, for example, in the great central section of his Gospel (9:51-18:14), there is no movement in the narration and no theological significance in the order of events he sets forth. We do admit that Mark has certain preconceptions, such as the eschatological factor, and these have coloured the impression that his narrative gives to the reader—perhaps even to the scholar, yet these preconceptions have not affected the actual recording of events. We find from Mark's Gospel record that the incidents are full of vivid, realistic touches, giving a true picture of Jesus of Nazareth as he actually was.

It is much debated among scholars whether Mark's Gospel is in any sense a biography of Jesus. Rawlinson¹⁸ says that the story of Jesus in Mark may be the product of bazaar rumour rather than of accurate record. Blunt¹⁹ also joins him in saying, 'If this were a biography, it would be a very defective one.' It is true that the Gospel by its very designation points out that it is not intended for biography: it is a story about the beginning of the Gospel, of the good news. If it were a biography, naturally it should start with the parentage, birth, childhood, growth and vocation of Jesus, but these we do not find in Mark's Gospel, which begins from the time of John's baptism. On the other hand, Westcott²⁰ was right when he commented on Mark's

¹⁷ G. J. Paul, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*. Wesley Press, Mysore, 1957.

¹⁸ A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*. Methuen, London, 1925.

¹⁹ A. W. F. Blunt, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*. Clarendon, Oxford, 1929.

²⁰ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel of St. Mark*.

Gospel as 'a transcript from life' because of the realistic touches found in the Gospel in the picture of Christ. As the Gospel is indissolubly associated with Jesus, the one who brought and made good news for us, naturally it deals with the life of Jesus also. So from the Gospel record we must obtain something approaching biography, though not in complete form. William Barclay²¹ aptly comments in this regard, 'If ever we are to get anything approaching a biography of Jesus it must be based on Mark, for it is the delight of Mark to tell the facts of Jesus' life in the simplest and the most dramatic way.'

It was Form-Criticism which denied any such possibility of finding a biography of the life of Jesus in the Gospel record. The début was made by M. Dibelius²² in 1919 in his book, *From Tradition to Gospel*. Later he was followed by other scholars like R. H. Lightfoot²³ in his *History and Interpretation in the Gospel*, Vincent Taylor²⁴ in *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, and especially by R. Bultmann²⁵ in his works in the present generation in Germany. Bultmann's basic principle is that it is impossible to reconstruct 'a historical Jesus' in going behind the *kerygma*: if we use the *kerygma* as a source then it will be not Jesus of Nazareth but 'Jesus Christ the proclaimed Lord' whom we find. In reply we have to say that the kerygmatic motive of the Gospel writing should not thereby discount the historicity of the incidents of the life of Jesus. Of course the incidents are undeniably coloured by the kerygmatic motives, but yet one has to admit that there is still extant in the Gospels material unaltered by the *kerygma*. As J. M. Robinson²⁶ aptly puts it, 'If the Church's *kerygma* reduced the quantity of unaltered material, it deserves credit for the quality of the unaltered material.' On the basis of the modern approach to history and the self, which is to be understood in terms of commitment to a kind of existence, the modern investigation seeks to find out the nature of the *kerygma* and thus gets to the brute facts so transformed by the kerygmatic meaning, taking the unaltered material as the measure. (The unaltered material will be that where Christ has made his intention and understanding of existence most apparent, so that there is no need for the Church further to interpret. Of course, if in the records we have instances where the Church herself speaks on behalf of Christ, or makes Christ say what she desires, then naturally we face difficulties). J. M. Robinson in tracing this

²¹ W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*. St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1954.

²² M. Dibelius, *op. cit.*

²³ R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*. London, 1933.

²⁴ V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*. Macmillan, London, 1933.

²⁵ R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*

²⁶ J. M. Robinson, *op. cit.*

new trend titles his book *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, for the old quest began with Schweitzer's epoch-making book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which although it opened up the quest in 1906 holds ground no longer. Today the post-Bultmannian trend is to follow the new quest, and his pupils have reopened it since the time that Ernst Casemann read his paper, 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus', to his fellow-Bultmannians in 1953. This new trend is seen in the quest for considering the deeds of Jesus as historical occurrences, as opposed to Bultmann's own stand, and Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth*²⁷ (E.T. 1960) illustrated this new quest. (In this context of the quest for the historical Jesus or for a 'life' of Jesus, we have to note that the term 'historical Jesus' has become almost a technical term to denote 'what can be known of Jesus of Nazareth by means of the scientific methods of the historian'. For this reason the present generation of theologians has equated the term 'historical Jesus' with 'the historian's Jesus', and so as to disassociate itself from this misconception has coined a new term in place of 'historical Jesus', namely 'Jesus of Nazareth as he actually was'). R. H. Fuller²⁸ has given a very good insight into this new quest. In writing the N.T. section of *The Book of the Acts of God*, he accepts the fact that the chief aim of the Gospels is to evoke faith, yet he does not agree with those who say that the Gospels are evidence for the *kerygma* but not for the facts about the historical Jesus. To him it is not a question of either/or, either history or proclamation, but the Gospels are both history and proclamation. The proclamation in fact involves an interpretation of historical traditions. In concluding, I would endorse Fuller's view that the task of the historical critic is not primarily to question the historicity of the Gospel record, but to acknowledge that the Christian proclamation involves a particular history, and to find out what that particular history was.

²⁷ G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*. English Translation, 1960.

²⁸ R. H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God*. Duckworth, London.