

CAN WE KNOW JESUS?

Those who have been accustomed to read their Gospels as primarily an account of the life of our Lord, or those who, over a number of years, have used for their spiritual reading and instruction those 'Lives of Jesus' which have long since established themselves as family favourites, will be prepared to answer this question with a vigorous affirmative. Surely, you will hear them saying, we are able to follow in great detail all the events of his life from the crib to the cross, all he did and said—we even know the where and when of it all. Others, perhaps in the course of a secondary education (and possibly on a higher level) who have cut their biblical teeth on scripture textbooks and have been introduced to such perennial difficulties as the Synoptic Problem or the relation of John to the Synoptists, have become aware that the writers of our Gospels do not always agree in their accounts and have to be 'harmonised.' And when this procedure—stretched to the breaking-point of an already remarkable elasticity—refused to surrender a solution, e.g. of why Matthew recounted a saying of Christ in circumstances differing from those enshrining the same saying in Luke, the long arm of coincidence indicated an exit from the problem: the saying, the event, happened twice.

But more inquiring minds have not been always convinced of this approach to the question of the life of our Lord; it has appeared *simpliste*. The recent investigation into the formation of the Gospels¹ shows how their growth was dependent on various factors: preaching, which limited itself to providing essential data about Christ; the tradition of the Church, which transmitted that message within the living framework of its life and faith; lastly, the work of the Evangelists as the climax of that process which resulted in our Gospels as the written record of redemption. And because they were precisely that, they were not, in the first place, a history but a theology, the sacred writers being dedicated more to the significance of what Christ said and did than with merely cataloguing the incidents of a crowded life. A certain unconcern is noticeable in matters of chronology and geography, and there is not always agreement as to the exact words used by Christ. But these points, and many others, were secondary to writers whose main intention was to offer their readers the meaning of Christ's life and teaching.

Yet such a view of the Gospels as theology rather than history (even though we do not exclude this latter) raises an important

¹ cf. Patrick Fannon, 'The Formation of the Gospels,' *Scripture*, 1960, pp. 112-19

question, or rather a series of questions. If the Gospels are primarily designed to teach Christ's message, so much so that the facts of his life have only a lesser importance, and if that message is presented to us as it was understood by the primitive Church, how can we know Jesus as he was? Further, if we cannot know Jesus as he was, is there not a danger that ignorance will father denial—not only of Jesus but even of his doctrine? Now this is not a new problem, and there is something to be learned by tracing briefly its origin and development, before attempting to discuss the historical value of the Gospel witness and the question as to whether a biography of Christ is possible.

In the heyday of nineteenth-century Liberal Protestantism, the notion took shape that the historical person of Jesus—who was born in Bethlehem, walked the streets of Nazareth, journeyed through the Judean hills to Jerusalem, there to suffer and be sentenced to death—was a much lowlier figure than he around whom our beliefs are centred. This smaller figure, it was claimed, had received a new and completely idealistic stature—that of the Christ of faith, a product of myth fashioned to accommodate the over-credulous. D. F. Strauss contested the belief that the Christ of faith was the Jesus of history—a pernicious distinction which soon hardened into a separation. And with it, the axe was laid to the root: henceforth, the basic christological problem was how our belief in Christ was to be historically defended and explained.

Strauss was followed by a galaxy of Liberal and Rationalist scholars who, in their different ways, applied his principle to their researches on our Lord, and the result was a spate of 'Lives of Jesus' which bypassed any possible supernatural associations with the Christ of faith, and concentrated on the purely human characteristics of our Lord. And so we have for example Renan's classic picture which turned Jesus into the ideal of a humanitarian religion, after casting aside the 'suspect' theology of the New Testament because it was 'unhistorical.' Even today, when the 'Jesus of history' movement has passed away, we can still discern faint traces of it in an emphasis on the humanity of Christ—which may well offer the required corrective to many of the ultra-radical modern views we have now to examine.

The rise of Form Criticism after the First World War signalled a new and contrasting line of studies around the subject of Christ. No longer was the historical Palestinian Jesus the subject of inquiry in the shape of 'critical' biographies, but rather the previously rejected Christ of faith was invited back to dominate the discussions. Whereas before an absorbing interest was shown in the details of his

earthly life, now, it was affirmed, these are of no significance and indeed cannot be known in isolation. Independent criticism had really boxed the compass—but its latest voyage was to end in failure, even if some soundings were made which would serve to plot the true course to an appreciation of Christ.

Rudolf Bultmann has loomed large on the contemporary scene in the new criticism and has not hesitated to push to their logical conclusions directives offered by some earlier critics. On the question of the historicity of Christ, Bultmann's thesis may be thus briefly resumed : there is not in the Gospels any account or saying of Christ which does not primarily reflect the faith of the Church—what we know is not Christ but the faith of the primitive community *about* him. This extreme position of affirming that Christ cannot be known independently of the representations made by the faith of his disciples (already suggested by Wellhausen) is due to Bultmann's philosophy which separates history from faith, and also to his sociological theories which attribute to the human mass a true creative power. This historical scepticism about our ability to know the Gospel figure of Christ is joined in Bultmann to the conviction that the New Testament must be 'demythologised,' that is freed from the shackles of a primitive thought pattern and re-expressed in a form intelligible to the twentieth-century mind. But that is not all. He has interpreted Christ in terms of existential philosophy to signify not so much a person in time and space as an announcement that God comes to man.

Against such views there has been, in the last decade, a noteworthy reaction. It has been well observed that continental opinions are watered down when they cross the Channel, and this school of thought never boasted an English department, but it is perhaps the recent Scandinavian scholars who have most strikingly rejected such proposals. In an address delivered at the opening session of the Oxford Congress on 'The Four Gospels in 1957,' Harald Riesenfeld, professor at the University of Uppsala, stressed a decided return to a more traditional view : the Gospel tradition should be traced to Jesus himself, and not to the primitive Church. And among Bultmann's disciples there has been a marked change of climate, even if a certain historical scepticism still survives among them, the tattered remains of the master's mantle. Among Catholics, his theories on Christ received no sympathetic recognition, but it was not till the last few years that a worthwhile attempt was made to attack his position radically.

Such, in outline, are the main trends of discussion about the historical Christ which emanated from non-Catholic scholars, and they

will be seen to be related to two centres of reference, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, which postulate an invalid separation between history and faith. Before we can hope to present a solution to the problem of Christ, that gap must be closed.

Revelation, we are becoming increasingly aware, was given not only in history but intimately tied to the events of a particular people's history, that of the Jews. The raw material which revelation made use of was the everyday life of a definite race-group, its members, their lives and loves, joys and sorrows, their homes in the fertile countryside of Galilee or amidst the rugged splendour of the hills of Juda. Salvation was to come to us wrapped in a Jewish covering. And the whole perspective of the New Testament is this salvation within history : God was revealing himself *in history*. The faith that was required of the primitive Church was a faith which was based on historical facts, as the missionary preaching recorded in the Acts of the Apostles testifies. Without such a starting-point, the message preached would be meaningless. Hence, in the primitive tradition, faith and history are indissolubly linked, and to the New Testament authors not only is their history factual, but they clearly consider that their faith is true only in so far as it corresponds with the truth of the facts reported. For them faith was not to be reduced to an act of total abandonment without any human guarantee, since fideism or faith alone would pave the way to unbelief. Faith must include an object, a fact, namely a return in some way or other to history. There is no radical opposition between the order of positive scientific knowledge and the order of faith, and in the New Testament we are dealing not only with kerygmatic theology but also with historical data : faith was based on fact.

And the faith of the primitive Church was based on the historical fact of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The significance of Jesus, his person, his work and the events of his life only appear with the place he occupies in the history of salvation ; God was revealing Himself in Christ. Even if we acknowledge that the growth of the Gospels knew multiple stages and that their elements underwent transforming influences in the primitive Church according as a living faith interpreted and sounded their depths, it is still possible to reach a scientifically certain knowledge of the facts, sayings, life and person of Jesus. And this because once the layers of tradition are defined, we must perceive an irreducible substratum : the unanimous affirmation of the sources and of a witness which attaches faith to concrete facts and real sayings, in a known period and at a known time. It is clear, moreover, that the Gospel writers' will to consign the work of salvation by Jesus Christ, a theological preoccupation, corresponded with

the intention to offer a true history. Now in the mind of the primitive Church Christ was not a person of the past but the risen Lord, present with his will and power, the one who now offered salvation. The formulas of its preaching in relating his history declare that he *is* and not that he was. What has taken place is understood according to its significance for today, and this today is no calendar date but the present such as God made it, opening out into the future according to His design. The earthly revelation of Jesus is still an actual revelation and in this perspective his words are dressed with the concerns of the Church.

Hence the development of tradition informed by faith is not a product of the imagination, not a creation of the mass, but the response to the mission of Jesus considered as a whole, the affirmation of a situation proper to him whose life began in Galilee to finish on the cross, and who now reveals himself as Lord. And so tradition, in each of its stages, witnesses the reality of his history and of his resurrection.

But testimony which was designed to arouse faith could not be a simple, material repetition of the deeds and sayings of Christ, the vehicle of revelation for all time. Indeed, any historical study worthy of the name will include more than a list of events—it is only in those small *aide-mémoires* which prepare the eleventh-hour student for the coming ordeal that such a procedure is adopted. No, events must be considered according to their significance, and the Evangelists, who were supremely qualified to do this, have not hesitated to interpret for us the life of Christ. Moreover, to reflect on the significance of an event is already one way of affirming that fact. The result is, of course, that theology and history have been interwoven, perhaps inextricably, and while it is necessary to search for history in the *kerygma*, it is also necessary to discover the *kerygma* in history. We may rightly reject the tempting simplification of the Jesus of history school which would concentrate on describing the merely human traits of our Lord, isolated from all contact with his divine mission. Equally we may reject the Christ of faith approach, which ignoring any human factors would examine purely theological considerations. The Church of the Incarnate Word has always taken her stand between the extremes of Arianism and Docetism, whatever be the guises their latter-day progeny may don. And this is really the key to the problem : the human and the divine are both present in Christ and both lurk behind the Church's written testimony to him. In it both find a place, and we must resolutely decline to accept any pattern of investigation which would sacrifice one in favour of the other. There is a harmony here, and even if it has been the Church's first care to teach

us this accord, she has not neglected to tell us that the notes of which it is composed are very real.

Hence the assertions of some Form Critics who write off the Gospel accounts of Christ and his doctrine as the unwarranted creation of the primitive community cannot be sustained, for the simple reason that the Church did not need to create ; she had sufficient matter to exploit. That this exploitation took the form of adaptation, actualisation, answers to questions posed by the nascent Church, redactional procedures in which a diversity of milieux, objects and forms played an influential role cannot be denied. That she allowed incidental differences of chronology, geography and even emphasis in reporting the words of Christ is also evident, as a comparison of the four Gospels will show. Yet, once more, exploitation is not creation but the attempt to excavate the hidden riches that lie buried in Christ and in his message. The Church did not need to salt her mine.

Admittedly, it would be difficult for us to try and disengage from their theological context all the facts and sayings of Christ's life, to take the christology out of Christ, so to speak. But, as has been suggested above, this may well prove a false problem. Separate those events from their meaningful presentation and they become meaningless. If scholars are directing research towards discovering the most primitive strata of the Gospel accounts, they are principally concerned to trace the development in tradition of the Christian message ; they cannot hope to unearth new and unexpected details of the life of Christ. The portrait which the Gospels sketch for us of Christ is sufficiently clear to establish in our minds his person and his mission. We may not always be sure of the time or place of an incident, not always informed of the *ipsissima verba* he pronounced on a number of occasions. But the important thing, the thing that really matters, is the content of what he did and said ; and is ours. We know him as he was.

Are we able, then, to have a biography of Jesus ? It has been indicated earlier in this article how this question would seem to have been answered by the numerous 'Lives of Jesus' which have an honoured place on our library shelves. It is not as simple as that, however. We have seen how the Evangelists were first and foremost concerned to transmit the doctrinal significance of Christ's life. His story was of secondary importance, even if the facts recounted have their value as providing material for a knowledge of Christ, as well as offering the sources for that doctrine.

A useful distinction must be made when we speak of a 'Life of Jesus.' Let us say straight away that the ideal sought after in the last

century, of a critical *biography* in a strict sense, namely a presentation of Christ which traces in some detail his development, both psychological and in his relations with external circumstances, is not feasible. Not only do we lack the mass of information such a biography would require. The Evangelists have not been over-generous in furnishing such data, nor, given their aim, could they be expected to do so. Even such an obvious requirement as an adequate chronology is lacking : scholars cannot even agree whether Christ's public ministry lasted one, two or three years. Given this situation, we can understand how a scripture scholar of such learning as Fr Lagrange was led to renounce his intention of writing a life of Jesus according to the classical formula.

What, however, can and must be our ideal is a *history* of Jesus—the collection of facts that we have about him, some chain of events, some links of cause and effect in these events. And this is possible : we have a significant and decisive minimum of facts ; there is a general curve in their incidence from Galilee to Jerusalem ; and there is an explanation of that graph. It must be admitted that numerous details, and often important ones according to our way of thinking, escape us, but, as we have already remarked, the Gospels offer us such an impact with the personality enshrined in their pages, as to make good the deficiencies which a strict historical method would deplore. Needless to say, such an historical portrait of Christ, were it to prescind from the supernatural dimension of Christ's character, would be no more than a travesty of his true likeness and would offer nothing less than a pale reflection of his reality.

Hence, in conclusion, we may state that our Gospels present us with sufficient reliable matter to give us an appreciation of Christ as he was, since their witness is anchored in history. The Christ of faith is no fascinating by-product of the Church nor a lengthened silhouette of the humble figure of Jesus of Nazareth. The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are one person, Jesus Christ, and this cornerstone of our faith is no prefabrication. We do not know all we would wish to know about him, perhaps led by an idle curiosity ; but the Evangelists have seen to it that we know all that is necessary. His ' Lives ' may often try to establish conditions of time and place for incidents which the Evangelists were content simply to join to a previous memory ; they may try also to smooth down with the heavy plane of ' harmonisation ' the knotty problems of discrepancy and the hard edges of discordance. In a word, they may try to offer us the satisfying continuity of a well-planned biography with the details of a diary. But this is a hope which exceeds its promise, and the promise of the Gospels was to tell us of salvation and of how Christ by his life and

death and resurrection wrought it. Here was not just another life to be written but a life to be preached.

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THE HIDDEN MESSIAH AND HIS ENTRY
INTO JERUSALEM—I

'Many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah" and they will lead many astray. . . . Then, if anyone says to you, "Lo, here is the messiah" or "There he is!" do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, "Lo, he is in the wilderness" do not go out; if they say, "Lo, he is in the inner rooms" do not believe it.' (Mt. 24:5, 23-4)

How precise a commentary these words make on all that age, feverish, deeply disturbed, superficially religious, that went down in flames with the burning temple and city just a few weeks after the small Christian community, duly forewarned, had left it to settle in Pella, bearing with them, we must suppose, their precious scriptures. It was these words that Jesus not many years before had spoken, with the same city and temple before his eyes, as he sat on the hill of Olives. The last years of the second temple had been full of the sense of impending tragedy. In October 62, when the course of events was already getting rapidly out of hand, a crazed prophet or dervish, the namesake of our Lord, appeared in the city among the crowds at the feast of Booths, crying out his lament over the city: 'A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegroom and the bride, a voice against this whole people!' Dragged before the procurator Albinus and flogged to the point of death, he still refused to keep quiet and was let go as one out of his mind until, four years later, in the opening exchanges between the artillery of Vespasian and the beleaguered, he was struck with a stone from one of the *tormenta* and killed.¹ This was only one of the untoward signs seen those days. Some said they saw a star shaped like a sword hang over the city, and there was also (so they said) a comet visible for a whole year. At the last Passover before the temple was destroyed some said they saw a great light shining round the altar, and it was reported that a sacrificial heifer gave birth to a lamb! And at midnight during the

¹ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 6, 5, 3