How Authentic are the Words of Jesus?

2. MEMORY AND MANUSCRIPT: The Debate

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There is no need for me to stress here the importance of the work which is under discussion. Behind it of course lies the work of Riesenfeld published in 1957. My task here is to show how the debate has proceeded since the publication of Memory and Manuscript in 1961 by referring to three reviews and a reply by Gerhardsson.
After adding further commendation of the value of this, Davies goes on to deal with a number of points where he feels greater clarification is needed. First, there is the matter of the fixed "Holy Word." Davies concludes: 'While the appeal to the Fathers does support Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson in their interpretation of the transmission of the tradition, it does not seem to us to corroborate their insistence on a fixed "Holy Word."' Had such a doctrine of the Word existed as they suggest, it is hardly credible that the struggle with Gnosticism would have been so crucial: that agonistic struggle arose partly because the appeal to "the tradition" was ambiguous.

Davies next queries Gerhardsson's interpretation of early Christianity in terms of the Temple, the Twelve and the New Exodus. He finds Gerhardsson's attempt to spiritualize Jerusalem and the same time keep it geographical. He welcomes Gerhardsson's emphasis on the importance of the Twelve, but feels him to be mistaken in seeing them primarily as Jewish rabbis and not emphasizing sufficiently the work of the Holy Spirit. He accepts Gerhardsson's division of the Christian tradition into Scripture, the words and works of Jesus, and the application of these by the Christian community, exemplified in the Jewish Scripture, Mishnah and Gemara. Christ is not given a sufficiently central place as fulfilling the whole of the Torah.

W. D. Davies3 agrees with the Scandinavian on two counts. First that 'it seems to us to corroborate their insistence on the fact that the essentials of the tradition find their ultimate origin in Jesus.' If the disciples of the Rabbis treasured their masters' words, the early Christians have done. Secondly, we can no longer doubt that the process whereby the Christian tradition was transmitted is not fixed, as was done in the light of the Pharaonic usage in dealing with Oral Tradition, a usage which was not without Hellenistic parallels. At this point, it all must be given to Gerhardsson's work. An indispensable task — that of gathering together what could be known of the oral and written transmission of tradition in rabbinic Judaism and showing its relevance for the understanding of primitive Christian usage — has at last been fulfilled.

Finally Barrett rejects the picture given of Jesus as 'the Rabbi' because He was cast out of Judaism and His tradition was not from men but from God. "If we take the further criticism of Primitive Theologians, did not proclaim the Rabbi Jesus and His teaching, but Christ crucified and risen; the source of their provocation was not a body of instruction but the fact of the resurrection faith'.

Barrett concludes: 'I find it impossible to accept the conclusion that Gerhardsson's book, though learned, thorough, conscientious, and acute, and one that every student of the New Testament must read, does not adequately explain the origins of the gospel tradition, or provide a satisfactory instrument for verifying its historicity.'

**HOSTILE**

Morton Smith's2 review of Memory and Manuscript is outspokenly hostile. His first criticism is that 'to read back into the period before 70 the developed rabbinic technique of 200 is a gross and misleading error. Philo was probably not being learnt by heart before AD 70. There had been a failure to preserve the ipissima verba of the early teachers: the names of rabbi disciples were recorded and the teaching attached to those names is minimal. Gerhardsson's explanation of this, as due to the fact that Judaism had a unitary doctrinal centre, is vigorously refuted on the grounds that the period up to AD 70 was one of sectarian conflict. 'Besides implausibly the emphasis on the Pharisees, he imposes Pharisaism on the rest of first-century Judaism.' Behind this, says Smith, lies 'G. F. Moore's myth of the Pharisaic teaching of Jesus, which Barrett perpetuates. He then states that 'to work back to the period before 70 the developed rabbinic technique of 200 is to work against the weight of historical evidence, and therefore condemned out of hand . . . The thesis "in the beginning was the Word" is critically examined by Smith and found wanting.'

**GERHARDSSON'S REPLY**

Gerhardsson has replied to many of these criticisms, and to Smith in particular in point of departure for Christian theology that rabbinic methods of instruction had characteristic features going back even to Old Testament times, and that the Pharisaic teaching of the time of Christ used methods representative of those common among Palestinian teachers at that time. 'Historical questions have been oversimplified by starting with the idea that since all things were made new in Christ, every resemblance between the early Church and its milieu was overshadowed by Christian influence, and therefore condemned out of hand . . .' The thesis "in the beginning was the Word" is brilliantly carried through.'


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