

The Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Gospels

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Synopsis:

1. Introduction

2. The Concept of History

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3. Kerygma, Form and History

The Gospels not merely "lives of Jesus"; form-criticism – the *Sitz im Leben* of the Gospel material; form and history; the *kerygma* and Jesus.

4. The Synoptic Problem

Common material; displaced sayings and incidents; implications of this problem for historical reliability.

5. The Miracle Stories

Pre-scientific suppositions of the writers – non- rather than un-scientific; God transcendent and immanent.

6. The Teaching of Jesus

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Possibility of events or sayings occurring more than once; the attempt to write a "life of Jesus".

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1. Introduction

In the space of an essay only an account of this subject can be given. No detailed discussion of all the Gospel material is possible. Certain issues, however, have been given somewhat more extended discussion as being demanded by the present situation in Biblical studies. Close scrutiny of only one or two passages has been set out, and a great number of unannotated generalisations and impressions have been made. It will be noted that the logical method pursued in this essay has led to a consideration of topics in an order roughly the reverse of that in which they have been raised chronologically in recent times. In days when disinterestedness tends to be emphasised, a caution needs to be raised as to whether the present subject-matter permits this approach. While a fair and reasonable appraisal is attempted with due consideration of the ideas of others, it must be realised at the outset that this essay is written from within the context of the Christian faith, and no doubt draws some of its character from that fact.

2. The Concept of History

The demythologising controversy has made it impossible to consider the historicity and historical reliability of the gospels without defining what one means by the concept of history. The problem here is not simply that historians conceive of their task differently today. Important though that be, it would then be our task to determine the way in which the synoptists conceived of their task. Rather, the historians' changed attitude comes from a conviction that the record of a particular event can never, no matter how dispassionately it is written, be simply what we might call a "bare recounting of facts".

Of key significance has been the recognition that, in history as recorded, fact and interpretation co-exist. The terms "objectivity" and "subjectivity" in history, therefore, may be applied according as one has collated and assessed relevant factual material in a self-coherent manner related as far as transcendent standards or as one has restricted and restrained factual material, selecting in such a way as to give best support to one's predetermined private interpretation. The serious question is whether there can be objective history even in this sense.

Doubtless the greatest issue is whether there are in fact any such things as "external transcendent standards". Certainly there are external standards within a particular cultural, philosophical or religious framework. To use a somewhat jarring contradiction of terms, within such a framework a "relative objectivity" is possible. The charge of "subjectivity" can only be made if there is no fair analysis of such facts as appear to point to a contrary view or if such facts are deliberately omitted or distorted. It must be clearly seen that this "relatively objective" approach is quite legitimate. The historian cannot approach his data with his mind, as it were, a blank sheet. Part of that intellectual heritage which makes him a historian is the ability to sift data for what is relevant to his particular task. This, however, is impossible without an intellectual frame of reference, and the latter is not to be lightly regarded as a preconception (though such it is in this given situation), since it is a built-up residue of individual and common experience in the various situations of life over a period of time.

Probably there is no matter in which this question has greater importance than that under consideration in this essay. Clearly, the Christian claim is that there are "external transcendent standards" – to deny this is to deny the being of God, while to deny that these standards can be known is to presuppose that God has not revealed himself. This is where the non-Christian finds it difficult to accept in any form the historical reliability of the gospel records – the men who wrote them were committed Christians, having accepted, not only that there is a God, but that this God has revealed himself in history for the salvation of men in the person of Jesus Christ. However, to disparage the Gospels on this count is a presupposition. Ultimately, it is a matter of faith one way or the other. In fact, the accounts seem to indicate that the person, teaching and acts of Jesus of Nazareth were such as tended to divide people for and against him, that there were others who interpreted him differently, that he was one of whom there could be no account which was "unbiased". The question is whether these "biased accounts" are therefore to be termed "subjective" in the sense given above.

Without launching into a detailed exposition of Christian apologetics, the following points need to be noted. The account given of the life and person of Christ, while presenting problems to the modern scientific mind, is self-coherent – i.e. if Jesus was as he was portrayed, if in him God was breaking into human history for man's salvation, and if this was a unique and decisive event, it is quite congruous that such sayings and deeds as we have should be attributed to him. But further, the point at issue is not concerning discrepancies in detail (supposed or real), nor is it related finally to an implied scientific hypothesis that certain of the recorded details could not have taken place – the issue depends on the protasis of the above statement as every scientist who is also a Christian realises. But, thirdly, if the protasis is true (and this is the point of faith or unbelief, of bias one way or the other), then the Gospel-writers had what might be truly called "external transcendent standards" and were dealing with facts which in essence bore a necessary interpretation which could only be expressed by one who had the right attitude (or bias). Points of detail in historical matters (i.e. in the writing of fact and interpretation) do not destroy this conclusion of the historicity of the Jesus Christ of the Gospel narratives.

Rudolph Bultmann and the demythologists, however, have taken a different view of history in order to support Christian faith in view of their rejection of much of the Gospel data as it stands. The latter comes

directly from an uncritical acceptance of former scientific presuppositions¹ and also from a radical application of the form-critical method to the Gospels based on an understanding of them as kerygmatic documents. The conclusion of the *formgeschichtlich Methode* was plain for Bultmann – “I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing of the life and personality of the historical Jesus.”² He considered that the *kerygma* and hence the interpretation of the early Church had so overlaid such primitive tradition as there may have been as to render it impossible to extrapolate any portrait of Jesus as he actually was. Bultmann the demythologist is to be seen in continuity with Bultmann the form-critic. The difference seems to lie in a more thorough-going existentialism. The questions of historical details and of the relation of form to fact are not of central importance. Accepting that the Gospels are *kerygma* expressed in the terms of the day, our task is to strip away the mythological framework, to discover the essential *kerygma* and to re-express it in terms acceptable to the current world-view. It is this process which demands a different concept of history³ if Christianity is to be regarded as in any way unique.

Bultmann distinguishes between the realms of *Natur* (nature) and *Geschichte* (history), the former being the realm of natural occurrence which is to be approached in a detached scientific manner, while the latter is the realm of human action in which one’s approach should be “involved” rather than detached. A historical event⁴ has two components – the happening and its interpretation. If either component alters, it is a different event. On this basis, an event may be *historisch* (if approached with the detachment suitable to the realm of *Natur*) or *geschichtlich* (if approached existentially so that its significance is allowed to affect one’s personal existence). It is this *Geschichtlichkeit* which is the true historicity for it is the personal history of each one of us. The application of this to the Gospels eases the force of his early dilemma, for, kerygmatic though the Gospels were, they represented *Geschichte* for the early Church and become *Geschichte* for us as their message impinges upon our present life. The questions of the historical (i.e. *historisch*) reliability of the records are the wrong questions to ask – essentially they are the attempt to examine the person of Jesus in a detached manner instead of in his relation to us today.

The chief criticisms of Bultmann’s approach to history centre in his historical relativism. Of greatest importance for him is the eschatological event which occurs as the past historical happening of Jesus of Nazareth is proclaimed and heard in the salvation occurrence. The “facts” of this past historical happening are not the matters of importance – indeed, one feels that in principle, if not explicitly, “*Kerygma* Christology has no need of the actual features of the earthly Jesus”, as Althaus has it,⁵ and even senses that this kind of existentialist theology comes close to attempted explanation of Christian experience apart from the historical event of Jesus Christ. In practice, Bultmann would deny this charge.

Certainly he does not deny the historical component of a *geschichtlich* event, but we do not know that component as such and have no way of knowing it. True to his premises, it is existential history, **my** history, that counts, and especially when dealing with the Christ-event this egocentric, existential and therefore relative view of history is unwarranted and inadequate. To cite Althaus again,⁶ “The history wherein God deals with men is essentially a history which genuinely happened. It is senseless to separate the two elements of the events to which the apostolic preaching bears witness in this way; on the one hand its character as an actual fact of history and on the other its character as the bearer of God’s action, so that one is emphasised more than the other, given preference to the other, and termed ‘authentic’. For both are a unity, and in this unity both elements are equally ‘authentic’. The salvation event takes place in happenings to whose historicity (in the hitherto usual sense of the word) witness is borne, and without which the salvation event is not present.

¹ See *Kerygma and Myth*, I (S.P.C.K., Longon, 1953), p. 3ff. I have ventured to call these presuppositions “former” in the light of such notable works as W. Heisenberg’s *The Physicist’s Conception of Nature*.

² *Jesus and the Word*, tr. L.P. Smith & E. Huntress (Nicholson & Watson, London, 1935), p. 8.

³ It has not been possible to give extensive foot-notes to this summary of Bultmann’s concept of history. Significant material is available in his *History and Eschatology* (Univ. Press, Edinburgh, 1957), especially his chapters on “The Nature of History” – pp. 110ff. Althaus’ analysis (chiefly of Gogarten) provides a concise summary and some acute comments – P. Althaus (tr. D. Cairns) *The So-Called Kerygma and the Historical Jesus* (Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1959), pp. 38-42.

⁴ Note that Bultmann is not referring to a “record of history”.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 41

Except where explicit reference is otherwise made, the terms “history” and “historicity” as used in this essay are to be understood in this “hitherto usual sense” as being related to “factual data” of the past and its interpretation in a manner either “objective” or “subjective”, these latter terms to be seen in the light of the discussion earlier in this section.

3. *Kerygma*, Form and History

It is now fairly well recognised that the Gospels are not what we call biographies of the historical Jesus. A great deal of selection has been necessary and particular themes and emphases are evident. In fact, it is clear that the records bear some relation to the kerygmatic and didactic aspects of the church's task. This is explicitly stated in the prologue to the shortest of the Gospels – Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου κ. τ. λ. (Mk 1.1). The important question is the relation between the *kerygma* and history in the synoptic records. It is too easily assumed that the *kerygma* must be primary, whereas there is at least one other alternative, *viz.* that the *kerygma* was implicit in the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, so that, while selection has undoubtedly been necessary, it has not been of the kind which would give a false impression of the person of Jesus, nor has the interpretation been of the kind which so overlays the events as to make the records unreliable witnesses.

The point of departure for form-criticism has been the attempt to see the use the church made of the Gospel stories before the Gospels were written and therefore the imprint this has made upon them as they now stand. The units of the synoptic Gospels have been examined in order to establish their life-setting, not so much in the ministry of Jesus, as in the worship and witness of the early church. In reality having discovered this *Sitz im Leben*, it surely does not necessarily follow that the original setting in the life of Jesus is to be excluded, though many critics seem to emphasise the church-situation to such an extent that the testimony to the other cannot be relied upon. R.H. Lightfoot in commenting on the handing down of memories and traditions of the words and deeds of Jesus expresses this value-relation thus,⁷ “They were valued, not so much (as we might have expected) in and for themselves, as for their importance in solving problems connected with the life and needs of the young churches.” The particular needs are seen to be “mission preaching, catechetical teaching, demonstration of the content and meaning of the Christian life, refutation of Jewish and other objections, and, perhaps above all, worship.”⁸ It is assumed that these memories and traditions would have circulated first in the form of stories and of sayings either alone or in small collections. These would in time take on a more or less fixed shape through constant repetition and the stories at least would tend to take on the form of similar stories about teachers and leaders in the Jewish or Hellenistic world. To some extent these pre-literary traditions can be discerned in the Gospels and can be classified according to their type or form.⁹ Space does not permit a full examination of form-critical data nor of the conclusions at which the critics arrived. Their method has done useful service in drawing attention to the pre-literary use of the Gospel material. There has, however, been criticism of such conclusions as have denied the basic historical reliability of the Gospel records.

As was seen in the case of the demythologists, many of the extreme conclusions do not stem from the data as such, but rather from the preconceptions of the modern mind. As Riesenfeld has it, “Scholars have set out from a conception of Jesus which has been constructed *a priori* and have then asked what portions of the Gospel material accord with this conception. They have more or less unconsciously used as the measure of their inquiry what Jesus can or cannot have done, without taking account of the fact that from the very first the tradition understood the deeds no less than the words of Jesus as something wholly unique which can be understood only in an eschatological setting. But an imperative requirement in the matter of method is that the nature of the investigation, and the criteria by which the material is judged, should be appropriate to the subject of inquiry.”¹⁰ On the assumption that most of the Gospel material was used in the early church for the purposes indicated (as no doubt it was), it by no means follows that the purpose of the Evangelists was the uncritical preservation of the data as used in the churches (if this was divergent from the facts as remembered). It seems to be tacitly assumed that modifications in the stories would have taken place in some sort of regular way throughout all areas – an unlikely situation in days of poor intercommunication. It also seems assumed that no distinction was seen between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith”,¹¹ whereas it is more

⁷ *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1935), p. 30. Cf. G. Hebert, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*, (SCM, London, 1962), p. 39.

⁸ Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 31.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰ “The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings” in *The Gospels Reconsidered* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1960).

¹¹ Cf. C.F.D. Moule, “The Intention of the Evangelists” in A.J.B. Higgins (ed.), *New Testament Essays. Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson 1893-1958* (University Press, Manchester, 1959), p. 165.

probable that, together with the proclamation of Christ and the realisation of his presence, there would have been eye-witnesses present who would have testified to the Jesus whom they remembered. With such people present in the churches, it would be truer to say of the Gospels that “they were in intention less interpretation, liturgy and theology than narrative statement.”¹² Further, if the critic acknowledges that the individual pericopes have considerable historical significance, there is still the problem of the connections with which the Evangelists have linked them together.¹³ This has greater significance for the account of the life of Jesus than is at first realised. H.E.W. Turner has noted,¹⁴ “The Christian evangelist was content to pass somewhat lightly over the earlier part of the Ministry of the Lord, and to focus his attention on the Passion; for him, as for some later Church theologians, Christ was ‘sent to die’...” Under this view, Jesus’ preparation of his disciples for his death tends to become the Evangelists’ retrospective interpolation. If this is treated as being not of the very fibre of the story but a thematic addition, the result is a quite different account of the mission of Jesus. The questions of chronology to be dealt with later affect chiefly the flow of the narrative but not the general portrait of Christ, his life, mission and teaching.

The questions raised about form-criticism above, however, are to some extent still within the acceptance of the priority of the *kerygma*. J. Jeremias has written, “Every verse of the Gospels tells us that the origin of Christianity is not the Kerygma, not the Resurrection experience of the disciples, not the Christ-idea, but an historical event, to wit, the appearance of the Man Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and his message... The Gospel that Jesus proclaimed precedes the Kerygma of the primitive community... The Kerygma too, the preaching of Christ by the Early Church, refers us back from itself at every turn. For the Kerygma proclaims an historical event: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...”¹⁵ The particular concern of Jeremias is the knowledge of the life of the historical Jesus. He accepts that form criticism has made the prospect gloomy, but is affirming the importance of the historicity of Jesus for both Christian *kerygma* and life, and that even using the modern studies it ought to be possible to gain an adequate understanding of the Jesus of history.¹⁶ However, more recently, a further aspect has been introduced by R.A. Bartels.¹⁷ The assumption underlying much of the discussion hitherto has been that the *kerygma* was the concise statement culled from the early chapters of Acts and set out, for example, by C.H. Dodd in his book, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*. This has been assumed as basic and formative of the Gospel tradition. Bartels brings in the question of the nature of Luke-Acts. The prologues make it plain that, whether the two are volumes of the one work, the reader of Acts is expected to have read Luke already. The accounts of the speeches in Acts of necessity were concise. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that they afford little factual information about the life of the Jesus they proclaim. Riesenfeld has noted that “with the help of Acts and of certain echoes in the New Testament epistles, we can construct notions of the early Christian missionary preaching to Jews and Gentiles alike. And, as we have already said, we have fragments of kerygmatic formulae about the saving work of Christ. But of anything which recalls the materials from which our Gospels were constructed we have, alas! not the least trace.”¹⁸ Bartels is probably right in explaining the lack in Acts in this way, though it is hard to see how the epistles could fit into the same category. The *kerygma* is seen to depend for its origin on the Gospel tradition. The problem of the epistles, however, has to be approached from a different angle. There appear to be plain allusions to the words of Jesus in the epistles but no express citations. It was presumed that these were known to the readers in the context of their original utterance, whereas direct citation could perhaps introduce a new *Sitz im Leben*. If, however, the Gospel tradition is seen as primary, then the way is open to understand the historical Jesus as the founder of the Gospel tradition which in turn determined the *kerygma*, a conclusion at which both Riesenfeld and Bartels seem to arrive.¹⁹ As the latter has it, “It was thus the theology, the contents, and the shape of the Gospel

¹² *ibid.* p. 165.

¹³ Cf. H.E.W. Turner, *Jesus, Master and Lord* (Mowbray, London, 1960), p. 75.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 75, 76.

¹⁵ “The Present Position in the Controversy Concerning the Problem of the Historical Jesus” in *Expository Times*, LXIX, 11 (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, Aug. 1958), p. 336. Cf. also R.H. Mounce, *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1960).

¹⁶ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

¹⁷ *Kerygma or Gospel Tradition – Which Came First?* (Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1961).

¹⁸ *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 152; *op. cit.*, p. 117.

tradition which determined the theology, the contents, and the shape of the kerygma – rather than the other way around. Jesus in reality was the creator and shaper of both of them.”²⁰

In *kerygma* and *didache* the church used the traditions of the life and teaching of Jesus, but, especially during the early days of eye-witnesses, they were treasured on their own account. The Jesus of whom they spoke had himself not only established the Gospel but had been responsible for the form that the later *kerygma* took. The issue of historical reliability, then, rests rather with the intrinsic problems of the Synoptic records themselves.

²⁰ Note that Riesenfeld does not hold Jesus as the shaper of the Synoptic tradition in its settled form (*op. cit.*, p. 150). The basic point surely is that Jesus was responsible for the fundamental Messianic interpretation of his life and work (*ibid.*, pp. 151-152).

4. The Synoptic Problem

The Synoptic problem comes in for consideration here, though not simply from the stand-point of origins, but also in the relation between the differences in details and the question of historical reliability.

The problem is posed by the fact of the considerable amount of material which these Gospels have in common. The substance of 606 out of 661 verses of Mark appears in Matthew, and some 380 of Mark's verses are substantially reproduced in Luke, only 31 verses having no parallel in the larger Gospels. Moreover, Matthew and Luke, apart from this material in common with Mark, have about 250 verses of common material cast in language which is sometimes practically identical and sometimes considerably divergent, while Matthew has some 300 verses and Luke some 520 verses of independent material. There can hardly be any criteria for judging the reliability of independent material except such as may be based on uncritical scientific presuppositions or as have been already considered with regard to the form-critical method. With the common material, however, differences raise their own problem of reliability, while similarities, especially those that seem to indicate literary dependence, may be evidence for sound common origin in objective historical fact.

Some differences are the occurrence of the same incident or saying in a different context. In some cases the possibility of distinct events cannot be excluded. If a rigid documentary theory of interdependence is held, such a difference is likely to be explained as a deliberate alteration of chronology. Thus, for instance, there is the question of whether the sermons of Mt. 5-7 and Lk. 6.20-49 consist of similar material uttered on two occasions (it is surely absurd to suggest that Jesus **could not** have repeated similar material in his teaching or that every utterance had the form and content of something entirely new!), or whether they are of our Lord which may not have originally occurred together but have been arranged in a logical sequence and independently and arbitrarily given a place in the narrative. The whole question of the sayings of Jesus, however, is a subject for later treatment. The chief caution raised here is against the tendency to regard the last as the only possible explanation.

Space forbids the consideration of all such instances, but some examples must be considered in order to know the nature of the problem. Such an example is the relation of Mk 1.16-20 (= Mt. 4.18-22) and Lk. 5.1-11. The passage from Matthew bears close literary affinities to the Markan passage the chief differences being (i) a filling out of details – the additions of δύο ἀδελφούς (which was, already present in the description of Andrew), λεγόμενον Πέτρον, ἄλλους δύο ἀδελφούς (this could again have been inferred from the description of John, and the fact that they were ἄλλους i.e. of a different family from the former two, is implicit in the phrase τὸν τοῦ Ζεβεδαίου), μετὰ Ζεβεδαίου τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶν, αὐτῶν; (ii) use of different words – περιπατῶν for παραγῶν (stylistic improvement), βάλλοντας ἀμφίβληστρον for ἀμφιβάλλοντας (more graphic and precise), ἐκέϊθεν for ὀλίγον (an indifferent change of meaning), εὐθὺς for εὐθύς (the true adverb for the adjective used in an adverbial sense), ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ for ἀπῆλθον ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ (repetition of the phrase of v. 20 as better designation); (iii) omissions – ὁ Ἰησοῦς (no loss of sense), γενέσθαι (unnecessary accretion), μετὰ τῶν μισθωτῶν; (iv) grammatical and structural differences – εἰς τῆ θαλ. for ἐν τῆ θαλ. (εἰς more precisely signifying motion and direction), λέγει for εἶπεν (use of the graphic present), use of οἱ (a more graphic reference to the two who were leaving their nets – likewise in v. 22), εὐθὺς (εὐθύς) attached to ἀφέντες instead of to ἐκάλεσεν (as in v. 20 – there is no contradiction of fact here, rather Matthew has emphasised the more important detail, the immediacy of their response), τὸ πλοῖον καὶ τὸν πατέρα αὐτῶν for τὸν πατέρα αὐτῶν Ζεβεδαίου ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ (this makes their action essentially more distinct and final, whereas Mark's account could possibly be taken as a casual departure). For the sake of this comparison, Mt. has been compared with Mk – these points are true whether or not it is held that Mt. has used Mk as his primary source. These two gospels are seen to be in close agreement in detail and to have literary affinity if not dependence. Lk., however, does not have this account of the call of the first disciples, but, after material in common with Mk (Lk. 4.31-44=Mk 1.21-39) ending in a verse which seems to parallel Mt. 4.23-25,²¹ he has the account of the draught of fishes. Some take this to be Luke's version of the call of the first disciples. It is seen as a re-setting of the Galilean resurrection appearance of Jn 21.1-19 (no doubt from an independent source), illustrating in dramatically symbolic form the task ahead, an assurance from

²¹ A more exact parallel would require the reading Γαλιλαίας with ADΘ etc. instead of the reading Ἰουδαίας with B etc.

Jesus reminiscent of the call in Mt.-Mk and a final statement that “they left everything and followed him.” But this is to foreclose the issue, for (i) Jn 21, far from appearing as a unique and isolated happening does not have the element of surprise but hints that the large catch of fish was a sign to them that it was Jesus (i.e. the same sort of thing may have happened before, cf. Lk. 24.35); (ii) while Lk. has no earlier account of the call, the narrative assumes some former relationship between our Lord and Simon (note 4.38,39 and 5.3) and seems to infer that Simon was already a follower; (iii) the power of the one he was following only overawed him when it was active in his own special field – hence the need for this reassuring word about “catching men”; (iv) the continued or occasional pursuit of their former business did not seem incompatible with their call to follow Jesus, as long as he was in Galilee (they fished by night, v. 5), but this emphasised the absolute nature of this call (however, cf. the comment on Mt. 4.22 earlier).

Another example is the relation between Mk 6.1-6 (= Mt. 13.54-58) and Lk.4.16-30, the accounts of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth. The accounts of Mk and Mt. are again in similar context in the story and have verbal similarities, though not as striking as in the previous instance. The account in Lk. is placed right at the beginning of his ministry, and the reaction to his words was so violent that it seems unlikely a second visit could be so uneventful in spite of his reminding them that “a prophet is not without honour, except in his own country...” If these visits are regarded as identical, there is a problem of chronology, while if they are distinct, there is the problem outlined above.

These questions of likenesses and differences, though considered in only two examples, lead eventually to questions of sources and the ways in which these have been used. Again, the space of an essay does not allow an adequate critical appraisal of these questions or of the proposed solutions. However, certain implications regarding historical reliability need to be seen. While it seems likely that Mk was the first of the Gospels and was used by the other two Synoptics, certain of the verbal differences seem to indicate that Mt. and Lk. may have read Mk in the light of a strong current Gospel tradition. This tradition may not have been standardised, but there were apparently still “eye-witnesses” in the church (Lk. 1.2). Some of the differences appear to be definitely stylistic, whereas others are random and make positive statement impossible. In some differences of detail of a more serious nature, the problem is not so easily resolved, but this may be on account of an inadequate knowledge of the circumstances and too great a reliance on inference and supposition. With regard to the common material of Mt. and Lk., whether they are thought to have a common **oral** or **manuscript** source, the reliance on earlier material (with the opportunity still to verify details – cf. again the Prologue to Lk.) points to the substantial historical reliability of this common material. No extrinsic criteria can be applied to the unique material – this can only be judged by intrinsic probability. It seems most likely that the material which the Gospel-writers sought out themselves would by that fact be substantially reliable.

5. The Miracle Stories.

For many people in this so-called scientific age it is the miracle-stories that form the greatest obstacle to accepting the historical reliability of the Gospels. This has been partly considered in dealing with the concept of history where it was stated, “The account of the life and person of Christ, while presenting problems to the modern scientific mind, is self-coherent – i.e. if Jesus was as he was portrayed, if in him God was breaking into human history for man’s salvation, and if this was a unique and decisive event, it is quite congruous that such sayings and deeds as we have should be attributed to him.”

In regard to the miracles, it is necessary to note the prescientific suppositions of the writers and of the people of the day. They did not make our distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Rather, their belief in miracles is to be seen in the context of a world-view regarding the whole creation as continually dependent on the activity of God and subject to his sovereign will (cf. Col. 1.16,17). All three aspects of divine activity – wonder, power, significance – are present not only in special acts but also in the whole created order (Rom. 1.20). The special acts of God, however, are related to the crises of the divine revelation when there are special demonstrations of divine power. The key to the understanding of the miracles is given in a statement by Jesus himself, “But if it is by the finger (Spirit, Mt. 12.28) of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Lk. 11.20). Miracles were seen as manifestations of the power of God rather than of the agent, even when this latter was the Son of God himself. The miracle was a sign that something was in the process of happening. The expression σημεῖον is most characteristic of Jn as descriptive of miracles. This emphasis is noteworthy in the saying at Jn 6.26, “You seek not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves.” Signs they **had** seen, but they were not signs to them, for their interest was focussed on the act itself rather than on its significance.

These suppositions, however, ought to be viewed as non-scientific rather than as unscientific. This is precisely where Bultmann is too undiscerning in his view. He says, “Modern man acknowledges as reality only such phenomena or events as are comprehensible within the framework of the rational order of the universe. He does not acknowledge miracles because they do not fit into this lawful order.”²² Rather, the scientist (and hence modern man) has tended to take a necessary assumption of his study and to make universal inferences from it. Scientific method, indeed, depends on the existence of “the rational order of the universe”. It is not then immediately essential to suggest that there is no God, or that if he is, he must be either wholly transcendent or wholly immanent. Yet these are surely the possibilities to which Bultmann has left himself open. The scientist has set himself to discover the laws by which this universe exists and changes, not to answer the questions of whether there is a God and what his relation might be to the laws he has discovered – such questions he simply cannot answer as a scientist. It is not inconsistent with this new understanding of the world to maintain that God is in nature, that the laws of nature are his laws, and that he is above nature, that he can use nature and its laws to fulfil his purposes. If God is not in the whole process, it is indeed an affront to the modern mind to suggest that he is present in special acts. However, the Christian doctrine of God holds together the concepts of transcendence and immanence.

Having opened the possibility of miracles, the question remains whether they did actually happen. If we hold them credible, then the general impression of the historical reliability of the records will count here too. It is noteworthy, however, that E. Stauffer claims that evidence for the miracles coming from outside the New Testament is “very abundant”. He relies chiefly on polemical literature which nowhere denies that Jesus did these things but seeks to explain them in other terms.²³

²² *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (SCM, London, 1960), pp. 37, 38.

²³ *Jesus and His Story* (SCM, London, 1960), pp. 19ff.

6. The Teaching of Jesus

The problem of the teaching of Jesus has been raised in part already. The particular aspect for consideration here is not whether these sayings represent genuine words of our Lord – this would be accepted in general by most scholars today, though with reservations in matters of detail. Rather, it is how the writers have used their sources, and the type of material the teaching in its present form represents.

It is acknowledged that there is reasonable evidence for the existence of an early Aramaic document in a fragment of Papias, “Matthew compiled the Logia in the Hebrew tongue (i.e. Aramaic), and everyone translated them as best he could.”²⁴ There is still some dispute as to what Papias meant by the “logia”. Some have suggested that it simply refers to a collection of Old Testament *testimonia*, a suggestion which is consistent with Matthew’s frequent Old Testament references. It may have been a collection of sayings together with the setting in which they were told, or simply a collection of sayings. There is no way of judging between these possibilities which is not determined by considerations of how the Gospel writers may have used these so-called “logia”.

If the term does refer to a collection of our Lord’s sayings, the large teaching sections may be direct selections from this source suitably fitted into the narrative, or they may be a body of sayings in a context of their own. In this latter case, their occurrence in isolated “outcrops” is seen in terms of detailed examples of our Lord’s preaching. No solution is here proposed – the best would tend to be “a good guess” rather than an ultimate conclusion. The point to note is that the possible existence of a documentary source of sayings enforces the impression of the substantial accuracy of this material in itself even if it be regarded as arbitrarily placed in its context.

²⁴ Preserved in Eusebius, *H.E.*, iii, 39.

7. The Chronology of the Gospels.

In many of the aspects considered so far, the greatest tangible problem has been the matter of chronology. Many of the other problems have not been so clearly discernible, but have depended on other assumptions.

It has already been suggested that in some cases the same type of event or saying may have occurred more than once, though this may be inadequate in cases where there are close verbal affinities of the record. It is likely, though, that similar events at different times would tend to be described in the same terms. However, the problem appears to remain unresolved. It may be that slight irregularities do not impair the historical reliability of the records.

Of interest is the attempt of Stauffer to write a "life of Jesus" and the method of dating which he adopts.²⁵ Indeed he adopts a new attitude towards the fourth Gospel as trustworthy source material for the life of Christ. The Synoptics by themselves follow a similar pattern, but John's Gospel leads to a different conclusion on the length of our Lord's ministry. Thus, Stauffer states, "It is clearly impossible to fit the chronological structure of John's Gospel into the narrow frame of the synoptic presentation." But he continues, "**But it is easily possible to insert the synoptic frame into Johannine construction**" (emphasis mine). He further argues for the "correctness of the Johannine chronology". These come almost as new terms in the discussion.

²⁵ *op. cit.*, pp. 17,18.

8. Conclusion.

The subject of this essay is raised by the nature of the Synoptic records:

- (i) their obvious relation to, if not dependence on, one another, and the differences within these similarities;
- (ii) the possible effects of the use of their source material over a number of years within the church for specific tasks of preaching and teaching;
- (iii) the deliberate bias of the writers towards their subject-matter;
- (iv) the intellectual framework from within which they understood the event of Christ.

The subject is also raised by certain present-day factors:

- (i) the question of the possibility of absoluteness in any historical writing, and therefore of the nature of the historicity of the person of Christ;
- (ii) an uncritical acceptance of certain present-day scientific preconceptions about the nature of reality;
- (iii) an unwillingness to accept certain facets of Jesus' teaching, leading to the notion that these were not his at all but current Christian ways of looking at things.

It has been seen, however, that the Synoptic writers are substantially united in their presentation of the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus and in their portrait of his person. Furthermore, on the problems of "modern man", if in Jesus Christ God was active in history for human salvation, there is nothing incongruous with those deeds recorded of him. This issue must be seen as it really is – a matter of faith or of unbelief – and the scientist who has faith is not thereby being inconsistent. The Synoptic Gospels are reliable records, but as such they challenge "modern man" to faith.

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