LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN CRITICISM

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Essex Hall Lecture 1936

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NOTE

The Essex Hall Lecture was founded by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association in 1892, with the object of providing an annual opportunity for the free utterance of selected speakers on religious themes of general interest. The delivery of the lecture continues under the auspices of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, as a leading event during the course of the Annual Meetings of the Assembly. A list of the published lectures still obtainable will be found at the end of this volume.

Essex Hall, London,
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LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN CRITICISM

DURING the last few years, in differing phrase, reference has repeatedly been made by New Testament scholars to "The Failure of Liberal Christianity." It is no new phenomenon. As long ago as 1910, an address bearing this title was delivered to the Cambridge Branch of the English Church Union by no less a person than the late Dr. F. C. Burkitt. "Liberal Christianity," he admitted, was "certainly a flourishing tendency in the nineteenth century," and in Lord Tennyson, the poet laureate, he recognised its prophet. "The general decline of interest in Tennyson's poetry," he continued, "is the measure of the decline of Liberal Christianity as a vital force."[1]

It is for men of letters to define the relation of the poet to Liberal Christianity, and to justify or explain the twentieth-century neglect of his writings.

[1] *The Failure of Liberal Christianity*, p. 10.

At his death, Tennyson was acknowledged to have been a poet who frankly faced the scientific problems of his age as none of his predecessors had done. In literature, as in religion, revivalism is not unknown. Speaking of Tennyson and Browning, Professor Hugh Walker said:[1] "There is substance in the work of these men. . . . If they are no longer read it is because their thought has penetrated the life of the time; and we may be sure that they will revive and have a second vogue when they are old enough to be partly forgotten." To-day, in religion as in politics liberalism is said to be a spent force. The wish is sometimes father to the thought. The permanence of dogmatism and despotism is nowhere assured. Reason and freedom are not for ever to be held in restraint, and discipline, however precious, is purchased too dearly by unquestioned obedience to authority in church or state.

Dr. Oliver Elton, reviewing nineteenth century literature, declares[2] "that reason

[1] *The Age of Tennyson*, p. 277.

[2] *A Survey of English Literature* (1920), II, p. 369.

and science, and the enthusiasm for humanity, which spoke out so boldly in the third quarter of the last century, left many facts of human nature, emotional and spiritual, out of their reckoning, and made too hasty a synthesis," but he is moved to express his belief "that the true and only sure hope for humanity lies in reason's permanent, insuppressible power of self-recovery." For Liberal Christians this faith is ineradicable. They would add that for its perfect work in the field of theology reason needs unrestricted liberty of expression, such as is rarely enjoyed in the creed-bound churches of Christendom.

What, then, in Dr. Burkitt's opinion,[1] was the Liberal Christianity of which he spoke, and why, in his opinion, did it fail? He defined it as "a movement of emancipation from external trammels," "a religion not of science but of sentiment," and asserted that it failed because "its breach with science became permanent," especially "in connection with the historical person of our Lord and his

[1] *Ut supra*, pp. 12, 13.

work on earth." Liberals like Harnack and Professor Peabody, both of whom he named, had exhibited Jesus as primarily a teacher of exalted ethics and modern philanthropy. It was a picture pronounced guilty by scientific historians of unwarranted violence to the text of the earliest gospels, and, in particular, of taking no proper account of the eschatological doctrine embedded therein. In 1929, Dr. Burkitt returned to the attack in an address at Manchester University on *Twenty-Five Years of Theological Study*: "The gospel according to Harnack and the school of 'liberal' thought of which he was one of the most learned and accomplished exponents was essentially timeless and general." Then came Schweitzer's book, translated into English 1910 as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. In it "one saw the great historical dilemma clearly put: if Jesus Christ be historical he belongs to his own age; if, on the other hand, we persist in asking for a Jesus Christ who is up-to-date we can only get it by constructing a Jesus who is not historical."

Is this dilemma real—an "Either-Or" —the one proposition to be taken and the other left? Does one who belongs to his own age, as, for example, Shakespeare did, never teach what is "essentially timeless and general"? Why are students of philosophy directed to the writings of Plato and students of biblical theology to those of the eighth-century prophets? Surely it is because in the Hebrew prophets and the Greek philosopher, as in the English dramatist, there may be found imperishable truths "essentially timeless and general."

Dr. Burkitt's attitude towards Liberal Christianity has been widely followed. In his last book (1934) Dr. Inge expressed it more moderately.[1] "The Liberal Protestantism which forty years ago seemed to be the natural religion for an educated man has partly lost its appeal. . . . Modernist criticism complains that Harnack as a critic stops half-way. He gives a portrait of a historical figure, of which strict history knows next to nothing." Last year, an

[1] *Vale*, p. 124.

ex-Chaplain of Ripon Hall, Oxford, writing on *The Redemption of Modernism*, gave a chapter to "The Failure of the Old Liberalism," in which he looks with much favour on "the German school of Form-criticism." "The new view," he declares, "has completely destroyed the foundations of the old liberal reconstruction of the life and religion of Jesus," the reason being that "from the four Gospels, written to instruct disciples in the religion about Jesus, it is impossible to discover the religion of Jesus in the old liberal sense." He goes further and supposes the ideals of liberal Protestantism, based on "a false and sentimental estimate of human nature" "were shattered in the disaster of the Great War."[1]

Dr. C. J. Cadoux, a congregationalist scholar, in 1934 said: "It can probably be taken for granted that criticism will not again be able to return to the 'liberal' picture of Jesus. . . . Frank recognition of the eschatological element in his teaching, and, still more, the coming of

[1] pp. 47, 48, 57.

Form-criticism, have shown this 'liberal picture' to be largely untenable."[1]

Form-criticism remains to be noticed hereafter. Meanwhile it should be observed that in these strictures upon it during the last quarter of a century, Liberal Christianity is implicitly regarded as something static—a corpus of belief, or, as some critics would say, unbelief, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. A writer in *The Times Literary Supplement*, December 14, 1935, stated it thus: "By the very completeness of its impregnation with the *Zeitgeist* of the eighteenth century Unitarianism was unable to modify itself in accordance with the changed intellectual climate of its successor. Thus the movement of liberation from tradition became itself a backwater in English theological development."

The history of Liberal Christianity from the beginning affords no evidence for this view of its character.

In the Society of Friends, whose indifference to eschatological speculation is almost as marked as their witness to

[1] *The Expository Times*, June 1935.

the application of Christian ethics to life is unquestioned, the fundamental Quaker doctrine of the supremacy of the "inner light" above all external authority, scriptural or ecclesiastical, may be said to have been almost rediscovered during the twentieth century. Samuel Fisher (1605–65) expressed the original Quaker attitude towards scripture when he claimed that "the light of Christ in the conscience, and not the letter of scripture, is the only firm foundation of the Church's faith, the only true touchstone of all doctrine, the only right rule of saving belief and holy life."[1] We may compare the words of Martineau: "We accept the light of conscience as no longer an unmeaning phosphorescence of our own nature, but as the revealing and appealing look of God. . . . The word of conscience is the voice of God."[2] Following the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, and largely under its influence, Quakerism, led by Joseph

[1] Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 289.

[2] *The Seat of Authority in Religion* (1890), p. 71.

John Gurney (1788–1847), lost its hold of the vital principle of its founder, and accepted the doctrine of scriptural authority together with the narrow theology associated therewith. In 1887 the Richmond Conference in America saw a serious attempt made to impose a creed upon the Society, but after the Manchester Conference of 1895, there was a re-birth of primitive Quakerism. To-day it is claimed that Friends may "accept the assured discoveries of science and the higher criticism without moving a hair's-breadth from the position taken up by the founder of Quakerism."[1]

Again, in *A Study of English Presbyterian Thought from 1662 to the Foundation of the Unitarian Movement*, a Cambridge scholar outside the "Movement" named, has recently traced, in her own words, "the fortunes of a body of men who modified their religious opinions and reconciled them with the scientific and philosophic knowledge of their time."[2] Radical Dissenters in the

[1] E. Vipont Brown, *Three Addresses* (1934), p. 25.
[2] Preface, p. viii.

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were rarely sentimental, and in their academies and published writings, as I have shown elsewhere, they were pioneers of scientific methods in the study of scripture. In an Address to the *Alumni* of Harvard Divinity School in 1880, Dr. J. H. Allen said: "Our relation as scientific theologians to the larger world of science is at once that of willing learners, and of independent co-workers and explorers. . . . Liberalism is not a code of opinion. It is a habit of mind." Otherwise expressed, in strict accord with our historical development it may be said that we are not free because we are Unitarians, but Unitarians because we are free. John Hunt, an Anglican scholar, sketching in 1896 the *Religious Thought in England in the Nineteenth Century*, with full knowledge of the Unitarianism of John James Tayler and James Martineau, said: "In this last development of Unitarianism we see the spirit of the age and its contrast with that of the eighteenth century."

Modern Liberal Christianity cannot

be identified with that of Lardner, Priestley, or Martineau, of Harnack or Peabody, however greatly indebted to them all. These scholars were not at one in their criticism of the gospels, though all reached their conclusions by the free exercise of reason upon the evidence available. Dr. Burkitt's verdict is returned against the evidence. Liberal Christianity in the nineteenth century was not a religion of sentiment but of science. The emergence from time to time of fresh evidence, the result of more intensive and exact study, led naturally and inevitably to changes of position on the part of open-minded scholars. Unitarian biography is full of records of such changes. Consistently with its principles, Liberal Christianity, as expressed by its leaders, has moved to what is called the right as freely and easily as to what is called the left, drawn in either direction by the weight of evidence scientifically examined. It cannot and ought not to be assumed that its movement is necessarily in one direction. History does not justify the assumption. Illustrations

might be multiplied. Take one strictly pertinent to our purpose. Dr. Estlin Carpenter dissented from Martineau's view that the Messianic theory of the person of Christ was made for him and palmed upon him by his followers. "The view that Jesus repudiated the Messianic character," he said,[1] "creates more difficulties than it solves." More recently (1920), an American Unitarian teacher, the late Dr. Clayton Bowen, said[2] with the utmost frankness: "Latter-day liberal theologians, with their social and ethical predilections, find the Kingdom of God on earth the key to the ministry of Jesus precisely in the same sense as it was to their own. The Jesus of their presentation, who belonged to the nineteenth century as much as to the first, and rather more to Berlin and Oxford and Boston than to Capernaum, was not the Jesus of the gospels any more than he was the Jesus of the Creeds." "But having said this," he continued, "we

[1] *The Bible in the Nineteenth Century* (1903), p. 378.

[2] *Theological Study To-day* (1921), p. 97.

have said nothing as to the essential contribution of Jesus." That he discovered, as we must surely do, in the relation of Jesus not merely or even chiefly to his own time, but to all time, including our own. Certainly if it should be proved that Jesus was altogether confined in message and mission to his own day, that his authentic teaching was the commonplace of contemporary thought, and, however coloured and transfigured, essentially a fantastic dream, rendered nugatory and meaningless by the passage of time and the process of events, then, indeed, "as a teacher," "he was," as an orthodox scholar once dared to call him, "the greatest failure the world has ever known." Before endorsing so singular a judgment, we may naturally pause and reflect. The question then arises: Whence derives this conception of their Lord in the minds of his worshippers, and what is its significance? It derives from a doctrine of Jesus as Saviour, a status supposedly superior to that of Jesus, Rabbi, Messiah, Martyr, a doctrine, expressed in terms

of eschatology and mystery, which forms the prelude to the later developments culminating in the creed of Nicaea.

Formerly, New Testament soteriology was largely based upon the epistles, especially those of Paul, and the four gospels were interpreted in the light of Paulinism by those whose orthodoxy should be above suspicion. To-day it is established, it is claimed, upon a fresh and critical investigation of the earliest sources of the synoptic gospels.

In itself, this method of approach to the problem of Synoptic Christology has much to be said for it. Once Hebrew scriptures ceased to be read exclusively in the light of Christian revelation, a sure advance was made towards a more accurate understanding of Old Testament theology. It is a clear gain that the gospels should be allowed to tell their own tale, corroborated and corrected only by the comparative study of like material in contemporary Greek and Hebrew literature. The outstanding facts of New Testament criticism, which contributed to the vogue of the older

method of exegesis, are by no means neglected by the new apologists for the "faith once delivered to the saints." The Pauline epistles are undeniably earlier than the synoptic gospels, and the communities in which the evangelical narratives were first framed had been converted by the great missionary and his companions.

Formerly, the presence of relatively few characteristics of Paulinism in the first three gospels as compared with the fourth was adduced as proof of their superior trustworthiness and of the *bona fides* of their authors. "The earliest gospels," said Menzies,[1] "are among the least doctrinal of the books of the New Testament. How a life of Christ would turn out which was written under the influence of a distinct type of doctrine, Christians were afterwards to learn when the fourth gospel came into existence. . . . There is no attempt in the epistles to make use of the evangelical narratives; and there is no attempt in the evangelical narratives to show agreement with the

[1] *The Earliest Gospel* (1901), p. 11.

doctrinal system. The two sets of writings belong as it were to two different worlds." Within the last fifteen years soteriology akin to that of the apostle and the fourth evangelist has been detected in the earliest sources of the synoptics. The existence of this soteriology as the central and predominant element in the evangel of Jesus and as the controlling and exclusive interest of the primitive Christian societies, with all that that implies for Christian discipleship, constitutes the question at issue between orthodox and Liberal Christians in the twentieth century.

Let us briefly glance at the sources of the synoptic gospels.

The sources of the first and third gospels, for almost a century, have been a fruitful field of study, and the identification of the two principal sources is now generally accepted. That Mark was one has been called "the assured result of New Testament criticism," though not all scholars are agreed that it was known to Matthew and Luke in the precise form in which it has come down

to us. More in debate is the extent and character of the second source, consisting largely, if not exclusively, of sayings of Jesus, whilst the recognition and delineation of the special sources used respectively by the first and third evangelists have more recently attained far-reaching importance in the discussion of the Synoptic Problem. Until a few years ago, in addition to the matters named, controversy turned upon the questions whether Mark was acquainted with the Sayings of Jesus, or *Q* (German, *Quelle*), as the reconstructed source was called, and upon what the answer, affirmative or negative, involved. During the last decade or so Mark itself has become the storm centre of New Testament criticism. This follows upon the advent of Form-criticism, or *Formgeschichte*, to give it the original name, which finds in the sources of the second gospel a soteriology that promises support to orthodox Christology, and pronounces afresh with added emphasis, "The Failure of Liberal Christianity."

For purposes of comparison with

Mark, we turn first to *Q*, by most scholars regarded as earlier in date. It is, of course, impossible within the limits of a single lecture to add another to the score or so reconstructions of the non-Marcan matter common to Matthew and Luke; nor may we even outline, much less discuss in detail, the many problems raised by *Q*. "The general opinion," says Dr. Vincent Taylor,[1] "is that *Q* is not a Gospel, and did not contain a Passion story; that for the most part, but not entirely, it consisted of Sayings; and that Luke has retained the original text and order of *Q* more faithfully than Matthew." The fidelity of Luke to this source, as we shall see later, is noteworthy, and, hardly less, the fact that *Q*, or part of it at least, in the opinion of most scholars, must almost certainly have been originally in Aramaic, the common speech of Palestine in the time of Jesus. The preservation in the Greek *Q* of Aramaic idioms and phrases, and hardly less its local and temporal colour, suggests that, if not in every detail, yet in

[1] *The Expository Times*, November 1934.

a large measure, it represents the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus.

For external evidence as to its authorship we have only the much discussed statement, reported by Eusebius the fourth-century historian, from the writings of Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia about A.D. 130, who was himself dependent for his information on an earlier Elder. "Matthew composed the Logia in the Hebrew (Aramaic) language, and each interpreted them as he was able." Formerly this early tradition was treated with respect, but in recent years, especially by the Form-criticism school, it has been given short shrift, and accounted little more than the idle chatter of one whom the historian actually describes as "small of understanding." Quite lately, however, the tradition has gained in repute from a fresh interpretation of the scorn poured upon the shallow-pated prelate. Dr. Manson, writing in October 1935, says:[1] "The statements contained in the fragment will not fit canonical Matthew, and it can be

[1] *Expository Times.*

shown in detail that they do fit the document *Q*. This involves the theory that the Papias fragment is a piece of tradition older than Papias himself, a view which seems to me inherently probable. No one who has pondered what Eusebius has to say about the intelligence of Papias will find it easy to believe that the historian would have wet his pen to record the private opinion of Papias on matters of biblical criticism. One does not quote as an authority the person whom one has just described as little better than an idiot".

Dr. Dibelius, the father of *Formgeschichte*, denies that Papias referred to *Q* on the ground that "he undoubtedly means our Matthew," and that his notices "are formulated already from the standpoint of literary Christians to whom the Apostles were authors."[1] Be it admitted that Papias had in mind the first gospel and was mistaken. An element of error in his statements is what we should expect in such a man, and it is

[1] *From Tradition to Gospel* (1935), p. 232, n. 2.

not a wild speculation that the name of the Apostle may have been attached to the gospel because it includes, in a form suitable for catechetical instruction, so much material from *Q*. That Papias was in any proper sense a literary person writing for those who highly esteemed the written word is directly opposed to what Eusebius says of him, and, what is more, to what Papias tells us of himself. "I did not think," he wrote, "that I could get so much profit from the contents of books as from the utterances of a living and abiding voice." These are not the words of a literary person composing for book-lovers, but the naïve sentiments of an uncritical scribbler harvesting traditions for simple-minded folk, and only the demands of a theory which must exalt Mark at the expense of *Q* could have misconstrued them. If we pay any respect to Hebrew methods of collecting and treasuring oral materials, of which abundant evidence survives, we shall subscribe to the statement of Dr. Moffat: "It is to reverse the probabilities of the case to discredit the tradition of

the Sayings of Jesus in favour of the narratives."[1]

Plainly, we must regard *Q* as a primary authority for the teaching of Jesus. The many reconstructions of it exhibit important differences, but these are not so striking as their agreements. Hence the impression this source makes upon scholars who have discussed its contents and character, when every allowance is made for their prepossessions, is by no means without value. "It was made," says Harnack,[2] "with the aim of giving authoritative teaching, and that principally ethical. . . . Above all, the tendency to exaggerate the apocalyptic and eschatological elements in our Lord's message, and to subordinate to this the purely religious and ethical elements, will ever find its refutation in *Q*." Dr. Stanton calls it[3] "a translation of an Aramaic document, embodying the oral tradition

[1] *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (1911), p. 203.

[2] *The Sayings of Jesus* (1908), pp. 203, 250.

[3] *The Gospels as Historical Documents* (1909), Pt. II, p. 106.

of those sayings of Christ which were felt by believers of the first days to be needful for the conduct of their lives and for sustaining their courage." Mr. George D. Castor, an American scholar, notes[1] its "Semitic, non-ecclesiastical character," and "its interest in practical morality and forms of worship." "The conception of the person of Jesus is the same as we find in the speech of Peter (Acts ii. 14). The great questions which we associate with Paul are not raised. . . . Nothing is more striking than the way in which the kingdom and future coming are stripped of their apocalyptical features, and made ethical in their bearing. The future coming is primarily a call to repentance. Taken as a whole, we have here our Lord's own rule of life and all his promises, a summary of genuine ordinances transforming the life such as is not to be found elsewhere in the gospels." Dr. Manson thinks[2] the absence of polemic from *Q* is due to the fact that "it was designed, as far as

[1] *Matthew's Sayings of Jesus* (1918), pp. 209, 10.
[2] *The Teaching of Jesus* (1931), p. 29.

possible, to avoid offending Jewish susceptibilities," and, with Dr. B. W. Bacon, recognises its affinities with the Epistle of James, of all epistles the most definitely ethical in character. So much, for the moment, for *Q*.

With a single exception, the special sources of Matthew and Luke cannot rival *Q* and Mark in age and importance as evidence of the word and work of Jesus. The exception is a source used by the third evangelist, known as "Proto-Luke," and first revealed by Dr. Streeter. Following an article in *The Hibbert Journal*, 1921, Dr. Streeter published his theory in *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* in 1924. With certain minor modifications, it has won wide acceptance. In the words of Dr. Creed,[1] who rejects the theory on evidence few have found convincing, "Briefly, Streeter's view is that, while the Canonical Gospel of Luke undoubtedly makes use of Mark, there is reason to think that Luke himself preferred another non-Marcan source, and that the Marcan material in the

[1] *The Expository Times*, December 1934.

Gospel should be regarded as a secondary interpolation into an earlier draft, which he appropriately calls Proto-Luke. Streeter suggests that 'Proto-Luke' may well have been an earlier work by the evangelist himself; that at a later date Luke came across Mark, and used it to enrich this earlier and independent work." "Proto-Luke," it should be added, was built up of *Q* and certain matter peculiar to the third evangelist, including the most precious parables of Christ. What is the Christology of this source? Dr. Vincent Taylor, who dates it A.D. 60–65, says: "The portraiture of Jesus is everywhere confined within the bounds of a full and complete humanity. . . . For him temptation is an experience repeated more than once. . . . The slight extent to which the Old Testament is quoted is a marked feature of 'Proto-Luke.' There is nothing mechanical or artificial, nothing which corresponds to the Matthean formula, "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet." . . . "In the genealogy the words 'as was supposed' were originally

lacking and added later. This of course implies that in 'Proto-Luke' the genealogy described Jesus as the son of Joseph." . . . "If we omit the words 'And was carried up into heaven' (Luke xxiv. 51) (for whose omission there is good manuscript authority), it is not certain that Luke xxiv. 50–3 was intended to describe more than the parting of Jesus from his disciples."[1] Clearly, "Proto-Luke," like *Q*, presents a more primitive and humanitarian Christology than the third gospel as we have it. Dr. Dibelius will have none of it. "Proto-Luke" fits ill into his theory of the character of the earliest sources of the gospels, though in it he contrives to discover evidence of eschatology. Thus the exhortation to take the lowest place at the wedding (Luke xiv. 8–11) "has grown out of an eschatological warning."[2] Without guidance, the reader might have suspected that Jesus, and not merely Luke, was inculcating a lesson in humility, but that

[1] *Behind the Third Gospel* (1926), pp. 263, 66, 69, 228.

[2] *From Tradition to Gospel*, p. 248.

would suggest that upon occasion the Master was a moralist. Not unnaturally, Luke is *la bête noire* of Professor Dibelius. "He is," we are told, "the first evangelist to interest himself in the human qualities of Jesus. This interest, however, is not in its origin Christian. It is explained by the literary attitude of Luke."[1] So, too, when in his Preface Luke mentions "many" predecessors, "There is no need to presume more than a few," whilst his "claim that he had traced things 'accurately' from the first, and that he had written everything 'in order' are 'conventional expressions,' "[2] or, as we might say, stories to be taken with a pinch of salt. The graces of a facile pen must needs cover a multitude of sins.

That "Theophilus" was a living person, not a mere symbolic name or a nobody about whom a harmless fiction might be woven is shown by the prefix "Most excellent," applied elsewhere only to the procurators Felix and Festus, whose existence has never been in doubt,

[1] *Gospel Criticism and Christology* (1935), p. 54.
[2] Ibid. p. 31.

and, with all his faults as a historian, Luke is not open to the charge of gross carelessness in the matter of titles and names. It is demonstrable that Acts was written by the third evangelist, and Dr. Cadbury and others hold that the two books were originally one. In Acts the writer, using the first person, gives in his description of Paul's last voyage and shipwreck what Breusing called[1] "the most valuable nautical document preserved to us from antiquity. Every seaman recognises at once that it must have been written by an eye-witness." Here, observe, the writer is speaking from first-hand experience, not, as in the speeches and letters scattered throughout the book, shaping materials and traditions after the manner of ancient historians. Similarly, in the Preface to the gospel, he is speaking of what he has seen and done. It is not clear why he should be a credible writer in his picture of the voyage in Acts and a conventional literary scribe consciously or unconsciously misleading his readers in the gospel. The

[1] *Die Nautik der Alten*, S. xiii.

assumption is, of course, made, not without good reason, that the Diary in Acts is written by the author of the book, and is not merely one of its sources.

Again, if Luke, as is generally allowed, handled *Q* with more respect than did Matthew, it may be supposed that his peculiar matter also, containing many sayings and parables of Jesus—indeed, Proto-Luke—is a fairly accurate transcript of original traditions. There is force, too, in Montefiore's plea that "If one considers the teaching of Christ from the standpoint of the psychology of everyday life and not of academic theory, it is obvious that the parables, and that in their most graphic and least curtailed form, such as we find in Luke, are just the element most likely to belong to the earliest stratum of tradition."[1] Luke's cavalier treatment of Mark must be attributed to stylistic improvements of a vernacular writing, to attempts, not always successful, to provide a better background for stories in the narrative, to dislike of expressions betraying

[1] *The Synoptic Gospels* (2nd ed. 1927), p. lxvii.

limitations and passions in Jesus and his disciples, and, not least in importance, to his rejection of Mark in favour of other sources, especially of "Proto-Luke."

What, then, is to be said of Mark, the earliest gospel?

According to Papias, "Mark having once been interpreter of Peter wrote down accurately everything that he remembered, without, however, recording in order what was either said or done by Christ." Petrine tradition behind the gospel, once accepted and extravagantly honoured as providing unimpeachable authority for its history and credibility, fell into disrepute, not altogether undeserved, with the progress of more exact study of the Marcan narrative during the last quarter of a century. *Formgeschichte* rejects it as worthless. The reaction has gone much too far. As Dr. Vincent Taylor reminds us: "Papias is reporting the words of an elder who must have been a younger contemporary of Peter."[1] Moreover, there seems no reason why

[1] *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (1933), p. 42.

an anonymous writing should have been attributed to Mark, who, unlike Matthew and John, was not an apostle nor an authoritative person, unless in one way or another he were really associated with the gospel. A comparison of the references to Peter in the second gospel with those in the first heightens the impression gained from the Marcan passages themselves that the Petrine tradition, though not referring to the gospel as a whole, is trustworthy, for in Matthew the influence of the church is plainly perceptible.

In his last contribution to the *Journal of Theological Studies* (April 1935), Dr. Burkitt showed himself unmoved by the arguments of Form-criticism. "The outline of Mark does not seem to me like the *Gemeinde-theologie*, the unconscious secretions of a community of believers. Nothing but a strong element of personal reminiscences could have produced it. And therefore I still hold to the belief that it embodies the private reminiscences of Peter, supplemented for the last week by the reminiscences of young Mark himself. . . . There is a good deal

of idealisation, of unhistorical embroidery, in the work, but the outline seems to me to be derived from real memory of real events."

The latest discussion (1935) of *The Sources of the Second Gospel*, by Dr. A. T. Cadoux, has revived, in another form, the tradition handed down by Papias. Dr. Cadoux is not satisfied with the method adopted by the German school, while fully recognising the singular phenomena in the gospel which it demonstrates and seeks to elucidate. In his opinion, sources consisting "only of isolated anecdotes and utterances" do not account for "the peculiar mixture of order and disorder in Mark." The redundancies and doublets together with the apparent tradition of the order of events are only "explicable on the assumption that the author was a compiler trying to harmonise several narratives into one."[1] Using as his main criteria "the interests, outlook and consistency of the narratives," he discovers three sources:—"A," a Palestinian gospel written in

[1] pp. 16f.

Aramaic about A.D. 40, "bearing the special authority of Peter," and translated by the evangelist; "B," written in Greek, probably by Mark, about A.D. 67, and betraying the influence of Alexandria; "C," also written in Greek, and exhibiting "points of contact with Paul." Their arrangement suggests that they were compiled "with a view to being easily learned by heart." The general result of this theory is to reassert even more strongly than before the history and credibility of the second gospel in its main features. All this is anathema to Form-criticism, which reduces history in Mark almost to vanishing point. Briefly, Form-criticism seeks to fill up the gap between the death of Jesus and the earliest gospel by reaching out, through a comparative study of forms of tradition and folklore, sacred and secular, to the mind of the earliest Christian communities, which preserved the memory of the Master's preaching. In the memory of that preaching, vague and uncertain for the most part, is the distinct recognition of a superhuman figure in the Lord Jesus

Christ, the Saviour who was to deliver his disciples from approaching woes at the end of all things close at hand. What therefore Mark lacks in verisimilitude is more than made good by his soteriology and Christology. "What founded Christianity," says Dr. Dibelius, "was not knowledge about historical process but a confidence that the content of the story was Salvation, Epiphany, Faith." Now, no one supposes that the chief motive of evangelists or their sources was biographical or historical. The temptation to point a moral and adorn a tale, even at some cost to veracity, has proved irresistible to preachers and story-tellers in all ages. Even didactic and doctrinal motives in a speaker or writer are not incompatible with a certain respect for mere matters of fact. Tares and wheat are inextricably mingled in many an excellent historical source, political and ecclesiastical, ancient and modern.

That Mark first turned the stream of tradition into a form of literature we call a gospel was no discovery of Germans in the twentieth century. It was perceived

much earlier. That this tradition was originally associated with the preaching of Jesus, and that much of it reflects the mind of the communities which treasured it is no startling news. This does not, however, necessarily mean, as Dr. Dibelius asserts, that "the tradition is not dependent on the personal recollection of eye-witnesses." Dr. Vincent Taylor rightly pointed out that the tendency of Form-criticism "is to ignore the creative activity of the original speaker." "If the Form-critics are right," he said, "the disciples must have been translated to heaven immediately after the Resurrection. However disturbing to the smooth working of theories, the influence of eye-witnesses in the formation of the tradition cannot possibly be ignored."[1]

How is the line drawn, then, it may be asked, between what Jesus himself really said or did, and what the community represented him as having said or done in the traditions incorporated in Mark? It is a crucial question. The

[1] *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, p. 42.

main criterion employed by Form-criticism is the relation of the narrative to the sermon whose content is eschatological. Almost everything else is more or less the product of the community varying in value down to zero. Extraordinary ingenuity and scholarship are employed in the analysis of the several types of tradition, and in the effort to deduce their original content, but even the Paradigm, the most valuable of all forms, is only relatively historical, since it must meet the needs of the hearers and prove the message. "Tales" owe their place in the gospels to their relationship to Christology, and both Paradigms and Tales deal with the divine which has become man.

Three examples of the Paradigm given are the Blessing of Children (Mark x. 12), the Tribute Money (Mark xii. 13ff.), and the Rubbing of the Ears of Corn (Mark xi. 22ff.). Doubtless mention of "the Kingdom of God" in the first passage and of "the Son of Man" in the third suffices to point to the presence of eschatology, but neither phrase occurs

in the discussion with Pharisees and Herodians about the tribute money. A plain man might be puzzled to find traces there of epiphany or eschatology. It reads like a terse discussion of the rival claims to recognition of the sovereignty of God and the state, summed up in the words, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." The distinction of two spheres is important, since for Romans Caesar and God were essentially one and the same. True, Jesus did not define the relation of the two obligations, but the inward and spiritual character of his teaching makes plain that in any conflict Peter's dictum expressed his master's view: "We must obey God rather than man." In the recently published British Museum papyrus, dated by palaeographers about A.D. 150, there is an interesting variant of the Marcan narrative. Lecturing at John Rylands Library, November 13, 1935, Dr. Dodd said: "We may suppose that in the early tradition there was a story of a question about payment of tribute, which took two

forms, one a more vague and general one which spoke of 'kings' and of 'things pertaining to the government,' the other a more definite one which spoke of 'Caesar' and 'tribute.' Much modern criticism belittles or denies Christ's interest in current politics. Admittedly, he did not see the conflicts of nationalism in forms familiar to us, but, in the Palestine of Procurators and Herods, of Pharisees and Zealots, of competing cultures East and West, he cannot have been unacquainted with them. He companied with taxgatherers, artisans, and even soldiers, and must have known what foreign domination of his native land meant both for good and evil. The attempt to depict him as completely obsessed with what lies beyond time and space does not consist with his discussion of tribute money, nor yet with his sympathetic interest in the welfare of the common people who 'heard him gladly.'"

The meaning of "the Kingdom of God" is a well-known problem. An English scholar, under the influence of

Form-criticism, recently affirmed that the expression "essentially involves a soteriology, a christology, and an ecclesiology." This is going rather a long way. A little further on we may reach the Church of England as by law established. "Church" has very little place indeed in the text of the gospels, and almost certainly neither word nor idea belongs to the teaching of Jesus. Undeniably, "Kingdom of God" in the gospels, in their sources, and on the lips of Jesus has commonly an eschatological content. Yet there are passages in the gospels in which this sense does not lie on the surface, and cannot be found save by those who are bent on its discovery. Little can be added to what Troeltsch has said:[1] "Jesus does not speculate about the nature of the Kingdom of God; it simply includes all ethical and religious ideals. . . . All attempts at a closer analysis are incomplete and uncertain. . . . From the study of the tradition it is quite impossible to discover with any

[1] *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (E.T. 1931), I, p. 51.

certainty what he taught about the manner of its coming. The Kingdom of God means the rule of God upon earth, to be followed later on by the end of the world and the judgment." We may therefore believe that Jesus bade his followers to love and forgive that the world might be a better place to live in and not merely to save their souls from impending doom.

"Son of Man" is generally a Messianic phrase and always found on the lips of Jesus himself. "Had it been a designation coined by his followers," said the late Professor Peake,[1] "the restriction of its use to utterances falsely assigned to him, and the failure to employ it in the narratives about him would be inexplicable." Nor may we take refuge, with Dr. Carpenter, in the view that Jesus never used it of himself. "The Son of Man hath not where to lay his head," in its context, does not call for a Messianic interpretation. To say with Dr. Dibelius,[2] that "the phrase is expressive

[1] *The Messiah and the Son of Man* (1924), p. 74.
[2] *Gospel Criticism and Christology*, p. 48.

of a belief that he who led a life of poverty among men and was condemned to die a painful death, will return on the clouds of heaven" is to read into the passage what is to be got out of it. Here the words can hardly bear the original Aramaic meaning of "Man generically," as they certainly do in the declaration "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" in Mark's version of Christ's defence of his disciples' plucking corn on the Sabbath, where otherwise the logic of the argument is completely destroyed. Dr. Dibelius sacrifices the logic by bringing the saying into relation with others as expressing "a christological idea."

It comes to this, that "Son of Man" in the gospel as we have it has more meanings than one, and has not invariably a Messianic or eschatological content, whilst the tendency to introduce eschatology into the phrase, visible in a comparison of the written records, would operate more easily during the period of oral transmission.

Again, the presence of miracles in the

gospel is no great marvel. Their absence would be a greater. To recognise conviction of divine epiphanies on the part of the communities that related them is unnecessary. Miracles of healing, so frequent in Mark, present no difficulty to medical science.

As Dr. Sanday said long ago:[1] "All those miracles which have to do with what would now be called 'nervous disorders,' all those in which there was a direct action of the mind upon the body, would fall into place readily enough. Given a personality like that of Jesus, the effect which it would have upon disorders of this character would be strictly analogous to that which modern science would seek to produce." In regard to a different order of miracle, he wisely adds: "We may be sure that if the miracles of the first century had been wrought before trained spectators of the nineteenth, the version of them would be different." What was said last century is not less true to-day when the science of psychology has made such

[1] *Dictionary of the Bible*, II, pp. 624–5.

remarkable progress. And miracles are no monopoly of Christian faith. They are associated with the lives of most founders of religions, before and after the birth of Christ, and with saints and martyrs throughout the centuries. A recent writer in *Bede, His Life, Times and Writings* (1935) remarks: "It probably comes as a shock to the reader unacquainted with medieval literature who approaches Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* for the first time, to find that a miracle occurs on almost every page. . . . And yet a fuller study of contemporary literature shows us that if there were none of these strange and incredible tales in Bede's *History*, we should have every reason for astonishment. . . . Again, it has been pointed out that many of the miracles related by Bede need not necessarily be miraculous at all, but merely 'coincidences brought about by perfectly natural means.' . . . 'And Bede himself,' saint as he was, 'sometimes heightens the miraculous element in his stories, as may be seen by comparing some of the incidents in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* with

the corresponding incidents in the *Anonymous Life*.' "

Frank acknowledgment of the nature of miracle in the gospels and of the credulity of those responsible for their transmission and preservation may be made by Liberal Christians. They are also at liberty to confess that acknowledgment of eschatological doctrine in the teaching of Jesus is one of some element of intellectual error in the teacher. None the less, they maintain that his teaching contains ethical and spiritual principles of abiding value, whilst his acts of mercy and compassion, however reported, testify to his exalted character and his profound interest in sinful and suffering humanity.

Words and deeds in Mark must be understood in the light of *Q* and "Proto-Luke," the contemporary, or it may be, the earlier sources for the life of Jesus. It is no vain presumption that had Christianity been from the beginning altogether a religion of soteriology, there would have been a violent rent in the body of the first disciples, whilst still

within the pale of Judaism, similar to that which followed Paul's teaching with regard to the Law—a rent which would have left its traces in the earliest records of Christ's words and work, as did the break of the Gentile with Judaic Christianity in Pauline and subsequent Christian literature.

Doubtless the popularity of eschatological ideas in the first century increases the probability that in our gospels they are unduly emphasised. Yet, as Dr. Cadbury urges,[1] "The incompatibility of eschatology and ethics is probably a difficulty that only moderns would feel. The prophets and the rabbis, Jesus and the apostles, not merely were able to accept into the same mind the idea of a near catastrophe and the demand for normal moral perfection; they even used the eschatology to enforce the ethics." Similarly, we may add, the inclusion of the Fourth Gospel together with the Synoptics into the Canon of the New Testament suggests that in the second century "John" did not seem so different

[1] *The Making of Luke-Acts* (1927), p. 234.

from its predecessors as it does to us.

Still, it is easy to exaggerate the extent to which eschatological doctrine dominated moral and spiritual teaching even in communities that looked eagerly forward to the end of all things. Every year that passed after the death of Jesus robbed apocalyptic hope of some of its potency and point, whilst problems of life, common to every generation, continued to press upon mind and heart. In religious teaching, as in worship, reverence is wont to accord tradition a place which reason no longer wholly justifies.

In the epistles of Paul, as we move from the earlier to the later, a change of emphasis in the matter of eschatology may be discerned. The Apostle's belief in the immediate Parousia, when he wrote 1 Thessalonians, did not seriously affect his practical policy, nor, to any great extent, his ethics, and these remained when the hope of an immediate return of Christ had almost faded from his mind. Crude doctrine blended with

philosophical treatises in Latin, the universal language, which was to last as long as books were read. "Modern languages," he said, "will at one time or another play the bankrupt with books, and since I have lost so much time with this age, I would be glad if God would give me leave to recover it with posterity." He has recovered it—for the masses of his countrymen—as a writer of English prose. The ethics of Jesus, not his eschatology, constitutes the permanent element in the legacy of his first disciples —ethics rooted in religion, an intuitive sense of the kinship of God and man, and of his own obligation to serve and save as the revealer of the divine love and forgiveness. If, however, the ethical and spiritual teaching of Jesus, and incidents in his life devoid of eschatological motive, are assigned to his disciples, then, truly, we set the disciple above his master, and the third evangelist, paradoxical as it may appear, must be held superior, in personality and in spiritual power, to the central character in his gospel.

One fundamental tenet of Form-criticism, taken over from earlier German scholars, remains to be noticed. It is that Jesus spoke in parable in order that he might not be understood; his message being esoteric doctrine for a few, not good news for the many. For this view, the saying in Mark (iv. 11, 12) provides the chief support: "Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them." Paul uses the same quotation from Isaiah (Romans xi. 8) to account by divine action for the extraordinary fact that Israel, the people of the promise, had not accepted the gospel. The result of divine action is construed as purpose, and this may even be what Mark meant, though in Hellenistic Greek the one particle may express result as well as purpose, and Matthew's version of the saying may give the right meaning. Dr. C. H. Dodd,

however, on the ground of the language and style of the passage and the fact that two inconsistent lines of interpretation have been mixed up in what followed, declares these are not words of Jesus, "but a piece of apostolic teaching." Dr. Manson finds the solution of the difficulty in the ambiguity of the original Aramaic particle, misrendered in Mark by a particle indicative of purpose instead of by a relative. He translates: "To you is given the secret of the kingdom of God, but all things come in parables to those outside who see indeed but do not know. . . ."[1] As Dr. James Drummond put it:[2] "To those indeed who are wholly unspiritual and unprepared the words may suggest nothing but the natural scene which they describe . . . but they are easily borne in the memory, and, as the mind becomes more humble and the experience of life deepens, come home with greater fulness of meaning and ever increasing power." Whatever interpretation of the passage we adopt,

[1] *The Teaching of Jesus* (1931), p. 78.
[2] *The Way of Life* (1917), I, p. 1.

its translation in our English version cannot represent the mind of Jesus, for many parables are expressive of simple moral and religious truth. Jesus did not use words to conceal but to express his thoughts, and his supreme merit as a maker of parable has been acknowledged by great Jewish scholars like Montefiore and Klausner.

Of Form-criticism a sober estimate is given by Mr. Luce:[1] "The world in which form-criticism has to move is at present so shadowy that detailed classifications and dogmatic judgments of provenance seem highly subjective and artificial. . . . Yet the influence of the moulding time of oral tradition must never be left out of account. Much that has passed unquestioned as primary may, in this new light, be seen as secondary, born rather of Christian aims and experience than in the mind or ministry of Jesus." With such a statement Liberal Christians have no quarrel. The modern method of investigation discloses the

[1] *Cambridge Greek Testament, Luke* (1933), p. xxi.

nature of the task attempted by the evangelists and the character of their materials, but its negative attitude towards history in the gospels is unwarranted, and its emphasis upon Christology is excessive, whilst it completely fails to account for the emergence of the humanitarian elements in the picture of Jesus so prominent in the earliest sources of his life and teaching, not excluding the gospel of Mark. Form-criticism may claim to link up gospels with epistles, to put the second gospel on the same plane as the fourth, to unify the doctrine of the New Testament, and trace the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity to the earliest sources of our knowledge of Christ, but when accepted for all that it is worth and more—as the final word of criticism and the key to the real meaning of the gospels, where does it lead us and leave us?

A pathetic answer to the question may be found in Professor Lightfoot's *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*, the Bampton Lectures for 1934. His final words are: "It seems, then, that the form

of the earthly not less than of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us. . . . For all the inestimable value of the gospels, they yield us little more than a whisper of his voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways. Only when we see him hereafter in his fulness shall we know him also as he was on earth." Setting aside the quaint speculation how our fuller knowledge of Christ in his glory will throw light on Jesus in the days of his flesh, I venture to assert that no Liberal Christian has been guilty of such scepticism. It is to build up hope for the future on despair of the past; to affirm the Eternal Christ by denying, in large measure, the historical Jesus; to exalt the Saviour by abasing the Teacher; and to strengthen the creeds of Christendom by undermining the commandments of its Founder. That way, surely, lies failure—failure in the effort to assert at all hazards the primacy of Christian principles in personal, national and international life, and failure not less certain in the cultivation of reverence

for the Man of Nazareth, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

It is not the Failure of Liberal Christianity.

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