THE GOSPELS AS HISTORY: A RECONSIDERATION.¹

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The study of the Gospels at the present time exhibits a marked reaction away from the methods dominant in the period before the War. The aim of Gospel criticism was defined as "the quest of the historical Jesus." It was assumed that a minute critical analysis and assessment of the documents might succeed in eliminating from the record a mass of intrusive material due to the thought and experience of the early Church. When this was done, the residuum would lie before us as a solid nucleus of bare facts, upon which we might put our own interpretation, without regard to the interpretation offered by the early Church in the documents themselves. In contrast with this, the dominant tendency at the present time is to emphasize the character of the Gospels as religious and not historical documents, to decry the significance of mere facts, if they could be ascertained, and to be sceptical about the prospect of ascertaining them. The reasons for the change of outlook and method are no doubt partly to be sought in the apprehension that the older method of Gospel criticism was leading to barren results; but I think that more important reasons lie in the field of general theological thought. There has been a revolt against what is called "historicism," and a renewed interest in Christian dogma, and therefore in the dogmatic aspect of the Gospels. The home of pure "historicism" was Germany, and it is in Germany that the reaction against it is most intense. In that country the pendulum is apt to swing with a violence unknown to us here. In the main, theology in this country, while it

¹An expansion of the lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 18th of November, 1937.
acknowledged and used the methods of historical criticism in which Germany led the way, never quite committed itself to the extreme positions of the critical-historical school. We are ready to listen to the teachings of the newer school perhaps without feeling that we must repudiate so ruthlessly as they do our former ways of thought. It is certainly all to the good that we should be reminded that the Gospels were not written, primarily, from historical, or even biographical motives. They were written "from faith to faith," to use a Pauline phrase. That is to say, they were written as confessions of faith in Jesus Christ, and as the means of creating such faith in their readers. A method of studying them which entails the deliberate neglect of those elements in them which reflect the faith of the Church, as the method of the older critical school tended to do, sets aside just that element in them which in the eyes of their writers made them worth writing. They did not write to gratify our curiosity about what happened in the past, but to bear witness to the revelation of God.

While, however, I believe that this shift of emphasis has re-invigorated the study of the Gospels, I think some of its most ardent advocates are not sufficiently aware that it does not, after all, dispense us from the duty of asking, and if possible answering, the historical question. The Gospels are primarily religious documents: granted. But they are Christian documents; and it belongs to the specific character of Christianity that it is an historical religion; that it witnesses to a revelation of God in history. It is not unfair to say that some theologians of the new school, in their horror of "historicism," are verging incautiously upon a new docetism. Some religions can be completely indifferent to historical fact, and move entirely on the plane of timeless truth. The Christian religion cannot. It rests upon the affirmation that a series of events happened, "under Pontius Pilate," by which God revealed Himself in action for the salvation of men. The Gospels, which are the fundamental documents of this religion, profess to tell what it was that happened. They do not, it is true, set out to gratify a purely historical curiosity about past events, but they do set out to nurture faith upon the testimony to such events. It remains therefore a question of
acute interest to the student of Christianity, whether this testimony is, in fact, true. A New Testament writer, contrasting Christianity with other forms of belief, declares, "We have not followed cunningly devised myths." Is his claim justified? Is the Gospel story history, or symbolic fiction?

It will be well to premise a few remarks upon what is meant by history. There are innumerable things that happen, in the sense that they have a definite locus in time and space; but no one is sufficiently interested in them to remember or record them. Such occurrences do not constitute history. Before we can speak of history, even in a rudimentary sense, there must be events which possess an interest and a meaning for at least a group of individuals, who for the sake of that interest and that meaning remember them, recall them in conversation, and perhaps ultimately record them for a wider circle. History in the full sense consists of events which possess not merely a private but a public interest, and a meaning which relates itself to broad and permanent concerns of human society. Thus historical writing is never a mere record of occurrences as such. It is, at least implicitly, a record of the interest felt in these occurrences, and of a meaning which they bore for those who took part in them, or observed them from a greater or less distance of time and space. The most rudimentary kind of history is the chronicle, the public equivalent of the private diary. But what indefatigable Pepys ever entrusted to his most private pages every single thing that happened even on one day of his life? And what chronicler ever recorded every event of each year enumerated in his lists? Both must select; and the motive of selection is to be found in the private or public interest evoked by occurrences. But neither diary nor chronicle is history in the full sense. Historical writing differs from these, not in the fullness or precision with which it records events, but in the truth and clarity with which its record brings out the meaning of the events.

We should further observe that as events differ in the intensity of meaning they possess for the experient of them, so one event will differ from another in requiring a larger or a smaller degree of interpretation if it is to be faithfully reported. Thus, if

1 II Peter i, 16.
you were giving evidence in court about a motor accident of which you were a witness, you would do well to confine yourself to bare facts. But if you tried to describe in an intimate letter the event known as "falling in love," the record of bare facts—what you said and what she said, what you did and what she did, on that memorable occasion—would convey nothing. The meaning is everything. Similarly among events of public interest there are some which can be adequately recorded as a series of bare occurrences—as for example the story of a scientific invention. There are others which can take their true place in an historical record only as they are interpreted, as for example, the beginning of the Reformation at Wittenberg, or the fall of the Bastille, or the abdication of King Edward VIII. It is true that the element of interpretation opens the door to all the fallibilities of the human mind, but the point is that the attempt to rule out any interpretation in such cases inevitably suggests a false interpretation. The events are such that the meaning of what happened is of greater importance, historically speaking, than what happened. There are even events of outstanding historical importance in which practically nothing at all happened, in the ordinary external sense of happening. It was simply that the meaning of the whole situation changed for an individual or a group, and from that change of meaning a chain of happenings ensued. Such events were the call of the prophet Isaiah, and the conversion of St. Ignatius Loyola, and the mysterious inward process that made the house-painter Adolf Hitler into the hope or the terror of Europe.

Now it is clear that the events narrated in the Gospels differ among themselves in this respect. The trial and crucifixion of Jesus could be recorded as bare fact. Tacitus reports it thus: "The originator of that name (scil. the name 'Christian'), Christ, was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate" (Ann. XV, 44). So far as that sentence goes, it is a purely factual record. But the context in which it stands, referring to Christianity as exitabilis superstition, supplies an interpretation. Indeed, an historian who records the death of any man is bound to suggest at least the reason why this death should be singled out from the myriads of deaths that happen every day,
and to that extent to interpret its meaning. Without such meaning, no man's death is an historical event, in the strict sense of the term. The Talmud, again, records that "they hanged Jesus on the eve of Passover . . . because he practised sorcery and led Israel astray." A Syriac philosopher of (probably) the early second century alludes to the fact that the Jews killed "their wise King," as an historical example of persecution of the wise and virtuous, along with the deaths of Socrates and Pythagoras. That is a more sympathetic interpretation of the fact. The Gospels record the same occurrence, with a different interpretation of its meaning. The occurrence, we may say, is the same; the event emerges as something different.

There are, however, other events narrated in the Gospels where the element of mere occurrence is evanescent. For example, if we ask what lies behind the story of the Temptation, it is likely enough that the merely factual element was as elusive as in the cases of Isaiah, Ignatius Loyola and Adolf Hitler to which I have referred. But it is quite another question whether or not the Gospels are veracious in affirming that the ministry of Jesus was introduced by an event of profound significance, an event in which the element of meaning altogether overshadows the tenuous substratum of observable fact. Again, what was the Resurrection, as mere occurrence? Various theories can be suggested—a corpse was resuscitated; or there were communications from the dead, like those claimed by modern mediums; or the disciples were the victims of corporate hallucinations. These are all theories abstracted from the record of the complete event, and it is impossible to produce convincing evidence for any of them. The complete event, that is to say the occurrence, whatever it was, plus the meaning it bore for those who experienced it, is given in the Gospels: Christ triumphed over death and was raised to the right hand of God. It is as thus interpreted that the Resurrection led to historical consequences in the rise of the Church.

But while the several events narrated in the Gospels are in this respect on different levels, the narrative as a whole is clearly

1 Bab. Sanhidrin, f. 43a.
2 Letter of Mara bar Sarapion, in Curedon, Spicilegium Syriacum.
concerned with an historical episode which for those who lived through it, or for those who experienced it through close fellowship with them, bore a weight of meaning greater than could be attributed to any other event in history. It was for them the eschaton, the final and absolute event, in which the Kingdom of God was revealed, and His purpose fulfilled. And we must observe that it was as thus understood that the episode in question won its place in history, as an "epoch-making" event in the strict sense. But for the fact that it was so interpreted—or rather (for "interpreted" suggest too self-conscious a process) that it presented itself to experience with this meaning—it might be not inadequately summed up in the words of Tacitus, and so dismissed. But we are surely justified in saying at least this much, that a supercilious and somewhat cynical Roman aristocrat, with all the prejudices of his class, regarding the episode entirely from the outside, at a date later than the bulk of our New Testament evidence, and at a great distance from the scene of action, is not a priori likely to have formed a juster estimate of its significance than those who stood under the immediate impact of the facts. The assumption that the whole great course of Christian history is a massive pyramid balanced upon the apex of some trivial occurrence, is surely a less probable one than that the whole event, the occurrence plus the meaning inherent in it, did actually occupy a place in history at least comparable with that which the New Testament assigns to it.

The outcome of all this is that we are not to seek in the Gospels a plain record of bare fact. The conditions in which they were produced did not allow of that. But the record in its actual form, in which the facts appear in a setting which interpreted them, is not for that reason unhistorical. At the same time we must recognize the inevitable presence in such a record of human fallibility. Even if we were disposed in the interests of a theory to deny it, the observation that the four Gospels often differ both in matters of fact and in interpretation of fact is enough to show that their record is not in any case inerrant. They were written from thirty-five to seventy-five years (or so) after the event, and we have no reason to assume that the writers were supernaturally protected from the natural infirmities to
which the human mind is liable. It is necessary therefore to deal critically with the documents in order to get back to the earliest, the best-accredited and the most influential form of the tradition.

The Gospel according to Mark is the earliest of the four, to be dated probably in the late sixties of the first century. Matthew and Luke may be placed, roughly, between 75 and 90, and John perhaps between 90 and 110. Clearly Mark is of great importance, since it takes us back to within about thirty-five years of the events. But thirty-five years is still a long time. How are we to bridge the gap?

One method is to attempt to associate our documents directly with eyewitnesses. Thus Mark is regarded as being the work of a companion of the apostle Peter, and preserving his reminiscences. The First Gospel is traditionally attributed to the apostle Matthew. When that view is rejected, the attempt is made to associate the apostle Matthew with a document believed to lie behind the Gospel bearing his name. The argument then runs that allowing for the infirmities of memory natural to two somewhat elderly apostles, we are in almost direct contact with the best possible kind of authority—that of the original eyewitnesses. Now it is, I think, highly probable that the Gospel according to Mark has some special relation to the tradition as handed down by Peter. But examination shows that it is impossible to regard the whole of this Gospel as direct Petrine reminiscence. Indeed the very arguments by which a Petrine derivation is made probable for certain sections tell against such a derivation for other sections. Thus the appeal to eye-witness is an appeal to something which must itself be established by other arguments, and not to something that can be assumed as fundamental. The Matthean origin of "Q" is much more uncertain; and if Philip be made guarantor for some of the special Lucan traditions, and the Beloved Disciple for some of the Johannine, in each case it is the character of the material that makes such derivation likely, and not the certainty of the derivation that guarantees the material. In itself, the attempt to find individual guarantors for various parts of the tradition is precarious, and does not carry us very far.
The whole tendency of recent criticism is rather to think of the Gospels as the deposit, or crystallization, of various aspects of a living and continuous tradition, embodied and expressed in the life of a community. This tradition is witnessed to by other New Testament documents. The Epistles set before us a first-hand picture of the early Church as a community in being. Its life and thought are seen to be controlled by constant reference to two main factors, described as the Gospel of Christ and the Law of Christ. The Gospel, which is the theme of the “preaching” (kerygma) of the Church, is a story of a divine act for the salvation of men, manifested on the stage of history, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Law of Christ is a body of ethical “teaching” (didache) carrying the authority of Jesus. It is noteworthy that several of the Pauline epistles fall naturally into two sections, a theological section, which expounds and defends the implications of the Gospel; and an ethical section, which sets forth the application of the Law of Christ. It is clear that the epistles presuppose a double tradition, of the story of Jesus and of His teaching, which is assumed to be known and accepted by their readers.

Now Paul regarded himself, in spite of his claim to independence and originality in the presentation of the Gospel, as the bearer of a tradition which was common to the whole apostolic body. “Whether I or they, it was thus that we preached, and thus that you believed” (I Cor. xv, 11). In the immediate context he cites as from this common tradition the statements “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and was seen of Cephas (and others).” Elsewhere he reports, as something “received from the Lord” (i.e. as primitive tradition), the story of the Last Supper (I Cor. xi, 23-26). This does not exhaust what Paul knows regarding the life of Jesus. He mentions the fact that He was born a Jew, claiming descent from David; that He had several brothers,

1 Gal. iv, 4; Rom. ix, 5.
2 Rom. i, 3. Paul shows elsewhere no interest in the Davidic descent of Jesus; we must suppose that he is here referring to generally accepted tradition.
including one named James, whom Paul knew quite well; that He worked among Jews, and not among Gentiles, and that the Jews were responsible for His death, although He actually died by the Roman method of crucifixion. He is also acquainted with a recognized tradition of the sayings of Jesus, two of which he quotes explicitly, while there is so much beside in Paul's ethical teaching which directly or indirectly recalls the actual words of the Gospels that we must suppose that both he and his converts were acquainted with a collection of sayings of Jesus, similar to those collections which have been used by the Evangelists. Further, Paul has a definite conception of the character of Jesus. Not only does he emphasize His righteousness and obedience (which might be taken as general or conventional), but he notes as His outstanding traits of character gentleness, forbearance, humility, and a complete absence of self-seeking. These traits are expressly held up for the imitation of Christians. Moreover, after Paul in Rom. xii-xiii has set forth the Christian moral ideal in some detail, he sums up in the words, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” This surely implies that the moral ideal he has set forth is that embodied in the character of Jesus.

The facts to which Paul alludes regarding the Jesus of history...

1 I Cor. ix, 5.  
2 Gal. i, 19.  
3 Rom. xv, 8. Paul must here be controlled by the tradition. If it had been possible to aver that Jesus had preached to Gentiles, this would have been a valuable asset to Paul in his controversy with the Judaizing Christians.  
4 I Thess. ii, 15, et passim. To say that the Jews ‘killed the Lord Jesus,’ and that He died by crucifixion, looks like a formal contradiction, since crucifixion was not a form of execution known to Jewish law. The statement, however, quoted here from the Talmud shows that the Jews accepted responsibility, and the situation described in the Gospels, in which the Jewish authorities take the initiative, while Pilate pronounces condemnation, explains the apparent contradiction in Paul.  
5 I Cor. vii, 10; ix, 14. Both these sayings are in the Gospels.  
6 II Cor. x, 1.  
7 Phil. ii, 7-8. Observe that the ῥαπελύωνος is not the Incarnation, which is described in the words ἔκενωσεν ἐαυτόν. As a man (ἕρεθις ὡς ἄνθρωπος) Christ humbled Himself.  
8 Rom. xv, 2-3.  
9 Cf. I Cor. xi, 1; I Thess. i, 6. Observe that these passages exclude the idea that Paul is referring to an ideal Messianic figure and not to the Jesus of history, for Christ is an object of invitation in the same sense as Paul himself is.  
10 Rom. xiii, 14.
are always related to His Messianic office and destiny. Then, it may be argued, how do we know that Paul is not describing an ideal Messianic figure, and not an historical person? The answer is that his account of Jesus as Messiah, while it corresponds to the one essential point in the Messianic idea without which Messiahship is meaningless—that the Messiah is the divinely appointed Head of the people of God, and the bearer of His Kingdom to the whole world—in all other respects represents the Jewish Messianic idea reversed. The Messiah should have exhibited the attributes of power and dominion on earth; instead, He "took the form of a slave." He should have united Israel under His sway; instead, He was rejected by Israel. He should have vindicated the Law; instead, He died under the curse of the Law as a malefactor. The phenomenon of a "crucified Messiah" was a "scandal" to the Jews. It could not have come from anywhere except out of history. To the Pauline historical data, therefore, we must add that Jesus came as Messiah, and (by implication) that it was as such that He was killed by the Jews; and that His death was the result of a conflict with the Law. These data we shall find reappearing in the Gospels.

The Pauline testimony, therefore, is all of a piece. He attests the character of Jesus, something of His life and death, and something of His teaching; and he assigns Him His place in history as a crucified Messiah. This testimony is of the utmost importance, since we know that Paul came into the Church (which he already knew before his conversion) within seven years (probably less) from the Crucifixion; that he was well acquainted with Peter, John, and James, the brother of Jesus; and that for all his differences of opinion, he never differed from them in his conception of the fundamental tradition.

Nor is Paul our only witness outside the Gospels. The anonymous author to the Hebrews refers in the same allusive way as Paul to generally accepted facts about Jesus. He knows that He was of the tribe of Judah; 1 that He preached salvation as the first Apostle of the faith; 2 that He was faithful and obedient to

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1 Heb. vii, 14.  
2 ii, 3; iii, 1.
God, learning obedience by suffering; that He was tempted, without falling into sin; that He met with great opposition; that He prayed to be saved from death; that He was crucified outside the gate (of Jerusalem); and that He rose again. There is no suggestion that the author was dependent for these facts upon any of our written Gospels. He says that he and his readers had received the Gospel from the original hearers of Jesus, and we may accept him as one more witness to the common tradition.

In the Acts of the Apostles we have a report of the preaching of the apostles, from which it seems possible to reconstruct (in summary) a formulated statement of the tradition which is presupposed, and referred to allusively, in the epistles. It contains, especially in the form given in Acts x, 36-43, a brief outline of the main facts of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, similar to that which is implied in I Cor. xv, 3-7.

Apart from the Gospels, then, we can recover from the New Testament a clearly articulated picture of the place which the historical tradition of Jesus occupied in the life and thought of the early Church. The Gospels represent the gathering together of this tradition about a central strand of testimony embodied from the first in the preaching (kerygma) of the Church, as well as in the teaching (didache) by which its ethical ideals were set forth. The two factors, preaching and teaching, the Gospel and the Law of Christ, reappear in our Gospels. Of our two earliest Gospel sources, Mark represents primarily the story about Jesus, and "Q" the teaching of Jesus.

The Gospel according to Mark, which is the basis of all the others, may be described, if regard be paid to the emphasis and proportion of the story, as a full account of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and of the events which directly led up to this crisis, prefaced by an unsystematic collection of episodes from His ministry. Its general structure can be shown to be determined by an outline similar to those which may be inferred

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1 Heb. iii, 2; x, 5-9.  
2 ii, 10; v, 8.  
3 iii, 12.  
4 xiii, 20; x, 12.  
5 xi, 3.  
6 iii, 12.  
7 xii, 2.  
8 xii, 2.  
9 iii, 3.  
from the data in the rest of the New Testament. Whatever elements, therefore, of later development may be recognized, the Gospel story as we have it in our canonical Gospels lies within a framework which can be traced to the earliest days of Christianity. The primitive preaching postulates the historical reality of the main facts, and so acted as a preservative of the historical tradition, over against any attempt (such as exhibited itself notably in Gnosticism) to devaluate the historical element in Christianity.

So far as we have gone at present, it might be the case that the detail of the Gospel story is the product of the mind of the Church working within the framework of the kerygma, or apostolic preaching. But we have, in any case, to account for the kerygma itself. A true historical perspective suggests that it would be nearer the truth to say that the kerygma, or the facts and beliefs involved in it, created the community, than to say that the community created the kerygma. The Church formulated it, no doubt, but except upon the hypothesis that something happened of which the apostolic preaching gives an account, we can assign no adequate reason for the emergence of the Church.

The Gospels, however, as they stand, belong to a comparatively late period. The authority to be attached to their evidence in detail will depend upon the earlier sources, written or oral, from which the Evangelists may be supposed to have drawn their material. There are two lines of investigation to be followed: (i) "source-criticism," which deals with the written documents, and seeks to establish their proximate sources; and (ii) "form-criticism," which seeks to reconstruct the oral tradition lying behind the proximate written sources.

I assume that the main results of source-criticism are familiar. Mark is the earliest Gospel. Matthew and Luke depend largely upon it as a source. They also depend upon a lost document, denominated "Q," which may be conjecturally dated to about the same period, the sixties of the first century. The "Q" material can be isolated for study, and Mark and "Q" can be compared. The importance of such a comparison rests upon the

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facts that the two sources belong to different geographical areas (Mark, Western; “Q,” Eastern), and to different circles in the Church; and that the interest and purpose of the two are quite different. Mark, as we have seen, represents primarily the Gospel story which goes back to the primitive preaching (kerygma); “Q” the tradition of the sayings of Jesus which was embodied in the teaching (didaché) of the Church. In so far therefore as we can recognize convergences or cross-correspondences between the two, they carry us back to a state of the tradition much earlier than the time to which Mark and “Q” belong. In point of fact, attentive study of the material reveals a considerable number of such correspondences. From the data attested by Mark and “Q” in conjunction we can derive a clear and relatively full picture of the character of the ministry of Jesus. This picture is based upon evidence which, when allowance is made for the time required for the tradition to develop in the two directions represented by Mark and by “Q” respectively, can hardly be later than, say, the forties. It may be used as a criterion for estimating the value of other material in Mark and “Q,” as well as in the other Gospels. By the use of such a criterion, it becomes clear that the general impression produced by the Synoptic Gospels as a whole is in harmony with this early and central tradition, with expansions which do not alter its character, but that there are sections of these Gospels, and still more of the Fourth Gospel, which lie somewhat off the line of this tradition, and may turn out to be of only secondary historical value.

Form-criticism is so called because it starts from the forms or patterns in which the material is presented, and seeks to draw conclusions from these forms with regard to the character of various parts of the tradition in the oral stage which lies behind the written Gospels. Its method, as distinguished from that of source-criticism, may be illustrated in this way. The source-

1 A list of doubly-attested sayings is given in Burkitt, The Gospel History and its Transmission, pp. 147-68. For our purpose not only such sayings come into view, but also those cases where the two documents confirm one another implicitly. It should also be added that in some cases, as for example, in predictions of the Second Advent, Mark and “Q” represent different and prima facie inconsistent traditions. Those points in which they agree obviously carry the greater weight when we are seeking for the central tradition.
critic takes, for example, the story of the Withered Hand (Mk. iii, 1-6 and parallels). By a minute comparison of the actual wording in the three Gospels he concludes (a) that this story was taken by Matthew and Luke from Mark, and (b) that Matthew has expanded it by the addition of a saying which is found elsewhere in Luke, and so was probably drawn from "Q." The form-critic, on the other hand, will take the same story, and observe that its pattern consists of three elements only—setting, action, and significant saying. He then points out that the same pattern is found, not only in the similar story of the Dropsy (Lk. xiv, 2-6) but also in sections whose content is quite different, e.g. the stories of the Blessing of the Children, of the Feast with Publicans and Sinners, and of the Anointing at Bethany. With only slight variations in the pattern a whole class of such stories can be collected, and can be compared and contrasted with other stories which have a different pattern. Similarly the Gospel Sayings can be classified, for example, as parables, poetical utterances, and prose aphorisms.

It is not necessary here to supply a detailed classification of the material, such as form-criticism seeks to provide. It is enough to note certain characteristics of the material.

(i) Apart from the long and sustained narrative of the Passion, the bulk of the oral tradition seems to have been in the form of brief stories and sayings, each of which aims at setting forth clearly and vividly some one main point.

(ii) It is thus possible in most cases to recognize the interest or motive which led to the formulation and preservation of the tradition. The interest is seldom directly biographical. Such biographical information as we can glean is all the more significant because it is imparted incidentally.

(iii) More often the interest is related to some theme belonging either to the preaching (kerygma) or to the teaching (didache) of the early Church. In each case the tradition was open to the possibility of being modified under the influence of some special homiletical or didactic motive, but in each case also, the nearer a particular story or saying stands to the primitive and permanent concerns of the Church, the more sure we may be that it belongs to the central tradition.
(iv) Sometimes the mere form of a unit of the tradition permits an estimate of its probable historical value. Thus, it is generally recognized that the parables as a whole have a strikingly individual style and character, which encourages the belief that they belong to the most original and authentic part of the tradition. Many of the aphoristic sayings on the other hand have little individual stamp, but are of the nature of current proverbs, so that it is hard to say whether they were coined by Jesus Himself, or taken by Him or His followers from a common stock. Similarly some of the stories have a suspicious resemblance in style and character to folk stories current in the Jewish or the Hellenistic world, while others have a unique form which seems to have been the product of the Christian genius.

(v) It is often possible to infer the situation in the life of the Church in which a particular element of the tradition had special significance. Thus such a story as that of the Coin in the Fish’s Mouth had obvious pertinence to the question of the payment of the Temple tax by Jewish Christians who no longer felt themselves to be within the Jewish community. That question is hardly likely to have become acute in the stage of Church life represented by the early chapters of Acts, and still less likely during the lifetime of Jesus. The story is suspected, not without good reason, of being a later accretion. On the other hand, such passages as those in which Jesus is challenged to give a sign from heaven, or accused of casting out demons by Beelzebul, may indeed have had apologetical value in the Church’s conflict with Jewish opponents, but no “setting in life” is so natural or appropriate as their ostensible setting in the life of Jesus Himself, who, as Jewish tradition avers, was accused of sorcery. We can scarcely doubt that they belong to the primary tradition.

If we ask what is the chief value of the method of form-criticism for our immediate purpose, I should answer that it enables us to study our material in fresh groupings, which point to distinct strains of tradition, preserved from different motives, and in some measure through different channels, and to compare these strains of tradition much as we compared the written sources, Mark and “Q,” in search of cross-correspondences and
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convergences. I will give an example. Take the following sections of the Gospels:

1. The Call of Levi (Mk. ii, 14).
2. The Feast with Publicans and Sinners (Mk. ii, 15-17).
3. Zacchæus (Lk. xix, 1-10).
4. The Sinful Woman in Simon’s House (Lk. vii, 36-48).
5. The Woman taken in Adultery (Jn. vii, 53-viii, 11).
6. The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk. xv, 1-7, Mt. xviii, 12-13).
7. The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk. xviii, 10-14).
8. The Parable of the Children in the Market-place (Mt. xi, 16-19, Lk. vii, 31-35—" Q").
9. The saying, “The publicans and harlots enter the Kingdom of God before you” (Mt. xxi, 31-32).

Here we have a great variety of traditional “forms”—aphorisms, parables, poetical sayings, dialogues, stories of various kinds—taken from all four main strata of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, “Q,” Matthew’s special source, and Luke’s special source), as well as from some unknown source which has entered into some MSS. of John and some of Luke. The underlying motives are various. No. 4 is primarily teaching on forgiveness, No. 7, teaching on prayer, No. 6 deals with the Gospel theme of the grace of God. Nos. 8 and 9 are simple comments upon the actual situation in the ministry of Jesus, the former in a poetical and parabolic form, the latter in aphoristic form. But all of them in their different ways exhibit Jesus as an historical Personality distinguished from other religious personalities of His time by His friendly attitude to the outcasts of society. This convergence of a great variety of strands of tradition is impressive. We may surely say, on strictly critical grounds, that we have here a well-attested historical fact. This fact stands independently of the

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1 The pericope adulterae is absent from our best MSS., with one single exception. Of the MSS. which contain it, some give it in Jn. vii, 53-viii, 11, some at the end of Jn. i, and some after Lk. xxii, 38. The story appears to have been given also in the Gospel according to the Hebrews. It was evidently a piece of floating tradition.

2 It is interesting to observe how this fact emerges in a fresh guise in the epistles. “This man receiveth sinners,” says the Lucan tradition (xv, 2): “receive one another as Christ received you,” says Paul (Rom. xv, 7). “A friend of publicans and sinners,” says the “Q” tradition (Mt. xi, 19); “God commendeth
historical status of the several stories in detail. Thus the story of the Woman taken in Adultery is poorly attested, being in fact no part of our canonical Gospels according to the best MSS. But the implications of the story regarding the attitude of Jesus to the sinful and to the self-righteous are in agreement with a whole body of evidence, and represent the witness of the central tradition.

As another example, take the following passages:

1. Rejection at Nazareth, with the saying about a prophet at home (Mk. vi, 1-6, Lk. iv, 15-30).
2. The Mother and the Brethren (Mk. iii, 31-35).
3. Jesus and His brethren (Jn. vii, 1-9).
4. The saying, "The foxes have holes..." (Mt. viii, 20, Lk. ix, 56-"Q").
5. The command to "hate" father and mother (Lk. xiv, 26, Mt. x, 37-"Q").

6. The Call of the Sons of Zebedee (Mk. i, 19-20).

The motive of No. 1 is the theme of the rejection of the Messiah by His own people, which appears also in Gospel sayings like Mt. xxi, 37-39, Lk. xiii, 34-35, and underlies Jn. i, 11, Rom. ix-xi, and numerous other passages. The motive of Nos. 4 and 5 is teaching (didache) about the conditions of Christian discipleship, and the same motive probably led to the preservation of No. 2. No. 6 belongs to a whole class of stories of vocation (the call of Peter and Andrew, and of Levi, in the Synoptic Gospels, and of Philip in the Fourth Gospel). The motive of such stories seems to have been to establish the fact that certain persons in the early Church possessed the authority given by a direct call of Jesus. But all five passages, however different their immediate motive, attest the fact that Jesus was during His ministry an exile from home and family.

His love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," says Paul (Rom. v, 8). It would be perverse to suggest that the stories and sayings of the Gospels were developed out of the Pauline dogma, which in that case would hang in the air.

Paul could produce no such dossier. He is concerned to show that he was nevertheless 'called to be an Apostle' (1 Cor. i, 1).

Consider in the light of this, Paul's statement, in 2 Cor. viii, 9, "for our sakes He became poor." This statement is dogmatic in form, referring to the Incarnation, but its point is sharper if the readers are assumed to know the tradition that Jesus did, historically, embrace voluntary poverty, and had nowhere to lay His head.
We may take one more group:

1. The apocalyptic saying, “I beheld Satan as lightning fallen from heaven” (Lk. x, 18).
2. The Parable of the Strong Man Bound (Mk. iii, 27, Lk. xi, 21-22).
3. The Temptation (Mt. iv, 1-11, Lk. iv, 1-13—“Q”).
4. The controversial Dialogue on Exorcism (Mk. iii, 23-26, Mt. xii, 25-28, Lk. xi, 17-20—“Q”).
5. The Demoniac in the Synagogue (Mk. i, 23-27).
6. The Gadarene Swine (Mk. v, 1-20).

No. 1 expresses epigrammatically, in apocalyptic form, the idea that with the coming of Christ the powers of evil succumb—an idea expressed also in such passages as Jn. xii, 31, xvi, 11, Col. ii, 15. The same idea is embodied in parabolic form in No. 2. No. 4 is apologetic in intention, as a defence of Jesus against the charge of sorcery which we know from Jewish sources to have been brought against Him. No. 3 we might take, in the light of Heb. ii, 15, as illustrating the theme, “tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin,” but it also exhibits the triumph of Jesus over the powers of evil. It is in this context that we must read the stories of exorcism. No. 5 gives an example of the kind of story which must underlie the charge rebutted in No. 4. In No. 6 a similar story is elaborated in a way which makes it very like popular stories of wonder-workers current in the Hellenistic world, and in its present form it probably lies very far from the central line of tradition; but it nevertheless preserves an element which is deeply embedded in the whole tradition of the words and works of Jesus.

It is in this manner that the whole question of the miracle-stories can best be approached. We do not argue—this particular story of miraculous healing can be shown to be vouched for by Peter as the guarantor of Mark, that one by Philip as the guarantor of Luke’s special source, and so forth. We begin with the observation that various strains of tradition are concerned with the theme that through the work of Jesus men enter into a sphere of “salvation” (σωτηρία) as well for the body as the soul (e.g. the “Q” passage Mt. xi, 5, Lk. vii, 22). The statement that Jesus
wrought miraculous cures is embodied in the primitive *kerygma* (Ac. x, 38). That "miracles" were a matter of experience in the early Church we have first-hand evidence in Rom. xv, 19, I Cor. xii, 28, II Cor. xii, 12, Heb. ii, 4. Whatever therefore we may make of any particular miracle story, we are dealing with a tradition which, for better or worse, contained this kind of thing from the very beginning. Since, then, the most authentic tradition certainly contained some miracle-stories, we may attempt to distinguish those whose form and character link them closely with that tradition,¹ from others which show a suspicious resemblance to non-Christian popular tales of wonder-workers,² and assign to the former a superior historical status.

I will forbear to give further illustrations. But something must be said about the Passion-narrative in particular.³ Here source-criticism suggests that the Marcan narrative has been reproduced by Matthew with some alteration and expansion in details; that in Luke it has been combined with a narrative from a different source; and that John, while he is in some measure indebted to Mark, has in substance followed an independent tradition. Form-criticism can go further, and having regard to the allusions to the story of the Cross in the Epistles, and to the formulation of it in the apostolic preaching (*kerygma*) in Acts, will suggest that underlying our three primary accounts there is a common form or pattern of Passion-narrative which may represent the "recital" of the Lord's death which, Paul says, formed part of the celebration of the Eucharist.⁴ This pattern is constituted of nine episodes.

1. The Last Supper. Forecast of the treachery of Judas.
2. Forecast of Peter's denial, and of the desertion of the disciples.

¹ Such as the Withered Hand, which is inseparably bound up with teaching about the Sabbath; the Paralytic, which is similarly bound up with the proclamation of forgiveness through Jesus.
² Such as the Blind Man of Bethsaida (Mk. viii, 22-26), the Dumb Man of Decapolis (Mk. vii, 31-37) and the Gadarene Swine.
³ In what follows I differ widely from some of the Form-critics. The points cannot here be argued, but the line of argument is indicated.
⁴ I Cor. xi, 26. The evidence adduced in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum N.T.* s.v. ἀγγέλλω makes it almost certain that καταγγέλλεις refers to a verbal recital of the story of the Cross.
3. Retirement to a place on or near the Mount of Olives. Betrayal; arrest; desertion of disciples.
4. Examination before the High Priest. Peter's denial.
6. Crucifixion at Golgotha.
8. The Empty Tomb.
9. Appearances to disciples.¹

The Marcan, Lucan and Johannine accounts insert various additional episodes but all give these nine in the same relative order with a large amount of the same detail. All of them reflect the ideas of the kerygma in showing that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures," but the actual prophecies cited differ almost entirely in the three accounts. The general idea of fulfilment of prophecy is common to all, and (as we should infer from the kerygma itself) probably primitive, but the particular working out of this idea is part of the specialization of the tradition in its various forms. Again, all our accounts emphasize the fact that Jesus was put to death as Messiah, but while John (in his Passion-narrative) confines the Messianic idea almost entirely to its aspect of royalty, Mark connects it explicitly with the titles "Son of God" and "Son of Man." Each account again includes certain supernatural "signs" accompanying the death of Jesus, but again these belong to the specialization of the tradition and not to its common pattern. If we consider the form which is common to all, and represents therefore the central tradition, we are impressed by the objectivity of the record, and the absence of any such "theologizing" of the Passion as we might reasonably have expected. On all grounds it seems probable that in the Passion-narrative we are in close contact with the primitive tradition. The story was not produced either by the preaching of the early Church or by theological reflexion upon it. It is the story which underlies the kerygma, and provided the basis for the theology of the Epistles.

¹The genuine text of Mark records no such appearances, being broken off at xvi, 8. But they are anticipated in xiv, 28; xvi, 7.
I have been able, in this lecture, to do no more than outline a method of criticism which promises a fresh approach to the problem of historicity. It is a method which does not aim, directly or in the main, at establishing a residuum of bare facts, presumed to stand independently of any meaning attached to them. The number of such facts which can be established by this or by any other method is strictly limited. The aim of this particular method is to recover the purest and most original form of the tradition, which inevitably includes both fact and interpretation. It starts from the existence of the early Church as itself an historical fact of great significance. By comparing the classical documents of the early Church—Epistles with Acts, Acts and Epistles as a whole with Gospels, and different elements in the Gospels with one another—it studies the formulation and growth of the tradition of Jesus and His teaching by which the Church lived. By analysis it discovers certain groupings and forms of material, and in each of them it recognizes a central and a peripheral element, a nucleus of firm tradition and a penumbra of secondary value. By this process it seeks to arrive at a clear conception of the central tradition as a whole, and to trace it to the earliest possible date. In so far as it is successful, it sets forth the primitive tradition, coeval with the Church itself. In this primitive tradition the facts are given from a particular point of view, and with a particular meaning. Apart from this meaning, the facts would not have taken the place in history which they actually occupy. For it is only the apprehension of the facts in this particular light that could account for the emergence of the Church as an historical phenomenon. Attempts to account for it on other grounds lead to a fundamental historical scepticism such as is reflected in M. Guignebert’s recent judgment: “The rise of the Galilaean prophet marks the beginning, however accidental, of the religious movement from which Christianity sprang.”¹ The connection of events ceases to be “accidental” if the tradition as we can recover it from the New Testament represents in substance a true memory of the facts, with the meaning which they really bore as an episode in history. We cannot, however, prove that this is so. What we can hope to prove is

¹ Ch. Guignebert, Jesus (Eng. trans.), p. 538.
that in the fourth decade of the first century the Christian Church
grew up around a central tradition which, however it is ex-
pressed—in preaching, in story, in teaching and in liturgical
practice—yields a constant picture of Jesus Christ, what He was,
what He stood for, what He said, did and suffered. The step
beyond that will probably be taken by something more akin to
faith than to objective historical judgment. Either the inter-
pretation through which the facts are presented was imposed
upon them mistakenly—and in that case few facts remain which
we can regard as strictly ascertained—or the interpretation was
imposed by the facts themselves, as they were experienced in an
historical situation, and gave rise to historical consequences—
and in that case we do know, in the main, what the facts were.
The latter conclusion may not be demonstrable, but it is not
unreasonable.