THE CHARACTER OF THE GOSPEL-RECORD.


HOW far is it possible and feasible to derive from the Gospels a factually reliable account of the character and ministry of Jesus? How far is it even allowable to try to do so?

All serious students now agree that real historical events do lie, at least to some extent, behind the Gospels. These documents, therefore, whatever their peculiar features may be found to be, fall within the broad category of historical literature; and as such they are patient of the same treatment as we have to accord to narrative literature generally.

Now I submit that the primary task facing the student of narrative literature is that of determining its historical trustworthiness, of ascertaining, that is, how far its statements correspond (in such ways as language can correspond)¹ to the events they purport to record. This is not, indeed, the historian’s only concern: he has also to select, and present, and interpret. But since Von Ranke wrote, the determination of credibility has been recognized as the primary requirement of good historical work: whatever other virtues a written history may show, if it states things to have occurred which did not occur, it is of inferior value as history. As regards the record of Jesus, the late Canon R. C. Moberly formulated the principle for all time, when he wrote in Lux Mundi:

Councils, we admit, and Creeds, cannot go behind, but must wholly rest upon the history of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One hardly needs to quote further authorities: let me confine myself to a couple of quotations from two eminent modern scholars.

Paul’s description of his preaching to the Galatians . . . indicates what the character of preaching at its centre must always be: it is a re-presentation of the history of Jesus: it is designed to place the hearers in the very presence of the historical event, and so to expose them to the power of God which worked in that event.²

¹ As Prue Sarn is made to say in Mary Webb’s Precious Bane, “words be hard to find for some things”.

If God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, ... then it is of vital importance to us to know as fully and as accurately as we can what manner of life and death it is in which God acts in this way. This is not an easy task, and there are, and always will be, temptations to take short cuts: ... I should say that to take refuge in the dogmatic formulæ of the past, however venerable, is simply to give up the theological task.¹

There is indeed a strong tendency at work to-day running contrary to this natural and normal demand for the historical facts—a recoil from "Historismus", as it is called. It seems to spring from dissatisfaction with the way in which certain liberal scholars had been doing their work, and a fear lest, through the rejection of certain non-primitive doctrinal elements in the narrative, permanently precious phases of the Gospel-story may be lost. In the opening pages of his History and the Gospel, Dr. C. H. Dodd rather strangely welcomes this shift of emphasis as salutary and invigorating. Yet that he does not really mean thereby to discourage a serious quest for the actual facts is clear from what he says in the immediate sequel.

The Gospels profess to tell us what 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 Christian theologian, whether their testimony is in fact true. No insistence upon the religious character of the Gospels, or the transcendent nature of the revelation which they contain, can make that question irrelevant. ... This [viz. the need of examining the events] at once raises the whole problem of the historicity of the Gospels, ...; and that problem cannot be set aside by assertions that the Gospels are not historical but religious documents. They are both, if the Christian assumptions are true.²

The grounds for pronouncing any particular narrative historically credible rarely, if ever, amount to actual demonstration, such as we have in mathematical theorems: but they are often quite strong enough to justify belief and to render incredulity absurd. From that high grade they shade off through an infinite number of lesser stages of probability, until the levels of the improbable, the barely possible, and finally the inconceivable are successively reached.

Long years of research and discussion have familiarized us with certain standards of historical judgment which are now

¹ T. W. Manson, in The Interpretation of the Bible (1944), p. 105.
² C. H. Dodd, History and the Gospel, pp. 15, 38.
commonly accepted as trustworthy. These are not of a rule-of-thumb description, and they require us to recognize a fairly wide margin of debatable uncertainties. Yet they permit of a large field of actual or virtual unanimity. We may instance the recent study of Old Testament history as aptly illustrating the fruitful use of these canons and standards of judgment. While, owing to the character of the records, much remains obscure, it is safe to say that what is now called "the historical view" of the Old Testament has come to stay, and that no history of the Hebrews which discards the principles of that view, and goes back to a traditionalist or fundamentalist basis, has the slightest chance of being accepted by those who really understand the conditions of the inquiry.

In enumerating the conditions of our being able to reach historical credibility, we may begin by taking for granted as obvious the technical equipment of the investigator himself. Clearly he must have an adequate knowledge of the relevant material and of the methods of assessing the value of historical evidence. But what more?

I. Firstly, the investigator must be an open-minded, sincere, truth-loving, and reverent man, with as little as possible in the way of mental eccentricity.

But here we are faced at once with a complication. There are those who insist that your student of the Gospels must also be "a believer": otherwise he may see no more in the Gospel-story than Tacitus saw—nothing more, for example, in the redeeming death of Christ than the execution of an unpopular Galilæan agitator. No such thing exists, it is urged, as a bare fact apart from any interpretation: our only materials are facts in which a certain interpretation already inheres: if, therefore, we do not accept along with the factual substratum the interpretation given to it by those concerned to record it, if we presume to segregate the "bare fact" and give it a different interpretation of our own, we are acting ultra vires, and the truth is not in us.

I know of no one who has written more strongly in this sense than Dr. C. H. Dodd. Thus:

In the world as we know it the outward and the inward, occurrence and meaning, are inseparably united in the event... the events of history do not exist as such
apart from their significance to those who experienced them, and this significance is inherent in them.¹

Either the interpretation 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.²

I have done my best not to misunderstand Dr. Dodd: but I can only say that, if he is really contending that, in dealing with the Gospels, we cannot get to any bare facts unless we accept the interpretation given to them by the evangelists, I must needs regard that contention as wholly untenable. True, some “interpretation” (in a psychological sense) is involved in every simple perception, and therefore in the narration of every occurrence: but it is clearly not in this sense that we are using the term when we speak of “history and interpretation in the Gospels”. We then mean more than the transmission of a perceptible event occurring in space and time: we mean the unfolding of that event’s ultimate significance. To maintain that we cannot discern the event unless we accept along with it the interpretation given to it by its reporters, appears to me to be palpably false. It flouts the basic principle of all normal historical study, which makes it its first business to get at the facts, irrespective of the way the sources interpret them. It was only by doing this, as Dr. Dodd himself plainly admits elsewhere,³ that scholars succeeded as they have done in Synoptic criticism. In *History and the Gospel* he tells us that his method by analysis . . . 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.

On several occasions he specifies the particular items which “preserved a memory of the facts”.⁴ A large part of his important book, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1936), is taken up with attempts to disentangle what Jesus really said and meant from

¹ *History and the Gospel*, pp. 28 f.
⁴ *History and the Gospel*, pp. 104 and 71.
what Dr. Dodd believes was the very different interpretation put
upon his utterances by the evangelists and their contemporaries.
But what is this but that very segregation of bare fact from the
interpretation of it which elsewhere he declares to be unwarranted?
The necessity of such segregation seems to me to be obvious.
How else are we to deal, for instance, with the Parable of the
Vinedressers in Matt. xx. 1-16, the utterance of which as a
“bare fact” is truthfully recorded, but of the real meaning of
which the evangelist was clearly quite ignorant. The baptism
of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptist is again a “bare fact”
in this sense: the Gospels give no interpretation of it beyond
the meaningless gloss in Matt. iii. 15 that it was “to fulfil all
righteousness”. The Gospels abound in such records of in-
cidents and sayings. The fear lest, by delving for the “bare
facts” we may get no more out of the Gospel-story than Tacitus
got is groundless, for Tacitus was not a competent and truth-
loving inquirer within the meaning of the act. Doubtless the
historian must carefully attend to the primitive interpretations
of his factual findings: doubtless also, when as a theologian he
arrives at his own interpretative conclusions, these latter will—in
the measure of his sureness of them—take their place for him
among the “facts” on which they have been based. But as
interpretations they are, even for him, and still more for others,
logically secondary to the historical data.

I find myself therefore compelled to insist on the legitimacy
of distinguishing the “bare facts” of the Gospel-story from even
the earliest doctrinal interpretations of them; and I hold that it
is sufficient, for purposes of historical study, that the investigator
should be an intelligent and sincere lover of the truth, and not
necessary that he should hold in advance any high traditional
Christology.

1 The Bishop of Derby’s tacit assumption that Jesus as Messiah accepted
and submitted to the baptism of repentance “on behalf of God’s people” (Christ
in the Gospels [1944], p. 27) is an interpretation which is simply read into the
story. There is no direct support for it in the Gospels: and its casual affirmation
in a book purporting to be loyal to critical principles is remarkable.

2 The two Dr. Mansons concur in the judgment that, as regards the traditions
about Jesus, the Church remembered better than it understood (Jesus the Messiah
II. The investigator must have access to sources written by persons who, through date, provenance, and otherwise, were in a position to know the facts reasonably well.

In this respect, the student of the Gospels is favourably placed. Nearly all scholars agree that the earliest of our extant Gospels, that of Mark (which is used in the composition of Luke and Matthew), was written a few years before or after A.D. 70, in all probability at Rome. An unnamed Christian Elder stated about A.D. 100 that Mark had been Peter's interpreter, and had written correctly, though not in order, the words and deeds of Christ. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (about A.D. 120), adds on his own account that Mark got his materials by remembering Peter's occasional teachings, and faithfully adhered to them. It is obvious that Papias and the Elder are identifying the evangelist with the John Mark mentioned in the New Testament; and although there are a number of puzzling features in his Gospel (showing that there were limitations to his knowledge, and that when he wrote he was no longer by Peter's side), I cannot see that they constitute the slightest ground for rejecting what Papias and the Elder tell us. If, as Dr. R. H. Lightfoot has suggested, this Papian tradition is apologetic in origin, one wonders why the Gospel was not ascribed to Peter straight away, as was an apocryphal Gospel written within Papias's time. On the other hand, if it is broadly true, it means that in the Marcan Gospel we are carried back to the memory of one who was Jesus' closest companion during his ministry. Even Dr. Lightfoot, sceptical as he is regarding much of its contents, recognizes that "it is possible that this gospel, rightly used, can tell us a very large part of all that we need to know about our Lord"; and ever and anon he mentions points where it seems to him historically trustworthy.

Papias also tells us, probably again quoting an authority earlier than himself, that "Matthew compiled the Logia in the Hebrew language, . . ." While many scholars have followed the late Dr. B. W. Bacon in regarding this as an inaccurate allusion to the canonical Gospel of Matthew, I hold with Dr.

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1 R. H. Lightfoot, History and Interpretation in the Gospels (1935), pp. xii, n. 1, and 28 f.  
T. W. Manson that it is more probably an accurate allusion to the collection of sayings usually known as Q.\(^1\) If this be true, we are brought into contact with yet another apostolic eye-witness.

In view of Dr. T. W. Manson’s recent article in this BULLETIN (December, 1944), I do not need to comment specially on the Gospel of Luke: but I would submit that in the light of the facts the Synoptic Gospels constitute a fairly strong body of literary witnesses. Very many events of ancient history are confidently accepted by modern scholars on evidence far less early and direct than we have for the words and works of Jesus. If the sources of our knowledge of Alexander the Great, for example, were as good as those we possess of Jesus of Nazareth, we should, as historians, count ourselves lucky.

III. But our investigator’s informants must not only have been in a position to know the facts reasonably well, but they must also have had the intelligence, willingness, and capacity to report them accurately to their readers. How do we stand in this respect with the Gospels? How far have the special interests and limitations of the evangelists interfered with the historical trustworthiness of their reports? Some such interference is almost inevitably present even in the best histories that have ever been written. In selecting, connecting-up, and presenting his matter, the narrator necessarily introduces some qualifying factors of his own. As Thackeray says in *The Newcomes,*

> The writer of the book . . . dresses up the narrative in his own way . . . And, as is the case with the most orthodox histories, the writer’s own guesses or conjectures are printed in exactly the same type as the most ascertained patent facts. . . . You tell your tales as you can, and state the facts as you think they must have been. . . .

The modern historian cannot altogether avoid a measure of subjective interference of this sort, though he does his best to limit it, and at least to keep it distinct from what he derives directly from his sources. But the further back we go in time, the less scruple we observe to have been felt in drawing up narratives of the past. Even Thucydides, the most scientific of ancient historians, used no references or footnotes, and felt free to put speeches of his own composition into the mouths of

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historical characters. Other ancient historians were far less scrupulous still. The Jewish mind seems to have been much more willing even than the Greek to falsify facts in the interests of edification. The pious romancing of the Priestly Code and of the Books of Chronicles furnishes abundant testimony to this effect.

No one can doubt that a considerable amount of this subjective manipulation and embroidering of the tradition has taken place in the structure of the Gospels. The inherent probability of that follows from the oft-mentioned fact that the primary purpose of their composition was religious rather than historical or biographical. The probability is seen to be a certainty when we study the differences between one Gospel-document and another. Nothing, for instance, could be clearer than the unhistorical character of most of the changes made by the Matthaean evangelist in the tradition he takes over from Mark. And in the light of these, we can speak with almost equal confidence of some of his divergences from Luke, where both are using Q—as, for instance, when in Matt. xii. 40 he turns the sign of Jonah into an edifying Old Testament forecast of Jesus' detention in his tomb (contrast Lk. xi. 30). Even Mark, our oldest extant Gospel, is not wholly free from the same doctrinal feature—as Dr. Lightfoot has abundantly shown in his Bampton Lectures. It is, for instance, highly unlikely that Jesus ever uttered the words, ὦ Χριστόν ἐστέ, ascribed to him in Mark ix. 41. Whatever we may make of the darkness reported by Mark to have occurred when Jesus was on the cross, the rending of the Temple-curtain (Mark xv. 38) is almost certainly symbolic or parabolic—as also is the blasting of the fig-tree (Mark xi. 13 f., 20). Form-criticism has encouraged scholars to suppose an ever-increasing amount of doctrinal interference with the tradition, and has correspondingly discouraged them from trusting in the historical reliability of any particular part of the record. So far has this process gone that it is now contended that we have no means of determining which sayings ascribed to Jesus are probably genuine, which spurious, which early, and which late. Dr. Lightfoot concludes his Bampton Lecture with the words:

It seems, then, that the form of the earthly no 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.

Now I submit that this latter-day scepticism as regards the historical element in the Gospels and our capacity to delimit it is a needless exaggeration. It seems to me inherently unreasonable to assume that we can probe back to an early Christian tradition, but to pronounce the attempt to probe back to its sources to be *ultra vires*. I know of no analogy for so arbitrary a blocking of the way, and many analogies against it. The Books of Samuel and Kings, for instance, were, like the Gospels, written primarily with a religious rather than with an historical object; they are permeated throughout with doctrinal interpretations. Yet who seriously doubts that a genuine history of Israel during the period of the monarchy can be constructed from them? Similarly in the case of certain eminent saints—Polycarp of Smyrna and Francis of Assisi, for instance. Their biographies can up to a certain point be reconstructed by means of the critical examination of the sources, despite the fact that these latter are all affected by the devotional extravagance of their writers.

In the case of the Gospels, however much the evangelists' idea of historical accuracy may have differed from our own, they would have defeated their own ends had they not at least intended and endeavoured to tell the story of the Lord's life truthfully according to their own literary standards. The clear distinction which Paul draws in I Cor. vii. 10-12, 25, 40 (cf. ix. 14) between the matrimonial and other regulations which he could quote as enjoined by Jesus himself, and those which he could not so quote, is an important indication of the weight which the early Church attached to the possession of an accurate record of his sayings. Over against the fact that even our oldest sources are to some extent affected by doctrine has to be placed (1) the great advantage which the personal links with the Apostles Peter and Matthew give to two of them, and (2) much of the internal evidence. I shall deal with this latter point under my next main heading. Here let me say a word more about the alleged doctrinal and symbolic manipulation of the Synoptic material.

The existence of such manipulation is, as I have said, not to be questioned; but we need something more than imagination
before we can affirm it to be present in any particular passage. To the care and insight of Dr. R. H. Lightfoot’s Bampton Lectures I pay a sincere and emphatic tribute of respect: but in many of his speculations with regard to the Marcan narrative I find myself unable to follow him—as also in his rejection of the customary hypothesis that Luke used a special source for his narrative of the Passion. I find it far harder to believe that Luke altered the Marcan Passion-narrative as freely and arbitrarily as Dr. Lightfoot’s theory requires one to suppose, than to accept the account of the Lucan Passion-story provided by Dr. Streeter’s Proto-Luke hypothesis. It seems to me arbitrary and needlessly precarious to suppose that, when Luke wrote, the only Passion-narrative extant was that of Mark. And if it was not so, why should not Luke have made use of a non-Marcan version? Dr. Lightfoot tentatively advances the view, “with great reserve and a keen sense of the dangers inherent in this form of exposition”, that the stories of the stormy voyage across the lake and the cure of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark iv. 35—v. 20) may be interpreted as a symbolic picture of the conveyance of the Christian Gospel across the sea to the Gentile world. Also, that the story of the cure of the blind man (Mark viii. 22-26) is a symbolic doublet of the account of the revelation of Jesus’ Messiahship to the disciples (Mk. viii. 27-30). I can only confess myself entirely unconvinced.

I have myself incurred severe criticism for attempting, in my *Historic Mission of Jesus* (1941), to reconstruct the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels on the basis of documentary analysis alone, without availing myself of the theories of the Form-critics. The reason I did so was that I am not convinced that Form-criticism has added materially to our means of knowing what Jesus’ life and teaching were like. It has made us more alive than we were to the presence of the Church’s hand in moulding her traditions about the Lord. Beyond that I am not prepared to go. And even that was known

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1 R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*, pp. 89-91. In the latter case, he prints the text of the two passages side by side to bring out the closeness of the parallels.

2 E.g., J. Lowe in *Journ. of Theol. Studies*, Jan.-April, 1943, pp. 84-86.
to us in principle from our study of documentary criticism. The principles of Form-criticism are apt to be very arbitrary and precarious. Its main assumption—that stories about Jesus were needed only or mainly for use in mission-preaching—is a pure assumption, and to me an improbable one. Apart from the inherent likelihood that Jesus' friends would treasure memories of him for their own sake, the Gospels contain numerous traditions that would have been quite unsuitable for the purpose of mission-preaching. The characteristics of the Gospel-stories on which Form-criticism bases its classification of them are just as easily and naturally explained on the hypothesis that they are substantially truthful accounts of correctly-remembered incidents, as on the hypothesis that they were shaped—or perhaps created—by some contemporary literary habit. The admitted existence of stories that display the features of more than one "form" is another weakness in the theory. The great Form-critics disagree widely with one another in their conclusions. Speaking generally, the result of Form-criticism is a heightened scepticism, which seems to be unreasonable—in some cases to the point of absurdity. Nor can I find any comfort in the observation that it is the thorough-going Form-critics who are to-day leading the movement back to what is called a theological interpretation of the Gospels.

I plead therefore that we can rely a little more confidently on our documentary analysis than many recent critics are disposed to allow. Much of it rests on clearly objective grounds. For myself, I go further, and whole-heartedly accept the late Dr. Streeter's Proto-Luke theory as more probable than any alternative explanation of the data. Many scholars still reject it: but every time it is attacked Dr. Vincent Taylor comes forward with what appears to me a convincing rejoinder. But even without that theory we may be said to possess a fair knowledge

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3 J. Lowe in *The Interpretation of the Bible* (1944), p. 122.
of the mutual relations of the documents out of which our Gospels are composed. Legendary touches do not discredit the main story told in a document, especially when (as is often here the case) we can fairly easily spot them. The fact that an exalted view of Jesus as Messiah and Lord is traceable in our earliest documentary strata does not constitute, as so many scholars to-day seem to think it does, a reason why the quest for the historical Jesus can now be regarded as discredited. I fully agree, therefore, with Dr. Dodd when he says we are comparatively well informed about the situation in general, about the main purport of what Jesus taught, in relation to the thought and problems of the time, about the kind of religion for which He stood, about the nature and causes of the opposition which He encountered, and about the proceedings which led to His death.¹

If, as is frequently the case, documentary analysis enables us to distinguish fairly confidently between the more and the less original parts of the record, I cannot see why the systematic endeavour to utilize reconstructively the material which has, by comparison, the best claim to be original is necessarily a relatively fruitless task compared with that of grappling with the Apostolic Gospel ².

IV. Finally, our investigator's findings must, if they are to be accepted as credible, form a coherent whole. One clear mark of a true story is that its several parts shall be consistent with one another and also with what we know of nature and reality generally.

If anyone should cry out that such a claim is the πρῶτον ψευδός of liberalism, which rejects the supernatural on principle and will make no proper allowance for the grand miracle of the Incarnation, I should reply that it is only because this claim has been allowed that we have been able to vindicate the historical reality of Jesus against the Christ-myth theory, to recognize in Mark the earliest of the Synoptic Gospels, to agree on the fictitious character of the more obvious Matthaean glosses on the Marcan record, and to carry on any fruitful discussion of Form-criticism or of the Apostolic tradition. If we may not rely on

¹ C. H. Dodd, History and the Gospel, p. 113.
the inner coherence of reality as a whole, then it is no use our arguing for any view as against any other view on any historical question whatever.

If, however, this test of coherence be allowed, then—I venture to think—it supports the conclusions to which the foregoing discussion has been leading us. It is quite impossible to account satisfactorily for the existence of the Synoptic Gospels without inferring at least the broad accuracy of their version of Jesus’ ministry and teaching. The parables, for the most part, could have come from no lips but his. It is incredible that he could have enjoyed the towering ascendancy he did in the minds of his followers, unless the Gospel-record of his having virtually claimed it were true. If we collect and classify all those portions of the Synoptic teaching which have, on documentary grounds, the strongest claim to be considered original, we discover a closely-knit and coherent system of thought, of a marvellous character indeed, yet on the whole fitting well into all the rest that we know of the early Christian movement.

It is, however, particularly in connection with the so-called miraculous element in the story that the application of our canon of truth becomes a matter of controversy. What the claim here amounts to is that the investigators must apply to the miracle-narratives those standards of inherent probability and improbability of which life in general—and science in particular—have put him in possession. This principle used to be understood to mean that no occurrence which could not be fully explained by the experience and science available up to the time of inquiry could ever be accepted as credible, no matter what evidence could be adduced in its favour: and there are still conservative scholars misguided enough to accuse liberalism of being in bondage to that rule. But now that it is realized that good evidence is itself part of our scientific experience of the universe, and that the universe contains mysteries not previously known, that stiff negative rule has been rightly discredited. We must not, however, draw the hasty inference that every appeal to inherent probability in the assessment of a miracle-story can now be confidently disallowed. We have still to remember that fictitious miracle-stories are known to be under certain conditions
easily and plentifully produced; also that, in proportion as a story is marvellous, so much better will be the evidence we ought to demand before we consent to believe it to be true. Regarding the Gospel-miracles, I wish to observe only that the so-called Nature-miracles are both inherently less credible, and are less well attested, than are the healing miracles (there being no trace of them in our earliest material Q and L). The Bishop of Derby, in his valuable Commentary on Mark and in his more recent booklet Christ in the Gospels, adopts a non-possumus attitude towards them. We may neither reject them, nor rationalize them—for the queer reason that to do so would be “utterly foreign to the whole spirit of the narrative”. And yet, the Bishop grants, we cannot accept them as they stand. This seems to me to be an arbitrary and feeble attitude, which would never be seriously recommended if we were studying the martyrdom of Polycarp, the stigmata of Francis, or indeed any miracle-story outside the four canonical Gospels. Whether we like it or not, we are compelled either to attempt a rational theory about each incident on its merits, and to frame our version of Jesus’ ministry accordingly, or else simply to evade the task of picturing the ministry at all.¹

Thus far I have for the sake of simplicity drawn all my illustrations from the Synoptic Gospels. Perhaps I may be allowed before I close to say briefly how I regard the Fourth Gospel, though, under stress of the present-day trends in Gospel-criticism, many scholars seem to have lost all interest in the question of its historicity. It is generally admitted that this Gospel is the most theological of the four. It is thus in a certain sense the least historical. Its discourses cannot, in my judgment, be regarded as reports of what Jesus and others actually said,

¹ Some modern conservatives allow themselves to caricature critical operations in a very wrong-headed way, forgetting that without critical presuppositions the very conclusions they themselves accept could never have been arrived at. Thus, Professor R. V. G. Tasker, The Nature and Purpose of the Gospels (1944), p. 32, writes: “The idea so popular amongst earlier ‘higher critics’ that we can sit in judgment on this [Marcan] narrative, and in the light of our modern insight and knowledge pick out parts of it which are congenial to the modern mind, and regard them as historical and primary, and reject others as unhistorical and later accretions, is an idea which is increasingly seen to be impossible, once the true character of the document is understood.”
even in that qualified sense in which the Synoptic discourses can be so treated. This judgment rests upon three facts:

1. they differ widely, both in language and subject-matter, from the discourses in the Synoptics; and, if we have to choose between them, the Synoptic discourses are clearly the more historical:

2. they are indistinguishable, both in language and subject-matter, from those portions of the Fourth Gospel which clearly represent the mind and hand of the Fourth Evangelist himself:

3. they represent Jesus as speaking openly about his Messiahship from the very beginning of his ministry, whereas Mark, with far greater verisimilitude, represents him as keeping it a close secret till Peter's confession at Cæsarea-Philippi, and as hardly ever using even the term "the Son of Man" before that.

When, therefore, the late Sir Edwyn Hoskyns asks about the Fourth Evangelist, "Is what he says so different from what Mark had said or from what is involved in the whole material which composed the earlier Tradition?" it is only with serious qualifications that we can concur in the clearly-expected negative answer. Over against the deeper theological interpretation in the Fourth Gospel, must be set its virtual abandonment (presumably as of minor interest) of some of the noblest and divinest ethical traits visible in the Synoptic portrait. Mr. W. L. Knox observes that there are moments when the evangelist "comes dangerously near to presenting Jesus as a purely docetic epiphany on the stage of history." On the other hand, I do not believe that this strong interpretative interest on the writer's part, which has so controlled his discourse-material, has affected in like measure the chronological, the topographical, and the narrative portions of his story. There are, for instance, strong grounds for believing that, in regard to the date of the crucifixion, he is in the right as against Mark: and I cannot see any ulterior purpose in his chronological scheme which could throw serious

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3 W. L. Knox, *Some Hellenistic Elements in Primitive Christianity* (1944), pp. 89 f.
doubt on its substantial accuracy. So far as narrative is concerned I believe with Mr. W. L. Knox that he never loses sight of the concrete historical figure.¹

In conclusion, let me say that, while the task of interpretation cannot wait until the historical investigation is complete,² while the two must go on concurrently, and while they will inevitably affect each other, I hold that the historical problems are logically prior to those of interpretation, just as seeing and hearing Jesus in the flesh—or at least hearing facts about him—was in the first century logically and inevitably prior to becoming his disciple. “How shall they believe in him whom they have not heard?” (Rom. x. 14). Much of the modern revolt against the quest for the historical Jesus arises from the fear that it is bound to lead to a non-supernatural, or as it is called a “purely human”, Jesus. But why should it? In our oldest Gospel-documents, Jesus is already an exalted figure, speaking in the name of God and as the supreme guide and rightful Lord of men. Any reconstruction which misses that point is so far unhistorical. It is often assumed that that is exactly what liberalism did; and it is therefore confidently stated—by the Bishop of Derby, for example—that the liberal attempts to get behind the various strata of tradition to the real Jesus have “broken down”.³ That charge may be true of biographies like those of Strauss, Renan, and Guigneberert: they are not, I submit, true of liberal scholarship as a whole. But in any case, I should fully agree that, while we must begin with a reconstruction of the historically attested facts, yet for a satisfying Christology we cannot possibly afford to neglect the light which the general witness of the New Testament throws back on Jesus’ life and person. Who is this, we must needs ask, who not only went about doing good, but who brought the Christian Church into being, who won the heart’s love of the persecuting Pharisee Paul, and the memory of whom could prompt the Matthaean evangelist so to torture history in order the better to set forth his glory—and the Johannine

³ A. E. J. Rawlinson, Christ in the Gospels (1944), pp. 9, 114.
evangelist to portray him as the co-eternal Logos of God? Through the historical facts there are now (as there were then), for the docile and the reverent, eternal glories to be seen.

I should not, however, admit that this stupendous Gospel, so inseparately linked in the mind of the early Church with the name of Jesus Christ, this unwavering glorification of him as Redeemer and Son of God, has anything at all to fear from the critical analysis and reconstruction of the Gospel-record. In the foregoing pages I have tried to show that such an analytical and reconstructive effort is amply justified from the purely historical point of view. I now close with urging that, so far from imperilling the rightful enthronement of Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, the quest for the historical Jesus is imperatively demanded of us, not only in the moral interests of sheer truthfulness, but as giving back to us that healthful contact with his life on earth which the unhistorical "safeguards" of traditionalism had for so long well-nigh hidden from our eyes.