THE DIALOGUE FORM IN THE GOSPELS

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The purpose of this lecture is to apply to certain parts of the Gospels the principles and methods of what is called in German "Formgeschichte", usually translated "Form Criticism". Of the discipline itself I need say no more than that as applied to the Gospels it attempts, from a study of the forms or patterns in which their contents have come down to us, to arrive at conclusions regarding the history of the material itself, both in its written state and, more particularly, in the pre-literary stage when it was handed down by oral tradition. The form-critic is temporarily disinterested in the subject-matter of the Gospels, except in so far as it has influenced or determined the forms; and he does not expect to arrive directly at conclusions regarding the authenticity or the factual truth of the record. Yet if he is able to establish the character of the tradition at the earliest date to which we can hope to have access, he will have achieved something not without importance, even for the historian who asks "wie es eigentlich geschehen ist". Indeed, the questions, What is the character of the tradition, and How is this or that particular report integrated into the tradition, are questions which should be asked, and if possible answered, before we raise the further question, "How did it actually happen?" It is this preliminary role which I should assign to the investigation on which we are now embarked.

Among the forms which have been recognized in the Gospels—parable, aphorism, pronouncement-story, tale (Novelle), and the rest, made familiar to us by a whole series of writers who, however, vary in the terminology they use—it seems that we should distinguish the colloquy or dialogue

1 A lecture delivered at Manchester University on the 28th of April, 1954, in connection with the jubilee of the Faculty of Theology.
(Gespräch). An important group of such colloquies, namely, those which have for their motive the controversy between Jesus and His opponents, was made the subject of a monograph by Martin Albertz, published a good many years ago, under the title, Die synoptischen Streitgespräche (1921). Albertz collected seventeen of these "controversial dialogues", and examined them with respect to the form in which they are presented. He concluded that they show all the marks of oral tradition. They occur as small, rounded units, extremely concise in style, with lines sharply drawn. All unnecessary detail is suppressed. There is no picturesque description, seldom any attempt at characterization, any indication of motive, or any psychological or emotional colouring beyond the very simplest. The normal pattern consists of (a) a brief indication of the occasion, (b) an interchange of speech and reply, each as a rule no longer than a sentence or two, with never more than three speeches for each speaker, seldom so many, and (c) sometimes, but not always, a summary statement of the effect produced. Nearly always the dialogue is initiated by a question or objection addressed to Jesus, which elicits His pronouncement on the matter in hand. Exceptionally, He takes the initiative Himself. In any case, the dialogue is so framed that His pronouncement stands out with the utmost distinctness, so that it may remain clear-cut in the memory of hearer or reader. Where this pattern is either expanded by the insertion of steps in the argument, or extended by the addition of further words of Jesus, or even of a further dialogue, Albertz thinks, we have some reason to suspect that development has taken place in the process of reducing the oral tradition to writing, though this is not always a necessary inference.

The pattern of dialogue thus described he compares with examples of dialogue from Jewish sources, and shows that the form is similar to that in which the pronouncements of contemporary rabbis were handed down. Yet there are characteristic differences, and the controversial dialogues of the Synoptic Gospels have an individuality which sets them, as a body, apart. Their true historical setting is the ministry of Jesus. The formulation indeed is to be credited in large measure to
those who shaped the oral tradition, but their work must have been mainly by way of selection and omission. For the actual colloquies between Jesus and His contemporaries to which they refer can scarcely be supposed to have been confined within the bare limits of the dialogue form as it meets us in the Gospels. But that the dialogues as we have them do in fact preserve a memory of such actual colloquies is on all grounds probable, and we may accept them as giving a trustworthy account of the matters at issue between Jesus and His contemporaries in Jewish Palestine, and of the pronouncements which He made upon them.

Thus far Albertz. The conclusion which he establishes for the controversial dialogues may in the main be applied to others whose aim is didactic rather than controversial. It is to be observed that he includes among the Streitgespräche such extremely brief sections as the two which are contained in Mark ii. 15-20, dealing with the complaints made against Jesus that He ate with publicans and sinners and that His disciples did not observe fast-days. These and similar pericopae are classed by other critics as apophthegmata, paradigms, or pronouncement-stories. When stripped of elements which Albertz suspects of being secondary additions, each of them consists of no more than a few words stating the occasion, a curt question, and an answer which occupies less than four lines (in Nestle). The colloquy is then at an end. It is indeed units such as these that he is disposed to regard as the norm, in accordance with the general tendency of form-critics to prefer the briefest forms, which they conceive to be most characteristic of oral tradition. He does, however, allow many qualifications of the strict view upon this matter, pointing out, e.g., that in the story of the man who had great possessions it is precisely the earliest known form (the Marcan), presumably nearest to the oral tradition, which contains those "psychological" traits which a properly behaved unit of oral tradition should avoid, and that in other cases the supposedly supplementary expansions of the dialogue have so much rhetorical effectiveness that they may well have been a part of it from the first.

However that may be, we have in the Synoptic Gospels a number of colloquies which, brief though they are, do bear
something of the character which we associate with the dialogue proper: there is genuine development of a theme through the conversational interchange between the interlocutors. Thus in the dialogue about Tribute-money (Mark xii. 13-17) the demand for the production of a coin, and the identification of the authority by which it was issued, are essential to the understanding of the pronouncement in which it all culminates: “Pay Caesar what is Caesar’s; pay to God what is God’s.” Without the intermediate steps its cogency would not be obvious. Again, in the controversy about authority (Mark xi. 27-33), the real answer to the question “By what authority do you act?”, is not the saying with which the dialogue concludes, “Neither do I tell you by what authority I act”. It is implicit in the intermediate steps: in Jesus’s question about the baptism of John, and in the speeches “aside” (πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς) which bring out the embarrassment of His opponents. Again, in answer to the question about divorce (Mark x. 2-9), Jesus requires His questioners to state explicitly the legal maxim by which their own varying practice is governed, and it is indeed necessary that this Mosaic precept should be clearly in view, to give point to His appeal to a part of the Torah which He claims has overriding authority.

The same method, essentially, is employed on a more elaborate scale in some longer dialogues. Take for example the Marcan dialogue with the man of great possessions (x. 17-27). It opens, as usual, with a question addressed to Jesus: “Good Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The first speech of Jesus contains two separate points. First, He repudiates the formal compliment with which He had been addressed, in order to establish a principle of great importance, which must govern all discussion of such themes as the present: “No one is good but God alone”. Next, he puts the questioner on familiar ground by citing the commandments of the Torah (which, as any instructed Jew must know, “give life in this age and in that which is to come”). The man claims that he has kept these commandments. The way is thus open for the more radical answer to his question which Jesus now gives. There is no reply from him: “he turned away in disgust, for
he was a very wealthy man." So the incident apparently ended. But we should be cautious in deciding that this is in fact the end of the dialogue. The usual view may be true, that at one stage of oral tradition the story thus far formed a closed unit. Yet as we have it the dialogue continues, the disciples, who thus far have not been mentioned, acting as a kind of chorus, whose speeches, however, are delivered "aside" (πρὸς ἑαυτούς). No one, I think, would wish to deny to Jesus the authorship of the striking saying about the camel and the needle. It may, no doubt, have circulated as an independent "wandering saying", but it is certainly apt to its context. Further, a dialogue which opened with a statement of the exclusive goodness of God ends fitly with the complementary statement of His sufficient power: "with God all things are possible." The fact is that these closing interchanges of the dialogue correspond, in a formal sense, with the generalizing aphorism which so often closes even the shortest colloquies. They therefore lie well along the standard line of development. At what stage the present form emerged, I should not care to say: that it is the work of the evangelist I should doubt. But in any case I can see nothing here essentially foreign to the principles upon which the Synoptic dialogues in general are formed.

Take another Marcan example: the request of the sons of Zebedee (x. 35-45). Here again, after the brief interchange with which the conversation is introduced, Jesus seeks to bring His questioners to the point at which a real answer can be given. The challenge to share His "cup" and "baptism", and the reply "We can", play much the same part in this dialogue as the recital of the commandments and the reply "I have kept them all" played in the foregoing one. But here, as in the dialogue about authority, the real reply is not the concluding saying, "To sit at my right and left is not mine to give", but is implicit in the intermediate steps in the dialogue. To share with Jesus His cup and baptism is to sit on His right hand and on His left. Once again the dialogue is continued, with the disciples acting as chorus; but here we know for certain that the sayings introduced had an independent history of their own, since they occur in other contexts elsewhere in the Gospels.
They are in fact among the most strongly attested sayings of Jesus. Yet, whatever the stage at which they were added, they form a fitting conclusion to the dialogue, providing an apt answer to the original request—the answer which is otherwise left implicit.

In two Lucan examples the process of development seems to have gone further, yet without departing essentially from the governing conception of the Synoptic dialogues. In the dialogue (x. 25-37) with the "lawyer" who asked (like the man of great possessions in Mark) "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the questioner is encouraged to recall the precepts of the Torah, like the Pharisees who in Mark raised the question about divorce. He cites Deuteronomy vi. 5 with Leviticus xix. 18, thus making a connection between the commandments of love to God and love to neighbour which in Mark xii. is attributed to Jesus Himself. Jesus responds (as He does by implication in the Marcan dialogue with the man of great possessions), "Do this and you will live". At this point the dialogue takes a fresh turn. In order to give an opening for the further development of the precept quoted, the "lawyer" asks, "Who is my neighbour?" This introduces the parable of the Good Samaritan, which, though long and elaborate, is only another way of provoking a questioner to suggest the answer to his own question; for the parable ends, "Which was neighbour?" The "lawyer" replies, "The one who took pity on him"; to which the obvious retort is, "Go and do likewise".

In the Lucan story of the anointing of Jesus by a woman (vii. 36-50), a parable, a very short one this time, is introduced into a dialogue with a similar intention. The dialogue is initiated (like the dispute about forgiveness which forms part of the story of the Paralytic in Mark) by an observation made aside (ἐν ἑαυτῷ) by Simon the Pharisee. Jesus takes him up: "Simon, I have something to say to you." Courteously enough, Simon replies, "Speak, Rabbi". Jesus then tells the parable of the Two Debtors, and adds (after the manner of the dialogue with the "lawyer"), "Which of the two will love him more?" Simon gives the required answer. The moral
of the story is then rubbed in with an insistence on detail which is certainly unlike the general style of the Synoptic dialogues. Jesus now turns to the woman, a silent figure throughout the scene, as if the whole conversation with Simon had been an interruption, or even an interpolation (as it may well be), and the dialogue continues very much after the manner of the Marcan pericopé of the Paralytic, with an assurance to the woman of forgiveness, and a suspicious "aside" (ἐν ἑαυτῶν) from the bystanders. This is ignored, except in so far as the final assurance to the woman may be held to imply an answer to it: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." The terms used are those associated elsewhere with a story of healing.

The signs of composition here are even clearer than in the foregoing pericopé. There is little doubt that in both we have to allow for the literary craft of the evangelist. But the point which seems to me significant is this: that even in these most elaborate types of dialogue the motives at work are no other than in such characteristically concise pericopae as the disputes about authority and about tribute-money. The interpolated parable in each case serves the same purpose as the production of the coin and the embarrassing question about the baptism of John. In the dialogue with the sons of Zebedee we may say that the Gleichnisworte about "cup" and "baptism" are themselves condensed parables, each of which could have been elaborated without altering the essential character of the dialogue. It appears that in all or most of the dialogues, when once we have got beyond the briefest type which is perhaps more aptly classified as "apophthegm", one formative principle may be observed: namely, that the interlocutor shall be required to co-operate in the argument—even, in effect, to answer his own question. In the "apophthegmata" he may be a mere foil or lay figure, with the sole function of eliciting the authoritative pronouncement of Jesus. He is rarely such in the type of dialogue we have been considering. His contribution to the discussion is significant, either positively or negatively.

With that, I will ask you to turn to the Fourth Gospel. Here the use of dialogue is even more ubiquitous than in the Synoptic Gospels, and on a far more elaborate scale. Dialogue
is employed, as in the Synoptics, to exhibit the teaching of Jesus, to bring out its meaning, and to illustrate it by way of contrast with other views. As the Synoptic dialogue often leads up to a series of further sayings of Jesus developing the same or kindred themes, so in John a dialogue constantly introduces a discourse delivered by way of monologue. So far, there is a broad similarity. If, however, we take a general survey of the Johannine dialogues, we are at once struck by the contrast in form with those of the Synoptic Gospels.¹

In the first place we miss, in the main, the brevity and conciseness upon which the form critics lay stress. Those traits whose absence is regarded by Albertz (and others) as characterizing the Synoptic dialogue form are often present in the Fourth Gospel. Particulars of time and place are frequent: a dialogue takes place at Jerusalem, in the temple, in Solomon’s Porch; or at a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the property which Jacob gave to his son Joseph, where Jacob’s well was; and so forth. More importantly, individual characterization, which is slight in the Synoptics, sometimes emerges quite strikingly in John. The Samaritan woman is certainly an individual character—pert, superficial, evasive, yet at bottom simple-minded and impressionable. Still more unmistakable is the character of Pilate. He is every inch the imperial administrator of subordinate rank, drawn from the new intelligentsia, sceptical and yet superstitious; anxious to get at the facts, and not to make a judicial blunder, because it is his job, yet as scornful of abstract truth as any dialectical materialist; disliking and despising the “natives” over whom he rules, and especially their local chiefs, but fearful of getting on the wrong side of them; not insensitive to the dignity and integrity of his Prisoner, yet in the end amenable to the argument, “If you discharge this man, you are no friend to Caesar”. It seems difficult not to conclude either that John had very good

¹ As typical Johannine dialogues I have in mind the dialogue with Nicodemus about regeneration (ch. iii), with the Samaritan woman about living water (ch. iv), with the Galileans about bread of life (ch. vi); the series of controversial dialogues in chs. vii, viii and x; and the dialogue with the disciples upon Christ’s departure and return in xiii. 31-xiv. 31.
information about Pontius Pilate, or else that he knew his type uncommonly well. It is true that this character-sketch is compiled, not from a single dialogue, but from an extended passage covering over fifty verses; yet it is this individual and no other who is interlocutor in the brilliant dialogue representing the examination of the Prisoner, and that dialogue derives much of its impressiveness from the reader's acquaintance with Pilate's character. If we place such character-parts in contrast even with the best that the Synoptics can offer—say the man of great possessions in Mark, or Mary and Martha in Luke—it is clear that we have before us a very different type of composition.

Turning more directly to the form, we observe that whereas in the Synoptics it is the exception for a dialogue to be initiated by Jesus, and the rule for it to be initiated by an interlocutor, the reverse is true in the Fourth Gospel. A dialogue commonly opens with an oracular utterance by Jesus ("Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God"; "I am the light of the world"; "A little while and you see me no more; another little while and you will see me"). The interlocutor makes a response which indicates either blank incomprehension ("What does He mean by saying 'a little while'? We don't know what He is talking about"), or else a crude misunderstanding ("Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" "Sir, give me this water, to save me coming all this way to draw"; "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?") Jesus sometimes retorts with a reproach ("Are you the teacher of Israel, and ignorant of such things as this?" "Does this scandalize you?" "Have you been with me all this time, and never known me?") but the failure to understand provides an occasion for Him to explicate the enigmatic saying or to carry the thought further. The part played by the interlocutor seldom goes beyond this. He is there to misunderstand and so to give opportunities for the development of the dialogue. Rarely can he be said to make any positive contribution, except indeed by way of the characteristic Johannine irony, as when "the Jews" urge in controversy the orthodox doctrines that the Messiah must be of unknown origin, and that he must "abide for ever", thinking they have
scored effective points against the claims of Jesus, whereas, for the evangelist, they have corroborated cardinal truths about the nature and destiny of Christ. Nor are the answers given by Jesus to His questioners such as to encourage or provoke them to answer their own questions. It is true that the entire Gospel challenges its reader, often by irony, paradox or riddling speech, to dig more deeply, but it does not appear that the actors and interlocutors are set forth as examples to him. In the main, at any rate, their role is passive and they serve as foils.

The difference in form which we have noted cannot be adequately accounted for by saying that whereas the Synoptics preserve many of the traits of oral tradition the Fourth Gospel is a highly literary composition. That is true, and yet it does not prevent the Fourth Gospel from preserving the character of oral tradition in some other forms. It offers, e.g. aphorisms, and sequences of aphorisms, scarcely distinguishable in form from those which we meet in the Synoptics, and some of its miracle-stories are recognizably from the same mould, even though they may show some idiosyncrasies. But the typical Johannine dialogues could not have been derived by any amount of merely literary manipulation from the Synoptic model. Their formative principles and motives are different. We must therefore look elsewhere for parallels.

In the Hellenistic world there was a long tradition of the use of dialogue as a vehicle for philosophical or religious teaching. The great exemplar was Plato, whose Socratic dialogues were classical. Other writers followed his initiative. Aristotle's lost "exoteric" works are understood to have been in dialogue form. For a time the dialogue seems to have been partly in eclipse, and its place was taken by the diatribe, which itself has some dialogue features. But it is doubtful if philosophical dialogues ever completely ceased to be written. In any case, there appears to have been a revival of interest in this form shortly before and after the beginning of the Christian era. Cicero's Latin dialogues were inspired by Greek models—mainly, it appears, by Plato himself. Plutarch, whose period of literary activity covers that of the Fourth Gospel, has left
some dialogues. A little later come the sparkling satirical
dialogues of Lucian of Samosata. More or less contemporary
with him, apparently, are the earlier extant Hermetic dialogues,
which were probably not the first of their kind. The Her-
metists, whose philosophy owed much to Plato, were no doubt
inspired by his example to put forward their teaching in dialogue
form. Their works are indeed not comparable with the earliest
Socratic dialogues, with their vivacity, their dramatic character-
ization, and their lifelike interplay of mind with mind. But
those qualities are not always to be found in Plato himself.
In some of his later dialogues the colloquy becomes little more
than a device for introducing long monologues. In the Timaeus,
e.g., it introduces a lengthy discourse of Timaeus the Locrian
on cosmology; and the Timaeus was “the Bible of the later
Platonism”, and seems to have had more influence on Hermetism
than any other Platonic dialogue. The character of the Hermetic
dialogue may be illustrated by two or three brief extracts.

First, from the dialogue “On Universal Mind” (Περί Νοὸ
Knowov). Hermes is instructing Tat. “No dead thing” (he says)
“ever was or is or shall be in the world. . . . Deadness is
corruption, and corruption is destruction, and how can any
part of an incorruptible thing be destroyed?”—“But, father”
(Tat rejoins), “do not living beings in the world die, being
parts of it?”—“Hush, my child! You are deceived by the
mere word by which the phenomenon is denoted. Living
beings, my child, do not die, but as composite bodies they are
dissolved; and dissolution is not death, but the separation of
a mixture into its components” (Corpus Hermeticum, xii.
15 f.).

Secondly, from the dialogue called “The Bowl” (Κρατηρ). Hermes has discoursed upon the way to the knowledge (γνώσις)
which is perfection. Tat has expressed the desire to be initiated.
Hermes replies: “My child, unless you first hate your body
you cannot love yourself, but if you love yourself you will possess
reason, and having reason you will partake of knowledge”—
“What do you mean by that, father?”—“My child, it is
impossible to be concerned about mortal and about immortal
things at once. Existing things are of two kinds, corporeal
and incorporeal, the mortal and the immortal, and the choice of one or the other is open to him who will choose . . .” (Corpus Hermeticum, iv. 6).

Thirdly, from the “Key of Hermes” (Ἅρμοδ Τρισμεγίστου Κλείς). Hermes has described to Asklepios the nature of the beatific vision; he adds: “It is impossible, my child, for a soul to be deified while it is still in a human body.”—“Deified, father” (exclaims Asklepios), “what do you mean?”—“Every separated soul, my child, undergoes changes”—“Separated? Again, what do you mean?”—“Did you not hear me say”, Hermes replies, “in my General Discourses, that all our souls are derived from one Soul? . . .”. (There follows a long exposition of this theme) (Corpus Hermeticum, x. 6-7.)

I need not stop to point out where this kind of composition differs from the dialogues of the Fourth Gospel. For one thing, Tat and Asklepios remain lay figures; they never come alive, as do some of the characters in the Fourth Gospel. But in spite of the differences, it is surely clear that they have certain features in common. The interlocutor plays an essentially passive part: his interpellations do no more than provide an occasion for the teacher to elaborate his thought. We have the enigmatic or oracular utterance, the incomprehension or misunderstanding of the disciple, the reproach for his obtuseness, and then the development of the theme. All this, as we have seen, is characteristic of Johannine dialogues also. The same formative principle or motive is at work in both, however different the content may be.

It seems, then, that the evangelist has moulded his material into forms based upon current models of philosophical and religious teaching, instead of following the forms represented in the Synoptic Gospels. It may be that he was acquainted with the Synoptic type of dialogue, and deliberately remoulded it. But we have to be prepared for the possibility that he had at his disposal a still fluid tradition, not yet crystallized into fixed forms, which he could deal with as he chose. There are some indications that this may have been so.

There are themes treated in the Synoptic Gospels in forms characteristic of those works, which reappear in the Fourth
Gospel under widely different forms, and yet in ways which suggest that a common tradition underlies both. I will give one example. In Mark viii. 11-21 there is a highly composite dialogue beginning with the request for a sign and its refusal, and leading up, through an enigmatic saying about leaven, to a reference to the multiplication of the loaves, so framed as to suggest that there was a mystery in it. The dialogue ends with the reproach, "Do you not yet understand?" Matthew has the demand for a sign and its refusal in a different context (xii. 38-40), where it leads up to a cryptic reference to the "three days" between the death and the resurrection of the Son of Man. Now John also has the demand for a sign in two separate contexts. In chapter vi it is associated with the mystery of the loaves, in a dialogue which also alludes cryptically both to the death of Christ (vi. 51) and to His exaltation (vi. 62), and in chapter ii with the saying, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up", which, says John, referred to the resurrection of Christ. I cannot bring myself to believe that the evangelist had before him the passages in Mark and Matthew, and carefully unpicked them in order to weave the material into a different fabric. Yet it is clear that he was working on material which the others also had. The most probable conclusion, as it seems to me, is that all three evangelists (or, if you will, their immediate sources) had before them a fluid and unformed tradition in which reminiscence and reflection were already mingled, and that each formulated the material after his own fashion.

I will confine myself for the present to this one example. I believe that if one starts by fully accepting, with all its consequences, the position that the form of the Johannine dialogues is the work of the evangelist, as literary craftsman, following a design current in Hellenistic religious and philosophical circles, one then finds oneself encouraged to search, by careful analysis, for elements of tradition which he was incorporating in these alien forms. Some such elements can be identified with parts of the tradition known to us in their Synoptic form, but it may well be that the still fluid tradition of the teaching of Jesus known to John included also material of which the
Synoptic evangelists have taken no account, but which is of such a kind that it can be integrated with the Synoptic tradition. The recognition of such material is a matter of very delicate judgement, and cannot hope to go beyond a reasonably high degree of probability; but I believe the quest to be far from hopeless.