

# NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP: ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND ABIDING WORTH<sup>1</sup>

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It is a pleasure to have the opportunity of sharing with you in the seventy-fifth Anniversary celebrations of your Faculty. I have myself reached the stage in life when I am somewhat puzzled by the celebration of birthdays. No doubt for the very young and the very old they bring a sense of achievement. But for those of us in the middle years they are a reminder of mortality, and so provide a somewhat dubious reason for celebration. With an institution such as this, however, celebration can be whole-hearted. It is appropriate on such occasions not only to look back over the achievements of the past but also to look forward with confidence to the future.

How is one to sum up the achievements of the last seventy-five years? It is a formidable task. Manchester has been fortunate in having a remarkable series of scholars occupying the Rylands chair of Biblical Exegesis. Not that it is a long series: to have had only four incumbents in seventy-four years is in itself remarkable. But the men themselves have been among the foremost of this country's New Testament scholars.

The first holder of the Rylands chair, A. S. Peake, ensured that biblical studies in Manchester made a notable beginning. He was described on his death, in 1929, as 'the greatest biblical scholar of his generation'.<sup>2</sup> Yet he must have seemed at one time a most unlikely candidate for that accolade. He came from a non-conformist family, and when he read theology at Oxford in the 1880s it was only a few years since the University had opened its doors to non-Anglicans. After graduating, he spent the rest of his life teaching theology—lecturing, indeed, in a theological seminary—in spite of the fact that he was a layman. If that does

<sup>1</sup>A lecture given on 16 Oct. 1979, on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Faculty of Theology.

<sup>2</sup>W. F. Howard, writing in the *British Weekly* for 22 August 1929, quoted by John T. Wilkinson, *Arthur Samuel Peake* (London, 1971), p. 192.

not seem strange today, it was certainly odd in Peake's day. Indeed, half a century after Peake took up his chair, when I myself was reading theology in the 1950s, I was frequently infuriated by people asking me: 'Why are you reading theology if you are not going to be ordained?' Perhaps it was in part because he was a layman that Peake was concerned to disseminate the results of biblical scholarship as widely as possible. It has been said that he did more than any other scholar to introduce the critical study of the Bible to this country. Yet he was a member of the Primitive Methodist Church—a denomination more noted for evangelical fervour than for theological radicalism.

It was perhaps precisely because Peake himself embodied both personal piety and rigorous scholarship that he was able to introduce a new approach to the Bible not only to the ministry of the Primitive Methodist Church but to many other Christians as well. If he did not entirely escape the hostility of those who believed that any form of biblical criticism implied an attack on the authority of the Bible, he nevertheless did a great deal to allay their fears and to change the climate of opinion in this country. He played a considerable part in persuading men and women of his generation that criticism was the proper preliminary to exegesis. It is perhaps some indication of the important role which Peake played in this matter that when Professors Rowley and Black published a new commentary on the Bible in 1963 it was entitled *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, even though it included not a single item from Peake's original volume. It seemed as though the word 'Peake' had become synonymous with 'one-volume Bible Commentary', much as the word 'Hoover' had become identified with a vacuum cleaner.

If one were to sum up Peake's achievements, it would be first and foremost as a teacher. There is no shortage of articles from his pen, but he is a middleman in biblical scholarship rather than an innovator. Look at the enormous volumes of the *Holborn Review* which he edited and you will find lengthy book reviews written by Peake himself, sometimes fifty pages a quarter, telling us what was going on in the scholarly world of biblical criticism at the time. Though he himself wrote some commentaries, and books on the authority of the Bible and on the Old Testament

understanding of suffering, he left no *magnum opus*. His achievement lay in changing the climate of popular opinion towards biblical studies rather than in pioneering any particular interpretation. This means that if we today want to know the scholarly opinion on any biblical matter in this country at the beginning of the century, or sixty years ago, when Peake's commentary was first published, then Peake is the man to tell us. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century had seen enormous advances in critical work on the New Testament, which had led to general agreement on most of the major critical problems, he wrote at an ideal time.

To Mancunians of the first quarter of the twentieth century, Peake's interpretation of the biblical material probably seemed *avant garde*. Not surprisingly, reading him today, at least on the New Testament, he seems somewhat old-fashioned. I do have Peake's *Century Bible* commentary on Hebrews on my bookshelves but I confess I hadn't realized it was there until I began preparing this lecture. I had simply assumed that Professor Bruce's commentary on the epistle was more likely to be of assistance. Peake wrote an essay on the Messiah and the Son of Man<sup>1</sup> but it is T. W. Manson's article on that subject that I have read and re-read.<sup>2</sup> If I do not naturally turn to Peake for help, it is partly because his work has been superseded by that of later scholars, partly because the questions which bothered him were not necessarily the questions which bother me. For example, he pays far more attention to critical questions than to the more theological issues with which many of us are concerned today.

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that much of what Peake wrote is outmoded, there are times when I have thumbed through the pages of one of his books and thought: 'How topical!' Sometimes one comes across a paragraph which could well have been written in 1979 rather than 1909. Take it out of context, set it for comment in an examination on the history of New Testament interpretation, and it might well leave a student guessing. Here, for instance, is a passage in which Peake comments on the

<sup>1</sup>*Bulletin*, viii (1924), 52–81.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.* xxxii (1949), 171–93, reprinted in *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, ed. M. Black (Manchester, 1962), pp. 123 ff.

question of the relationship between Paul and what we would term the historical Jesus:<sup>1</sup>

The view that Paul owed little to the teaching of Jesus was more fashionable at one time than it is today, though it still finds advocates. We are told that the apostle had but little interest in the earthly life of Jesus. His attention was fixed on the Pre-existence, the Incarnation, the Passion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Session at God's right hand. His thought and emotion were concentrated on these great theological facts; to the details of His earthly career and to His teaching he was almost entirely indifferent. Although the remarkable silence of the Pauline Epistles on the life and teaching of Jesus renders such a view plausible, I cannot believe that it will bear searching scrutiny. The extent of the silence may be exaggerated. Paul appeals to the sayings of Jesus as finally settling certain questions of conduct. His knowledge of the facts of Christ's career and the details of His teaching was probably more extensive than has often been admitted; and his attachment to His person, the depth of his gratitude to Him, were too profound for such indifference to be at all natural. I do not institute any detailed comparison between the utterances of Jesus and the epistles of His apostle, but I remind you of the situation in which Paul was placed. There is unquestionably a change in the centre of gravity. Paul's emphasis is thrown much more fully on the great facts of redemption, the Death and Resurrection. . . . the Cross itself inevitably put the teaching [of Jesus] into a secondary place.

Here is Peake refuting a view of Paul's attitude to the historical Jesus which most of us associate with the name of Bultmann, and describing it as *passé* before Bultmann himself had begun to write. Whether or not we are persuaded by his argument that Paul knew more about Jesus than might appear from his letters, it is interesting to notice Peake stressing both the vital change in thinking brought about by the Resurrection and the importance of understanding the situation in which Paul found himself. Both these themes are axiomatic for New Testament scholars today; nevertheless, one still finds it vitally important to remind one's readers and hearers of their truth.

Or again, listen to a passage taken from Peake's book on *The Nature of Scripture*.<sup>2</sup> You may perhaps think that he is stating the obvious when he says that the Bible is not a manual of ready-made theology and ethics. It certainly was not obvious to the men and women of his generation, and I fear that it is not

<sup>1</sup>The Quintessence of Paulinism', *Bulletin*, iv (1917), 285–311.

<sup>2</sup>London, 1922, pp. 67–71.

obvious to all Christians today, judging by the way in which the Bible is still appealed to and used—or abused—in theological argument. But even more interesting is Peake's insistence on the diversity within the Bible. Those of us who were brought up during the period of 'biblical theology' which dominated biblical studies in this country for many years may be surprised to find Peake stressing ideas which are once again being emphasized by biblical scholars. According to Peake, the Bible is not primarily a manual either of theology or of ethics. . . .

Only in fragmentary portions, as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews has told us, was it possible for God to speak to His ancient people; it was only in a Son who was the radiance of His glory and the clear-cut impress of His essential being that He could fully translate Himself into human speech and express Himself in a human experience.

And this leads us to the further result that we have come to recognize the glorious variety of Scripture. We do not find that the Biblical writers always express themselves in accordance with the same scheme of doctrine, not even in the New Testament, still less in the Old. We can frame no satisfactory theology by an indiscriminate collection and arrangement of all the Biblical statements on each subject. The whole movement of revelation as an historical process must first be studied. Each writer must be placed in his context, and his theology as a whole so far as possible reproduced, and only when this has been done can the various types of theology be brought together and unified. Only in this way can we do justice to the rich and many-sided experience of the writers and the truths which have been conveyed through it. We can hardly over-emphasize the importance of the fact that while the Bible contains doctrines of the highest importance, it is primarily a book of experimental religion; and that the truths it enshrines did not come simply as direct communications of theological propositions, but were realized through doubts and misgivings, through wrestlings of the soul with God, through long and perplexed groping, or through some sudden and radiant flash of insight. And it is this human element which gives the Bible so much of its appeal to the human heart, and stamps it with such marks of authenticity. If we go expecting to find a body of doctrine formulated with scientific precision, or an accurate record of events such as a modern historian would give us, we may be disappointed. But we find something far better: we find life itself, the interaction of the Divine and the human in a great national history, and the experience of many an elect spirit. We may lose in abstract correctness, but we gain in warmth and interest. The teaching may not be so instantly available as if the Bible had been restricted to a series of theological and moral statements accurately expressed and duly co-ordinated into a system. But the difficulty in disengaging them from the history in which they are embedded is far more than balanced by the vital experimental quality conferred on them by the process through which they have come.

Fifty years after the death of 'the greatest biblical scholar of his generation', then, we find that Peake's books are so out of date that one would never think of recommending them to undergraduates, and yet diligent search through them will discover emphases and insights which foreshadow the outlook of the 1970s. If I were an optimist, I suppose that I might be encouraged by these two facts. I might be comforted by the thought that, if Peake's writings now seem out of date, this means that we have made some progress in the last seventy-five years. And if parts of them still seem apt, does this not mean that there are certain areas in New Testament scholarship in which his work has stood the test of time?

In fact, however—and is it only because I am by nature a pessimist?—I feel discouraged. When I find Peake setting out views which I still find myself needing to underline seventy-five years later, I inevitably wonder: have we then made no progress in the intervening years? Are we simply going round in a circle? Or is it perhaps that on these particular issues we are reacting against changes of opinion which held sway in the intervening years? Since scholarly opinion tends to swing to and fro like a pendulum, have I simply caught Peake on one or two matters at the same point on the arc that I myself happen to be? And when I find Peake, that great teacher, hopelessly out of date on critical matters, this inevitably raises in my mind, as one who tries to teach: what, then, is the value of New Testament scholarship and teaching, if today's assured results become tomorrow's question marks? Hence my title—and those of you who are familiar with Peake's writings will have realized that I stole it from Peake himself. And though his book was in fact entitled *The Bible: its origin, its significance and its abiding worth*, I make no excuse for adapting it, since what Peake was concerned with in that volume was in fact the value of critical methods in studying the Bible.

It is perhaps worth asking why it is that the work of scholars like Peake becomes outdated, so that Peake's Commentary needed to be re-written and his *Critical Introduction to the New Testament* was replaced with a new volume by R. H. Fuller. On the one hand, of course, there are new developments in critical

study. Peake's *Critical Introduction*, for example, was published in 1909. Though E. de Witt Burton had already propounded a four document hypothesis in 1904,<sup>1</sup> it was very different from that which B. H. Streeter set out in 1924.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes there are discoveries which produce dramatic results. While Peake was writing, the Greek papyri which transformed scholars' views of New Testament Greek were being unearthed and edited by George Milligan. Even scholarly opinions can sometimes have dramatic results—as with the work of the form critics; it is just sixty years since the first form critical studies, by Dibelius and Schmidt, were published.

Secondly—and this is something far less tangible—there are the presuppositions with which any scholar comes to the evidence, and the questions which he thinks it important to ask. These, of course, arise out of the development and discoveries which have been made, and reflect the philosophy of the period—or, at least, the *Sitz im Leben* of the particular scholar. We are not surprised to find Peake treating the gospels primarily as historical documents. It is true that he acknowledges that they may have been influenced by the Christology of the Church; it is true that he argues that the impression made by Jesus is more important than what he said. But he regards the question of Jesus' self-consciousness as a vital one, and he has little regard for the work of Wilhelm Wrede since, in his view, it leads to total scepticism.

The value of Peake's work, then, must be judged in relation to his own time. When we read the work of scholars written seventy-five years ago, it is necessary to remember the situation in which they were working. We need to make a mental adjustment, similar in some ways to that which we make when reading the Bible itself, putting ourselves back into a past era. The abiding value of Peake's work was in establishing in the minds of his contemporaries the value of criticism as a necessary preliminary to exegesis. If that is now taken for granted, it is to a large extent the result of Peake's influence on the men and women of his generation. And if there are circles where criticism is still regarded

<sup>1</sup>*The Principles of Literary Criticism and the Synoptic Problem*, Chicago, 1904.

<sup>2</sup>*The Four Gospels*, London, 1924.

as 'the work of Satan', then perhaps Peake's words are still relevant.

With the coming of C. H. Dodd to Manchester in 1930 we have moved on a generation and come to a new era. The names of Dodd, T. W. Manson and Vincent Taylor dominated New Testament scholarship for at least twenty-five years. Their influence on the theological climate of this country was immense. Dodd himself stayed a mere five years in Manchester—which was no time at all compared with the other men who have occupied this chair—but during that five years he published, among other things, his *Commentary on Romans*, his *Parables of the Kingdom*, and an article on 'The Framework of the Gospel Narrative' which has had an influence on subsequent study of the gospels out of all proportion to its size.<sup>1</sup> We may therefore justifiably include C. H. Dodd in our survey: indeed, how could one bypass him?

In the preface to his *Commentary on Romans*, Dodd described his aim in these words: it was 'to discover as exactly as possible what Paul meant, in his own terms' and 'to try to indicate the bearing of what Paul meant, upon our experience, our own questions, and our own thought'.<sup>2</sup> Reading through the commentary, one is tempted to wonder whether Dodd was not more successful in relating his understanding of Paul to the situation and experience of the 1930s, than he was in discovering 'exactly . . . what Paul meant, in his own terms'. Nevertheless, I notice that Dodd is listed as a 'best buy' in a recent book about Romans.<sup>3</sup>

The *Parables of the Kingdom*<sup>4</sup> was an epoch-making book. It was an attempt to interpret the parables within the context of the ministry of Jesus. It is no exaggeration to describe the notion of realized eschatology upon which it is based as the most significant development this century in the discussion about the Kingdom of God. In this book Dodd repeated and expanded the arguments for his theory which he had previously set out in a

<sup>1</sup>*E.T.* xliii (1932), 396–400, reprinted in *New Testament Studies* (Manchester, 1953), pp. 1–11.

<sup>2</sup>*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London, 1932), p. xxxiv.

<sup>3</sup>John A. T. Robinson, *Wrestling with Romans*, London, 1979.

<sup>4</sup>London, 1935.



lecture given in 1927.<sup>1</sup> The debate which Dodd initiated, and which continued for many years, centred on the interpretation of certain key texts—e.g. on the precise meaning of the verb ἤγγικεν in Mark 1:15 and of the Aramaic word which lay behind it, and on the proper translation of the participle ἐληλυθίαν in Mark 9:1. Had the Kingdom of God arrived with the ministry of Jesus or had it only drawn near? Was it in fact already present, if only the disciples had possessed the eyes of faith to see it?

What I find interesting, looking back on this debate, is the way in which both Dodd and his opponents handled the evidence. The issue was the meaning of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God within the ministry of Jesus. Did Jesus himself think of the Kingdom as present or future? The debate turned, however, on the niceties of Greek grammar in Mark 9:1, where the problem is clearly the way in which a saying of Jesus was understood at the time when Mark recorded it, and on the recovery of an Aramaic original at 1:15, where we have a Marcan summary of the preaching of Jesus. Looking at the evidence today, the questions which come into my mind are: Did *Mark* think of the Kingdom of God as present in the ministry of Jesus? Has *Mark* adapted the saying about seeing the Kingdom come in power to suit his purpose? I find it difficult to argue directly from the Greek used by Mark to the interpretation of Jesus himself. Clearly the presuppositions with which most of us approach the evidence today are very different from those which underlay Dodd's work. It is not simply that we reach different conclusions. Even the questions which we think it possible to ask are different.

Dodd offered a consistent exegesis of the parables on the basis of realized eschatology. Here we see a fascinating example of the way in which presuppositions not only influence one's approach but also predetermine the outcome. If you come to the parables as a firm believer in the notion of realized eschatology, then it is possible to interpret them in those terms. The seed which was sown secretly in previous generations has now grown to maturity: the ministry of Jesus is the time of harvest, the time of judgement, the time of reward. On the other hand, if you are a

<sup>1</sup>The 'This-worldly Kingdom of God in our Lord's Teaching', *Theology*, xiv (1927), 258–60.

believer in futurist eschatology, then it is possible to interpret the parables in terms of futurist eschatology, as the work of Bultmann demonstrates.<sup>1</sup> But since the British tend to avoid extremes, the most popular interpretation in this country is the mediating view of Joachim Jeremias,<sup>2</sup> which modifies the position of Dodd, though leaning to his side, and advocates eschatology-in-the-process-of-being-realized. Jeremias' work on the parables demonstrates that it is possible to interpret the parables in terms of inaugurated eschatology. Whether or not his interpretation has uncovered for us what Jesus himself meant by the parables, however, seems to me very dubious indeed. For what Dodd and Bultmann and Jeremias and many other commentators have done is a twentieth-century version of what the evangelists did: they have interpreted the material in terms of their own understanding of the situation. For the evangelists, of course, the situation with which they were concerned was their own: the parables must make sense for their communities. No doubt they read them and re-told them in the light of their own understanding of the coming of the Kingdom. Modern commentators may think they are more objective—though often they are concerned, like Dodd, to relate the teaching of Jesus to life today—but they, too, inevitably, interpret the material in the light of their own understanding of the situation, and so impose a particular interpretation on the material which the next generation of scholars finds unconvincing.

If Dodd's book on the parables was influential so, too, was his article on the historical framework of the gospels. In contrast to those form critics who had assumed that the gospel pericopes had been strung haphazardly together, like pearls on a string, Dodd argued that the so-called *Sammelberichte* of Mark, which served to join the pericopes together, made up a consistent continuous narrative. They were not, to change the image, mere pieces of sellotape, linking the material together, but were themselves part of the tradition. What Mark had done was to take this historical outline of the ministry and to use it as the

<sup>1</sup>E.g. in *Jesus and the Word*, E.Tr., London, 1934: *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, E.Tr., Oxford, 1963.

<sup>2</sup>*The Parables of Jesus* (rev. edn.), London, 1963.

framework for his gospel, inserting the remaining tradition at appropriate points in the narrative. Dodd believed that this outline of the ministry was itself part of the primitive *kerygma*. Like Peake, Dodd believed that history was important and he assumed that it had been important to the early Church also. It is not surprising that Dodd refused to abandon the search for the historical Jesus—a search which culminated for him in his last book, *The Founder of Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> At a time when more radical scholars were taking up the new quest for the historical Jesus, Dodd was continuing the old, using the gospel sayings as evidence for the messianic self-consciousness of Jesus in a manner very similar to that used by Peake.

Dodd's article confirmed many British scholars in their belief that the order of events in St. Mark's gospel was basically historical. If Mark used a traditional historical summary of the ministry of Jesus, then form criticism did not, after all, compel them to abandon the familiar outline or treat it as topical rather than historical. Almost twenty-five years after it first appeared, however, Dodd's article was subjected to searching scrutiny by D. E. Nineham.<sup>2</sup> Even if Dodd's hypothesis were true, argued Nineham, and Mark possessed a traditional historical outline of the ministry, this could not provide the kind of historical information which Dodd had suggested. The structure was too flimsy and too vague to provide any kind of historical order of events. In other words, the skeleton which Dodd claimed to have uncovered was more like the skeletal framework of a modern building, steel girders around which bricks are added in a more or less haphazard order, than the skeleton of a body, which dictates which limb goes where. Nineham went on to raise questions regarding the purpose of such an historical outline within the *kerygma*. What had the early preachers used it for? Dodd was assuming that they were interested in history. Was he perhaps

<sup>1</sup>Although this was not published until 1970, it incorporated the substance of lectures delivered in 1954. Dodd did not change his mind significantly on this matter in the intervening years.

<sup>2</sup>The Order of Events in St. Mark's Gospel—an examination of Dr. Dodd's Hypothesis', pp. 223–39 in *Studies in the Gospels*, essays in memory of R. H. Lightfoot, ed. D. E. Nineham, Oxford, 1955.

failing to put himself into first-century shoes, assuming that the early Christians' interests were similar to his own?

It is interesting to notice that Dodd himself, in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge, had recognized this problem of putting ourselves back into a first-century setting and grappling with strange ways of thinking:<sup>1</sup>

The ideal interpreter would be one who has entered into that strange first-century world, has felt its whole strangeness, has sojourned in it until he has lived himself into it, thinking and feeling as one of those to whom the Gospel first came; and who will then return into our world and give to the truth he has discerned a body out of the stuff of our own thought. . . . This is an ideal. That any of us, or all of us together, will be able to realise it fully, or to give a final interpretation of the New Testament, final even for our own age, is not to be supposed. But here our task lies.

Since Dodd himself described the task as impossible, he would, perhaps, forgive me for suggesting that he did not succeed in it. Indeed, I believe that the difficulties are even greater than he realized. Dodd recognized that the eschatological ideas of the New Testament are strange to us. But one wonders whether his own understanding of 'realised eschatology' might not have been strange to the men and women of the New Testament. In trying to make sense of the New Testament, it is a constant temptation to produce something which makes sense to us and to read that back: it is very difficult indeed to put ourselves back into the minds of men of the first century and make sense of the evidence in their terms. And though so-called 'radical' scholars may be more aware of the problem, they are not necessarily any better at solving it. Dodd's Jesus made sense in the 1930s and Bultmann's Paul<sup>2</sup> made sense in the 1950s. Would either of them have been at home in the first century AD? Perhaps the 1970s are a period of pessimism, in New Testament scholarship as in other things, but I suspect that we are more aware, today, of the cultural gap between the New Testament world and our own and of the problems of entering their thought world.

Dodd's understanding of realized eschatology provided for him a yardstick in dealing with problems concerning the changes

<sup>1</sup>*The Present Task in New Testament Studies* (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 40 f.

<sup>2</sup>*Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. I, E.Tr., London, 1952.

in the tradition of the sayings of Jesus. Naturally he regarded futuristic eschatological sayings as later adaptations and additions by the community. Once again, we see an example of the way in which presuppositions inevitably influence the way in which one interprets the evidence. Moreover, although Dodd acknowledged that there are changes in the tradition due to the changing eschatological perspective, one wonders whether in other respects he made sufficient allowance for the shaping of the material during the period of oral tradition. Yet Dodd was not unaware of the problems raised by form criticism. Interestingly enough the lecture which he gave at the Fiftieth Anniversary Celebrations of the Faculty here in Manchester was a study in form criticism entitled *The Dialogue Form in the Gospels*.<sup>1</sup>

T. W. Manson was considerably *less* well disposed than Dodd towards form criticism. He described its results in classifying the material as 'interesting but not epoch-making'. This classification, he suggested, did not take one very far. In a characteristic comment he remarked that 'a paragraph of Mark is not a penny the better or the worse as historical evidence for being labelled, "Apothegm" or "Pronouncement Story" or "Paradigm"'.<sup>2</sup> But once form criticism went beyond the business of putting labels on the material, Manson felt that it had got out of hand. In an address given at Westminster College, Cambridge, in 1949, he argued in support of Dodd's view that the framework of Mark was historical. Manson declared that after working with the problems for many years, he was 'increasingly convinced that in the Gospels we have the materials—reliable materials—for an outline account of the ministry as a whole'.<sup>3</sup> In Manson's view, the quest of the historical Jesus could go on and must go on.

In the same lecture, Manson poured scorn on what he termed 'ardent explorers of the *Sitz im Leben*'.<sup>4</sup> What he disliked was the fact that, as he put it, 'they tend to explain more and more in terms of the *Sitz im Leben der alten Kirche* and less and less in terms of the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*'. His quarrel, of course, was with

<sup>1</sup>*Bulletin*, xxxvii (1954), 54–67.

<sup>2</sup>'The Quest of the Historical Jesus—continued' in *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, ed. M. Black (Manchester, 1962), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* p. 6.

those who assumed that stories and sayings were created by the community to meet the needs of the community. 'Professor Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition*', he remarked tartly, 'is an account, not of how the life of Jesus produced the tradition, but of how the tradition produced the life of Jesus.' He acknowledged, nevertheless, that 'it is undoubtedly a good thing that the Gospels should be studied in the context—so far as we can know it—of the interests, problems, and practical needs of the people who first used them'. This somewhat grudging admission was as far as Manson was prepared to go in recognizing the value of studying the *Sitz im Leben*. Looking back on Manson's work thirty years after that essay was written, that comment sums up for me the difference between the way in which he approached the gospels and the way in which many of us who were privileged to sit at Manson's feet feel compelled to approach them now. I for one would not disagree with him that sorting out the material into different forms does not take us very far in understanding the material; nor in feeling that the imagination of critics in inventing situations in which sayings might have been created can run wild; nor in recognizing that the pursuit of the *Sitz im Leben* can be a circular one, since we can recover it only when we know the interests and concerns of the early community—which we can discover only from the supposed *Sitz im Leben*. Nevertheless, it is the form critics' emphasis on the *Sitz im Leben* of the material in the community, and their awkward questions about its use and adaptation, which have subtly changed the climate of opinion, so that I find I can no longer approach the material in the way that Manson did, and ask the questions which seemed proper to him.

Here, for example, is the publisher's blurb on the dust-jacket of Manson's first and most famous book:<sup>1</sup>

The main object of these studies is to demonstrate two propositions: first, that the form in which the teaching of Jesus is delivered is determined by two factors: the kind of audience addressed, and the period in the ministry—before or after Peter's confession; second, that the key to the contents of the teaching is the prophetic notion of the Remnant; that 'the Son of Man' in the teaching represents Jesus' formulation of the Remnant Ideal; and that he is the Son of Man by embodying that ideal in his own person.

<sup>1</sup> *The Teaching of Jesus*, Cambridge, 1948.

You will, I hope, see my difficulties. The form in which the teaching of Jesus is delivered is determined by . . . the kind of audience addressed'—but how do we know what audience was addressed? We know only the setting supplied—rightly or wrongly—by the evangelists. 'And by the period in the ministry—before or after Peter's confession'—but how do we know the period in the ministry? We know only where the evangelists placed the sayings, and Mark's outline, pivoting as it does round Caesarea Philippi, seems to be a theological rather than an historical construction. I leave it to Old Testament scholars to tell me whether there ever was, in truth, a prophetic notion of the Remnant; but if there was, can we hope to find Jesus' formulation of it? Are we not dealing, rather, with the theology of the Church? The title which Manson gave to his book, *The Teaching of Jesus*, sums up my dilemma. We are far less confident, now, that we can recover that teaching. The focus of our interests has moved, inevitably, from Jesus to the early Church, from history to Christology. The questions which we bring to the material are different, because we recognize that the questions we used to ask cannot be answered.

We can see another example of the change in our presuppositions and approach by looking at another well-known book by Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> This is primarily a commentary on the text of the document Q, which Manson attempts to reconstruct. He based his work on the conclusions of the source critics and the four-document hypothesis of Streeter. Whether or not Q ever existed as one document I do not know; if it did, I suspect that it was either much longer than Manson's reconstruction or much shorter. Fifty-five years after Streeter's *Four Gospels*, in the light of work done by form critics and redaction critics, we ought to be more cautious about the possibility of reconstructing documents underlying our gospels. Yet one surprising thing about gospel criticism today is that in some areas yesterday's conclusions are not always questioned. I am amazed, for instance, to find some scholars talking confidently about the theology of Q. Is it not astonishing to find them boldly reconstructing the

<sup>1</sup>London, 1949; re-issue of Part II of *The Mission and Message of Jesus*, London, 1937.

theology of a hypothetical document? Moreover, the work of the redaction critics is based on an assumption that we know what Matthew and Luke did with their sources. It is convenient to take over the conclusions of yesterday's source critics because they seem to provide us with solid foundations for the work of redaction criticism. But those who are looking at the source critical problems today are not quite so confident about the answers. We need constantly to re-examine old questions, and ask whether new discoveries and new approaches do not affect old conclusions.

One obvious area in which new discoveries have greatly affected our understanding is that of the Jewish background to New Testament thought. Here the material from Qumran has added enormously to our knowledge of Palestinian Judaism—albeit of an off-beat kind. Its value for understanding the New Testament is perhaps illustrated if I say that one of the books which I found shed most light on the problem of the use of Old Testament quotations by New Testament writers was not written on that subject at all, but was a book by Professor Bruce on *Biblical Exegesis in Qumran*.<sup>1</sup> And if Professor Bruce has used the material from Qumran to illuminate our understanding of the New Testament, so too has Professor Lindars.<sup>2</sup> With them we come to the present day, and the problems which confront us now. It is time to look back over our survey, and to sum up.

There is a story told of a former student of theology who returned to his old University and happened to pick up a copy of an examination paper which had just been taken by the current generation of undergraduates. 'Good gracious!' he exclaimed, 'the questions here are exactly the same as those set in the examination paper which I sat years ago.' 'Oh yes,' replied the professor, 'we set the same questions every year.' 'But surely the students have got wise to this by now?' said the visitor. 'Oh yes,' came the reply, 'but you see in Theology we change the answers.' Whether or not that is true of other branches of theological investigation I leave you to judge; as far as New Testament study is concerned, it seems to me that our survey of work

<sup>1</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts*, London, 1960.

<sup>2</sup>Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic*, London, 1961.



done in the first half of this century has demonstrated that many of the *questions* which we put to the material have changed dramatically. Those of us who are involved in teaching the subject are not always aware of the extent to which our thinking has changed. There was another former student—this time someone who had been an undergraduate at the same time as myself—who heard me lecture on the subject of 'Recent developments in New Testament studies' about fifteen years after we had both left University. Afterwards he came up to me and said, with a somewhat dazed look, 'Things have certainly changed in the last fifteen years.' I looked at him with equal astonishment. I had not realized that the changes in New Testament scholarship and in my own thinking had been so great.

And that incident, I think, sums up my own dilemma as a teacher of New Testament studies. Clearly I must teach the truth as I see it, but I must never give the impression that the answers are infallible. Both questions and answers must continually be re-examined, for New Testament scholarship is a living subject. It does not stand still. In this respect, of course, it is like many other subjects. In science it is even more difficult to keep up-to-date. No responsible teacher will give the impression that his answers are necessarily the final ones. The scholars whose work we have been surveying all had very clear opinions of their own; yet they did not impose them on others. It is said that Peake often set out the evidence before his students and left them to make up their own minds on the matter—a habit which exasperated those who were used to being given clear-cut answers to every question. T. W. Manson would often set out alternative explanations and conclude by saying: 'Well, you pay your money, and you take your choice.' Professor Bruce, I am told, after arguing his own case with conviction and force, has often concluded an argument by saying 'Ah well! The other fellow may be right after all.' The greatest teachers certainly do not impose rigid views upon their students; they train them to go on thinking for themselves.

And if the New Testament is to be relevant to each generation, then there is a sense in which we must expect its interpretation to change. The tragedy comes when teachers are a generation

behind in their understanding. I can see the point of performing Shakespeare in modern dress; it is an attempt to interpret the message of his plays in our own situation. I have never been able to understand the point of performing Shakespeare in Edwardian dress.

How, then, can we sum up the achievement of the giants of the past? Sometimes we shall find ourselves using their work directly, to great profit. Increasingly, we are likely to find ourselves disagreeing both with their methods and with their conclusions. And yet we stand on their shoulders and owe them an immense debt of gratitude. Dodd, writing of his predecessor at Cambridge, F. C. Burkitt, remarked: 'his achievement remains both as a sure foundation for further studies, and as an inspiration to those who labour at the same unending task.'<sup>1</sup> It is a fitting description of Dodd himself, and of the others who have established the tradition of New Testament scholarship in this University. Our debt to the past seems to me to have been summed up in the gesture made by Professors Rowley and Black when they named their Commentary after Peake. Not one article was taken over from the old book to the new. Yet the continuity with the past, and their debt to the scholars of the previous generation, was such that they were led to call it *Peake's Commentary*, a tribute to the abiding worth of critical scholarship.

<sup>1</sup>*The Present Task in New Testament Studies*, Cambridge, 1936, p. 6.