

## READING THE GOSPELS AS HISTORY

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The four NT Gospels are virtually the only source for our knowledge of the acts and teachings of the earthly Jesus.<sup>1</sup> They are received by the Christian church as the work of inspired writers, apostles and prophets who were guided by the Spirit of God to give a true portrayal and interpretation of his life and work, and they are also historical documents whose origin and formation can be investigated and in some measure discovered. Our topic today raises the question whether these two perceptions of the Gospels are in conflict.

Written some time after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Gospels have been subjected to careful and prolonged study to determine their background and the degree to which they accurately reflect his preresurrection ministry. The historical investigation of the Gospels has mainly taken four routes, (1) the attempt to identify underlying documents (known as "source criticism"), (2) the attempt to identify individual literary units and analyse their formation and classification (known as "form criticism"), (3) the attempt to trace changes in these units during their transmission prior to their use by the Evangelist (known as "tradition criticism") and, finally, (4) the attempt to identify changes that each Evangelist himself made in composing his Gospel (known as "redaction" or "composition criticism"). Each of these avenues of research is perfectly legitimate but, as in other areas of historical study, the results arrived at are heavily influenced if not

<sup>1</sup> There is a brief reference to his ministry by the 1st-century Jewish historian, Josephus (*Antiquities* 18, 63f = 18, 3, 3) and a few additional sayings of the earthly Jesus recorded elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 20:35) and in other sources (cf. J. Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus* [London] 1958).

determined by the world-view with which the historian approaches the texts and by his other historical and methodological assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

## I

An assumption that may be addressed at the outset is the view, still held in some quarters, that history writing is an objective science in which the historian is a neutral observer and evaluator of probabilities. This view has been effectively discredited for general history by such writers as C. Becker, and H. S. Commager and, for biblical history, by A. Richardson.<sup>3</sup> Its fallacies have been illustrated again in the work of J. Kenyon on critical historians in Britain.<sup>4</sup>

As Bernard Lonergan<sup>5</sup> and others have reminded us, the term "history" may be employed in at least two senses, that which is written and that which is written about. It is history in the former sense that is presented to us both by the Evangelists and by modern historians of early Christianity. Such history is by its very nature interpretive and modern historians, including of course the present writer, are no less subjectively involved in their reconstructions than the Evangelists were in theirs. As one who very early had to contrast the history of the War between the States received at my grandmother's knee and in Jefferson Davis' *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*<sup>6</sup> with that presented, for example, by C. A. Beard in the public school text-books of my high school years, I later read the diverse accounts of the ministry of Christ and historicity of the Gospels by, say, F. W. Farrar, C. H. Dodd and B. Gerhardsson<sup>7</sup> on the one hand and D. F. Strauss and R. Bultmann on the other with a distinct sense of *deja vu*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I address these questions in more detail in E. E. Ellis, "Gospels Criticism: A Perspective on the State of the Art," *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (ed. P. Stuhlmacher; Tübingen, 1983) 27-54.

<sup>3</sup> C. Becker, "Detachment and the Writing of History," *Atlantic Monthly* CVI (Oct 1910), 524-36; H. S. Commager, *The Study of History* (Columbus OR, 1966) 43-60; A. Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane* (London, 1964), 83-183.

<sup>4</sup> J. Kenyon, *The History Men* (London, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York, 1972), 175.

<sup>6</sup> J. Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (2 vols; London and Cranbury NJ, 1958 [1881]).

<sup>7</sup> F. W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (London 1912); C. R. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London 1971); idem., "The Framework of the Gospel Narrative," *NTS* (New York, 1953) 1-11; B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Lund 1961).

<sup>8</sup> D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus* (London 1902 [1835]); R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (London 1935).

The subjectivity inevitably involved in the reconstruction of the past does not, of course, diminish the importance of a proper method or excuse us from criticizing historical reconstructions that are demonstrably defective in this or other respects. A currently widespread view of the origins of the Gospels with its skeptical attitude toward their historicity seems to me to warrant such criticism, specifically, (1) in its misrepresentation of its own confessional presuppositions as a scientific or critical stance, (2) in its misuse of historical method and (3) in its mistaken historical and literary assumptions. Let us look at these points in order.

1. The historical study of the Gospels has been marked for the past two centuries by a cleavage in world-views, characterized on the one side by deism and on the other by Christian theism or, in the categories of H. Thielicke, by Cartesian and non-Cartesian assumptions.<sup>9</sup> In the mid-20th century it was dominated in many circles by a Cartesian, that is, rationalistic approach for which Professor R. Bultmann was probably the most influential representative. Regarding history and the natural world as a closed continuum of cause and effect "in which historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural transcendent powers,"<sup>10</sup> Bultmann viewed, and indeed on *a priori* grounds had to view, large portions of the Gospels as later mythological creations. On the same grounds he had to limit the "authentic" sayings of Jesus to those he regarded as originating in Jesus' earthly ministry since no exalted Lord could, in fact, speak to and through the Gospel traditioners and Evangelists. These attitudes and conclusions which Bultmann and other rationalist historians represented as "scientific" and "critical" were in fact only the expression and predetermined result of their world-view, that is, their philosophical and thus ultimately confessional commitments.

2. Other questions of method are not unrelated to these philosophical assumptions, for example, the assignment of the "burden of proof" in determining whether a particular episode in the Gospels originated in the preresurrection mission of Jesus and the criteria by which its preresurrection origin could be established. The proposed criteria were (1) an episode's appearance in more than one Gospel, (2) its lack of so-called "developed," that is, postresurrection tendencies, (3) its dissimilarity from the idiom or ideas found in contemporary

<sup>9</sup> H. Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith* (3 vols; Grand Rapids 1974-81) 1.30-173.

<sup>10</sup> R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York 1960) 292 (GT: *Theologische Zeitschrift* 13, 1957, 411f.); cf. idem, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth* (London 1953) 7 (GT: 18).

Judaism or early Christianity and (4) its coherence with other Gospels material thought to be authentic. Some of the criteria raise certain probabilities and some simply beg the question, but none of them produce any "assured results."<sup>11</sup> As the critiques of M. Hooker and E. L. Mascall have pointed out, the conclusions drawn from them were "very largely the result of [the scholar's] own presuppositions and prejudices."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the criteria received an importance beyond their due from the assumption, adopted by E. Kasemann and others, that the Gospel accounts should be regarded as postresurrection creations unless proven otherwise.<sup>13</sup> Does this view of the burden of proof accord with good historical method?

According to E. Bernheim's classic text on historical method the historian has the two-fold task of testing the genuineness and demonstrating the nongenuineness of his sources.<sup>14</sup> Applied to the Gospels this means, as W. G. Kummel has rightly seen,<sup>15</sup> that the historian must not only test the preresurrection origin of a Gospel account but also must demonstrate that any part of that account is created in the postresurrection church since the Gospels present their narrative in the context of the preresurrection mission of Jesus. In a word, a good historical method requires that a Gospel passage be received as an episode in Jesus' earthly ministry unless it is shown that it cannot have originated there.

## II

Under the influence of R. Bultmann and M. Dibelius<sup>16</sup> the classical form criticism raised many doubts about the historicity of the

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ellis (n. 2), 30f.

<sup>12</sup> M. Hooker, "On Using the Wrong Tool," *Theology* 75 (1972) 581; cf. *idem*, "Christology and Methodology," *NTS* 17 (1970-71) 480-87; E. L. Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ* (London 1977) 87-97.

<sup>13</sup> E. Kasemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus" (1954), *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London 1964) 37 (GT: *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen I*, Göttingen 1960, 205). He was followed by the Anglo-American writers, N. Perrin (*Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus* [London 1967] 39) and J. M. Robinson (*A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* [London 1959] 38). The latter is critiqued by R. P. Martin, "The New Quest of the Historical Jesus," *Jesus of Nazareth: Savior and Lord* (ed. C.F. H. Henry; Grand Rapids, 1966) 25~45.

<sup>14</sup> E. Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* (New York, 1965 [1908]), 332. C. V. Langlois and C. Seignobos (*Introduction to the Study of History* [New York, 1966, 1898] 155-00) are less balanced and more sceptical: "The historian ought to distrust a priori every statement of an author" (157).

<sup>15</sup> W. G. Kummel, "Jesusforschung seit 1950," *Theologische Rundschau* 31 (1966) 42f.

<sup>16</sup> R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York <sup>5</sup>1963 [1921]); M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York <sup>2</sup>1965 [1919]).

Synoptic Gospels, but this form criticism itself was shaped by a number of literary and historical assumptions which themselves are increasingly seen to have a doubtful historical basis.<sup>17</sup> Here we may mention three.

The early form criticism assumed, first of all, (1) that the Gospel traditions were transmitted for decades exclusively in oral form and began to be fixed in writing only when the early Christian anticipation of a soon end of the world faded. This theory foundered with the discovery in 1947 of the library of the Qumran sect, a group contemporaneous with the ministry of Jesus and the early church which combined intense expectation of the End with prolific writing. The Qumran community shows that such expectations did not inhibit writing but actually were a spur to it. Also, the widespread literacy in 1st-century Palestinian Judaism,<sup>18</sup> together with the different language backgrounds of Jesus' followers--some Greek, some Aramaic, some bilingual--would have facilitated the rapid written formulation and transmission of at least some of his teaching. Finally, the major factor that occasioned writing in early Christianity was the separation of the believers from the teaching leadership. This is evident in "the Jerusalem Decree" (Acts 15) and in Paul's letters. But this factor was already present during the ministry of Jesus, who had groups of adherents both in the towns of Galilee and Judea and probably also on the Phoenician coast, in the Decapolis and in Perea.<sup>19</sup> There are good grounds, then, for supposing not only that the traditioning of Jesus' acts and teachings began already during his earthly ministry, as H. Schurmann has argued,<sup>20</sup> but also that some of them were given written formulation at that time.

The missions of the Twelve<sup>21</sup> and of the Seventy<sup>22</sup> were two such occasions for this. Although the missionaries may have been trained orally and may have so delivered their own messages, it is doubtful that during the brief sojourn in a town they could have trained their

<sup>17</sup> Cf. E. E. Ellis, "New Directions in Form Criticism," *Prophecy and Hermeneutic* (Tubingen and Grand Rapids 1978), 237-53; idem (n. 2), 39-43; Stuhlmacher (n. 2), 2f.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 2, 204 = 2, 25: The Law "orders that [children] should be taught to read. . .;" cf. *idem*, *Antiquities* 12, 209 = 12,4,9; Philo, Embassy to Gaius 115, 210. Further, see R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer* (Tubingen <sup>3</sup>1988), 112-15.

<sup>19</sup> Jesus had hearers and doubtless some converts from Syria (Matt 4:25), the Decapolis (Matt 4:25; Mark 3:8; 5:20; 7:31), Tyre and Sidon (Mark 3:8; 7:24, 31; Matt 15:21; Luke 6:21).

<sup>20</sup> H. Schurmann, "Die vorosterlichen Anfänge der Logientradition," *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Dusseldorf 1968) 39-65.

<sup>21</sup> Mark 6:7-13, 30 (διδασκείν) parr. Matthew (10:1,7-14) and Luke (9:1-6, 10) also draw upon a Q tradition of this episode.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 10:1-20.

converts orally. Most likely, they would have written down some of Jesus' teachings. If they taught in Aramaic, Greek-speaking converts would have had a special need of written translations.<sup>23</sup> There is then some probability that the apostolic missionaries began a written transmission of at least some of Jesus' word and work during his pre-resurrection mission.

Secondly, (2) the early form criticism tied the theory of oral transmission to the conjecture that Gospel traditions were meditated like folk traditions, being freely altered and even created ad hoc by various and sundry wandering charismatic jackleg preachers. This view, however, was rooted more in the 18th-century romanticism of J. G. Herder<sup>24</sup> than in an understanding of how religious tradition was handled in 1st-century Judaism. As O. Cullmann, B. Gerhardsson, H. Riesenfeld and R. Riesner have demonstrated,<sup>25</sup> the Judaism of the period treated such traditions very carefully. The rabbinic traditions, specifically, use technical terms that show the care with which they were transmitted. Although they were not written until the 2nd century or later and, as we shall see, although they differ in important respects from the Gospel traditions, they exhibit terminological parallels with NT usage that are highly significant. The parallels are too precise to be coincidental, and in all likelihood they derive from a common root in pre-Christian Judaism. For the (later) rabbis hardly borrowed from the Christians, and the 1st-century Christian texts could not, of course, have borrowed from the subsequent rabbinic materials.

The NT writers in numerous passages applied to apostolic traditions the same technical terminology found in rabbinic Judaism for "delivering," "receiving," "learning," "holding," "keeping," and "guarding," the traditioned "teaching."<sup>26</sup> The use of these terms may be illustrated by the following passages from the NT letters:

<sup>23</sup> On the use of Greek by many Palestinian Jews in the first century, cf. J. Sevestre, *Do You Know Greek?* (Leiden, 1968), 96-175; J. A. Fitzmyer, "Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.," *CBQ* 32 (1970), 501-31 = *ibid.*, A Wandering Aramean (Missoula, 1979), 29-56; M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2 vols; London 1974), 1. 58-100.

<sup>24</sup> J. G. Herder, *Christliche Schriften*, 1796, cited in W. G. Kummel, *The New Testament: the History . . . of its Problems* (Nashville, 1972), 79-83, 330.

<sup>25</sup> O. Cullmann, "The Tradition," *The Early Church* (London 1958), 55-99; B. Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadelphia 1979); H. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia 1970) 1-29; Riesner (n. 18).

<sup>26</sup> E.g., 1 Cor 11:2; 15:3; 2 Thess 3:6; 2 Tim 3:14; Tit 1:9; Rev 2:13, 24f.; Aboth 1:1, 3; Peah 2:6 ("receive," "deliver"); Matt 21:33; Mekilta on Exod 21:11 ("hear"); Matt 9:13; Sifre on Num 15:41 ("learn"); Matt 28:20; 1 Cor 11:2; 1 Tim 6:20; Sifre on Deut 11:32 ("keep"); cf. John 8:31. Cf. W. Bacher, *Die exegetische Terminologie der judi-*

You obeyed from the heart the type of teaching (τύπον διδαχῆς)  
To which you were committed (παρεδόθητε) . . .

Watch out for those creating dissensions and roadblocks  
Against the teaching (διδαχῆν) which you learned (ἐμάθετε)  
Rom 6:17; 16:17

I received (παρέλαβον) from the Lord  
That which I also delivered (παρέδωκα) to you.  
1 Cor 11:23

What things you learned (ἐμάθετε) and received (παρελάβετε)  
And heard and saw in me, do these things.

Phil 4:9

Therefore, as you received (παρελάβετε) Christ Jesus as Lord  
So walk in him. ..as you were taught (ἐδιδάχθητε) . . .

Watch out that no one makes a prey of you  
Through philosophy and empty deceit  
According to the tradition (παράδοσιν) of men. . .  
And not according to [the tradition] of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

Col 2:6-8

Stand firm and hold to (κρατεῖτε) the traditions (παραδόσεις)  
Which you were taught (ἐδιδάχθητε).

2 Thess 2:15

Anyone who goes too far and does not abide (παραδόσεις)  
In the teaching (ἐδιδάχθητε) of Christ  
Does not have God  
He who abides in the teaching  
This one has both the Father and the Son

2 John 9

Contend for the faith  
Once delivered (παραδοθείση) to the saints.

Jude 3

By their use of such technical terminology these NT writers, coming  
from three apostolic circles--Pauline, Johannine and Jacobean, both

*schon Traditionsliteratur* (2 vols in 1; Darmstadt, 1965), 1. 165f. and 2. 185 ("receive"); 1. 106f. and 2. 115 ("deliver"); 1. 189f. and 2. 219-24 ("hear"); 1. 94ff., cf. 199-202 and 2.96-100, cf. 2.34f. ("learn"); 1. 170 and 2.186f. ("keep"). Cf. K. H. Rengstorf, "mathetes," *TDNT* 4 (1967/1942), 434-50.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Cullmann (n. 25), 62f., 68, 74f.; C.F.D. Moule, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge, 1958) 89; E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia, 1971), 96 (GT: 146).

identified their tradition as "holy word" and also showed their concern for a careful and ordered transmission of it.

Rom 6:17, when compared with Rom 16:17, is quite revealing. It refers to a "type" of teaching that must have been common to Pauline and other apostolic circles since the Apostle can assume it had been taught to congregations in Rome, where he has never been. Furthermore, when Rom 16:17 is brought into consideration, this "type" is contrasted to teachings promulgated by another mission or missions, probably a judaizing-gnosticizing group that has given Paul trouble elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

The work and word of Jesus were an important albeit distinct part of this apostolic tradition transmitted to the churches. Luke (1:2ff.) used some of the same technical terms, speaking of eyewitnesses who "delivered (παρέδοσαν) to us" the things contained in his Gospel and about which his patron Theophilus has been instructed (κατεχήθης). Similarly, the amanuenses or co-worker-secretaries who composed the Gospel of John speak of the Evangelist, the beloved disciple, as an eyewitness and a member of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples.<sup>29</sup> "This is the disciple," they write, "who is witnessing concerning these things and who wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true." In the same connection it is not insignificant that those to whom Jesus entrusted his teachings are not called "preachers" (κήρυκες) but "pupils" (μαθηταί) and "apostles" (ἀπόστολοι), semi-technical terms for those who represent and mediate the teachings and instructions of their mentor or principal.<sup>30</sup>

From these and other observations it has become apparent to many scholars that the early form criticism was seriously flawed in its

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ellis, "Paul and his Opponents" (n. 17), 109. On Rom 6:17 as a specific understanding of the Christian faith in contrast to other aberrant understandings cf. E. Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1980) 181f. (GT: 171f.); F. Godet, *Epistle to the Romans* (New York 1883), 256f., 496 (FT: 2. 55f., 605). Otherwise: C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols; Edinburgh, 1979), I. 324. I now incline, with Cranfield and Donfried, to include Romans 16 in the letter to Rome even if Paul sent the letter, in modified forms, to other churches as well. Cf. K. P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate* (Minneapolis, 1977), 50-60; otherwise: T. W. Manson, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles* (Manchester UK, 1962), 225-41.

<sup>29</sup> John 19:35; 21:24f.; cf. 13:23; 18:15f.; 19:26f.; 20:1-10; 21:7, 20-23. Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London, 1976), 298-311; E. E. Ellis, "Background and Christianity of John's Gospel" *SWJT* 31 (1988). Pace S. S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Nashville, 1984), 80ff. and R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols; Garden City, NY, 1970), 1. CI-CII, who distinguish the Evangelist from the Beloved Disciple. On Jesus traditions in Paul's letters cf. E. E. Ellis, "Traditions in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 32 (1986) 481-502.

<sup>30</sup> On parallels with other rabbis and their disciples and other Jewish usage cf. Mark 2:18 = Luke 5:33; K. H. Rengstorff, 'ἀπόστολος,' 'μαθητής,' *TDNT* 1.413-33; 4. 431-55.

use of folk-tradition analogies to understand the earliest transmission of the Gospel traditions. While the practices reflected in the somewhat later rabbinic writings are not analogous in every respect, as we shall see below, they do provide, from the same culture and general time-frame, important insights for understanding the usage of Jesus and his apostles. It is not without significance that Jesus was known as a "rabbi," that is, a "teacher,"<sup>31</sup> a prophet-teacher to be sure but a teacher nonetheless. Those who passed on his message not only had their "teacher training" under a master rabbi but also continued his methods in their transmission of his word and story to others.<sup>32</sup>

A third fundamental axiom of classical form criticism is also historically doubtful, that is, that the geographical and chronological framework of the Gospels was wholly the creation of the traditioners and Evangelists. The Gospels are not chronologues, of course, and the Evangelists feel free, as did the Roman historian Suetonius, to organize their presentation on thematic or other lines. However, if C. H. Dodd's schematic framework of Jesus' ministry is not fully acceptable,<sup>33</sup> K. L. Schmidt's views are much less satisfactory.<sup>34</sup> Among other things Schmidt drew too sharp a dichotomy between editorial and traditional elements in the Gospels and did not recognize that the Evangelists' editorial arrangements--such as the journey to Jerusalem in Luke (9:51-19:44)--are often simply a reworking of received traditions.

If the classical form criticism built, in a number of respects, upon a poor foundation, is there a better explanation of the origin and formation of our Gospels?

### III

An acceptable reconstruction of the formation of the Gospels must take into account both 1st-century Jewish attitudes toward the

<sup>31</sup> Matt 23:8; John 1:38; 20:16. Cf. H. Shanks, "Is the Title Rabbi Anachronistic in the Gospels?" *JQR* 53 (1963) 343f.; M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2 vols; London, 1974), 1. 81f.; A. F. Zimmerman, *Die Urchristliche Lehrer* (Tubingen, 21988), 86-94. Of course, the term, "rabbi," does not have in the Gospels the same technical connotation of "ordained scripture-scholar" that it has in the later rabbinic writings (cf. M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and his Followers* [New York, 1981, <sup>1</sup>1968], 42-48), but the connotation of "biblical teacher" was clearly present in the 1st century. Jesus had this role and his instruction had more in common with rabbinic methods than is usually recognized (cf. E. E. Ellis, "Biblical Interpretation in the New Testament Church," *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (4 vols; ed. S. Safrai et al. [Assen and Philadelphia 1974-], 2. i (1988) 704-21.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Riesner (n. 25), 246-98, 408-87; Zimmermann (n. 31), 144-93.

<sup>33</sup> C. H. Dodd, "The Framework of the Gospel Narrative" (1932), *New Testament Studies* (New York, 1953) 1-11.

<sup>34</sup> K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (Darmstadt, 1964 [1919]).

transmission of religious traditions and the charismatic, prophetic character of the ministry of Jesus and of the primitive church. With respect to the former B. Gerhardsson's conception of a controlled transmission of Gospel traditions marked a clear advance beyond the earlier form criticism, but his analogy between the Gospels and rabbinic writings was unable to account for the kind of alteration and elaboration of traditions, uncharacteristic of the rabbis, that one observes even when comparing one Gospel with another. Indeed, the traditioners and Evangelists seem to handle Jesus' word with the same kind of freedom that they use with another type of "holy word," citations from OT scriptures. How is this free handling of their Lord's word to be understood? Their conduct in this respect is best explained, I believe, by a prophetic consciousness.

Jesus viewed himself<sup>35</sup> and was perceived by others<sup>36</sup> to be the bearer of the prophetic Spirit, and he promised the same Spirit to his followers.<sup>37</sup> Already in his earthly ministry the apostles were sent on their missions of teaching, healing and exorcisms in the role of prophets whether, as J. Jeremias has argued, the Spirit was already conferred on them<sup>38</sup> or, perhaps not very different, whether the endowment of the Spirit upon Jesus was active in their use of his name. It is clear in any case that the Gospel traditioners and the Evangelists included themselves among those who fulfilled a prophetic role in their perception of the "mysteries" of the kingdom of God,<sup>39</sup> in their preaching and persecution and in their writing as "wise men and scribes," that is, scripture teachers.<sup>40</sup>

The following two passages may serve to illustrate the prophetic status of those to whom Jesus entrusted his story and his teachings. The first is from the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5:11f.:

Blessed are you  
When . . . they persecute you . . . for my sake

<sup>35</sup> Matt 13:57 = Mark 6:4 = Luke 4:18, 24; 13:33f.; John 4:44; cf. Matt 12:28 = Luke 11:20.

<sup>36</sup> Mark 6:15; 8:28; cf. 8:11; 14:65 = Matt 26:67f. = Luke 22:63f.; 24:19.

<sup>37</sup> Matt 10:19f. = Mark 13:11 = Luke 21:15; 12:12; John 7:38f.; 14:17f., 26; 16:7; cf. Matt 3:11 = Mark 1:8 = Luke 3:16.

<sup>38</sup> J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London, 1971), 19. Cf. Matt 10:1; Mark 6:7, 30; Luke 9:1f.; 10:9, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Matt 13:11 = Luke 8:10. This Q tradition has a parallel in Mark 4:11. "To know mysteries" of God's purposes is a prophetic trait in apocalyptic Judaism, going back to Daniel. Cf. Ellis (n. 17), 57-62; Luke 10:23f. par.

<sup>40</sup> Matt 13:52. In Matt 23:34 "wise men and scribes" are apparently equivalent to "apostles" in Luke 11:49. "Wise man" is equivalent to "prophet" in Philo (*On the Giants* 5, 22; *idem, On the Unchangeableness of God* 1, 3).

Rejoice and exult (ἀγαλλιᾶσθε) . . .  
 For so they persecuted  
 The prophets who were before you.

The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to Jesus' disciples, that is, his "pupils" (οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ), a term that in Matthew often designates the Twelve but also may refer to a much larger body of people who sat under Christ's instruction.<sup>41</sup> The present pericope is directed to, or at least finds its fulfillment in, a narrower group of those who are sent to carry Jesus' message to others, that is, those who are apostles. It is in this context that they are essentially equated with earlier prophets, who also mediated God's word under persecution and martyrdom.<sup>42</sup> The term "exult" (ἀγαλλιᾶσθαι) is often used in early Christianity to characterize the exalted state of inspired prophetic exclamation.<sup>43</sup>

A second teaching, found in all three Synoptics and in sources underlying them, appears in the mission of the Twelve (Matthew), in instructions to disciples (Luke)<sup>44</sup> and in the apocalyptic discourse on the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the age (Mark, Luke):

When they bring you [to trial] . . .  
 Say whatever is given you in that hour  
 For it is not you who speak  
 But the Holy Spirit

Mark 13:11

The Lukan form is somewhat different: 'I will give you a mouth and wisdom' (Luke 21:15, στόμα καὶ σοφίαν). This is perhaps to underscore an allusion to the persecuted apostolic witnesses in Acts, especially Stephen.<sup>45</sup>

These passages point to the prophetic credentials of those disciples of Jesus who transmit his word to others. They are included in the Gospels because *inter alia* the traditioners and Evangelists regarded themselves as also having such credentials. This best explains their boldness and confidence in adapting and applying OT texts to Jesus as well as in contemporizing Jesus' words to their own situation.

A brief example may illustrate one way in which they do this.

Mark 8:34 reads

<sup>41</sup> E.g., Matt 10:1; 11:1; 20:17. The qualified "twelve disciples" presupposes that there were more. Cf. Luke 10:39; 19:37; John 4:1; 6:60-67; 1 Cor 15:6; K. H. Rengstorf, 'μαθητής,' *TDNT* 4 (1967/1942) 450-53.

<sup>42</sup> On the prophet as martyr cf. G. Friedrich, 'προφήτης,' *TDNT* 6 (1968) 834f.

<sup>43</sup> Luke 1:46f.; 10:21; John 8:56; Acts 2:26, 30f.; Rev 19:7; cf. 1 Pet 1:6; Ignatius, Eph 9:2, Mag 1:1, Phld. preface, cf. 7:1f.; Shepherd of Hermas, Mandates 5, 1, 2; 5, 2, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Matt 10:19f.; Luke 12:11f.

<sup>45</sup> Acts 6:3, 10; 15:7; cf. Acts 3:18, 21; 4:24f.

If anyone would come after me  
 Let him deny himself  
 And take up his cross  
 And follow me

In Jesus' earthly ministry this invitation had one meaning and one only: 'Come and die with me in Jerusalem.' Luke (9:23) adds a single word to this saying:

And take up his cross *daily*

By this addition Luke or better, the exalted Lord through his prophet, universalizes the invitation. In effect he says, "No one died with Jesus at Jerusalem. But the demand remains, and all Christ's followers can in their daily lives and in their deaths follow him, carrying whatever cross that may be their lot." In this way Luke brings Christ's teaching into the present situation of his hearers. Given the Evangelists' prophetic credentials, such elaborations and con temporizations are no less an authentic word of Jesus than the words he spoke in his earthly ministry.

Ordinarily oracles of the risen Lord, such as one finds in Revelation 2-3, are not incorporated into the Gospel traditions. But there are a few instances in which this appears to have occurred.<sup>46</sup> If so, they also are no less authentic teachings of Jesus.<sup>47</sup> As an example of this, one may cite Matt 18:20:

Where two or three are gathered in my name  
 There am I in their midst

It is difficult, though perhaps not impossible,<sup>48</sup> to conceive of an extended presence of the earthly Jesus. More likely this is the exalted Lord's presence via the Holy Spirit in the corporate body of believers.

There are few if any historical or literary grounds, however, to suppose that the Gospel traditioners created events in Jesus' life.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Luke 11:49-52 = Matt 23:34-36. In Luke the passage is a quotation introduced by the formula, "the Wisdom of God said," but in Matthew it is simply a saying of Jesus. "Wisdom of God" is a designation for the exalted Christ in I Cor 1:24 and a title for him in 2nd-century texts (Justin, Dialogue 38:2; 61:1; 100:4; Clement of Alexandria, Exhortation 8). As the earliest use of this rare title, Luke 11:49 probably introduces a prophetic saying from the exalted Lord. Cf. E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids 1983) 171-74.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. G. F. Hawthorne, "The Role of Christian Prophets in the Gospel Tradition," *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament. Essays in Honor of E. E. Ellis* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne with O. Betz; Grand Rapids and Tübingen, 1987), 119-33.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Luke 9:47; John 1:48; 2 Kgs 5:25f.

Assertions to this effect almost always represent a failure to understand the care and historical concern with which the Gospel traditions transmitted the story of Jesus. If a proper historical critical method is followed, proper presuppositions observed and the practices of 1st-century religious Judaism understood, the Gospels of the NT will be found to be a reliable presentation and faithful portrait of the teachings and acts of the preresurrection mission of Jesus.

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