

INTRODUCTION

Requisites for research on Jesus' life

Historical criticism has carried out painstaking work on the literary sources of Jesus' history. Assuredly it has not lacked its reward. Little may have been settled, but progress say since Strauss's *Leben Jesu* (1835) has been extensive and unmistakable.

There seems to be a less substantial gain to record in the primary task of making use of the sources for historical purposes.

In individual particulars these last decades are, of course, the period which, with its variety of fresh stimuli, has richly augmented our scholarly resources. Many are the transmitted sayings of Jesus that have come closer to being understood, and many the standpoints dominating the Gospels that have been more clearly opened up for us through our knowledge of the historical background.

But the two decisive questions are still these: What do we know of Jesus' life? and—a question with its own independent importance—What do we know of the history of the oldest views and representations of Jesus' life? The two questions can also be subsumed in one: How do we manage to dissect the Gospel tradition in these two directions: how do we separate what belongs properly to Jesus from what is the material of the primitive community?

Coming to the recent literature on Jesus' life (in the widest sense) with these questions in mind, one feels the onset of a sense of disappointment. Looked at more closely, this impression is seen to be in part the consequence of the unusual difficulties that inevitably attach to the subject itself; and in part to be attributable to the predominance of literary work on the sources, with its frequent obscuring of our awareness about the latest and chiefest undertakings of research. But in substantial measure it also stems from a defective critical method.

This seems to become obvious specifically at three points.

First of all, it is indeed an axiom of historical criticism in general that what we have before us is actually just a later narrator's conception of Jesus' life and that this conception is not identical with the thing itself. But the *axiom exercises much too little influence*. As a rule it is remembered only when certain things shock us; which means essentially (1) where we find strictly miraculous features, (2) where there are manifest contradictions in the same source, and (3) where one report clashes with another. Where such shocks do not occur we feel, without going very deeply into it, that we are on firm ground in the life of Jesus itself, that we are through with criticism when by dint of work on the sources and reflexions on the subject we have arrived at the oldest account.

There is no clarity of principle in this. I should never for an instant lose sight of my awareness that I have before me descriptions, the authors of which are later Christians, be they never so early—Christians who could only look at the life of Jesus with the eyes of their own time and who described it on the basis of the belief of the community, with all the viewpoints of the community, and with the needs of the community in mind. For there is no sure means of *straightforwardly* determining the part played in the accounts by the later view—sometimes a view with a variety of layers.

A second point is very closely bound up with this one. *We are in too great a hurry to leave the terrain of the evangelists' accounts*. We urgently want to utilise it for the history of Jesus itself. In order to do so features that cannot be credited are cut out and the meaning is worked out in such a way as to become historically serviceable; that is to say, *something which was not in the writer's mind is substituted for the account and represented as its historical content*. There is extremely little sensitivity to the tremendous precariousness of this procedure; but above all no questions are asked about whether the characteristic life which belongs to the account itself is eliminated by it. Our first task must always be only that of thoroughly illuminating the accounts on the basis of their own spirit and of asking what the narrator in his own time intended

to say to his readers; and this work must be carried out to its conclusion and made the basis of criticism.

Thirdly, psychology is to be taken into account. By no means do I wish to speak here only of researchers—of whom there are many in different camps—who exhibit for every Gospel story such a precise knowledge of the historical circumstances and, specifically, such an intimacy with the inner life of Jesus that one might well doubt whether one is listening to a confidant of Jesus or reading a novel. I am also thinking about the fortunately numerous scholars who demonstrate more tact and reserve in this.

Psychology is all very well if it is a question of producing the necessary connection between fixed points or if its service is exploratory, where there is a strict check on the possibilities and necessities deriving from established facts or even, for the matter of that, from supposed facts. But scientifically psychology fails to carry conviction if the crucial points are not themselves determined or if there is a facile proffering of what may well be in itself conceivable as if it were already the real thing.

And this is the malady to which we must here allude—let us not dignify it with the euphemism “historical imagination”. *The scientific study of the life of Jesus is suffering from psychological “suppositionitis”* which amounts to a sort of historical guesswork. For this reason interpretations to suit every taste proliferate. The number of arbitrary psychological interpretations in literature of facts, words and contexts in the Gospels is legion. Nor is it simply a matter of harmless superfluities. These interpretations at the same time form the basis for important structures of thought; and how often do people think that the task of criticism has already been discharged by playing tuneful psychological variations on a given factual theme!

I am by no means asserting that all work in this direction has been entirely useless, but it seems to me to be an urgent necessity that we should have done with subjective judgements. The psychological treatment of facts is permissible only when we know that they are indeed facts and even then we must still call a supposition a supposition. Otherwise there is a blunting of our awareness that scholarship finds value not in emotive

descriptions which afford the reader pleasure but only in strict accuracy and certainty of knowledge; otherwise we will forget that we must at least always be *striving* for these things and that it is better to have a little real knowledge, whether positive or "negative", than a great assortment of spurious knowledge.

These reflections will appear somewhat presumptuous to the well-disposed, and even more to the ill-disposed, reader as I have done nothing to exemplify these maladies of criticism; and they will seem pointless so long as I do not say what observational basis I have for making these pronouncements. Let my readers then consider my remarks to be a sort of motto which I should like to prefix to the investigations which follow. To be sure those who read them will not find here by a long way everything I think I can offer by way of proof, but I hope that from a series of examples they will be able to see what my meaning is and that those in essential agreement with the investigation will lend the seal of their approval to the motto.

The subject and the sources, with special reference to Mark

The question of the messianic self-consciousness of Jesus which is exercising modern scholarship is far from the thoughts of the Gospel narrators; indeed for them it simply does not exist at all. From the beginning of his life or of his work, from his birth or his baptism, Jesus for them *is* objectively the Messiah. This naturally implies a corresponding consciousness, but the idea of this consciousness and of its genesis is not present. It would be a complete misunderstanding of the mind of these writers to presuppose that they had any ideas about the development of this consciousness.

On the other hand, the evangelists do offer us certain data relevant to the other question of *when Jesus was acknowledged as Messiah or when he made himself known as such*. If scholarship can reach the stage of making any certain pronouncements about Jesus' messianic consciousness from this starting-point, then it must manifestly be by way of inferences.

My intention in the following investigation is to subject these allegations, together with whatever else is relevant to them, to

an examination. This, of course, is only a very provisional and inexact paraphrase of my intentions.

In this undertaking we must refer to all four Gospels. I would add to them the older extra-canonical Gospels of which we have some fragments, were it not possible to say at once that for the problem under consideration these have nothing worth mentioning to offer. The canonical Gospels must be considered separately. This is important.

With the great majority of modern critics I share the opinion that our Gospel of Mark, or something extremely like it, lies behind the two other synoptics. I naturally do not venture in making this assumption to solve *every* individual literary problem posed by the parallel portions of the three Gospels; but despite continued contradiction of it, the main point seems to me to be so well established that we may use it as the basis for new ventures.¹

If this thesis is correct and if the fourth Gospel must remain out of account as a completely secondary picture, then the whole burden of responsibility falls almost entirely on Mark in regard to all questions touching the authentic story of Jesus and in particular *the course and development of his life*. The reliability or unreliability of Mark's tradition in this connection is essentially decisive for the reliability or otherwise of the Gospel tradition as a whole. Mark must therefore stand in the forefront of our investigation.

Matthew and Luke, however, are not on this account valueless even where they themselves depend on Mark, nor of course is John. To hold them valueless can be the approach only of those for whom the question of the most primitive development of the *interpretation* of the life of Jesus gets lost to view behind the question of the real life of Jesus.

I am making no presupposition about the antiquity of Mark. There can be no talk as yet of a *proof* that it was written before A.D. 70. On the other hand, the usual arguments are also

¹ cf. Wernle, *Die synoptische Frage*, 1899, which presents an excellent summary of the results of standard critical works, besides making an independent contribution to many questions; though, of course, it is not free of some audacious judgements.

hardly sufficient really to guarantee a later date. Indeed researchers with essentially the same presuppositions now champion this view and now the other.

In the same way, however, I am also leaving completely open the question of the relationship of the Gospel to Peter. In an investigation of the kind we are undertaking the intrusion of such problems could only have a harmful effect. Everything to do with the internal circumstances of the Gospel must first be explored on its own account. Only afterwards can we ask whether the result favours the tradition of a Petrine basis for the Gospel or not.

As against this another presupposition must indeed be made: namely that the Markan narratives are something essentially other than records of Jesus' life taken down on the spot. This is to be sure a platitude, yet, on the other hand, there is nothing platitudinous about it when one sees that in practice criticism again mostly makes meagre use of this theoretically uncontested thesis.

At best Mark wrote something like thirty years after the events, and at best gave a free reproduction in *part* of his book of what an eyewitness had reported to him of his reminiscences, long enough before they were written down. It will suffice to refer to the doublet in the feeding stories (ch. 6 and ch. 8) to prove that he does not everywhere follow this eyewitness, if indeed he follows him at all. Everyone who knows anything about human tradition must admit that even when we make these favourable assumptions the faithfulness and exactness of individual reports becomes somewhat uncertain. If, on the other hand, one looks at how the critics go on drawing quite assured conclusions from the most inconsiderable and characterless details and from the position of sentences and phrases in the narrative, or from the appearance or absence of individual words or concepts, one should by rights believe in a miraculous process of transmission.

Yet another consideration is more to the point here and must be compelling at least for all those who recognise only historical standards in Gospel research. Mark actually has a large share of unhistorical narratives in his Gospel. No critical theologian

believes his report on the baptism of Jesus, the raising of Jairus's daughter, the miraculous feedings, the walking of Jesus on the water, the transfiguration, or the conversation of the angel with the women at the tomb, in the sense in which he records them. If the theologian sees facts *behind* such information he is nevertheless compelled to grant that they have undergone a very substantial transformation and distortion, whether in the mind of Mark or otherwise.

Can this knowledge have no consequences for the rest of the Gospel's contents? A real distrust of concrete portions of the record naturally cannot have its basis here, nor should this lead to its being expressed. But we are certainly warned forcefully by the Gospel itself against a too ready confidence and from the start are challenged to check its contents rigorously. It is not a matter of indifference whether this is or is not clearly grasped by those coming to the Gospel. To bring a pinch of vigilance and scepticism to it is not to indulge a prejudice but to follow a clear hint from the Gospel itself.