

The Irresponsibility of New Testament Scholarship in the Twentieth Century

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A brilliant young German New Testament scholar said to me recently in an e-mail message, "What is more, scarcely anything new can ever be said; mostly it is the arrangement of well-known thoughts from a new point of view that is helpful and releases new impulses. Really new thoughts are accordingly received with great scepticism. So I often ask myself what we are actually doing." That on the one hand, and the spurious excitement of the "Honest to Jesus!" movement, publicising the work of the Jesus Seminar, on the other hand. The Jesus Seminar meets several times a year in the United States and sets itself to decide by vote the likely authenticity of the sayings of Jesus and of events in the Acts of the Apostles. It was founded by Robert Funk. His book, *Honest to Jesus*, aims "to set Jesus free", to "demote Jesus", and to "declare the New Testament a highly uneven and biased record of various early attempts to invent Christianity." The show will be on the road in the United Kingdom when Funk visits the country from the end of March AD 2000 to the beginning of May to hold seminars and rallies. It seems that close detailed scholarship by individuals dealing with the New Testament is regarded as boring and that the only excitement is to be gained by joining with others and getting Bishop Spong to puff your book, trying to shock the public in echo of Bishop John Robinson.

This at the end of a century when more Jewish material contemporary with the New Testament has been published than in any previous century. The rich finds at Qumran have made scarcely a whit of difference to New Testament scholarship.

What went wrong? When scholarship concerning a body of material like the New Testament is found to be boring we have to ask how we got to this situation. Could it be that Gresham's law that bad money drives out good applies in scholarship as well?

The Jesus Seminar is only one of the many attempts to apply the

procedures of democracy to New Testament scholarship. You gather together a body of “experts” on the subject and you decide the “consensus” by means of a vote. James M. Robinson of Claremont has gathered together a team to produce an edition of Q, the hypothetical source represented by the material common to Matthew and Luke that is not in Mark. These scholars have not realised that when an assembly takes a vote on a number of issues, although every decision will be taken by a majority vote, it is quite possible that the majority will vote in the minority in a majority of cases. [G.E.M. Anscombe, “On Frustration of the Majority by Fulfilment of the Majority’s Will,” *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*, Vol. Three, *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp. 123–129.] Further, as anyone who has acted as member of a board of examiners knows, the marks and the opinions of those who hold an extreme position count for more than the marks and opinions of those who are nearer to the mean. Accordingly, the scholars who play the game according to these rules are hiding behind majority decisions that they are quite likely to disagree with. But we, the audience, are not supposed to know that, for the aim of the exercise is to lay down the line which students and the interested laity are supposed to toe. Finally, the members of these groups select themselves; they are not elected by anyone, although they usually hold paid positions in universities to which they have been appointed by their peers. They have also usually completed doctorates, for which they were well advised not to step out of line.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars working on the New Testament were offered a range of choices between quite different positions. In each case some powerful figures ensured that the whole of scholarly opinion swung behind one of those choices, and the other choice was almost lost to sight. I think that the wrong choice was made in each case. Perhaps that series of wrong choices has landed New Testament scholarship in the state it is in.

The choices had to do with eight historical questions on which decisions had to be made: the Synoptic Problem, christology, the messianic secret, the nature of the Kingdom preached by Jesus, the authenticity of the writings contained in the Pauline corpus, Paul’s christology, the genesis of the revelatory material in the Fourth Gospel, and the evaluation of the great fourth-century uncial manuscripts of the New Testament. When the Qumran material came to light and was slowly published, the fact that the new evidence counted on the other side in each of the eight cases was ignored or swept aside. Any disparity between the view of Judaism according to Qumran and the

ruling view of the New Testament Judaism we call Christianity was even counted in favour of the ruling view.

The accepted solution to the Synoptic Problem was firmly established and consolidated by Eichhorn at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. His view was even superior to the views of his followers, because he took account of the fact that parallel passages in two or three of the Synoptic Gospels might differ from one another because they were each different translations of a common Aramaic or Hebrew original. That complication has long dropped out of sight. But he argued that Matthew and Luke used Mark and a common source that we call Q. The only opponents argued that our first three gospels were made out of each other. Perhaps Luke was an edition of Matthew while Mark was an epitome of Matthew and Luke. Or Mark used Matthew, and Luke used Matthew and Mark. Or Matthew and Luke used Mark, and Luke also used Matthew. The few outsiders, like Schleiermacher, who dared to wonder whether these supposed "authors" of our Gospels were not too much like scholars sitting in their studies to be entirely credible, were ignored. Nobody stopped to ask whether the supposed editorial freedom exercised by each of these pretended "authors" would not have cut across their deeply held views (views that could well have lead to their martyrdom) that the sources they were "editing" with great freedom were sacred. These scholars did not even consider the possibility that the putting together of our four Gospels took place in isolated monasteries which often had to live in extreme danger of persecution. These scholars "knew" that monasticism was a third or fourth century invention. Even the discovery of the ruins of the Qumran community and their hidden library caves has not shaken their simple faith.

The supporters of Q do not stop to wonder why the verses from this alleged single "source" are embedded in different positions in the many small fixed collections of sayings in Matthew, Luke, the Didache, Justin Martyr, and the Gospel of Thomas. Is it credible that the compilers of these collections all dismembered a single fixed collection we call Q? The protests of Joachim Jeremias and Charles Kingsley Barrett against this nonsensical theory have rarely been noticed and have never been answered.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the scholarly community was faced with a choice between two competing stories about the development of the christology of the New Testament. Hermann Gunkel argued that there was already in existence in Judaism a christology about the divine revealer, a divine-human act, and

sacraments. Already there existed in Jewish-syncretistic circles a belief in the death and resurrection of Christ. We have to reconstruct this Judaism out of the New Testament.

Wilhelm Bousset under the influence of Harnack and his predecessors argued that Christianity developed from a Jewish apocalyptic movement into a cult of Christ under the influence of Hellenism. The drawing of Jesus into the centre of a cult of a believing congregation, the astonishing doubling of the object of worship, he argued, was only conceivable in an environment in which the Old Testament monotheism no longer held unconditional absolute sway. Jesus was given the title *Lord*, a title borrowed from Syria and Egypt, according to Bousset.

With predictable lack of discernment, the scholars chose to follow Bousset, who wrote a learned monograph, rather than Gunkel, who threw off his ideas in a brilliant pamphlet. The Qumran scrolls have given us a figure elevated to the highest position on a heavenly throne, than whom none is greater, but there are learned ways of avoiding any conclusions about Judaism that might be drawn from that.

The Jesus Seminar is following a host of recent writers in assuming that Jesus did not think he was Messiah. Again, they are all making the wrong choice between two hypotheses on offer at the start of the twentieth century.

It was agreed that Jesus did not openly proclaim that he was the Messiah. One group of scholars then argued that he kept his beliefs secret, only disclosing them at the end to the disciples; or that he and his disciples held that he was Messiah-elect, waiting for the Father to reveal him. Another group of scholars, led by William Wrede, argued that Jesus the prophet was turned into the Messiah by his followers long after his death. The early Christians created a fiction in order to reconcile Jesus' silence with the legendary accounts of his momentary epiphanies as Son of God, such as the Transfiguration. The fiction was that Jesus imposed on his disciples a ban against telling the messianic secret. The proof that this was a fiction was supposedly discovered in the impossible injunction to secrecy to the parents of the twelve-year-old girl who was raised from the dead when Jesus had been followed there by a large crowd who had witnessed the healing of the woman with the issue of blood. This implausible fiction was supposed to have been invented by Mark.

The sophisticated theory about Mark is unlikely. The more likely view is that Jesus did not say he was the Messiah. In this, he was following the practice of the numerous other figures at the time who

held that they were the Messiah. Many people saw in Jesus the Messiah; they reported his baptism by John the Baptist as the baptism of the Messiah or his lonely mountain-top vigil as the Transfiguration. Mark ingeniously put together the story of the woman with the issue of blood and the raising of the little girl, unwittingly providing grist for Wrede's mill. In any case, the call for silence was probably an implicit command that silence should be kept until the prayers and sacrifices in the Temple had been completed. The upshot is that the silence of Jesus about his messiahship was the inevitable practice to be followed by anyone who thought he was indeed the Messiah.

Why else was Jesus crucified than as a messianic pretender? Do these scholars think that the superscription on the cross, *King of the Jews*, was a fiction?

At the end of the nineteenth century Johannes Weiss argued that the preaching of the Kingdom of God as soon to come was central to Jesus' teaching. Harnack in his influential open lectures at the University of Berlin at the turn of the century opposed to that the view that Jesus, by his healing and forgiving sin, brought the Kingdom, so transforming the older notion into a conception of the Kingdom of God as the power that works inwardly. Our C.H.Dodd learnt his ideas about "realized eschatology" in Berlin in the early years of the century. This view is based on two verses in the Gospels: "If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then the Kingdom has come upon you" (Matt 12.28; Luke 11.20) and "The Kingdom is not here nor there, but within you" (Luke 17.21). These scholars ignore the little word *if* in the first saying, the clear meaning of the preposition translated *within* in the second—it means *within your grasp*—and the common ellipse whereby Kingdom stands for the judgment of the Kingdom or the promise of the Kingdom. The parables, which Jesus taught in order to rouse people to be ready for the day of judgment and the coming of the Kingdom, were interpreted as stories about the present Kingdom. The scholars who taught "realized eschatology" did not believe in the incarnation of the Son of God. Their faith was in some hidden cosmic force that Jesus enabled people to tap.

The study of the Pauline corpus occupies a strange position in biblical scholarship. Every other book of the Bible, except those attributed to Paul, is regarded as a compilation of ancient traditions. There are no "authors"; at the best "schools". Perhaps Mark was an author, they say, although it is much more likely that the collection of disparate material we call *Mark* was a compilation from ancient sources made in a monastery of St Mark. Luke was the author of Luke-Acts, but he was a compiler of sources rather than a creative writer like

Gibbon or Niebuhr or Mommsen. No Old Testament writing; no Jewish writing of the century or two before or the century or two after the birth of Christ was the work of someone we would recognize as an author. But, they say, Paul is different. Here the older hypotheses of Bruno Bauer or Christian Hermann Weisse or the members of the Dutch school that the Pauline letters were composite have been laughed out of court. The only question is how small or how large is the extent of the genuine letters of Paul of Tarsus within the corpus that bears his name. The result is a theology of Paul that is at best a complicated internal and external dialogue and at worst a mess. But that is scholarship, ye ken.

These scholars do, however, claim to have discovered one central and novel Pauline thought, his belief that to be a Christian was to be “in Christ” in the way the roots of a plant are “in” the soil or in the way the leaves of a plant are “in” the air. “Christ” was seen as a cosmic “man” within which Christians lived. He is the corporate new humanity. This reading of the evidence was powerfully influenced by Comte’s new religion of humanity, an atheistic construction that was found to be very attractive by Christians threatened by the new views of science. Johannes Weiss showed that the reading of such phrases as “If any man is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5.17) in this sense was highly unlikely. The little word *in* with a singular name or personal pronoun never means *in* in a local sense. Nobody would extract an “in Beelzebub” theology from the Pharisaic charge that Jesus cast out demons in the prince of demons; *in* clearly means *by*. No one would think that Paul meant that the Christians, who greeted the fact that had stopped persecuting them, glorified God *in Paul*, as though Paul were a cosmic realm into which they were incorporated; “they glorified God in me” of course means “they glorified God because of me *or* for me” (Gal 1.24). Generations of faithful Christians have been mystified by preachers telling them that they must live in Christ, and they have less and less often been told what Christ has done, and is doing, for them.

Scholars were presented with an extraordinary far-ranging view of the Fourth Gospel by Bultmann’s magisterial war-time commentary. Bultmann’s theory had three parts. He argued that a great deal of the distinctive revelatory discourses of John’s Gospel came from sources written down before Jesus began to preach. He argued that the material was combined with traditions about Jesus by a towering theologian who constructed a vision of Jesus as cosmic redeemer. He argued that this great synthesis was domesticated by an ecclesiastical redactor who brought Johannine Christianity into the church by adding references to

traditional Jewish eschatology and to the sacraments. Bultmann's successors all but ignored the first part of the thesis, in which Bultmann had drawn heavily on the Odes of Solomon and the Mandaean writings to prove his case. All attention was concentrated on Parts Two and Three. Neither Bultmann nor his followers have paid attention to the evidence of the textual variants which shows that such features as the myth of the Beloved Disciple or the demonisation of The Jews was due to scribes rather than to editors. It might have been expected that the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which revealed a Judaism deeply imbued with the ethical dualism of light and darkness, would have led to a revaluation of the distinctive revelatory discourse material. Gunkel's insight has been forgotten, even when new evidence confirmed his hunches. The revelatory discourses are likely to belong as a whole to a Judaism that wrote down visions of the exalted Son of Man long before Jesus was born.

In the nineteenth century scholars were offered a choice between the view that the great fourth-century manuscripts of the New Testament we know as Aleph and B (the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus) were pure transcripts of the earliest copies of the New Testament writings and the view that they represented a skilful edition made by scholars who were charged with the task of standardizing the text of the New Testament in face of the threatening chaos produced by the countless variants between individual manuscripts. Most scholars plumped for the first view, and their decision seemed to be supported by the later discovery of papyri copies of individual books and collections of books, the text of which was closer to the two great fourth century manuscripts than to any others. But all that the papyri demonstrated was that the fourth century editors were good at their job. However, they clearly made mistakes, and these mistakes give us a clue to the type of rules they used in their editorial work. The scholars who chose to believe that the great uncials were pure copies of the originals were relieved of the difficult business of thinking about the mass of variants on offer. They could safely ignore the mass of later minuscule manuscripts as later corruptions, forgetting that these same papyri often threw up evidence of readings which had hitherto only been found in the twelfth century or later. These scholars themselves had the same rules as their fourth-century predecessors, which reinforced their preference for these witnesses. They too followed the rule *Prefer the harder reading*, forgetting the corollary, *unless it is too hard* and the rule *Prefer the shorter reading*, forgetting the corollary, *unless you prefer the longer*. Textual criticism became regarded as a technical subject that most scholars left to the "experts"

who provided them with ready-made answers. They forgot that the evidence of the variants was part of the evidence upon which they were trying to base a judgment as to the likely meaning of the passage under consideration.

The cumulative effect of these eight disastrous choices made by the majority of scholars in the twentieth century and passed on, year after year, to their students, has been to take the savour out of New Testament scholarship. When tremendous energy has had to be expended to refine and elaborate over-simplified theories, the result is bound to be tedium. For example, in any one paragraph of the Synoptic Gospels where common material is being presented, there are literally hundreds of differences between the three texts, if one takes account of the textual variants as well as the differences between our edited versions of the Greek. If Matthew and Luke were editing our Greek Mark, or if Mark was epitomising our Greek Matthew and Luke, we would have to explain why the later editor made each of the hundreds of small alterations. What labour. If, however, we have three different translations of a common Hebrew or Aramaic source, each of which has been subject to the normal process of being passed on with the addition of new material, perhaps, and with the ever-present possibility of scribal corruption, our task of interpretation is at once both more interesting and more plausible. Or, to take another example, if the passage in Paul we are examining is not from his pen alone, but consists of words he wrote which have been enlarged by the addition of collections of Jewish sayings, and which have in turn been subjected to the normal corruption that arose as one scribe after another copied the passage, we are freed from the impossible task of constructing a consistent Paul and freed to recognize the rich and varied history of the material before us.

If we persist in working our wood against the grain, we blunt our tools and try our tempers. If we work *with* the grain, all goes smoothly and we retain our pride in our work. The guild of twentieth-century New Testament scholars is full of frightened men and women who spend their time looking over their shoulders at the giants to see which way they should go. They have lost all excitement at their search, and no longer expect to find anything new and fresh. Or else they turn to the benighted general public, who are frankly mystified by the results of their labours, and go on the road in order to convince them that only they are being honest to Jesus.