I BELIEVE IN THE BIBLICAL–HISTORICAL JESUS

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Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), a German theologian, held that we do not know much about the historical Jesus. All ideas of supernatural nature in the Gospels, such as real incarnation, virgin birth, miracles and bodily–resurrection, are *ipso facto* unhistorical but mythological, Bultmann argued. Further, the Synoptic Gospels give such a theological picture of Jesus that they cannot be historical. The historical Jesus is nearly lost from sight behind the "geschichtliche" Christ of the church's faith. But this, according to Bultmann, is no loss for theology, for faith cannot rest upon the security of historical research. [1]

However, not all NT students want to follow up such a radical scepticism of the Gospels. Not all agree that "quest of the historical Jesus" is of less importance. [2] It is nevertheless a matter of fact that a variety of Jesus–studies have strongly been influenced by principles drawn up by the German theologian J. S. Semler (1725–1791), often called the father of Biblical criticism. A main thesis in Semler's theology was that "The Word of God" is different from "The Word of Scripture". This led Semler to regard the inspiration of all Scripture a problem. He was opposing the trustworthiness of miracles and the supernatural in Scripture. No arguments were left for treating the Bible different from any other human book. [3]

In other words, a principle for seeking a canon in the canon had been established that plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions. A theological publication from 1970 for example, reveals this with high amount of clarity. [4] The critical principle of trying to find a "word", "tradition", a gospel or a faith, that is behind and more original than the word of Scripture is followed up in much of the influential theology today. In other words, is it not possible to find a Jesus that is more trustworthy than the Jesus of the evangelists?

Scholars – a *priori* – having chosen a standard of how to interpret, for example the Gospels in search for "genuine tradition", are led into a practice of selection and subtraction of the gospel–material that has all the marks of being subjective. Hans Kung, a Catholic theologian, and one of the writers in "Kanon" (see footnote 4), follows a radical critical method of the NT material. However, taking up the question of "a canon in the canon", he claims that those who follow such a hermeneutical principle want to be more biblical than the Bible, more new testamently than the NT, more evangelical than the gospel, and even more Pauline than Paul. The true Paul is the entire Paul, and the true NT is the entire NT,

Kung holds. The bold program becomes "subjective arbitrariness". [5] The outspoken John A. T. Robinson has also been challenging the validity of modern NT studies. He requests that the scholars be more concerned to call a thesis a thesis and a theory a theory, not objective findings. One example reveals the subjectivity Robinson is pointing out. One scholar regards, for example, the beloved disciple of Jesus to be John the apostle, but not the author of the fourth gospel (R. E. Brown), while another says the beloved disciple is the author of the fourth gospel, but not John the apostle; (O. Cullmann).

The danger of "subjective arbitrariness", to use Kung's expression, is not easy to avoid when a study of the historical Jesus tends to be more evangelical than the gospels. Because to distinguish the historical Jesus from the Jesus of the evangelists will, as the history of investigation reveals, open the field for a variety of Jesus–models. And the various results are sometimes so different that it is hard to understand that the scholars speak about the same Jesus.

We will in this article not only discuss some of the theoretical principles being used in NT scholarship, but we will also enter into a discussion of two of the christological dogmas we confess, namely, the birth of Jesus from a virgin, and his resurrection. We want to see how these dogmas are being treated in some part of NT scholarship.

It has been a general accepted theory that the Gospel of Mark represents the oldest Jesus–tradition, even though several scholars today are less dogmatic on this point. The strongest witnesses in the Old Church held that Matthew is older than Mark.

W.G. Kummel, also a German, belongs to those who find "no knowledge of the historical sequence of events underlying this (Mark's) presentation of Jesus' activity". A basic theological idea was binding the gospel together. One cannot draw historical conclusions of any kind from the sequence and arrangement of the individual texts in the context of the gospels at all, he argues. An oral tradition behind the gospels was being shaped and reshaped in the context of the proclamation and teaching of the Christian community. Therefore may we not simply calculate that the transmitted stories and sayings correspond to the historical actuality of Jesus' life and teachings. Thus, according to Kummel, the possibility of giving a historically reliable picture of Jesus' life and teaching is called into question. [7].

We see that the historicity in Mark as well as in the other gospels is being questioned. This also relates to the historicity of the birth of Jesus as it is reported in the nativity stories as found in Matt 1–2 and Luke 1–2. Kummel regards this material to be younger than much of the other material in Mt and in Lk. [8] In characterizing this material, Kummel speaks about the conception that grew up that Jesus was born of a human mother without the assistance of a man, and the idea that Jesus was begotten without a father. The attempts to explain the birth of Jesus are slightly attested in NT, says Kummel: "because people at first apparently did not everywhere feel the need to develop further ideas at all about Jesus' essential sonship to God". [9]

W. Pannenberg, also German, calls the nativity stories, "legends". The story of the virgin birth bears all the marks of a legend that has been constructed out of an etiological interest. Theology, Pannenberg says, cannot maintain the idea of Jesus' virgin birth as a miraculous fact to be postulated at the origin of his (Jesus) earthly life. To that extent it is problematic that the virgin birth found entry into

the Apostles' Creed, he says. [10]

That the material in Matt 1–2 and Luke 1–2 is of a later date than other material in the gospels is not an obvious theory. I. H. Marshall (Scotland) comes to the conclusion that form and style in for example Luke 1–2 have character of being Hebrew–Aramaic, and thus not necessarily younger. This also corresponds to Luke 1:1–4 where eye–witnesses and servants of the word are being referred to, undergirding the author's claim that his findings about the historical Jesus are true and trustworthy information. No decisive objection exists to the Old Church's conviction that Luke wrote this gospel. He had opportunity to consult the apostles and other disciples. Why should he not also have contacted Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Joseph? [11]

We cannot bypass the fact that both the apostle Matthew (who else?) and the apostle–disciple Luke intended to present the nativity stories as accepted facts. To characterize this material as only conceptional and ideal (Kummel), or as legends (Pannenberg), having been developed according to felt need in the primitive community, is to empty this biblical truth of historical validity and to detract from a realization of its theological importance. Without this truth our total understanding of NT theology is defective. [12]

Coming to the question of the resurrection of Jesus, we will first point out that J. Jeremias, who devoted much of his life to Gospel studies, argued that Mark 16:1–8, where we have Mark's record of the resurrection, must be held as a secondary construction, an "apologetic legend" which sets out to prove the reality of the resurrection of Jesus by the empty tomb i.e. the story of the empty tomb in Mark 16:1ff belongs to a late stage of the Easter traditions. The disciples, Jeremias points out, experienced the resurrection of Jesus, not as an unique mighty act of God in the course of history hastening towards its end, but as the dawn of the *eschaton*. [13]

Kummel, who regards the reports in the three other gospels as depending upon Mark 16, is also unable to look upon the material in that chapter as trustworthy. It is not conceivable that the woman intends to annoint a corpse on the third day after the death, he says, and not the custom to use spices in caring for the dead. "In view of these improbabilities it is hardly possible to regard this account as historically reliable". [14]

Outside the gospels, then, nowhere do we find the slightest hint of the knowledge that Jesus' tomb had been found empty, or that it was even regarded as important to emphasize the tomb's being empty when people spoke of belief in Jesus' resurrection, according to Kummel. The account of the discovery of the empty tomb developed only later and at the time of Paul obviously still was not known, according to Kummel [15]

Both Jeremias and Kummel have chosen not to take the records of the Gospels at their face value. Both look away from the possibility that eyewitnesses and evangelists have written down the accounts as we have them in the four gospels. The material is regarded "secondary", "apologetic legends" and, "hardly historically reliable". The accounts of the empty tomb are said to have developed later. Scientifically, however, no result exists which should force us to believe that the resurrection record in the four gospels cannot have been written by the evangelists Matthew (also an apostle) Mark (also apostle–disciple), Luke (apostle–disciple), and John (also apostle) as strongly believed in the Old Church. And further, we have no reason for saying that the Mark 16 verses 1–8 is secondary, neither do we

know that the three other Gospels built upon Mark 16 in their resurrection accounts. Kummel's argument, that the account of the empty tomb was developed later even after the time of Paul, sounds rather curious. Taking the Gospels at face value we see that their common witness is that Jesus was not found in the tomb; the tomb was empty. It is also interesting to see that that the faith of the disciple Jesus loved was not created by the empty tomb as such, but he believed when he understood that Jesus was risen, and as he saw that the burial cloth of Jesus was left in the tomb (John 20:6–8). Kummel's argument is also strange seen on the background of I Cor 15, the resurrection chapter in Paul's writings. Paul argues strongly that the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact, and that our faith and our salvation are dependent upon this fact. How is it possible to say that Jesus has been risen from the tomb and at the same time not know of the empty tomb?

Such a view is possible only by saying that a "resurrection faith" or an "Easter faith" is more at stake than a resurrection that was both bodily and historical.

Some have argued that the resurrection stories are impossible to harmonize. "The answer to that question depends upon the stance of the critic", says G. E. Ladd, an American NT Scholar who himself tried to set up a harmonization without intending to suggest that we really can know in what order the resurrection events happened. It is the purpose of no evangelist to give a complete history of the appearances, Ladd says. However, the fact that the evangelists present diverse accounts, show their independence of each other. [16] It is right, the fact of the resurrection, as it is portrayed in the Bible is impossible for many modern men to accept. Ought we not, then, say that it is faith in the living God that vindicates our confidence in the resurrection of Christ? This is persuasive, Ladd says, but is contradicted by the course of Paul's thought. If Christ is not risen, faith is a futile thing. The reason for this is not obscure. The God who is worshipped in the Christian faith is not the product of that faith, nor the creation of theologians or philosophers. He is not a God who has been invented or discovered by men. [17]

Those who believe, then, that alterations and additions to the original tradition of resurrection have taken place, will have to count with various motives, ideas and conceptions created in/by the so called primitive church, and mixed into the resurrection accounts as we have them in the NT. The historical bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ will thus be presented with a large amount of uncertainty.

On the other hand, those who regard the Gospels to represent primary witnesses and apostolic authoritative information, will regard the accounts as trustworthy, even though it might be impossible to put it all into a system of resurrection facts. We should leave the accounts of the resurrection as true and also complementary.

Influential critical theology especially German has partly referred to Martin Luther's thesis: *"Was Christum treibet"* (What teaches Christ) in order to justify a selective methodology dealing with the question of the historical Jesus and NT writings. [18]

It is a fact that Luther followed the Old Church's questioning of the canonical value of writings like Jude, James, Hebrews, and Revelation. [19] However, as also Althaus points: Luther's evaluations were by himself regarded as subjective; he did

not intend to require anyone to accept his judgements. Luther also omitted some of the sharpest phrases about James as well as softening others. Luther's main point, however, was more to prevent his Roman opponents from continually using James as an argument against the Reformation gospel, than to fight the letter of James as such. [20] But even though James "makes God's law the main thrust", as Luther said, it should not have been impossible for Luther from his renewed understanding of the difference between law and gospel, to also be able to agree that "the law of God" prepares the way for Christ and in that sense is also "preaching Christ". [21] Whatever James contained, it had to be interpreted according to the sense of the rest of Scripture for the single reason that "the papists embrace it alone and leave out the rest". [22]

Thus it is clear that Luther's criticism is strictly limited. The problems of the relationship of the Bible to natural science, to history, to anthropology and to philosophy, which have become such significant problems in much of theology since the enlightment, did not exist for Luther. He was not critical in the name of reason or in the name of sciences (even what earlier was called science might today be regarded in several cases to be in way philosophy of science). [23]

Luther basically accepted the Bible as an infallible book, inspired in its entire content by the Holy Spirit. It was the Word of God in everything it said; for example, all miracle stories were the Word of God, unquestionable truth, and to be believed precisely because they were contained in Scripture. [24] Luther regarded the apostles to have authority from Christ, and that this authority manifested itself in the gospel of the apostles. [25] And it was the office of a true apostle to preach of the suffering, resurrection, and office of Christ. [26] Speaking of the doctrine of the virgin birth, Luther says: "We shall hold to the word in faith against all temptations and speculations". [27] "We are not all apostles", says Luther, "who by the certain decree of God have been sent to us as infallible teachers. Therefore not they, but we, who are without such a decree, may err and fall in faith. So nothing but the divine words should be the first principles of Christians, but the words of all men are conclusions which are derived from there and must be led back to them and verified by them". [28] "We must let the prophets and apostles sit at the desk, and we seated at their feet must listen to what they say, and not say what they must listen". [29] Luther says also: "I have learnt that it is only the books called the Holy Scripture I have to show the honor of believing that none of their authors ever failed. All other books I study in this way that I do not believe them unless they are able to prove what they say from Holy Scripture or from obvious reason". [30]

This principle, however, is not followed up in dominating NT studies today and much of the theology that is called Lutheran is far away from Luther's principles. Luther made no distinction between the authority of the Bible and the authority of the Word of God. He was not distinguishing between a "faith" or "an original tradition" and the form of the faith as we have it, for example, in the gospels. [31] Althaus holds that Luther on this point failed to follow up "that understanding of the word and of the faith which produced Luther's reformation." [32] He argues that this was a law, and the corresponding faith was a legalistic faith. [33] "The development of historical exegesis stands between us and Luther", Althaus says, "and we cannot simply go back to Luther as if it did not exist". [34]

Kummel also points to this. It is recognized by modern theology, he says, that Luther held to Scripture as the highest authority in questions concerning

Christian teaching and conduct. The material in the Bible was being used as "proof texts" for the faith. However, this cannot be followed up, according to Kummel, and the reason is simply that the tradition we have in the gospels has been changed and altered in such a way that what we have in the gospels is not the same as the pure tradition of the historical Jesus. [35]

In other words, modern NT exegesis and theology have difficulties in following the principle *Sola Scriptura*, for the simple reason that the accounts of the gospels have been deprived their trustworthiness as true witnesses to our Lord Jesus Christ. While the Catholic Church speaks of the Church's tradition in addition to Scripture, the modern theologian often speaks of "an original tradition" that frequently means something less and different from the accounts of the gospels of the evangelists.

I. H. Marshall also finds it impossible to lay any a *priori* emphasis upon the trustworthiness of the Gospels: "To assume that the 'biblical Jesus' or 'the Jesus of the Gospels' is the same thing as 'the historical Jesus' or 'Jesus as he really was' is fundamentally misleading because 'the biblical Jesus is an abstraction'. Even though we believe in the inspiration of the Bible, we must still face up to the question of what historical facts lie behind the Gospels. We cannot assume that everything happened exactly as it is recorded....". [36] Marshall is referring to scientific criticism as means of finding the historical Jesus. He agrees, however, that the path from the gospels to Jesus, according to this methodology, is a difficult one to trace. [37] We agree.

What, then, do we know about the Jesus Christ we confess and believe? We have seen that the answers from those who are seeking the historical Jesus vary.

Boiling down the question and taking a hard look at the methodology followed in NT studies we discover one important thing. The proof texts also used by the various critics of the gospel material are nothing else than what we already have in the accounts of the NT writers. This material, however, is taken and treated in a way contrary to the nature and intention of the accounts themselves. As Hans Kung also pointed out, the bold program becomes "subjective arbitrariness". Consequently, the various "Jesus–pictures" we are left with, are very often portraying a different Jesus, a Jesus not found by reading Scripture itself. This was crucial for the Fathers of the Reformation – *Sola Scriptura*, and this should be basic also for us.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth should lead the apostles in their testimonies about Jesus Christ (John 14–17). As John, the apostle, also states, "The man who saw this has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe" (John 19:35, comp. John 20:30–31 and 21:24–25).

Who, then is the historical Jesus? We have no other Jesus than the one witnessed to by the Scriptures, the one promised in the OT, the one who came as we see him in the NT, true God and true Man, born of virgin Mary, the one who on the third day rose again from the dead after having been an atonement for all our sins. This Jesus is Christ, he is the Son of God given us by God himself and witnessed to in the Scriptures in the way God himself wanted the testimonies to be written down.

We are not supposed to divide Jesus into a historical Jesus on the one hand and a supernatural Christ on the other. It is a false picture of the historical Jesus when it is said: his death was historical, but the resurrection is not. Here

"historical" tends to mean what can be explained in such a way that our reason understands it.

As Jesus was true God and true man in one and the same person, so also the testimony about him; our Saviour is both truly divine and truly human at the same time. A historical Jesus different from the Jesus Christ of Scripture is a false Jesus, a Jesus other than the one preached by the apostles (2 Cor. 11:4, Gal. 1).

Notes

[1]See various writings of Bultmann translated into English, such as *Jesus and the Word* (London, 1935), *Jesus and Mythology* (London, 1960) *Theology of the NT* (London, 1956), *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Blackwell 1963), see about Bultmann and his theology in W.G. Kummel: *The NT: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* pp. 330 ff (Abingdon, 1970), see also in G. E. Ladd: *A Theology of the NT* pp. 22 ff (Eerdmans, 1981), and D. Guthrie: *NT Theology IVP,* (London, 1981), pp. 44ff.

[2]See for example writings of E. Kasemann, H. Conzelmann, J. M. Robinson.

[3]J. A. Semler: *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Kanon* Vols. I–IV. 1771–1775 (*(Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon)* See Kummel, *"Investigation"* pp. 62 ff and G. Maier: *The End of the Historical–Critical Method,*p. 8 and p. 11, *Eng. trans.* (Concordia, 1977).

[4]E. Kasemann, ed. *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (15 essays written by 15 theologians), (Gottingen, 1970).

[5]*Kanon* p. 192, *Comp* pp. 403–407 and 331, 337, see also G. Maier, *ibid.*

[6]John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the NT, pp. 310ff* (London, 1976).

[7]W. G. Kummel, *Theology of the NT,* pp. 23–24 (Eng. trans. SCM, 1980).

[8]Kummel, *Introduction to the NT,* (Abingdon 1975).

[9]Kummel, *Theology,* p. 124.

[10]W. Pannenberg, *Jesus–God and Man,* pp. 144–150 (Westminster Press, 1968).
[11]I. H. Marshall: *The Gospel of Luke,* (Paternoster, 1978).

[12]D. Guthrie, *NT Theology,* pp. 367–374

[13]J. Jeremias, *NT Theology,* pp. 311 ff (Vol I) (London, 1971).

[14]Kummel, *Theology,* pp. 100 f.

[15]Ibid pp. 101–102.

[16]G. E. Ladd, *I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus,* pp. 91–93 (London, 1979).

[17]Ladd, *Theology,* pp. 317 ff, comp. I. H. Marshall, *I believe in the historical Jesus,* pp. 242 ff. (Hodder and St., 1977).

[18]See Kasemann in *Kanon* f. ex pp. 403–407

[19] See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of M. Luther,* pp. 82–86 (Phil., 1966).
[20]Althaus, *Ibid.*
[21]Maier, pp. 31 f.

[22]LW 34, 317 WA 39.2 187f.

[23]Althaus, pp. 82–86.

[24] Ibid., p. 51.

[25]Ibid., p. 82.

[26]Ibid., p. 82.

[27]Ibid., p.53 (WA 37. 55).

[28]Luther, De fide 1535 Von Menchenlehre 1522 and Seertio omnium 1520, see ref. in E. Hirsch: *Hirsch: Hilfsburch zum Studien der Dogmatik 4 (aufl. Berlin, 1964) pp. 94, 88, 85. See also ref. in Maier, pp. 64f.*

[29]Luther's Works, 1:15 (Munich Ed).

[30]*Grund und Ursache* 1521, see ref. f. ex. in Martin Luther, *Skrifter i Udvalg Intr. til Luther af Prof dr. theol C. Fr. Wisloff, a scholar in Luther's theology,* p. 30. ((Kobenhanv, 1981).

[31]Althaus, pp. 52–53.

[32]Ibid., p. 51.

[33]Ibid., p. 52.

[34]Ibid., p. 102.

[35]Kummel, *Theology,* pp. 14–16.