
How Authentic are the Words of Jesus?

2. MEMORY AND MANUSCRIPT: The Debate

*By THE REV. R. E. NIXON MA, Senior Tutor
of St John's College, Durham*

THERE IS NO NEED for me to stress here the importance of the work which is under discussion. Behind it of course

lies the work of Riesenfeld published in 1957.¹ My task here is to show how the debate has proceeded since the publication of *Memory and Manuscript* in 1961² by referring to three reviews and a reply by Gerhardsson.

QUALIFIED APPROVAL

W. D. Davies³ agrees with the Scandinavian on two counts. First that 'it seems historically probable that the essentials of the tradition find their ultimate origin in Jesus'. If the disciples of the Rabbis treasured their masters' words, so would the early Christians have done. Secondly, 'we can no longer doubt that the process whereby the Christian tradition was transmitted is to be largely understood in the light of the Pharisaic usage in dealing with Oral Tradition . . . a usage which was not without Hellenistic parallels. At this point, full recognition must be given to Gerhardsson's work. An indispensable task — that of gathering together what could be known of the oral and written transmission of tradition in rabbinic Judaism and showing its relevance for the understanding of primitive Christian usage — has at last been fulfilled.'

After adding further commendation of the value of this, Davies goes on to deal with a number of points where he feels greater clarification is needed. First, there is the question of a fixed 'Holy Word'. Davies concludes: 'While the appeal to the Fathers does support Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson in their interpretation of the mode of the transmission of the tradition, it does not seem to us to corroborate their insistence on a fixed "Holy Word"'. Had such existed in so tangible a form as they suggest, it is hardly credible that the struggle with Gnosticism would have been so crucial: that agonic struggle arose partly because the appeal to "the tradition" was ambiguous.'

Davies next queries Gerhardsson's interpretation of early Christianity in terms of the Temple, the Twelve and the Torah. He criticizes his attempt to spiritualize Jerusalem and at the same time keep it geographical. He welcomes Gerhardsson's emphasis on the importance of the Twelve, but feels him to be mistaken in seeing them primarily as Jerusalem rabbis and not emphasizing sufficiently the work of the Holy Spirit. He finds fault with his division of the Christian tradition into Scripture, the words and works of Jesus, and the application of these by the Christian community, as the equivalents of the Jewish Scripture, Mishnah and Gemara. Christ is not given a sufficiently central place as fulfilling the whole of the Torah. ' . . . the Church, as it looked back to the New Exodus wrought in Christ, first

remembered not the demand but the Person of Jesus Christ'

Davies concludes: 'By bringing to bear the usages of contemporary Judaism, in a fresh and comprehensive manner, on the transmission of the Gospel Tradition, they have forcibly compelled the recognition of the structural parallelism between much in Primitive Christianity and Pharisaic Judaism. This means, in our judgment, that they have made it far more historically probable and reasonably credible, over against the scepticism of much form-criticism, that in the Gospels we are within hearing of the authentic voice and within sight of the authentic activity of Jesus of Nazareth, however much muffled and obscured these may be by the process of transmission. And even though, in the light of the hesitations we have indicated, it may have been taken too boldly, this is a significant step forward.'

TWO FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

C. K. Barrett⁴ is likewise warm in his commendation of Gerhardsson's handling of the study of Jewish tradition. He devotes the greater part of his review to dealing with 'two fundamental questions: (a) How far does the evidence used apply to the period before AD 70?, and (b) Does the rabbinic material, and the quasi-rabbinic material from Qumran provide the true background for the eschatological preaching of Jesus?'

First Barrett thinks that Gerhardsson has overpressed the idea that the Gospels were at first regarded as oral Torah. The evidence of Papias does little to demonstrate the historical value of the oral tradition in the second century. His idea that Luke has not made extensive alterations to Mark is denied and he is stated not to have given due weight to the *polloi* of Luke 1: 1. 'Before Luke wrote, Christianity had already become a literary phenomenon.'

Barrett then deals with Gerhardsson's emphasis on Jerusalem. He describes as tendentious his omission of references to Luke 13: 34f. and his failure to make anything but the barest allusion to 21: 20-24. 'For Luke, not Jerusalem the city, but the Holy Spirit, is the source of the word of God.' The acceptance of the account of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 comes under fire, and Dr Barrett will have none of the idea that Paul recognized the Jerusalem Apostles as the church's doctrinal authority.

Finally Barrett rejects the picture given of Jesus as 'the Rabbi' because He was cast out of Judaism and His tradition was not from men but from God, and 'Paul, and other New Testament theologians, did not proclaim the rabbi Jesus and his teaching, but Christ crucified and risen; the source of their proclamation was not a body of instruction but the fact of the resurrection faith'.

Barrett concludes: 'I find it impossible to avoid the conclusion that Dr Gerhardsson's book, though learned, thorough, conscientious, and acute, and one that every student of the New Testament must read, does not adequately explain the origins of the gospel tradition, or provide a satisfactory instrument for verifying its historicity.'

HOSTILE

Morton Smith's⁵ review of *Memory and Manuscript* is outspokenly hostile. His first criticism is that 'to read back into the period before 70 the developed rabbinic technique of 200 is a gross anachronism'. The Mishnah was probably not being learnt by heart before AD 70. There had been a failure to preserve the *ipsissima verba* of the early teachers. Only a few names of rabbis were recorded and the teaching attached to those names is minimal. Gerhardsson's explanation of this, as due to the fact that Judaism had a unified doctrinal centre, is vigorously refuted on the grounds that the period up to AD 70 was one of sectarian conflict. 'Besides imposing rabbinism on the Pharisees, he imposes Pharisaism on the rest of first-century Judaism.' Behind this, says Smith, lies 'G. F. Moore's myth of "normative Judaism"':

Smith suggests that Gerhardsson does not make enough of the places where the teaching of Jesus is differentiated from that of the scribes (Mt. 7: 29) and Jesus, Peter and John are shown to be unlearned (Jn. 7: 15, Ac. 4: 13). He then shows the following differences between the gospels and the rabbinic material: (i) Greater divergence in wording in the gospels: (ii) The gospel material is predominantly narrative, the rabbinic expository: (iii) The gospel tradition was about a miracle worker. (iv) The arrangement of the gospels is not to expound the Law but to preach the Saviour. 'Finally: the literature of the NT shows almost no trace of the methods of teaching and the mnemonic

techniques which rabbinic literature often mentions and always presupposes.'

Smith then adds two further points for good measure. First he finds an increase of Pharisaic influence in the early church due to Paul — 'Therefore it is quite probable that both the gospels and Paul are a good deal closer — most of all, in vocabulary — to rabbinic Judaism, than were Jesus and his immediate followers.' Secondly he finds it impossible to account for the false accretions to the tradition (birth stories, nature miracles and so on) and the surprising omissions (some of the resurrection appearances and a reliable record of Jesus' attitude to the Law).

GERHARDSSON'S REPLY

Gerhardsson has replied to many of these criticisms, and to Smith in particular in his second book.⁶ He emphasizes that rabbinic methods of instruction had characteristic features going back even to Old Testament times, and that the Pharisaic teachers of the time of Christ used methods representative of those common among Palestinian teachers at that time. 'Historical questions have been oversimplified by starting with the idea that since all things were made new in Christ, every resemblance between the early Church and its milieu must be regarded as a secondary influence, and therefore condemned out of hand. . . . The thesis "in the beginning was the sermon (*kerygma*)" is brilliant as a point of departure for Christian theology. But as a historical statement it is simply incorrect.' The debate goes on.

¹ *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings* (Mowbray 2s. 6d.). It also appears in *The Gospels Reconsidered*, A Selection of Papers read at the Conference on The Four Gospels, Oxford, 1957 (Blackwell, 1960).

² B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Uppsala, 1961).

³ W. D. Davies in *Neotestamentica et Patristica*, ed. W. C. Van Unnik (1962) (reprinted in Appendix xv of *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, Cambridge, 1964).

⁴ C. K. Barrett in *Journal of Theological Studies* (N.S. xiv, 1963 pp. 445-9).

⁵ Morton Smith in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1963, pp. 169-176).

⁶ B. Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund, 1964).