

IS BULTMANN'S THEOLOGY A NEW GNOSTICISM ?

by GERALD L. BORCHERT

PROFESSOR BORCHERT is Associate Professor of New Testament in the North American Baptist Seminary, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He is a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, where he has served as Teaching Fellow and Research Assistant; he has been engaged for some time on a doctoral programme for Princeton in the area of the New Testament and Gnosticism. The present study is a by-product of this work.

RUDOLF BULTMANN is unquestionably one of the great theological scholars of the twentieth century. Because of some of his opinions about the New Testament, moreover, he has become famous (or infamous) in almost every theological circle.

To gain an appreciation of Bultmann and thereby attempt to criticize this great scholar justly one must seek first to understand if possible the writers who have most influenced him. Every theologian stands on the shoulders of others and Bultmann is no exception. Those which appear to have left a lasting impression upon Bultmann include Wrede, Heidegger and Bousset. W. Wrede's work on the messianic secret ultimately led Bultmann to his investigation of the Synoptic Tradition. In addition, the works of K. L. Schmidt and M. Dibelius undoubtedly influenced him in this study.

In the area of Existentialism the influence of Heidegger and Kierkegaard—as mediated through the early Barth—is significant. Barth is especially important for understanding Bultmann's view of eschatology. The early Barth sought to solve the problem of Schweitzer by means of a timeless eschatology wherein the parousia was made part of the essential content of faith. Barth soon realized, however, that timeless eschatology was not the New Testament view. Instead of a timeless view he chose, as Torrance has pointed out, a view which is little more than the Doctrine of Grace as it concerns history. But the interest here is not in Barth except to point out that what Barth has rejected as contrary to the New Testament still continues to fascinate Bultmann.

When turning to the area of Christian origins it is important to notice that on the one hand the works of Bousset seem to have

made a significant contribution to Bultmann's thought while on the other hand the works of Schlatter seem to have made very little except a negative or a revulsive impact upon Bultmann, as is indicated in his article in the Goguel *Festschrift*. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Bultmann's major works on the Christian origins generally give only passing attention to Old Testament antecedents. With respect to Bultmann's investigations into Christian origins his opinions about Gnosticism are extremely significant. In Gnosticism Bultmann locates the basis of many Christian ideas and he employs this Gnosticism to dispatch the importance of the Old Testament as the foundation for Christian thought. Bultmann attacks Schlatter because he considers the Tübingen scholar to have been subject "to peculiar inhibitions" and one who incessantly interpreted the "New Testament one-sidedly out of the Old Testament-Jewish tradition". It is not out of place in this connection to point out that Bultmann has a similar problem. Building upon the work of Reitzenstein's *Poimandres*, Bousset's *Hauptprobleme*, Mark Lidzbarski's work on the Mandaeans, and subsequently on Hans Jonas's *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, and the investigations of the famous English scholar Lady Drower, Bultmann incessantly interprets the New Testament, especially the works of John and Paul, one-sidedly out of the Gnostic tradition.

The problem with the approach of Bultmann as over against that of Schlatter, however, is intensified because the Marburg theologian collapses chronology. Beginning with his articles in 1923 it becomes increasingly obvious that Bultmann favoured a pre-Christian Gnosticism. In order to support this view Bultmann's method necessitated a cavalier use of chronology similar to that which has often been condemned in Reitzenstein. Those who along with Bultmann argue that the existence of a pre-Christian Mandaean sect can be viewed in the basic strata of the Mandaean sources have not faced squarely the many problems in their sources, including the origin of the triple baptism, and the protection of the tombs of the dead for three days; not to mention the fact that even if certain strata can be isolated, these scholars have produced nothing but a subjective basis for dating the strata. But even more important is the fact that these scholars have not taken seriously the devastating criticisms of Lietzmann, Burkitt and Casey, who have shown quite clearly that the Syriac Church has left an indelible mark upon Mandaeanism whereas even the Bultmannian scholar Schmithals has had to admit that simply because Paul uses terminology which is also employed by the Gnostics, it does not thereby follow that

Paul meant what the Gnostics meant by this terminology. While Schmithals considers that Paul derived his terminology from the Gnostics ; the reverse, indeed, is just as possible and more probable if one takes history seriously.

Because of his captivating arguments and his vivid writing Bultmann has influenced a number of scholars to search out Gnostic influences upon the writings of the New Testament. Heinrich Schlier reworked the book of Ephesians into a Gnostic document and turned hell into a purgatory by shifting the middle wall of partition from the human to the supra-human situation. Walter Bauer in his enthusiastic acceptance of Bultmann's views completely re-structured the Fourth Gospel in terms of late Mandaean sources. In the revision of his commentary it is worthy of note that Bauer has dropped without comment his earlier proposed Mandaean emendations of the Fourth Gospel. Bultmann's own work on the Fourth Gospel, however, continues to stress with increasing force the impact of Gnostic influence.

Bultmann has carried this Gnostic emphasis even into the study of the Essenes. Wherever there is a dualism, it is a Gnostic dualism. In this respect a most surprising statement occurs in the third German edition of Bultmann's *Theologie* wherein he says that the investigations of the Dead Sea Scrolls have not changed any of his opinions. One of Bultmann's pupils, K. G. Kuhn, began his work with similar opinions but soon realized that what Bultmann was calling Gnostic in the scrolls was in fact based more on an ethical dualism and far closer to the dualism of the Fourth Gospel than the dualism of the Gnostics.

Before discussing the relationship between the theology of Bultmann and the theology of the Gnostics it is necessary to remember that Bultmann is a German and Emeritus Professor in a German State University. Since the time of Luther, German Protestantism has been the bed-rock upon which much of the increased understanding of biblical studies has been built. Moreover the freedom for investigation—including the encouragement of originality—which is available within the German university system has been responsible not only for novel notions in modern Christianity but has also been responsible for calling forth the great conservative defences. Taken together these novel notions and conservative defences have constantly demanded deeper penetration into the meaning of Scripture. In a Christian community where men believe that they have not only the inspired Word but have also the inspired interpretation superficiality reigns supreme because men suppose that their minds have been able to incorporate all of God's

truth. It is in fact, as Émile Cailliet has often said, nothing less than the temptation "to colonize the reality with the intelligible" taken to its ultimate conclusion. Nevertheless, adequate interpretation must take the writers of Scripture seriously and no argument about *Vorverständnis* can nullify this basic fact. As the Aarhus scholar J. Munck has stated, the existential theologians who have treated the biblical writers as "fools" and incapable of presenting the facts accurately are without excuse.

In turning to the similarities between Bultmann and the Gnostics, therefore, this writer does not propose to have given a complete exposition of Bultmann's theology, but to set down what appears to be striking similarities in Bultmann's work with those of certain so-called Gnostic Christians in order that the contributions which Bultmann has made to our understanding of the Bible might be distinguished from his tendency to adopt Gnostic views. To a discussion of these similarities attention is now directed.

First the refining of form-criticism has been one of Bultmann's major tasks. Yet the form-critical knife often seems to cut only in a more refined fashion than the knife of Marcion. How often the ecclesiastical redactor is employed as a convenient means for sidestepping issues. But Bultmann's writing may not only bring to mind Marcion. Bultmann's interpretations especially of Paul—in terms of the subjective Easter-faith of the Apostles combined with an existential view of realized eschatology—may bring to the minds of critics Tertullian's statement about Valentinus that "although he seems to use the entire volume he has none the less laid . . . hands on the truth only with a more skilful ingenuity than Marcion" (*De Praescr.* 38).

Second, a very striking similarity between Bultmann and the second-century Gnostics is the fact that both attribute little historical importance to the account of the earthly life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Far more important than the record of the life of Jesus is the record of the words of Jesus and even the records of these words are not accepted as they stand. Accordingly, if one were to write a Gospel according to Bultmann one suspects that it might not differ widely in form from that of the Gnostic Gospel according to Thomas.

Third, the earthly life of Jesus is separated both by the Gnostics and by Bultmann from the resurrected or eternal Christ. In the Gospel of Thomas the "Living Jesus", who is to be identified with the resurrected Jesus, imparts *gnosis* or secret words of knowledge to his disciple Didymus Judas Thomas. For the Gnostics an earth-bound Jesus was incapable of delivering the knowledge which

would lead to salvation. As over against the Gnostics Bultmann has not specifically held that an earthly Jesus would be incapable of revealing the way to salvation. But what is problematic at this point involves Bultmann's slippery conception of that which constitutes the content of the revelation. Some of his students engaged in the new quest, such as Bornkamm, regard Jesus' work as involving Jesus' life of existential commitment to God; by which is implied that fact that Jesus' life is a challenge standing out before men as their living standard or plumb-line. Now Bultmann would not follow his students in this respect because he believes that the Gospel stories of Jesus are so overlaid with theological accretions that one is not able to catch more than an enigmatic glimpse of the Jesus of history. For the Marburg theologian only the Christ of faith can be seen in the New Testament. According to Bultmann, Jesus made no Christological statement respecting His divine nature because Jesus was simply a prophet and a teacher who was raised by believers to the right hand of God.

Fourth, the purpose of the revealer in both the writings of Bultmann and the writings of the Gnostics is strangely similar. The *call that comes from without*, which appears for instance in the beautiful Gnostic Hymn of the Pearl, comes to awaken the soul and remind it to assume its destiny. The Cross of Christ, for Bultmann,¹ is the challenge "to undergo crucifixion with him". Only in the light of this challenge can one understand Bultmann's other remark that "the saving efficacy of the cross is not derived from the fact that it is the cross of Christ: it is the cross of Christ because it has this saving efficacy".

Fifth, when one turns to the world-view of Bultmann and of the Gnostics one notices a strange phenomenon. The New Testament, in fact the whole Bible, is set in the framework of the so-called three-story universe. Despite the Hellenistic influence upon the Hebraic tradition, the thought pattern of the Jews, apart from certain noteworthy exceptions, continued to be based upon this three-story framework. Even the angels of God and of the devil were fitted into this structure. Now the striking fact about many of the Gnostic sects which came into close contact with Greek thought is that they developed a new framework which ultimately became known as the Ptolemaic system. The planets were regarded not as isolated balls of matter but were considered to be spheres which Burkitt likens to onion layers encasing the earth. These rings were the dominions or kingdoms of the lower deities through which a

¹ E.g. in writings such as those in *Kerygma and Myth*, I (1953), etc.

person had to ascend successively after death if he was to reach the state of bliss. In turning to Bultmann one notices that he also rejects the three-story universe although he does not accept the Ptolemaic system. Bultmann is living in the post-Copernican era and his theology has been moulded in accordance with this view. No one can condemn Bultmann for accepting the Copernican system but Bultmann has gone a step further and has made his theology fit into Copernican science. Thus, he rejects the reality of hell except as it is within man and he rejects heaven except as it is likewise within man. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find that for Bultmann eschatology is meaningless except as it refers to man's present existence. Bultmann's eschatology is, really, timeless as his view of history is, seemingly, purposeless.

Sixth, like the theology of the Gnostics, the theology of Bultmann deals primarily with soteriology. This soteriology is virtually anthropocentric in character. Many of the Gnostics were, indeed, concerned with their deities as is evidenced from their cosmological speculations. But their major interest in the cosmological speculations—such as those of the Barbelo-Gnostics and those of Ptolemaeus and Basilides—concerned *man*, who was entombed in this world yet, in fact, because of his *internal light* was destined for re-entry into the pleroma. Accordingly the Gnostic is viewed as an immortal being. The man of existential commitment for Bultmann may not be born with immortality in his veins but through faith he enters the realm in which "he is already above time and history". This realm is quite unlike Cullmann's eternity or Vos's higher concept of history. It is, instead, an ideal realm much like that propounded by C. H. Dodd in his *Parables of the Kingdom* (p. 207). Now Bultmann is not concerned with cosmological speculations but his interest in "personal history" as seen in his Gifford Lectures² is not far removed from a demythologized Gnostic concept of man. At this juncture, it is important to remember that *demythologization is not a twentieth-century concept*. It was employed by Plutarch in relation to the Isis and Osiris mystery myth. Accordingly, when the modern interpreter demythologizes the weird myths of the Gnostics he may well be employing a similar method to that used by the Gnostic philosophers when they interpreted these strange myths to their communicants. An interesting illustration of the meaning lying behind one such myth, the myth of the illegitimate offspring of Sophia

² *History and Eschatology* (1957), reviewed by J. I. Packer in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY xxxi (1959), pp. 225 ff.

(Wisdom), can be found in an article by Burkitt in Vol. XII of the *Cambridge Ancient History* (pp. 467 ff.).

Perhaps the major difference between Bultmann and the Gnostics is that the Gnostics over-emphasize the fatalistic element or distort what might be called predestination, while Bultmann, seemingly, distorts faith. In the *Gospel of Truth*, which is perhaps closest to Christianity and not too far removed from the Augustinian or hyper-Calvinistic tradition, there is the following statement: "The Father is perfect. He knows every space which is within him. If he pleases, he reveals anyone whom he desires by giving him a form and by giving him a name" (R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 152). Over against this predestination stands Bultmann's vivid concept of faith. Anyone who has read much of Bultmann cannot help but be captivated by his dynamic concept of faith. Yet when the substance of faith, as "existential knowledge", is divorced from the historical life, death and resurrection of Jesus one cannot help but feel that he has entered a realm not unlike the Gnostic fog of forgetfulness.

In conclusion, on the basis of these few observations it appears as though Bultmann's theology reflects certain Gnostic patterns, which are constructed in terms of their twentieth-century forms. Now the Gnosticism of the early centuries of the Christian era was rejected because, as Van Unnik correctly judges, there was a great gulf "between biblical Christianity and Gnosticism, even though Gnosticism made use of biblical texts". Accordingly, the Church is reminded that, if she desires to remain true to her biblical basis, wherever Gnostic tendencies appear in twentieth-century theology such theology should be weighed very carefully because the use of biblical texts may not necessarily imply fidelity to the biblical message.

*North American Baptist Seminary,
Sioux Falls, S.D.*