

Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord
Edited by Carl F. H. Henry (Eerdmans)

Reviewed by J. Clement Connell

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The title of this symposium aptly describes the theme which unites its sixteen essays, namely that experience of salvation through the eternal Lord is grounded in the historic events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. A number of conservative scholars offer a valid answer to the existentialist theology of Bultmann, which no longer commends widespread approval, but for which continental scholarship has found no satisfactory alternative.

Naturally a review of this kind cannot do justice to all sixteen contributors. The reviewer has therefore made a selection, but the essays to which no reference has been made are equally worthy of attention. One hopes that this review will stimulate the reader to study the whole volume.

In the introductory essay, 'Crosscurrents in Contemporary Theology', the editor sets the scene by tracing the movements of theological thought through the twentieth century from the rationalistic modernism of the early years to the decline of Bultmann's domination of continental theology, which became apparent in 1963-64. This penetrating survey of significant trends shows that none of the outstanding theological thinkers of this period provided a stable foundation for faith because none of them acknowledged the fully objective character of the Scriptures as being in themselves the authoritative voice of the transcendent God. Even Barth, whose insistence on the transcendence of God killed rationalistic immanentism by 1930 and brought new life to the churches, failed to provide the true meeting point between man and God; and this in spite of the emphasis of his dialectical theology on the confrontation of man by God, because in his view such confrontation does not come via objective historical events and pronouncements. For Barth revelation is not expressed in intelligible propositions and universally valid truths. Therefore both Barth and Brunner opened the way for the spread of existentialism by denying the reality of certain historical events, particularly the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The dialectical theologians therefore had no defence against Bultmann, who understood the whole New Testament existentially, rejecting all objective history in it and being satisfied merely with the 'thatness' of Jesus. But Bultmann is no longer supreme in this field. Käsemann in 1954 showed that to require merely 'thatness' for Jesus virtually amounts to docetism. Hence now most Bultmannians

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look for some historicity in the person of Jesus. But other alternatives to Bultmann than his deviating disciples are also claiming attention; the traditional conservatives, the Heilsgeschichte school, the Pannenberg school, and the independents such as Thieleke and Stauffer.

Carl Henry proceeds to show how the new development, particularly in the recognition of salvation history, deals with those two main weaknesses of the Barthian dialectical theology which prevented it from resisting the thoroughgoing existential kerygmatic theology of Bultmann and the form critics, namely first the dissociation of revelation from history, and secondly the failure to accept the propositional statements of Scripture as presenting truth which is universally valid quite apart from the response of the individual to that word.

Even as a survey of the arguments with which the Heilsgeschichte scholars answer the deficiencies of the Barthian and Bultmannian thesis and the excesses of form criticism, Carl Henry's essay is of value, but it also shows that there is the need to go even further than to elucidate errors and that there is therefore an opportunity here for evangelical conservatives to make a positive contribution to the solution of the problem. He presents the central problem of New Testament studies today as being 'to delineate Jesus of Nazareth without dissolving Him as the Bultmannians did, without demeaning Him as many dialectical theologians did, and without reconstructing Him as the nineteenth century historicism did, so that it becomes clear why and how He is decisive for Christian faith....' (p. 16).

The Heilsgeschichte school comes close to the evangelicals in several respects in meeting this demand, particularly in recognising the objective historical reality of the sacred events which bring divine revelation and redemption and also that 'the meaning of those events is divinely given, not humanly postulated' (*ibid.*); but the school is divided as to *how* the interpretation is given, whether by an authoritative written word, or through subjective experience. Even Cullmann, who acknowledges that Jesus, and not the disciples, is the source of the interpretation of His redemptive activity, falls short of 'the biblical representation of the God who both speaks and acts', and of the faith that God gives ontological propositions about His own nature (p. 18). Pannenberg does insist that truth must be universally valid and stresses the objective character of the revelation presented by historical events, but he also will not allow that this revealed truth is given in conceptual form.

R. P. Martin's essay, 'The New Quest of the Historical Jesus', surveys the development of the attempt to get behind the narratives of the Gospels in a search for the so-called real Jesus from its beginning in the historicism of the nineteenth century. He assesses the theology of the New Quest both in its extreme Bultmannian form which looks for a Jesus who is not in the Gospels and in the post-Bultmannian which allows more historical fact in the Gospel record, yet is still questing for a Jesus which they, like the nineteenth century liberal historicists, have themselves already delimited.

Dr. Martin's final section discloses the doubtful nature of several of the assumptions of the new Questers. He seems to find the root cause of their failure in their pre-occupation with existentialism, their concern with the individual man's anxieties and his search for the meaning of life, failing to see that man also needs to know the objective truth of the God who is outside and above him. The essay is generously illustrated with quotations from the scholars under discussion. It is significant that most of them are German, and when Dr. Martin lists for example

the English scholars who have, by painstaking examination of the text, rediscovered a large amount of the historical quality of the Fourth Gospel, he notes that the New Questers have as yet shown little appreciation of this.

The attempt of the demythologisers to meet the situation of modern man and particularly of intellectual man, is faced in Berger Gerhardsson's essay, 'The Authenticity and Authority of Revelation'. Modern man does not believe in God and does not accept any form of absolute authority, so has no firm foundation for his thought and conduct. The demythologisers attempt to meet this need of modern man by standing where he stands: since he no longer believes in the existence of God they present to him a gospel which rejects the idea of God's separate existence. But however much modern man may have rejected authority he needs authority. One will never save him by drifting along with him in the swirling waters of his own experience, but by lifting him to the rock which is above him.

Gerhardsson thinks that the new theology of demythologising has shown up the Reformed Church's uncertainty about the place of tradition in forming the theology of the day. At first sight his plea for tradition might seem to impose an undue restriction upon freedom and initiative in thinking, but he proceeds to show that all reform must have a link with what precedes, like a new shoot out of an old stump. If the new theology is to be called Christian at all, it must make some appeal to the existing criteria of belief in the actual words of the New Testament in the facts of Jesus' life and teaching; 'If this message is to be presented as Christian, its Christian authenticity and authority must be preserved' (p. 58). We must not fail to take into account the God who speaks and acts in Jesus Christ.

The argument of this essay is correct so far as it goes, but perhaps not strongly convincing. One may ask, why we must present a Christian message. Could it not be that some other form of thought leads man to the fulfilment of his being? Obviously the answer is 'no', but he does not effectively say why. A more adequate treatment of the question of authority is needed because ultimately the direction in which any theology is developed depends upon the authority on which it is based. This authority must be either the transcendent self-existent God, who chooses to reveal Himself in a spoken and written word, which itself demonstrates the historic person of God's incarnate Son, or alternatively the subjective reasoning or even responsiveness of the human mind and spirit. It must be either the 'thus saith the Lord' of the Hebrew prophets and the 'I say unto you' of Jesus, or the '*panta andra pantōn chrēmātōn metron*' (every man is the measure of all things) of Plato (Theaet. 183 B).

Something of this claim for the authority of Jesus appears in Adolf Koberle's essay, 'Jesus Christ, the Center of History'. He counters the Bultmannian rejection of any dependence on actual historical events by contrasting the two fundamental views of time, either that held by the Indian type of philosophy, which claims that the Absolute can be grasped with equal immediacy at all points of history, a view which allows for no steady movement towards the fulfilment of a purposed end; or alternatively the biblical view, which presents a succession of divinely ordered events which reveal God and His purposes.

The centre of these events is Jesus Christ. His authority is absolute, not depending on the experience of those who consider Him, yet it is discovered only by those who are willing to accept Him for what He declares Himself to be. 'One must set foot on this bridge joining time and eternity in order to find out that the

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bridge will bear his weight' (p. 66). God can be seen in Jesus Christ alone, not only in the incarnate person, but in the act of reconciliation through bearing man's guilt on the cross. The fact of Christ crucified is essential to one's experience of the atonement. But Christ is not a figure of the past for He is still the key to the future consummation of God's purposes.

The foregoing contributions to the symposium disclose the fundamental principle that discovery of the truth depends on the method of approach. One may either rely on the powers of human reason alone, or be willing also to submit personally to an authority outside the human, i.e. to the God who claims to be the truth, as in John vii. 17. That the latter method of approach is in keeping with the proper exercise of reason is shown by the following essays which deal with the text of the New Testament. Accurate exegesis supports the conviction that the biblical record of the life, words, death and resurrection of Jesus is factual and that the details of the Gospel narrative cannot have been framed to fit the theological kerygma of the first century church.

F. F. Bruce in 'History and the Gospel' examines and argues soundly for the reliability of the Four Gospels as sources for the history of Jesus, while Leon Morris, 'The Fourth Gospel and History', answers in particular the alleged differences between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics. The brevity of the essay necessarily limits the author to little more than pointing to some of the main features of the Gospel's historical accuracy and its avoidance of distortion through theologising. He reminds the reader of the thorough and painstaking study of the subject already made by C. H. Dodd (*Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*) and others. A valuable argument in support of this Gospel's historical reality introduced by Dr. Morris is the implication of John's concern for 'the truth', one of his major themes, allied to his stress also on witness.

Bastian Van Elderen on 'The Teaching of Jesus and the Gospel Records' accounts for the apparent discrepancies in the Gospel narratives by the differing but complementary objectives of the four individual witnesses; 'Each account stands in its own right as a legitimate emphasis and interpretation' (p. 115). He makes use of the concept of *Sitz im Leben* (situation in the life of Jesus), but not to colour the Gospel narratives with the church theology. He argues that the particular way in which any item is introduced into the narrative is determined either by the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* or especially by the *Sitz im Leben des Verfassers* (situation in the life of the authors). The Gospel writer is not by this imposing his own theology on the words or actions of Jesus, but selecting and arranging according to the readers whom he has in view. In measure Van Elderen follows the methods of the Form Critics, although with a different purpose, but like them he is in danger of reading more into the variations of wording between alternative Gospel records of the same event or speech than may be intended by their original authors.

By contrast Everett F. Harrison, '*Gemeindetheologie: The Bane of Gospel Criticism*', is prepared to explain variations in Jesus' reported words, by Jesus' repetition of them on more than one occasion. Both he and Van Elderen deal with Matt. vii. 11 and Luke xi. 13 but whereas Van Elderen ascribes the alteration of 'good things' in Matthew to 'Holy Spirit' in Luke to Luke's emphasis on the Holy Spirit, Harrison recognises the possibility that Jesus Himself used both forms of the saying. His main theme however is to disclose some of the fallacies of the form

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critical method. He emphasises the fact proved by experience that a group is psychologically receptive, but never creative: hence the Church as a group could not have created the details of the gospel narratives. This latter statement is surely valid, even if we recognise the fact that the Church's theology could have been developed by interchange of thought between members of the group.

The editor has made it clear (p. 9) that evangelical Protestants must overcome their pre-occupation with negative criticism of contemporary theological deviations and construct preferable alternatives. This desideration is certainly supplied by the contribution of James P. Martin, 'Faith as Historical Understanding'. Rejecting any prior philosophical definition of faith, but recognising the fact that faith in the biblical sense belongs to the realm of Heilsgeschichte he uses the Bible to show that the nature of faith is determined by its object, and that faith which has Jesus Christ as its object is involved in the understanding of history because Jesus is the reality of history. God's purpose for Israel found its goal and fulfilment in Him, but further through the historic events of His incarnation, death and resurrection the fulfilment of Israel's history is carried forward into the ongoing life of the church, which moves forward to a final fulfilment which is consummated at His Parousia.

The distinctively constructive feature of this essay is its penetrating exegesis of the text of the New Testament in the theology of Paul and Hebrews. The author studies the words of Paul, not to discuss Paul's spiritual experience or Paul's particular interpretation of the Christ event, but to discover the truth which Paul presents in harmony with the total revelation of Scripture. He asks, for example, what Paul meant by writing 'faith came' (Gal. iii. 23, 25), since Paul himself insists that faith was already present in Abraham. The answer is that Jesus Christ came introducing a new point of time in history and therefore a new content of faith, for He is faith's object. The relation of Abraham's faith to ours is therefore that of promise to fulfilment. But faith in Christ does not end at that point, for it brings one into the Way in which Christ is the *archegos*, the pioneer, who carries history forward to its ultimate fulfilment. Faith therefore involves an understanding of history because it makes the man of faith a sharer in the true movement of history, being a sharer in Christ. This Christ is not a theological concept, but the historic person whose life, death and resurrection form the centre of history. Thus in Hebrews also Christ as the *archegos* and *teleiotes*, the pioneer and consummator of faith, carries the believer forward in the process of history to its final consummation.

An essential factor in the revelation of truth, largely disregarded by existentialist theologians, is the activity of the Holy Spirit. Although recognised by the authors of these essays, it is little emphasised until the last essay, 'The Christ Revelation as Act and Interpretation', by K. S. Kantzer. These concluding pages of the book stress the fact that God is to be known by what He has said, as well as by His actions, and it is the Holy Spirit who brings this word, this propositional truth, by His control of the prophets and of the apostles in its delivery, and by His illumination of the hearers in its reception. This may be a repetition of an old and well worn doctrine, but it is none the less true. Its very antiquity may invalidate it in the estimate of those who seek a new theology to match the new opinions of human intellects, but for that very reason it needs all the more to be emphasised. One could have wished for at least one

J. Clement Connell, "*Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord* Edited by Carl F. H. Henry (Eerdmans), *Vox Evangelica* 5 (1967): 92-96.

essay devoted entirely to the action of the Holy Spirit both in conveying and interpreting the history of Jesus incarnate and exalted.

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Prepared for the Web in February 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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