

The Facts in the Life of the Historical Jesus

By Frederic E. Blume

What the facts in the life of our Lord are, and what the meaning of these facts is for our faith, is of vital concern to us. To one who is not acquainted with the course that Biblical criticism has been running in these latter days, it may seem strange that there should be any discussion of the topic at all. He could very possibly be thinking: "The facts of the life of Jesus? Why, they are what I read about in the Bible, especially in the Gospels of the New Testament!" Such an attitude would of course be absolutely proper and the one that has always been held by those who believe that the Bible means what it says and what Christians who believe the Bible have always understood it to mean. Sad to say, today the prevailing current in theological thinking at large runs in quite a different direction, and even in the bosom of church bodies that once clung to the literal understanding of the history related in Scripture the thought is being tolerated, even espoused, that one cannot be too absolutely certain as to just what the facts of Jesus' life might have been (this because of the negative criticism of the Scriptures that has come to the fore so strongly in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries); or (and this is the direction criticism is taking of late) even if we should know with greater certainty more about the actual facts of Jesus' life, that such knowledge would finally be of very little value to us since, it is contended, the ultimate questions of our being have to be answered on other terms than are those described for us in the confessions of faith which the church has traditionally held.

We shall here make the endeavor to see what the attitudes have in the past been regarding the historical facts of our Lord's life and how we are to evaluate the contemporary efforts being made to deny completely any significance in such facts or at least drastically to downgrade their meaning for this jet-age world.

The New Testament Itself Speaks Concerning the Facts of Jesus' Life

In the current welter of discussion regarding the knowability of the facts of Jesus' life, it is well to keep in mind how the truth of our way to salvation has been revealed to us by God Himself: by that deliberate act of God who called the writers of the Old Testament (prophets) and the writers of the New Testament (apostles) into His service and by the power of His Holy Spirit made them so completely His own that their words, though spoken by them, and often after inquiry, deliberation, consultation, and research, were the very Word of God, and that by virtue of the fact that they had been made God's "slaves," that is, beings whose will was no longer their own but that of the Lord who had called them into His service. The last of the "classical" Lutheran dogmaticians, David Hollaz, dwells on the fact that ultimately it was the mercy of God that prompted Him to provide for His revelation in a written scripture and call the prophets and apostles to their appointed task. He also stresses the point that the designation of "apostle" ought not be denied to the evangelists Mark and Luke in view of an even wider use of the term in the New Testament.¹

The apostles were to bear witness to Christ, in the first place to His resurrection (Ac 1:22; 2:32) but also to all the details of His earthly life (Ac 2:22–24). It was just to these concrete, historical facts of Jesus' life that the Apostle Peter appealed so confidently. When Peter spoke the words Acts 2:22–36, he was addressing an as yet non-Christian audience. Acts 3:12–16 Peter again speaks of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, this time to the crowd that gathered in Solomon's Portico after he and John had healed the lame man at the temple's Beautiful Gate. In neither case did these contemporaries reject the apostle's evidence as to the historical facts of Jesus' life to which he had referred. By personal experience they were in full possession of these facts. In a similar vein, R.A. Cole writes:

...half a generation later, Rabbi Saul the tentmaker, who had given opinions "in the name of Rabbi Gamaliel," as the saying was, when on trial before King Agrippa, can still confidently

¹ David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum* (Rostock & Leipzig, third edition, 1722), pp 87–89.

appeal to the common knowledge as to the historicity of the account of the life and death of Jesus the Carpenter, the unlettered Rabbi of Nazareth, who dared to give decisions in His own name.²

In the first century neither Peter nor Paul had any trouble convincing either their Jewish or their Gentile hearers of the historicity of those facts that stand at the very heart of the Christian faith. These facts had occurred, at the farthest, within the memory of many men then living. The apostolic interpretation of these facts was not so universally accepted, but on the facts themselves there was no argument.

What the hearers of Peter and Paul accepted without question, namely, the historicity of the facts pointed to concerning the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, that modern criticism denies out of hand. And the most common reason alleged for such denial is the fact that the New Testament books that tell of the life of the Lord are not primarily historical documents at all but are of a theological nature and derive ultimately from the gospel preaching of the first generation of Christian missionaries. On the basis of this New Testament material, so the argument runs, the hard-core facts of His life cannot be learned, since the primary objective of these books is homiletical and not historical.

Furthermore, so it is claimed, we are absolutely lacking the materials for what would be a first-class modern biographical study of Jesus of Nazareth. His mental and psychological development remain a closed book. Hence, a modern biography is impossible; hence, the biographical facts contained in the gospels simply cannot be accepted, not as historical data, that is, but their meaning must be arrived at in some different way.

The allegations just referred to have become the stock in trade of “the historical-critical approach” to the scriptures, of “the new hermeneutic,” in fine, of all those who deny the verbal inspiration of the Bible, its clarity in the sense in which Luther used that term, and the presence of miracles in the usual sense of the word both in the process by which God gave His revelation in written form to men and in the narratives which this written revelation contains. At this point we need not examine further the modern view of the preaching of those who first proclaimed the gospel of a risen and victorious Savior (the “kerygma of the early church”). In his study *Luke: Historian and Theologian* I. Howard Marshall of the University of Aberdeen has with great clarity and abundant documentation shown how, in the modern view, the preaching of the earliest church was a proclamation without any historical content: that it was not a summons to accept historical facts on which a faith might be grounded, but that it was simply a challenge to accept a person. The “kerygma” of the early church was then nothing but Bultmann’s “*Dass*,” the fact *that* such a person as Jesus of Nazareth very probably existed but that no other statements about him could be made with absolute confidence.³

The conflict of interest between historian and theologian would, we may be sure, have been a thought utterly strange to Luke, the writer of our third gospel. In his foreword to the gospel, Luke indicates, in the dedication of his two-volume work to “His Excellency Theophilus,” that Theophilus has been instructed in the facts of the Christian faith, and that Luke wishes to strengthen him in this faith by making available to him the results, in literary form, of extensive research and interrogation of witnesses (Lk 1:1–4). He wants to accomplish this certainty by merely telling the *facts* of the gospel story in an *orderly* way.—The “order” Luke has in mind surely is not that of chronological sequence alone but rather an order implicit in the nature of the narrative itself which he is about to present

R. McL. Wilson has pointed out that Luke accomplished his purpose of establishing the “certainty” concerning the facts of Jesus’ life by placing an emphasis on precisely those three items that in the second and third centuries were to be the bulwarks of the church’s defense against the Gnostics.⁴ These were the authenticity of the witness to our Lord’s life by His apostles, the propriety of the orthodox church’s interpretation of Scripture as opposed to that of the heretical gnostics, and the unbroken series in which the eye-witness testimony to the facts of Jesus’ life was passed on from the time of Jesus to the writers’ own times.

² R.A. Cole, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), pp 18f.

³ I. Howard Marshall, *Luke; Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), pp 44–52.

⁴ R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p 44.

The facts that have come to light concerning gnosticism's attack on the church since the discovery of the Coptic Gnostic library at Nag-Hammadi⁵ in Egypt during the 1940's have made us aware what a deep-rooted aberration the movement was and how it had been infiltrating the thought of the church from the earliest times;⁶ so there is every justification to read Luke's preface to his two-volume work as his own indication of how he intends to mount his attack on this form of gnostic or docetic teaching that minimized the importance of the historical Jesus and substituted the wildest of theosophic speculations.⁷ In the work of Luke, then, as in all the New Testament, historical fact and theological interpretation of that fact do not stand in opposition. The facts of Jesus' life demand theological interpretation simply because they concern the life of Jesus of Nazareth, true man and true God, the Savior of the world. It becomes very apparent, as we read their works today, that those who see the interests of theologian and historian as mutually exclusive categorically reject the thought that the Incarnate Logos appeared among men to fulfill the plan proclaimed and the promise made in the *protevangelion* of Genesis 3:15.

As the New Testament writers present it, then, the Christian faith is based on historical facts, miraculous facts indeed (resurrection, ascension, a ministry filled with deeds that defy the accepted "laws of nature"), but still actual occurrences within the time and space of men.

In the matter of gospel-historicity, it is especially the Gospel of Luke that has been under attack, undoubtedly because of Luke's own claims in his preface, Luke 1:1–4, that eyewitnesses to the historical facts therein recorded had "turned over" or "passed on" to the writer the facts concerning whose reliability they themselves could bear witness; that he had himself carried on careful research both in existing written documents and on the basis of such oral testimony as he had received.

A frequently repeated attempt to impugn the historical accuracy of Luke in both the Gospel and Acts is to allege that the speeches in Acts are composed in the manner of ancient writers of history. Here the words of the great Greek historian Thucydides are regularly quoted when he explains how the many speeches in his writing came into being (Thucydides I:22):

As to the speeches, it was my habit in each instance to report the speaker as saying what was most appropriate to the occasion but to stick as closely as possible to the overall intention of the words actually uttered.⁸

The entire matter of this misuse of "poetic license" by ancient imitators of Thucydides is discussed (with generally negative results) by Henry J. Cadbury in *Beginnings of Christianity*.⁹ The rebuttal of the learned Theodor Zahn is entirely adequate. He remarks that the statements of Luke in his preface would scarcely seem consonant with the declared habits of Thucydides, but that "We must surely reckon Josephus among those utterly ridiculous imitators of the style of Thucydides whom Lucian castigates in his *How (not) to Write History* 26. Many passages in Josephus prove he belongs there. But Luke never so, neither in the Gospel nor in Acts."¹⁰

In addition to the many rectilinear proofs that can be brought for the historicity of the New Testament writings and in particular those of Luke, there also exists a vast amount of what we could call "unconscious corroboration." These are the many instances where the writer—and we shall show only a few instances from Luke—has said something, or brought a statement in a certain way, that would not have been put this way had

⁵ W.C. Unnik, *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings*. A preliminary Survey of the Nag-Hammadi find (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1960). Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*. An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic manuscripts discovered at Chenoboskion (London: Hollis & Carter, 1960).

⁶ Andrew K. Helmbold, *The Nag Hammadi Gnostic Texts and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967).

⁷ Marshall, p 39.

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, translations from other languages are by the writer.

⁹ *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I The Acts of the Apostles*, Edited by J.F. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake. Vol. V Additional Notes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966 reprint), pp 402–427.

¹⁰ Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Lucas* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1913), p 28 and note 42 there. Cf. also: Theodor Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 3rd edition (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1907), II, 336–452.

the writer not been the careful, research-historian that Luke professes to be. Or had he been an out-and-out falsifier, he would in very obvious fashion have gone about pretending to give concrete details in a story in order to make it sound all the more like a real narrative of a real event. Anyone who has read in the apocryphal writings allegedly relating to New Testament facts and figures, will readily recall a sheaf of examples of such patent straining for verisimilitude. Merely to page through M.R. James' *The Apocryphal New Testament* or any of its counterparts would furnish an almost endless number of examples.¹¹ A falsifier will inevitably overstate his case.

How different it is with the New Testament! Luke 8:3 we read of "Susanna and many other women, who were rendering service to them out of their private resources." Why single out this one lady, and allow the rest to fade away in anonymity as "many others"? Mary of Magdala, Joanna wife of Chuza, a well-known official, could have been mentioned by one who was merely trying to make his made-up story look real. The same thing simply could not have been true with regard to this otherwise unknown Susanna. Obviously, she was a Christian lady well-known to the Christian circle in which Theophilus moved, and in his sober narrative of events Luke is simply recording what he had found to be the case.

Again, the way the writer at Luke 4:20, 8:41, and 13:14 speaks of the Jewish synagogue, its services and personnel, agrees entirely with what men knowledgeable in the history of Jewish worship have presented as the usual state of affairs in the first century.¹²

At Luke 8:43 a considerable section of the most weighty textual tradition we would muster omits the statement about the woman with the hemorrhage of such long duration that *she had spent all she had on doctors* and still had not gotten any better. Manuscripts Vaticanus, Bezae, a third century papyrus now in the Bodmer collection, and representatives of six early versions all omit the statement. The rest of the textual tradition in manuscripts and the versions retains the statement. What are we to make of the matter? Obviously some early editor of the New Testament, thinking to do honor to Luke the Physician, omitted the statement, and he was followed by that small number who leave it out including the weighty Vaticanus. But surely Luke had written the facts as his study had shown them to be. Again, Luke was merely being factual.

How carefully Luke carried on his own historical investigation may be illustrated from his addition of the detail at the end of the 17th verse in the fifth chapter, *and the power of the Lord was directed toward Jesus' doing miracles of healing*. Both Mark (2:1–12) and Matthew (9:1–8) relate the same matter. Only Luke has this specific detail, one that his own investigation had led him to emphasize.¹³

All three synoptic Gospels have the pericope concerning "new wine in old wine-skins." Only Luke concludes with the saying (Lk 5:39): *And no one who has had aged wine asks for unaged; for he says, Aged wine is mellow*. Also the ancient students of the Bible were having trouble with this verse. A number of the fathers simply omit the verse, as does the "western text." Variants in two important text types show that from an early period scribes felt they could create an acceptable sense for the passage by making some alterations. Very few manuscripts (but these include both Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) read the saying as translated above. The problem seems to have arisen because it was not recognized that also sayings of Jesus have to be read with varying degrees of seriousness. Zahn seems to have hit upon the right thing also in this passage, for he remarks about the passage revealing, on Jesus' part, a tolerant and kindly insight into the foibles of human nature. He understands the verse to caution "those who turn to the new not to be too much disturbed by criticisms from those who cling to the old." He suggests that here Our Lord displayed a good sense of humor.¹⁴ Most certainly, though the other records omit the saying, the researches of Luke showed him that Jesus had said this on this occasion; so the evangelist included the saying here since it served the overall purpose he was pursuing in the writing of this Gospel.

That the evangelists recorded sober fact concerning the life of the historical Jesus must also be recognized from this that what Jesus foretold of his suffering, death, and resurrection did not at all agree with

¹¹ Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1926).

¹² Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint), I, 438.

¹³ Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Lukas*, p 260.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 269.

his apostles' preconceived notion of what the Messiah should be like. When Jesus spoke of his end, the things said were completely beyond them ("They regularly missed the point of what was being told them," Luke 18:34). They simply could not have manufactured the great facts of our salvation as these were carried out by the Lord.¹⁵

The Apostle John adds his testimony concerning the historicity of Jesus. It runs like a refrain through his First Epistle that "we"—that is, John and the other followers of Jesus who were eyewitnesses to the great facts of our salvation—have "heard," "seen," "observed," "touched," this life everlasting *which appeared to us* (1 Jn 1:2). Surely here John was countering the rising proto-gnosticism that was so very soon to make its all-out effort to deny to the Christian faith its concrete historical reality and transform it into another figment of the imagination such as was all the mythology of the movement that was to become the great destructive heresy of the second century. John's defense against false doctrine is to point to the facts of the life of the historical Jesus.

The Apostle Peter in erecting his defense against the vagaries of gnosticism he sees coming does this by pointing to the historical fact of the transfiguration of our Lord (2 Pe 1:16–18), the same Lord who had prophesied the death (1:14) which is also standing so closely before him.

Modern criticism has made much of what it calls the "historicizing" of the Gospels. By this it means that it was the later generations of the church, the believers of the last decades of the first century, who introduced historical data into their preaching of the Christian faith and that the first preaching of the faith had known no such references. On the basis of the brief survey of New Testament statements concerning the historical Jesus we have just made, we must agree with Marshall, who says:

We are thus justified in asserting that the primitive preaching did contain historical references and that it included statements which were meant to confirm the historical character of these references.¹⁶

Historical Facts in the Earliest Post-Apostolic Writers

As we now move into the first quarter of the second century, we see that the first leaders of the church after the days of the apostles, the so-called "Apostolic Fathers," with almost litany-like repetition, stress the historical facts of signal importance in the life of Jesus of Nazareth: his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. In fact, R. McL. Wilson, a specialist in this area of historical studies, insists that during the second and third centuries "the main point at issue was whether the Christian faith could be detached from its biblical and historical bases and presented as a form of Hellenistic theosophy."¹⁷

Bulking large in the "Apostolic Fathers" are the letters one Ignatius of Antioch wrote to a number of churches. This statement found in the Letter to the Trallians (9:1) is characteristic of many found throughout Ignatius' literary remains:

Don't listen, then, whenever anyone tries to make a point to you apart from the Jesus Christ who was of the tribe of David, born of Mary. For he really and truly was born; he ate and drank; in all truth, he was persecuted at the time of Pontius Pilate, was really crucified and really died.

The insistence on placing the passion of our Lord "at the time of" Pontius Pilate (the "under" of our Creed, the *sub* of the Latin) arose, of course, from the attempt of a gnostic-related movement of those early days that denied to the Lord Jesus a real body of flesh and blood and kept on insisting that the "body" the disciples thought they saw was a mere phantom, one that did not even leave footprints on the soft sand! (The apocryphal gnostic "Acts of John" 93.)¹⁸

¹⁵ William F. Arndt, *The Gospel according to Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), p 386.

¹⁶ Marshall, p 51.

¹⁷ Wilson, p 74.

¹⁸ James, p 252f.

Magnesians 11:1 stresses that “His passion and resurrection occurred at the time of the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate.” Our salvation, Ignatius says, was “truly and surely accomplished by Jesus Christ, Who is our Hope.” And to the Smyrnaeans (1:2) in a similar vein he writes that our Lord “was truly of the tribe of David according to the flesh but Son of God according to the will and power of God, truly born of a virgin, baptized by John...that at the time of Pontius Pilate and of Herod the Tetrarch he was crucified in our stead in the flesh.”

These Facts Stated in the Works of Learned Defenders of the Faith

In the second half of the second century a converted philosopher, Justin by name, called “The Martyr,” addressed a well-constructed defense of the Christian faith to the Roman emperors of his day. We know this learned, high-level appeal for just treatment to be accorded to the Christians as Justin’s Apology. In chapter 35:9 of this appeal Justin writes: “...that this happened (the details of the crucifixion as recorded by the four evangelists) you are able to learn from the court records of the time of Pontius Pilate.”

The first name-worthy Latin writer to issue a defense of Christianity, Tertullian, speaks in similar fashion in the 5th and 21st chapters of his Apology. He invites his readers, the magistrates of the Roman Empire, to consult their official imperial records for the facts of the life-story of the Lord and there read how the “whole story of Christ was reported to Caesar, who at that time was Tiberius, by Pontius Pilate.” Their official archives would verify the truths spoken of concerning the earthly career of Jesus of Nazareth.

In at least nine different places Justin Martyr refers to the Crucifixion of Jesus as having occurred “at the time of Pontius Pilate, procurator in the time of Tiberius.”

We may be very certain that these learned men, using the languages of the Empire in their defense of the right of the Christian Church to exist, were sure that the facts of the earthly life of Jesus were of extreme importance, were, in fact, the very basis upon which that Church’s faith rested.

In his study of “The Teaching of the Old Roman Creed” in the work on *Early Christian Creeds* J.N.D. Kelly admits that:

It is significant that in all the Ignatian contexts in which the dating UNDER PONTIUS PILATE occurs the writer is pressing home, as against Docetic denials, the reality of Christ’s experiences. So, too, the first of the extracts of St. Irenaeus cited above (*Adv. haer.* 2, 32, 4) is avowedly aimed at heretics who allege that Christ wrought His miracles “in appearance.”

In continuing the discussion, however, Kelly asserts that “...if a few passages can be quoted with such an unambiguous anti-Docetic bias, it is impossible to detect any such innuendo in the great majority of them.” The real reason for the early insistence on historical dating of the passion of Jesus Kelly believes to find elsewhere:

...in the fact that the saving story of which the creed is a recapitulation is rooted in history. A date was called for so as to bring out that these events did not happen anywhere or at any time, and that the Gospel is not simply a system of ideas. For once Rufinus succeeded in hitting upon the truth when he remarked: “Those who handed down the creed showed great wisdom in underlining the actual date at which these things happened, so that there might be no chance of any uncertainty or vagueness upsetting the stability of the tradition.” Without anyone saying so in so many words, the instinct of the Church recognized the need for a historical reference.

Kelly seems to have rather overstated his case. Granted, “the instinct of the Church” was correct in seeing the need for such historical reference. But the instinct of the Church could not have been unaware of the need to counter the Docetic heresy. It needs to be remembered that every statement of the Apostles’ Creed was aimed at a definite doctrinal error that was rearing its head during the second century. What Kelly calls “anti-Docetic bias” and the need for definite historical connections ought not be treated as two separate entities: they

are merely the opposite sides of the same coin. A comparison between the writings of the anti-heretical church fathers and the very documents of these heretics discovered at Nag-Hammadi shows that the fathers rather understated their case against the opponents. Nag-Hammadi shows that the Gnostics were even worse heretics than the fathers made them out to be. The “instinct of the Church” realized where the problems were. And the fathers stated them, sufficiently, and yet always definitely.¹⁹

Allegorizing Exegesis Ignored the Historical Facts

Sad to say, the importance of a stress on history also in connection with the earthly career of Jesus, as this was recognized by the early Christian creeds and the early church fathers, at an early stage in the history of interpretation faded before an all-consuming devotion to the use of allegory in interpretation of the Biblical text. By the time of Martin Luther it was insisted that Scripture had a four-fold sense and schoolboys were obliged to memorize a Latin jingle that stated what each one of these four senses of sacred text was or at least in which connection it was to be found. “Allegory shows what you are to believe” ran the verse. But since allegory in principle cut itself loose from every concrete historical basis, by its use almost any passage whatsoever could be adduced in support of almost any doctrine any expositor had in mind. An example would be the treatment accorded the word “Jerusalem” at Galatians 4:25f; the word was to be understood in four different ways: literally, it meant the city in Palestine; allegorically, it meant the church of the Lord; anagogically, it pointed to the heavenly city; morally, it signified the human soul.²⁰ At times different terms were used for the second, third, and fourth classes named; sometimes everything but the “literal” meaning was lumped together into a single class with a name like “figurative,” “tropological,” or even “allegorical.” At other times the three classes were reduced to two. But the effect was always the same. Since any other “sense” than the literal was in principle held to have equal validity with it in the interpretation of a passage, the general tendency from ancient times on was to ignore completely the exegesis of the word (the answer to the question, What does it say and mean?) and go on immediately to some subjective application of the word (the answer to the question, What does it mean to me?).²¹

To the pagan scholars of Homer in Hellenistic Alexandria it was the most natural thing in the world to allegorize the Homeric myths, either because it was felt that these stories of the gods were in some way vehicles of esoteric knowledge, or, in a more practical vein, because many of the stories told of the gods and goddesses, if understood literally, would have made these deities guilty of conduct that was universally regarded as immoral for a human being. So then the argument went: if the words that are read speak of immoral deeds done by the gods, they must have another meaning than the one these same words generally convey since it is impossible that gods do morally reprehensible things. Thus, myths in Hellenistic paganism were allegorized.

Hellenistic Judaism obviously borrowed the habit. Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish preacher who philosophizes in Platonic fashion about the books of Moses, manages to find contemporary Stoic and Platonic meanings in the words of Moses by ignoring completely what the words that stand there actually mean. To him the four rivers of Eden are not four streams of water that run downhill in obedience to the law of gravity but rather the four great Stoic virtues of contemporary pagan philosophy: prudence, self-mastery, courage, justice (Allegorical Interpretation, I. 63). The only direct connection between the words of Moses and these Stoic notions is the number four. But Philo simply asserts: “This means that” in total disregard of the meaning of the words as they stand there.

In the days before Martin Luther it was not that the historical facts of the earthly life of Jesus were doubted or challenged. This was not the case. Not until we come to the modern world do we find that the obvious literal meaning of the words of the evangelists about Jesus’ life are flatly denied as conveying objective truth and then interpreted by a newly-named but still the same old process of allegorical interpretation, that ignores the meaning of the words being read and makes some “relevant” application. Now however the name

¹⁹ J.N.D. Kelly *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 2nd ed., 1960), pp 149–150.

²⁰ Robert M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, rev. ed. 1963), pp 119f.

²¹ Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev. -Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909), I, 422.

for the process has become “historical-critical” approach to the Bible, or “existential interpretation,” or “meaningful exegesis.” More of this when we come to speak of the New Testament interpretation that is very contemporary with us.

Though an allegorizing interpretation did not deny the facts of Jesus’ life nor doubt the authenticity of the apostolic word, so long as interpreters lean toward allegorizing, they will automatically side-step if not entirely ignore the full import of the first, the primary, the originally intended literal meaning of a passage. Here it is the method that is at fault. For it sees in the concrete details of a passage, be that narrative or figurative language, direct support for the details of an already formed and passionately defended dogmatical system. It is then this dogmatism that obscures the single intended sense which the inspired writer meant to convey. Witness the way symbolical applications of the blood and water that flowed from Jesus’ side to the Two Sacraments have tended to obscure the obvious intent of the apostle and eyewitness (Jn 19:34), namely to stress the absolute reality of Jesus’ death. (The comments of Bengel on the passage are still worth reading.)²²

Luther’s Thinking on the Understanding of Statements of Fact

Luther’s work of reformation in the church that we associate with October 31, 1517, was preceded by another reformation, this time one in Luther’s own approach to the understanding of Scripture. As lecturer on the Bible in the University of Wittenberg, Luther had long since come to the conviction that the time-honored four-fold sense of the Word simply had to be abandoned. In principle, if not always in practice, his insistence put an end to the speculative allegorizing that had dominated the church since the days of Origen and Jerome. How strongly Luther felt on the subject he reveals in remarks he makes on the scholastic exegetes. He calls them insipid and no-good dreamers, to whom exegesis has become a game, for “they play with the *sensus literalis, allegoricus, moralis, anagogicus*; men call them doctors, scholastici. Good! They are really scholastici, actors and buffoons” (WA, I, 507).

In his study on “The Task of Exegesis” in the *Festschrift* for C.H. Dodd, *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, E.C. Blackman writes concerning Luther’s insight that the understanding of the literal meaning of a passage was an indispensable preliminary to any further interpretation. He says:

Luther’s term *sensus grammaticalis* is perhaps to be preferred: the plain meaning of the words as their author intended them with reference to his contemporary situation. Whatever development or application of meaning is attempted by the exegete must be anchored in this meaning. But he must go on to elucidate the perennial meaning of the text, that is, the significance of it which makes it contemporary for the reader today. This has been called the spiritual sense, even by Luther who rejected the multiple sense of the Schoolmen. But Luther is quite emphatic that it is not an addition to the literal sense, but contained within it, and only discerned after thorough study of the literal sense.²³

When Luther enumerates the books of the New Testament that present the cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith, Justification by Faith Alone, he puts John’s Gospel at the top of the list together with his First Epistle. Then follow the chief epistles of Paul and First Peter. Luther made these his choice as the books a Christian should virtually get by heart because in them he found the doctrine of Christ so clearly presented (*Christum treiben*) (WA, DB 6, 10). In the sixteenth century the truth and value of the facts of the historical Jesus were not in question among responsible people. From what has been said about Luther’s attitude toward the “grammatical sense” it would appear that he accepted without reservation the historical facts of Jesus’ life. A cursory reading of Luther’s sermons on the Gospel texts for the church year in his *Hauspostille* will

²² Joh. Albert Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Stuttgart: Steinkopf, 1915), p 422.

²³ *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, Edited by W.D. Davies and D. Daube, in honour of Charles Harold Dodd (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), pp 6f.

demonstrate how to the Great Reformer what the Scriptures said about the earthly life of the Savior simply were historical facts not to be questioned.²⁴

Criticism's Challenge of the Historical Worth of New Testament Statements

Any real historical value has been denied to the New Testament statements regarding the life of Jesus by a movement that results from the convergence of two informing principles: a formal principle that espoused a rationalistic humanism, which denied to God any place of importance in the world whatsoever; and a material principle that treated the books of Scripture as the products of the spirit of man, therefore on a par with the sacred books of all religions and books whose ultimate meaning was to be grasped by isolating and identifying the component documents, written or oral, out of which the books of the Bible as we know them were, at some time or other, thrown together.

The two movements ran side by side, though the beginnings of the dogmatical attitudes of rationalistic humanism become evident before there was any great attempt made at literary or source criticism. English deism and Spinozist pantheism were the first to make a supernatural revelation of the thought of God to man either impossible or unnecessary: deism completely separated God from the world, pantheism identified the two with the result that God was actually eliminated. Now reason, preempting the place given to revelation, reigned supreme.

At this juncture the modern principles of "literary" criticism came into play. It began when around 1800 men began to argue that the Homeric poems could not be the products of a single poetic genius but must be collections and editings of previously existing materials: sagas, legends, myths.

The method soon spread to the Old Testament and then to the New. Men imagined that they could identify and characterize a number of previously existing written sources behind the Pentateuch and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Moses could not have given the church the five books that bear his name nor could the apostles who appear as Matthew, Mark, and Luke have given the church the Gospels that bear their names. At best, an early form that somewhat resembled our Mark must have come into existence at an early date, somehow or other in connection with the preaching of Peter, but this was then drastically revised and amplified and altered to give us the three synoptic Gospels. The names attached to them would at best be meaningful symbols; at worst outright attempts at forgery.

Still, as nineteenth century liberalism ran its course, it was not using a method or philosophy different from that of rationalistic unbelief of all ages. The "higher criticism" has always in principle rejected the basic teaching of Scripture and has then invented reasons why it has been forced to reject, of course always on "scholarly grounds," the authenticity and historical reliability of the Biblical record. The first higher critic in Christianity was Marcion, a thinker with Gnostic leanings. The Uppsala historian of religions has shown how that which makes for unbelieving criticism in our world was definitely at work in Manichaean thinking, one of the late survivals of Gnosticism. Widengran writes:

(The Manichees) maintained (Christendom's) books had not been composed by Jesus' original disciples or, if they had, the texts were subsequently revised by Judaizing writers and therefore required to be subjected to strict scrutiny. As a whole they must be regarded as spurious and interpolated. The Pauline letters, on the other hand, sustained far milder criticism, and to this degree the Manichees again were true heirs to Marcion.

²⁴ Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p 114, quotes Luther on the relative value of the gospels: "Since John speaks relatively little concerning Christ's deeds, but much of his preaching, while the other three Evangelists write much about his work and less about his words, John's Gospel stands as the glorious and principal Gospel, greatly to be regarded above the others. So also we must place the letters of Paul and of Peter high above the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke." (WA, DB 6, 10) The historicity of New Testament statements are for Luther a totally different matter. Cf. his *obiter dictum*: "The Gospels and the apostolic epistles were written...that we there might see for ourselves how Christ lies in the crib, wrapped in swaddling clothes..." (WA 10, 1, 15).

For the Manichees the guiding principle was to distinguish the falsifications which attempted to confuse the pure teachings of the gospel with the views of Judaism, and the criterion was of course the Manichaeic dualistic antithesis between spirit and matter, light and darkness, good and evil.²⁵

As did the scholastic exegetes whom Luther so severely criticized, so truly did the practitioners of source analysis indulge in playing games with the words of Scripture. Imagination was given a free rein, and at the drop of a hat, new documents, new situations, new motivations, new editors and editorial policies were invented and thereafter dealt with as if they possessed objective, concrete reality. But the one objective reality, that in the writers of the New Testament the Holy Spirit was speaking God's words to men and that their words were true, factual, and historically trustworthy in every way—this objective reality was rejected and declared unworthy even of consideration by men of intelligence and cultural enlightenment.

The Historical-Critical Method: the Most Radical of Negative Criticisms

About fifty years ago there began in Europe what in some ways was a radical departure from the approaches of higher criticism, in others was but a natural development of the method already in operation. By the 1930's this critical method was spreading to America, and it is still with us today, though again in an altered form both as to its material and formal principles.

According to its material principle criticism had in its stress on the ultimate documentary sources that were poured together to make our Biblical books still left many questions unanswered. If a primitive form of Mark was the basic gospel document that was then "improved" on by "Matthew" and "Luke," where did this *Ur-Markus* come from? Something needed to be done about the material principle behind the doctrine of gospel origins.

And the formal principle, that optimistic philosophy of the Age of Liberalism, that saw man capable of endless improvement, that believed him in an evolutionistic way "day by day in every way getting better and better," that saw all men and nations within the foreseeable future living at peace with one another, that believed disease, poverty, and every form of distress shortly to be totally vanquished by advances in technology,—all this fine stuff dreams are made on crumbled about the heads of the systematic and exegetical theologians of the day, and the "liberal" interpreter of the New Testament found himself in increasingly deep hot water. For World War I had happened, nation after nation tumbling into it. Universal love had turned out to be selective hate, and the horrors of trench warfare with its barbed wire entanglements, machine guns, and poison gas had been followed by widespread starvation and despair. Those who turned to the Word of God for comfort found little consolation in the "assured results of criticism" that had been the theological nourishment of a whole generation of professional interpreters of the Scriptures. The assurance that there had once existed not one Isaiah but a whole raft of them and that Paul's epistle of optimism and joy, that to the Philippians, was really something welded together out of at least two letters—all this was cold comfort to a soul crying out in anguish. The keynote of contemporary thought was being struck by the watchwords: *Angst* - Despair - Death.

Then somebody dug up the long-neglected writings of a Dane of the the mid-nineteenth century. Theologically trained, he had never taken a parish, but spent a considerable patrimony publishing his own pseudonymously produced writings which no one was buying. Constantly at war with the established church, he turned from a pessimistic view of society to a pessimistic view of his own inner life. Man's existence in this world was beset by the unending necessity of making decisions in matters of limitless consequences for himself. Whichever way such a decision went, the maker of it would bear the dire results, but he could not avoid making the decision, like: Shall I study theology or sell life insurance? Shall I emigrate or stay here in Denmark? And it was this Dane's fundamental thesis (it will be recognized by now that we are talking about Søren Kierkegaard)

²⁵ George Widengran, *Mani and Manichaeism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p 125.

that only while in the throes of such weighty decision making was the individual actually living the life of a human being. And the more open-ended he was to the future the closer he came to a state of “authentic being.”

Now, Søren Kierkegaard stoutly maintained that he was not a theologian (with which judgment one would heartily agree), nor a philosopher (ditto), but a writer of belles-lettres. However that may be, many theologians took him seriously and soon there appeared, inspired by the “Either-Or” thrust of SK’s thinking, what became known as the “dialectical theology.” The details of this way of thinking do not concern us here except insofar as these theologians took to applying their point of view to the interpretation of the Bible. Now as never before critical students of the Scriptures insisted over and over again that “particular historical facts are not the presupposition of faith.” And here they were thinking especially about the historical facts of the Resurrection of Jesus as the basis of all Christian faith and hope as Paul speaks about them in First Corinthians 15:12–19. Dialectical theologians insisted that the interpreter’s responsibility was to understand the message of the texts, not as a system of teaching, but as something of meaning for “theological existence today.”²⁶ It will be readily recognized that here the principles of the thought of Søren Kierkegaard are merely being stated in theological terms.

Side by side with this turning to dialectical understanding came a development in the material principle behind the doctrine of gospel origins. This new development of the 1920’s was form criticism, called by the Germans *Formgeschichte*.

This new theological discipline—at many universities and schools it soon became that—sought to get the message of the gospels by first of all considering their separate component parts, called pericopes, that is, the separate sayings of Jesus, the reports of the miracles, of his passion, of his resurrection, and the like. These were to be studied, not as they stand in the New Testament, but as they were thought to have circulated among the early Christian communities in oral form, passed on from one to another. The missionary preaching of the first generations of Christian teachers had to do, so it was claimed, strictly with the proclamation of Christ as the Lord (the kerygma). The kerygma was not supposed to have had anything to do with the historical facts of the earthly Jesus: these circulated in the oral tradition of the pericopes. Being transmitted orally, the pericopes were undergoing constant modifications, not on the basis of any historical research into reliable testimony concerning the historical Jesus as this was carried on by Luke for his Gospel and Acts, but rather on the basis of the interests and needs of that particular worshiping community. The inevitable result of this line of approach to the story of our Lord’s life will have to be that *the Gospels tell us very little about the historical facts of Jesus’ life but a great deal about the history of religious thinking in the Christian communities in which the several pericopes finally took form*. To what degree anything of historical worth is to be found in the Gospels at all depends upon the notion of the particular critic one happens to be reading at the moment, but in general the thesis is stoutly defended in this historical-critical, dialectic-theological, form-critical approach to those documents that speak of the earthly life of our Savior: they are first-rate historical documents, not for the age of which they treat, the life of Jesus of Nazareth, but for the age in which they came into being, the later decades of the first century! To form-criticism the tradition about Jesus is not faithful to history!²⁷

Is there need for any further justification of the contention that the historical-critical approach to Scripture is the most radical of the many modern methods of unbelieving Biblical interpretation? It is not so much that the method denies the facts that are the basis of our faith. This denial too it is guilty of in many cases. Of greater importance for our immediate concerns is that the approach denies that we even have the possibility of knowing these historical facts which from the first century on have been the solid basis of the Christian faith.

The New Hermeneutic: Old Method, Some New Names

While the 1950’s were the decade of Karl Barth with his dialectical theology, and the 1960’s became the time of the reign of Rudolf Bultmann, the 1970’s bid fair to become the time when the “name theologians,” the people who write the New Testament commentaries in the various series that have been with us from youth on

²⁶ Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1969), p 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 7.

up and who are writing the lead articles in the religious encyclopedias that will continue to be used for many years to come, will prove to be the students and disciples of the famous man from Marburg, people now referred to as “the post-Bultmannians,” the protagonists for the New Hermeneutic.²⁸

Let it be clear from the outset that this is neither new nor a viable theory of Biblical interpretation. It is essentially German university theology, as the form of the name it has given itself would indicate.

Rather than being something new, however, it is but a further development of the material principle found in Form Criticism; as to its formal principle, it has merely substituted for the loosely-knit thinking of Kierkegaard the more precisely-stated and elaborately-worked system of a professional philosopher, Martin Heidegger.

If that were possible, however, this New Hermeneutic would seem all the less to make us confident of having solid historical facts upon which to base our faith. The great mentor of the movement, Rudolf Bultmann, has gone so far as to state that the demand for historical certainty is a sign of “unfaith.” In his *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* Paul J. Achtemeier has put the matter very fairly and plainly while speaking about “availability of historical knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth”:

Bultmann...argued that such knowledge is unavailable, and rightly so. All we need to know about Jesus is the fact that he is the revealer. That alone is enough to make us realize that we are not our own masters, and that our own quest for security is fruitless. Any further knowledge about Jesus as a person would simply contribute to our desire to achieve self-security apart from God. Indeed the very desire to possess such knowledge is an act of unfaith. It represents the desire to have our security located somewhere other than faith in God, who destroyed all human security.²⁹

Bultmann’s successor at Marburg, Ernst Fuchs, who has also written very extensively on the hermeneutical problem, speaks in similar fashion about any “attempt to find some proof for the truth of faith.” Again we quote from Achtemeier: “Any such attempt to provide proof for the truth of faith is completely at odds, says Fuchs, with true faith.”³⁰

And how has this New Hermeneutic gone about even further to “spiritualize” the facts of the historical Jesus?

In two ways. It has introduced a new element into the process of *Formgeschichte* and it has turned even more definitely to the acceptance of a system of thought that simply bypasses the existence of anything like a real God by taking up within itself the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Concerning the latter it is enough for our present purposes merely to note what the effect has been of the incorporation of such a system of thought into a method that is to expound Biblical texts. We again let Achtemeier speak:

The new hermeneutic is therefore not limited to exegesis; it is *a way of doing theology* (emphasis ours), and it will be better understood if that is kept in mind. Otherwise, much of what is said will seem to wander far from the more limited task of interpreting New Testament text, and will seem to lack exegetical justification. Further, because it is a way of doing theology, the new hermeneutic will at times seem to move in ways for which insufficient exegetical warrant is provided, had its proponents intended to limit themselves merely to such interpreting. Rather, the new hermeneutic, as a way of approaching theology, is, its proponents would argue, based on sound exegesis but not limited merely to an exposition of texts. “Interpretation” (hermeneutic) means making sense of (and thus interpreting) human existence rather than simply deciphering

²⁸ We here refer to such time-honored institutions as the two New Testament commentaries, the *Meyer Kommentar* and the *Lietzmann Handbuch* series, and the *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* encyclopedia, now in its third edition.

²⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p 69.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 110.

texts, and to carry out such a program the new hermeneutic sets its sights on the whole area of theology.³¹

It is however rather with the material principle behind the new hermeneutic that we have here to do. This concerns the introduction of a new (imaginary) process in the attempt to explain how the Gospels and Acts as we now have them came into being. This is referred to as *Redaktionsgeschichte*, redaction criticism, the study of an alleged process of editing.

It will be recalled that *Formgeschichte* thought of the raw materials out of which the Gospels finally happened into being as being separate units of gospel material circulating through the early Christian world in the form of an oral tradition. These units, the pericopes, the new hermeneutic imagines, were now taken up (whether in their oral or already in some written form seems immaterial) and were worked over in editorial fashion. And here's the nub of the matter! This was not, say these people, a process of editing as we might know it, one aimed at eliminating linguistic crudities, straightening out inconsistencies, and establishing something of a uniformity of style between the several sources of material that had come from a variety of places: some Christian, others Jewish, still others obviously Hellenistic (and hence pagan). The redactor (who he was does not matter) took it upon himself to *write into the traditional materials concerning the life of Jesus* (and in the case of Acts also concerning the life of the early church) *the particular theological interests that were of moment to himself, his community, his immediate environment.*

It is especially the name of Hans Conzelmann, of Heidelberg and Göttingen, himself a student of Bultmann, that has been associated with this latest enterprise. In 1953 while still at Heidelberg he published a study in the "theology of Luke." Its title was *Die Mitte der Zeit*.³² In 1964 a fourth edition of this work came out. Now the author was at Göttingen and was establishing a definite school of thought in Lukan exegesis. In 1963 he issued his commentary on Acts in the "Handbuch" series³³ and by 1972 students and assistants of his were bursting into print with doctoral-dissertation-become-books like the study of Luke as Hellenistic historian by Eckhard Plumacher.³⁴ Other men of prominence in New Testament studies have joined this movement, which is supposed to present an alternative to Bultmann's program of radical demythologizing. Unfortunately, if that is possible, under this approach the historical facts of New Testament history become even more uncertain.

Conzelmann's thinking starts with the assumption that the first Christians lived in the expectation that Jesus would return to earth immediately. Believers lived in fervent expectation of the parousia. We do best to quote Marshall's excellent analysis of Conzelmann's doctrine:

The thought of the church had to come to terms with the new situation; apocalyptic excitement had to be succeeded by a faith adapted to life in a world that went on in much the same way as it had always done.

Several early church theologians wrestled with this task, and Luke occupies a prominent place among them. He reinterpreted the eschatological content of the traditions which he incorporated in his Gospel in such a way that the parousia was regarded as *sudden rather than soon* (emphasis ours) and transferred to the indefinite future rather than expected at any moment.³⁵

The picture we are to get of the situation is then this that someone (here conveniently labeled "Luke") took the traditional account of the life of Jesus that he found in circulation and edited it by means of changes in a variety of ways so as to reflect in the Gospel as such the theology of his own much later age, according to Conzelmann, the time of the Old Catholic Church. Of course, "Luke" could have been a whole succession of editors, one or more; it really does not matter. What is important for Conzelmann and the *Redaktionsgeschichte*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p 30.

³² Hans Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 5. Aufl., 1964).

³³ Hans Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte No. 7 Handbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1963).

³⁴ Eckhard Plumacher, *Lukas als hellenistischer Schriftsteller* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972).

³⁵ Marshall, p 77f. Cf. also Conzelmann, *Outlines*, p 150.

school is that it was the church as such that was here active and bringing its doctrine to expression. To this way of thinking it is *the church* that is the *source of doctrine*. How strangely like Rome this sounds!

Meanwhile, what has happened to the historical reliability of statements of fact? In his discussion of the passion story in Luke's Gospel Conzelmann answers that question plainly and simply: where Luke differs from Mark's account, these variations are editorial inventions on Luke's part and are used to express his own point of view.

Let there be no mistake about the abyss fixed between the method of exegesis here described and that of the Church that has to this day continued in His Word by profession and in practice. We recognize that the Gospels are not stenographic or phonographic reproductions of the facts of the history of our salvation. Admittedly the Gospels, as is the rest of the New Testament, are preaching. But the content of preaching and the statement of historical fact do not stand in opposition to one another. Rather, each writer makes that selection of the many historical facts available to him and arranges them in such a way and with his chosen emphasis so as to underscore that basic thought concerning the Savior that is as it were the theme of the sermon he is here preaching in narrative form. To insist that the Gospels, just because they are preaching, cannot also be historical is, to borrow a word from a much-repeated billboard slogan of the present, plain STUPID.

The Inadequacy of the Moderate, "Evangelical" Approach

There are of course many New Testament scholars of reputation, outside that tight circle of German university theology to which the above-described persons belong, who have been most unwilling to follow in the paths of the radical advocates of the destructive criticism, like the devotees to demythologizing, redaction-criticism, salvation-history (in a technical sense), or whatever -ism the particular writer may think is the star to which he has hitched his wagon. To name a few: C.H. Dodd of England (now deceased), Krister Stendahl of Uppsala and now of Harvard Divinity School, Regin Prenter of Denmark. It would go entirely beyond the scope of this study on the importance of the facts of the life of the historical Jesus even to characterize the work of these men about which many words of commendation would have to be spoken. They would not go along with the Bultmannian *Dass*. The picture they have of the first disciples of our Lord is that of a group of earnest, zealous, and faithful men, men neither stupid nor pathological as unbelieving criticism has often made them out to be. Yes, men who out of a sincere and honest heart were doing their very best. But men—aye, there's the rub—good, honest, sincere men. Nothing more.

Here We Stand!

It has been an important part of our church's faithfulness to the motto it has taken for itself, to Continue in His Word, that all Bible interpretation in its midst be carried on in conscious agreement with the definition our church's earliest teachers gave of the process by which the books of Holy Writ came into being: inspiration by God's Holy Spirit of the prophets of the Old and the apostles of the New Testaments, a process that is in itself a miracle, an action of the God of all grace that defies all human analysis but that is still the plain teaching of the Bible itself.

These inspired instruments of divine revelation were God's own spokesmen. They stood so completely in His service that their words, though spoken by them and with their habits of thought and expression behind them, were still the very words that are God's revelation of Himself and His gracious will to us. The words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John concerning the facts of the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth are God's Word of revelation to us. God wanted His thoughts to be revealed to us precisely in the way in which these, His chosen spokesmen, spoke them.

Behind the words they spoke—and what is saying the same thing—behind the divinely inspired self-consciousness of these writers of the books of the Bible, Gospels and Acts included, we cannot, and ought not even try to, go.

Their words tell of facts. And this Word of God is Truth.