

# The Life of Our Lord in Contemporary Interpretation

by Frederic E. Blume

When present-day writers on Biblical interpretation claim the support of Martin Luther for their position that “the Word of God” is not at all to be identified with the written words of the Holy Scriptures, they at the same time directly or implicitly claim for themselves the support of the Great Reformer in their method of interpreting the Scripture. It is repeatedly alleged that the methods used by themselves in the sixth and seventh decades of the twentieth century are but a return to the approach to Scripture that Luther and the other Reformers held to, an approach that was allowed to fall into disuse in the post-Reformation age of orthodoxy out of a variety of dogmatic considerations.<sup>1</sup>

The picture we get of the situation today in the fields of Old and New Testament interpretation is a varied one: on the one hand, there are a number of slogans or catchwords around which much of the activity in Bible study has revolved. These catchwords include “Formgeschichte,” “Gemeintheologie,” “demythologizing,” “existential interpretation,” “The New Hermeneutic.” On the other hand, the picture regularly becomes agonizingly confused by the fact that the big “names” in the area of Biblical studies apparently have a great deal of difficulty in making themselves understood even to their own kind. They are constantly challenging one another to state precisely what is meant by such words as “faith,” “word,” “event.”

It is not the intention in this brief discussion to dwell on all the phases and aspects of Bible interpretation as this is being carried on at so many of the name-worthy schools of theology in our own land and in the nations beyond the seas. It shall rather be our purpose here to sketch in broad outline where, in this anniversary year of the beginning of the Reformation of the church through Martin Luther, the world of critical Biblical scholarship stands in its approach to a study of the life of our Lord as this is recorded for us in the four Gospels of the New Testament.

When Martin Luther read the Gospels, he read them as that which they present themselves to us as being: accounts by the four evangelists of the facts of our Lord’s birth, teaching, work, suffering, death, and resurrection. To him there was no question that what these four recorded had once occurred in actual fact; and when they recorded that something contrary to the laws of nature and to the everyday experiences of most men had occurred, then Luther accepted this as the account of a miracle, a miracle that had actually happened in historical time.

We are well aware of the fact that Luther had some reservations about a few of the later books of the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> While this is undeniably true, it should never be stated unless another fact is likewise mentioned, namely, that Luther felt that in a small number of the books of the New Testament the Gospel of Jesus Christ is presented in so clear and direct a fashion that, in our study of them, these books ought to take precedence. They are: the Gospel and First Epistle of John; the epistles of Paul, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians; and the First Epistle of Peter.<sup>3</sup> He did not mean that the first three Gospels are any less the Word of God or true and factual accounts of the life of Jesus Christ than is that of John. What he did mean was that what the other books do, those here mentioned do in outstanding fashion, so that John is for instance named the “greatest evangelist” and his Gospel the “outstanding, heart-warming, and chief of the Gospels.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, “Word of God and Hermeneutic” in *The New Hermeneutic*, edited by James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 78ff.; also his article “Hermeneutik” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed. (RGG<sup>3</sup>), III, pp. 242–262.

<sup>2</sup> Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964), p. 106.

Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenburg Press, 1961), p. 225.

<sup>3</sup> Kooiman, op. cit., p. 225. WA DB 6, 10, “[these chief books are] the real kernel and marrow of all books; so they should properly be put in the first rank, and every Christian is to be urged to read them in preference to others and is by daily reading to make them as familiar to himself as is his daily bread.”

<sup>4</sup> Eduard Ellwein, *Summus Evangelista: Die Botschaft des Johannesevangeliums in der Auslegung Luthers* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1960), pp. 7f. WA DB 6, 10.

Once this item in the Great Reformer's thinking on Holy Writ is duly appreciated, it will not be so hard to see why he, for various reasons, put four books, Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Revelation, at the end of the New Testament in his *Neues Testament Deutsch* of 1522 and in his table of contents omitted numbering them together with the other twenty-three books, a practice that was continued down to the *Gesamtbibel* of 1546.<sup>5</sup> In this connection Luther made it abundantly clear that he would not deny the right of other Christians to consider these four on a par with the rest. The point here is that Luther's attitude toward the questions of the New Testament canon did not at all make of him a sixteenth-century forerunner of the higher criticism that came into being in the nineteenth. Just because his conscience was so completely bound under the Word of God as written in the words of the Holy Bible was he able in all Christian freedom to express his opinion as he did.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, for Luther the starting-point of interpretation was that the four Gospels were the writing of the four evangelists who are named as authors; that Paul wrote the letters ascribed to him, and that the epistles I Peter and I John were from the pen of the Apostles whose names they bore.

Luther's approach, then, to the understanding and interpretation of the New Testament was determined by what he believed these books to be. Such is always the case. Our principle of interpretation of a given book (our "hermeneutics" of it) is determined in all-important considerations by what we hold that book to be. To put it another way: our doctrine of inspiration or our denial of that doctrine will determine how we will deal with any book of the Bible, our hermeneutics. If I believe one of the Gospels to be the work of the first-century Christian named as its author, my interpretation of it will be of a certain kind. If I however hold that same book to be a more or less fortuitous gathering-together of materials from a variety of sources, then my approach to that same Gospel will in the very nature of things have to follow an altogether different pattern.

Today, the theological discipline of hermeneutics is being held up to ridicule, even contempt. What once was thought to be a valid introductory study in theology and a necessary one since it dealt with the theory of interpretation while exegesis was given to its practice, is today being given short shrift by the protagonists of "The New Hermeneutic." An excellent textbook like that of the Dane Frederik Torm is given patronizing treatment, to say the very mildest thing one can, and the student seeking guidance through the maze of mid-twentieth century New Testament interpretation is cautioned that the old familiar guides have today grown obsolete and that the old trusted discipline of hermeneutics is much more likely to lead astray than to lead to a proper understanding of the meaning of the books of the New Testament. It is contended that hermeneutics has declined in direct proportion as critical scholarship has risen, and that while liberalism has turned to criticism, conservatism has kept to hermeneutics as a discipline. Typical here is the essay entitled "Hermeneutic since Barth" contributed by James M. Robinson to the symposium *The New Hermeneutic*.<sup>7</sup>

It will be noted that while *hermeneutics* is scorned, *hermeneutic* has been installed as queen of the theological disciplines. And this is no figure of speech. "The New Hermeneutic" believes that it can, and ultimately will, supplant all other approaches to the understanding of the Scriptures and that this "new" approach must be used as the basic methodology, not only in exegesis, but also in church history, dogmatics, homiletics, and in *Seelsorge*.

<sup>5</sup> WA DB 6, 12f. *ibid.* XXXIII. William Tyndale in his New Testament translation of 1534 lists the New Testament books precisely as Luther had done: the first twenty-three from Matthew to III John are numbered; then follow Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Revelation without numbering. Cf. *The New Testament*: Translated by William Tyndale, 1534 (Cambridge: The University Press, 1938), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 233. WA DB 6, 10. Luther's own words in the *Septemberbibel* of 1522 are "*Summa*, St. John's Gospel and his First Epistle; St. Paul's epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's First Epistle—these are the books that show you Christ and teach everything that you need to know for your salvation even though you never see another book or hear another doctrine. St. James' epistle, therefore, in comparison with these, does not have much for you, for it does not preach the Gospel in the manner of these other books."—For this interpretation of the often mis-read and mis-quoted *stroern Epistel* of Luther ("straw-epistle") as meaning not "flavorless" but rather "like threshed straw without profitable content," see *sub. voc. Stroh* and *Strohen (strohern)*, and especially the quotations there from Luther's usage, in Moritz Heyne *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: S. Herzel, 1895), vol. III, coll. 877–879.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Hermeneutic*, Vol. II in *New Frontiers in Theology*, edited by James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 1–77, esp. pp. 15–19.

How did it come about that a new movement developed within the traditional list of theological disciplines, one that pretended that it was possible to turn the familiar hermeneutics upside-down, yes, that insisted, unless the latter did occur, that all theological study was headed straight for disaster?

One answer to this question that is not entirely facetious could be that the case of The New Hermeneutic is strangely parallel to that of Neo-Orthodoxy. Rather than being what its name implies, the latter is a Palaeo-Heterodoxy, and the former, The New Hermeneutic, has nothing to do with hermeneutics understood as the principle of interpreting the words of Holy Writ; rather than being something new, it is as old and out-worn as is all negative, unbelieving criticism of the Bible that in the immediate past was closely connected with what we understand by “liberal theology.”—The two words “liberal” and “conservative” when used in this connection are really quite meaningless. Much better it would be to adopt into our usage two German words that would at least say what we would want understood by them: the suggestion here is that instead of “conservative” and “liberal” the words *bibelgläubig* and *bibelungläubig* be used. The Germans of today are so conspicuously taking over words bodily from our language that there would be no harm in occasionally returning the compliment!

The liberal theology as it came to its *floruit* in America during the 1930's was nothing if not *bibelungläubig*. So far as the Old and New Testaments were concerned, liberalism accepted all the “assured results of criticism” as this had begun around the year 1800 in the universities of Europe and had held sway there ever since. Documentary source theories for both Testaments went in the main unquestioned, the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis for the Pentateuch, the Two-Documentary Source Theory for the Synoptic Gospels. In the eyes of this *bibelungläubig* scholarship of the age of liberalism, Israel was no longer God's Chosen People created to keep His Words of Promise alive. It was no longer looked upon as that people from whom the Messiah would come and to whom His words should then in the first place be addressed. To them Israel was rather but a highly interesting small nation of the Near East, one that happened to live on the land-bridge between Egypt and the Tigris-Euphrates valley but that in all things was subject only to the social and economic laws that determine what life is to be like for the individual and for the nation to which he belongs. The history of an Israel so conceived was to be studied on the basis of precisely the same presuppositions, as was the history of any of its neighbors. To this liberal theology too Jesus of Nazareth was but another rabbi from Galilee, one of perhaps outstanding sweetness, gentleness, and purity of character; one who saw perhaps a little more readily, and more deeply than others do, into the nature of men and things, and one who had a great deal of success in conveying His thoughts and feelings to the despised and underprivileged among His contemporaries. An outstanding man? Of course! A great teacher? The world's best!! A model for all of us to follow? Without question!!! But, alas, as with Poe's raven, “only this, and nothing more.”

From this essential position of liberal theology the new hermeneutics have deviated in only minor details, and such deviation would be claimed as an improvement upon the position held a third-century ago. The idea that the two Testaments, the three Synoptic Gospels included, are more or less haphazardly gathered and accidentally preserved bits of history, information on early cultus, gems of wisdom, and a little plain talk in pastoral counseling is still with us. Only today the picture given by the new hermeneutics is quite a bit fuzzier than the one we got from the higher critics of the liberal age. The Synoptic Gospels, for instance, are no longer to be looked upon as compilations in which a handful of once-existing but now irretrievably lost literary documents have been more or less skillfully woven together to produce the gospel-form of book, but we are being told that we must get behind these supposed documents, that may really never have existed after all, to the time when stories about the life of Jesus were being passed around from one Christian community to another, first in the Jewish Christian world of Palestine and then also in the Gentile Christian world of Hellenistic and Roman culture. If these stories, or sayings, about Jesus actually were based upon something in the lifetime of Jesus, present-day criticism would have us believe that naturally they would be much changed in the process of being passed about by word of mouth from person to person, and from community to community. The change might be slight or radical, so that it was altogether possible that a saying originally uttered by the opponents of Jesus came to be ascribed to the Lord Himself and that a meaning was finally given to that saying which Jesus never would have had for it if the saying had been His in the first place. Both during the time when the sayings

about the life of Jesus were passing about in oral form, repeated from mouth to mouth, and during the time when they came to be written down, the new theology assumes that ideas and problems in which the people of that decade were especially interested were moved back in time to the days of our Lord. It assumes that the way of putting that idea and the particular solution of the problem which the later decade wanted was put into the mouth of Jesus so that He is presented in the Gospels as solving many a pressing question that arose only in the later church. Neither the question nor its answer, so present-day Bible-interpretation contends, actually was there during the years 27–30 A.D., when Jesus walked this earth in His public career. The Gospels do not give us reliable information concerning the life of Jesus the Christ: they do however—and this is stressed over and over again—have a great deal to tell us, if we handle them in the right way, about the age in which they, or the smaller parts out of which they are composed, were either created or re-formed out of some previous material.

Just as the present-day approach to the Gospels is that of a liberalism grown fuzzy, so is the picture of the Savior we get when we study the writings of the men of The New Hermeneutic. Jesus, the lonely prophet from Nazareth in Galilee, is for the most part still there, but as we look more closely at His facial features and at the manner of His gait, these come to resemble more and more closely the look and manner of walking of the particular theologian whom we happen to be reading at the moment.

It will be clear by now that The New Hermeneutic has taken over *in toto* the presuppositions and the methodology of *Formgeschichte*, that radical form of modern Gospel criticism that came to the fore in Europe between the two World Wars and that served sort of to bridge the gap between the Age of Liberalism and the Era of Neo-Orthodoxy. The method was proposed in Europe right after World War I but did not “catch on” in America until the 1930’s. Briefly, *Formgeschichte* proceeded on the following assumptions:<sup>8</sup>

In utter disregard of what history has said about the origin of the four Gospels and about the two apostles and the two apostolic men who wrote them (as in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* III: 3–4; 23–25; 30–31), *Formgeschichte* set about to reconstruct, without finding analogies for its fabrications anywhere, what it would henceforth look upon as the process whereby the Gospels came into being.

In the first place, rather than dealing with the Gospels as works of literature produced in a certain place, by a certain individual, for a definite purpose, and intended for a reading or listening church, *Formgeschichte* concentrated on the single, small, separate units of which the Gospels, and especially the Synoptics, were thought of as being composed. Dibelius called them pericopes. These separate *pericopes* were then studied as though they were but another example of folk literature, the legends, tales, and sagas that preserve what is of interest and value in the history of many a people.

Secondly, these pericopes were then thought of as having been put through a process of remolding and revision, first of all in the time when they circulated orally. Some of them, it is generally admitted, may have had an actual basis in some word or deed out of the lifetime of Jesus. Such a “true tradition,” however, could be, and generally was, altered by the special interests of the church during the time between the ministry of our Lord and the time when the particular Gospel came to be written down. The story would be altered to make it

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<sup>8</sup> K. L. Schmidt opened the door to the new methodology with a book on the framework of the life-story of our Lord in the Synoptic Gospels. He called it *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (Berlin, 1919) and sought to show that the greater part of Mark was a series of episodes or stories quite recklessly strung together by some “editor,” who was not beyond using such mechanical devices as the word εὐθὺς *immediately* to bridge the gap between two episodes.

Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann were the leaders in developing and popularizing the method. Dibelius’ *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1919; 3rd ed., 1959; English transl. of 2nd ed., *From Tradition to Gospel*, New York: Scribner’s, 1939) and Bultmann’s *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1921; 4th ed., 1958; English transl., *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*; Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), have become quite the “bibles” of this branch of the “higher criticism.” It should be noted here that B. H. Streeter, whose *The Four Gospels* appeared in 1925 (New York: Macmillan, 9th impression, 1956) did not discuss *Formgeschichte*; he had however a new multiple-documentary-source theory of his own to promulgate. Rather, he vigorously opposed the then new endeavors as “always precarious and sometimes perverse,” (quoted in A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament*, second edition, revised by C. S. C. Williams (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 58.

A textbook reportedly to appear also in English translation that applies the method especially to the Old Testament is Klaus Koch, *Was ist Formgeschichte?* Neue Wege der Bibellexese (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins GmbH, 1964).

say what the later age felt the need of having it say. Of course, so went the argument, a large percentage of what the Gospels speak about did not actually take place, ever! Many elements borrowed from the Palestinian Jewish and the Hellenistic pagan life of the nations of the Near East came to be associated with the life and words of Jesus. If the church of a later decade found these things of value, it connected them with the lifetime of Jesus, ascribing to Him words that He never uttered and deeds that He never performed, but which the Christian communities of a later time were interested in; so they ascribed them to Jesus. Accordingly, the canonical Gospels (and here it is generally the first three that are under discussion, John forming a class by itself) will be practically worthless as sources for information about the life of Jesus of Nazareth, but they will be first-class historical source material for the later history of the church during the time when the Gospel-materials were going through their formative stage.

In the third place, *Formgeschichte* contends that these units of tradition (the pericopes) were put together without much plan or reason; so the way is left open to the critic to fit them into any scheme that will suit whatsoever he imagines the history of Jesus and of the early church to have been like.

Fourthly, the tradition-units appear in a number of forms, and the claim is made that much can be learned from a comparative study of the various forms (hence the origin of the term *Formgeschichte*.)

Finally, in view of all these claims, the conclusions that must be drawn about the value of the Gospels as sources of information and concerning the way they are to be approached (the *hermeneutic* of them) go something like this:

a. The Gospels are products of entire Christian communities and have been brought into being by corporate, never individual, action—they are *Gemeindetheologie*, “community-theology.”

b. The forces that transformed already existing material or created some anew were cradled in a definite social milieu, a life situation (Dibelius coined the term *Sitz im Leben* and popularized it), and this definite life situation with its questions, interests, and problems was responsible not only for *the way in which* things were related about the life of Jesus of Nazareth, but it was also ultimately responsible to an extremely large degree for *the very things themselves* that were told about Jesus. Hardly ever, says *Formgeschichte*, was the *Sitz im Leben* to be found in the history of Jesus: it is regularly to be sought in the history of the early church, in the decades generally between the destruction of Jerusalem and the writing of that particular Gospel, an event which in the nature of things the *Formgeschichtler* put quite late in the second half of the first century.

In order to complete our picture of this most radical of modern critical approaches, we shall need something of an account of the forms in which the critics imagine the Gospel materials to have circulated during the oral period, forms that were then crystallized when for some reason or other they came to be reduced to writing (and let us remember that not a single one of these pericopes now reduced to writing out of the thousands there must have been if *Formgeschichte* is valid has been discovered by any one of the extensive archaeological undertakings throughout that ancient world. Nor does any ancient historian or literary man drop the least hint that there ever were such or that the elaborate process here taken for granted ever ran its course. )

Every critic has his own notions about and terms for the forms in which the Gospel-materials are alleged to have circulated, but the following sketch will serve our purposes. The materials concerning both the deeds and words of Jesus are thought of as passing about in the following forms:

#### I. Stories that involve incidents in Jesus' life.

As a rule these are quite brief. They end in a saying that drives home the lesson. They are variously named: pronouncement stories, apophthegms, or paradigms. An example would be the passage about the tribute money, which ends in Jesus' unforgettable pronouncement regarding Caesar and God (Mark 12:17).

## II. Novellen or Miracle-tales.

Bultmann sees a strong resemblance to the miracle tales (especially of supernatural healings of disease) that were told of the wonder-workers in the pagan Hellenistic world and therefore believes that these stories of Jesus as a worker of miracles were brought into the Gospel tradition only after the Christian movement had passed out of the confines of Palestine and had moved out into the Graeco-Roman world of the eastern Mediterranean. Bultmann would then look for their *Sitz im Leben*.

## III. Stories about Jesus.

This form of pericope has considerable variety, but time and again the critics here insist that the picture given of Jesus as one transcending the purely human and the purely natural has been strongly influenced by the myths that the pagan people believed concerning their heathen gods. An example would be the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord.

## IV. Sayings of Jesus.

Again, these are of several types:

- a. *Wisdom words*. Though wisdom literature was much admired by the Jews, and even though nothing could have been more natural than that Jesus should utter such brief words of sanctified wisdom, Bultmann contends that at least some of the sayings of this kind must have been put into the mouth of Jesus.
- b. *Prophetic sayings*. These include not only sayings regarding the future, like the prediction of the destruction of the Temple, but also sayings in a prophet's, that is, a preacher's manner, like the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount.
- c. *Legislative sayings*. Included here are Jesus' teachings about prayer, fasting, divorce, forgiveness, and a great variety of other topics. Sometimes the Formgeschichtler call them *church words*, since, from their point of view, they were put into the mouth of Jesus by interests arising in the later church, for by doing so the church felt that it was gaining the authority of Jesus for the position which it by that time had come to hold. An example would be the sayings about the Sabbath in Matthew 12:1ff, which—so the argument goes—no self-respecting Jew of Palestine, not even Jesus of Nazareth, would have uttered on Palestinian soil. But since the Gentile Christian church came to view the Sabbath regulations in a way quite different from that of the Jewish Christian church, these sayings were put into the mouth of Jesus at that later time to win support for these views and practices in the matter of the Sabbath law. Jesus Himself, they contend, could never have talked like that!
- d. *I—sayings*. These are sayings in which the person of Jesus is made to stand out in prominent fashion. Comparisons are drawn with certain "I am" sayings ascribed to pagan Hellenistic deities; hence, sayings of this type are labeled importations from the extra-Palestinian, Hellenistic world and are for that reason of questionable historicity. [All the wondrous I AM sayings of our Lord then are to be taken as nothing more than the products of a pious but utterly perverted religious self-consciousness of a later corporate church!! Surely the designations "radical" and "destructive" are not too strong for this, the latest type of approach to the study of the Gospels.]
- e. *Parables*. This group is well defined, and even the most radical critics admit that Jesus may have spoken some of them.

## V. The Passion Story.

Critics are split over whether this was a well-knit narrative or whether it was pieced together from shorter fragments which were later embellished by the addition of other material. At any rate, The Passion Story is held to be one of the forms in which the Gospel materials circulated and were worked over.

If so much of the Gospels is then according to the Formgeschichtler to be ruled out as historically unreliable, what kind of material finally could, according to them, be accepted as furnishing reliable information concerning the Jesus who did His work here on earth between the years 27 and 30 A.D.? Here our critics have set up a highly arbitrary critical principle.<sup>9</sup> The principle is that only those passages in the Gospels can be accepted as historically trustworthy that have no parallel either in the early church or in contemporary Judaism. But is it not to be expected that there should be parallels between our Lord's teaching and that of the first-century rabbis? *Parallels* are all we are talking about, not necessarily agreements. The rejection on the other hand of sayings of Jesus that have a parallel in the early church stems from the oft-repeated contention that Jesus never intended to found a church to come after Himself and that therefore all sayings that have a parallel in the church have been put there at a later date by that same Christian church.

However, if such is the case, we might well ask, "*What can be known about the life and teaching of Jesus?*"

On this matter the present generation of New Testament scholars have veered away slightly from the position once held by the man who was at one time the teacher and mentor of a great number of the people who today occupy the chairs in theology in Europe's leading universities. That one is Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg. He taught that all we can or ought to want to know about Jesus' life is the mere *Dass* of it: *that* such a One existed, and no more! Bultmann's reason for this position was twofold: as leading Formgeschichtler he held that, the Gospel-materials being what they are, there is heartily little that we can actually know of Jesus beyond the mere *that-ness* of Him; what is more, says Bultmann, to ask to know more is evidence of unfaith or as he would say, *prima facie* evidence that we are leading an "unauthentic existence" and are dependent in the very ground of our being on such a material thing as the proof furnished by an historical argument. The reason for Bultmann's talking this way cannot be taken up here but hangs together with his having imported into his "theological" thinking the existential philosophy of an earlier colleague of his, the secular philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Many of the students of Bultmann have retreated a little from his extreme position and, while still holding in the main to his basic presuppositions (and it must not be forgotten that Bultmann does have presuppositions: the radical denial of each one of the statements of the Apostles' Creed!), some of them have published opinions that say: "But after all there are some things aside from the mere *that-ness* of Jesus that we can accept as historically reliable, written though they be in the Gospels."

By now it will be clear what the fundamental point of departure is for the present-day critic who considers the life story of our Lord in the light of the four Gospels. We might formulate his feelings thus:

"I. The words of the Gospels may convey to us great spiritual truths, but that is not to say that they also tell us historical facts.

"II. The known facts of Jesus' existence are few indeed, and what we have of them has been quite thoroughly overgrown with a lot of extraneous matter, matter that an early church either produced or adapted to suit its own needs.

"III. What that early church therefore did was interpret the meaning of Jesus as it saw Him, not necessarily as He was during the life-time he spent upon earth.

"IV. The words written in the Gospels, which already are interpretations of what Jesus meant to the early church, now need to be interpreted by us anew in order that by means of this double interpretation we may arrive at a little further insight into the one known as Jesus of Nazareth."

Small wonder then that hermeneutics as a theological discipline is being so roundly rejected by the "Bible-scholarly" world! Hermeneutics teaches us how to get at the meaning intended by the original writer for his original readers. But in the currently popular *wissenschaftlich* view there was neither original meaning nor

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<sup>9</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 163.

original writer nor original readers. For the new hermeneuts all of these factors are extremely variable and as slippery as was Proteus of old.

We shall take note finally of the positions held by two men who stand in the front rank of New Testament critics today and who occupy at least a part of the place once held in New Testament studies by the now-retired Rudolf Bultmann. One of these is Ernst Käsemann, professor in the University of Tübingen. His basic positions he has quite thoroughly spelled out for us.<sup>10</sup>

In his essays Käsemann highlights the preaching of Jesus as the distinctive element in the data given us by the Gospels. He says, for instance:

*Our investigation has led to the conclusion that we must look for the distinctive element in the earthly Jesus in his preaching and interpret both his other activities and his destiny in the light of this preaching.*<sup>11</sup>

Another writer profoundly to affect New Testament studies in our generation, especially studies in the life of Jesus, is a member of the faculty of Bultmann's old university, that of Marburg. He is Ernst Fuchs, a volume of whose essays has likewise been made available to us in English translation.<sup>12</sup>

For Fuchs the outstanding trait of Jesus' ministry was his readiness to consort with tax collectors, sinners, and other disreputable people and to share meals with them. This act was not simple sociability or condescension but, as Fuchs sees it:

*A man who dares to act in God's stead, and who, it must always be remembered, draws to himself sinners who, but for him, would have to flee from God. ... the situations reflected in the community debates and discussions preserved in the Gospels might well cast doubt on the genuineness of a particular saying; but they might equally cast light on Jesus' conduct.*<sup>13</sup>

This then is the Jesus who emerges from the studies in the Gospels being carried on in many places of the theological world in this 450th year of the beginning of Martin Luther's Reformation. The resulting Jesus is still the teacher of profound insight; He is still the ideal man whose personal conduct is worthy of all emulation. But—as to the Baptist's word about Him as the Lamb of God come to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29)? Here the men of The New Hermeneutic would answer with a unanimity that is not so common among them in other matters. They would say:

The words attributed to John the Baptizer surely reflect a great spiritual truth which the early church felt and was striving to bring to expression in this quaint figure. They may still be of value to us today if they will serve as a means whereby we may come to an existential encounter with the spiritual Christ.

This brief excursion through current Gospel interpretation will have served its purpose if it will but encourage us to a deeper devotion to God's Written Word so that under our Lord's gracious protection and guidance Luther's heroic word may remain true for us also:

*Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn  
und kein Dank dazu haben!*

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: CSM Press Ltd., 1965).

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964).

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., p. 22.