

The New Quest of the Historical Jesus---

A Liberal Response

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I. Introduction

PERHAPS the chief theological issue of the past twenty-five years and one which now claims almost the entire attention of New Testament theologians and scholars is based upon the following predicament in New Testament exegesis, namely, that the Christian proclamation has been "packaged" with an obsolete, mythical world view. The association of the two, i.e., kerygma or proclamation and cosmology, in New Testament literature has made the Christian gospel appear to the modern reader as incredible and as untenable to maintain as the antiquated cosmology which accompanies it.

At this juncture the debate as to what is mythology in the New Testament and how to deal with it remains open but considerably confused and so long as the "new theologians" in their quest for hidden meanings in the New Testament continue to pile ambiguity upon ambiguity it will remain so. So far, it seems, the fundamentalists are the only ones to remain outside of the debate. For them there is no issue. The New Testament is God's word and this "fact" must be maintained against all costs and all scientific evidence to the contrary. The liberal position needs to be re-examined and perhaps to be restated, but it has not been "beached" as some theologians of the new order would have us believe.

Rudolf Bultmann is of course at the center of the controversy and while it is not my purpose to pursue here the

fine points of his theology nor to review at length the many criticisms formulated by his students [certainly this audience needs no introduction to such details], it is my intention to present a criticism of developments in the debate of the so-called "Post-Bultmannian period," specifically involving James M. Robinson's "new quest of the historical Jesus."

Bultmann, as you are well aware, is easily misunderstood. But, then, the language of most existentialists whether in German, in French or in English translation is difficult to follow and it is to the credit of Bultmann's critics that in spite of his use of a somewhat ambiguous existential terminology many points of his now famous demythologizing thesis have been clarified. The following paragraphs, though probably oversimplifying Bultmann, are intended to bring into sharper focus for our discussion those elements in Bultmann's thesis which relate most importantly to the continuing debate.

II

Early Christian writers assumed reality of a world beyond or transcending nature which they objectified in narratives about God, angels and evil spirits. As Bultmann observed, Christians believed themselves to be living in a three-storied universe. The floor of heaven was located just above the highest mountains; hell was below, earth was sandwiched in between heaven and hell and communication between the spheres was a matter of several moments flight. For a few years of mortal life, men dwelt between the ceiling and the basement with supernatural powers from above and below intruding upon the scene. Angelic and demonic agents were ac-

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tively influencing men and in this manner contesting with each other for complete control of the world.

Early Christian writers believed that the end of the age was near, that a cosmic upheaval should follow signs of the approaching end and that crucial among all of these apocalyptic events was the final defeat of evil, the resurrection of the dead, a last judgment and assignment of all men either to salvation and heaven or to hell. The peculiarly Christian mythical innovation was its proclamation that in the person of Jesus Christ God lived for a time upon earth among men, that he allowed himself to be crucified in order that all men's sins might be atoned and reconciliation with God achieved, that through his resurrection death and demonic forces were finally defeated and that the risen, exalted Lord should soon appear to usher in the last stages of the grand program providing for man's salvation.

All this, says Bultmann, is in the language of myth.¹ It reflects the Christian's deep concern for the basic though paradoxical and opposing forces involved in living: birth and death, growth and decay, the sustaining and the waning of life. The Christian myth-maker, as in the case of all early myth-makers, projected upon a cosmic screen the deeply felt, though scarcely understood, anxieties, fears, hopes and longings which arose out of his experiences. The real seat or ground of myth, then, is man himself and for this reason New Testament myths should be interpreted anthropologically, not cosmologically, or "better still," Bultmann says, "existentially."² "The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in

which he lives."³ Bultmann, therefore, maintains that the mythical framework of the New Testament must be reinterpreted or, to use his term, **demythologized**. It is his conviction that the kerygma embodies a truth independent of its mythical setting which can be made available to modern man once it is stripped from its pre-scientific mythical conveyance.

Now let us see what we have come to. What alternatives for interpreting New Testament themes have been proposed, or are maintained, in consequence of or perhaps in spite of, the demythologizing debate? Two extreme positions may be speedily dealt with: (1) For fundamentalists, the predicament calls for a decision either-or, all or nothing and the choice is all. Since fundamentalists reject the findings of modern science in favor of literal conceptions of God and the universe, the proposal to demythologize would seem irrelevant and meaningless. All, i.e., of the New Testament is assumed to be God's word. To preserve the text as it is written is one major test of loyalty to the Christian tradition. (2) For the skeptic, also, the predicament may involve a choice of all or nothing, but in this latter instance the choice would likely be nothing. That is to say, the entire New Testament would be rejected summarily as containing no substantial meaning for man in the modern era.

Less extreme alternatives are provided by liberal and Bultmannian proposals. These two are in agreement on at least two points: (a) that New Testament cosmology is obsolete and must be eliminated, but that (b) the New Testament contains some truth independent of its mythological context. The chief difference between the two involves the content of truth. For the liberal, the truth relevant for today is found in the ethical and moral implications of Jesus' life and in his teach-

¹Rudolph Bultmann, *New Testament & Mythology, Kerygma & Myth a Theological Debate*, H. W. Bartsch, ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, p. 10.

³*Ibid.*

ings. For the "new theologians," the truth is contained in the proclamation of God's saving event in Jesus Christ, a truth which is mediated through an existential encounter with Christ.

Bultmann's use of the term, **demythologizing**, has been somewhat misleading. To demyth would seem to imply the rejection of myth entirely. This is precisely what liberal New Testament scholarship proposed some thirty or forty years ago, but this is precisely what Bultmann does not intend. Bultmann proposes to re-interpret New Testament myths so as to offer man an understanding of himself, i.e., to find existential meaning in the myths. Perhaps the term, **re-mythologizing**, would be more suitable. At least some of Bultmann's students and critics have suggested that the latter would be more adequately descriptive of his procedure.

Bultmann's proposal to demyth, then, was not new. He, himself, readily admits this fact.⁴ Pre-war liberal scholars as well as some earlier Christian thinkers were aware of incongruities in New Testament literature which were brought to light by the advance of science. They and Bultmann realized the necessity to re-interpret. But it was Bultmann's commitment to the central position of the kerygma that distinguished his demything from that of liberals. From Bultmann's point of view, liberal demything swept out everything including the essential core of the New Testament, namely, the proclamation that Jesus Christ was the decisive event through which God achieved man's salvation. However, as Bultmann points out, even this proclamation is couched in mythical language. The question remains, therefore, whether the kerygma itself can be demythologized so as to be meaningful to the person "who no longer thinks

mythologically."⁵ Bultmann concludes that such demything is not only possible but mandatory and that the substance of such a demything is an existential re-interpretation of the kerygma. To believe in the cross of Christ, for Bultmann, does not mean concern for an objective event in time, or concern for a mythical process worked outside of man by God for man's redemption, "but rather," he says, "to make the cross of Christ one's own."⁶ The cross, so interpreted, becomes an ever present reality, a moment of personal decision and a judgment of oneself. "The preaching of the cross as the event of redemption challenges all who hear it to appropriate this significance for themselves to be willing to be crucified with Christ."⁷

III.

What we have said of Bultmann, though briefly presented, I trust will be sufficient for our purposes. More of his doctrine will, I am sure, emerge in connection with our criticism of developments in the Post Bultmannian period to which we now turn our attention.

The following quotation from John Cobb, Jr. summarizes in excellent fashion the chief issue of the advancing dialogue between Bultmann and representatives of the new quest:

If the one all-decisive act of God occurred in the death and resurrection of Jesus and in such a way as to be invisible to any historical perspective it follows that the form and content of the historical life of Jesus must be essentially irrelevant to Christian faith.⁸

The relevance of the historical Jesus in Bultmann becomes, therefore, the crucial problem and it would appear

⁴Schubert Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (New York: Harper & Bros. Pub., 1961), p. 43.

⁵R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸John Cobb, "The Post-Bultmannian Trend", *The Journal of Bible & Religion*, Vol. XXX (Jan. 1962), p. 4.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 12.

from the analyses of Robinson and Cobb that the logical outcome of Bultmann's existentially oriented theology is, from their point of view, a serious de-emphasis of the historical Jesus. This is a **serious de-emphasis** because while Bultmann's kerygma does relate to Jesus and to history, his conception of Christian experience theoretically requires no absolute dependence upon an encounter with Jesus Christ. What Robinson and others suspected could happen given the Bultmannian existential thesis without sufficient anchorage to the Jesus of history did in fact happen in the thinking of Schubert Ogden for Ogden has concluded, if I understand him correctly, that an event of existential moment might occur anywhere in any religious tradition and that such an event has no necessary connection with what is taken to be the distinctive Christian claim, unless, of course, one refers to all religious experiences as Christian. "The first conclusion to be drawn from it," [i.e., from man's condition of fallenness] Ogden says, "is not that man needs Jesus Christ, but that he needs a new self-understanding."⁹

In contrast with Ogden's reconstruction of Bultmann, those of the new quest hold the encounter with Jesus Christ to be central to Christian existence; they maintain that the church's kerygmatic proclamation about Christ and the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels are identical and that this conclusion when followed to its logical end, re-establishes the Jesus of history to a decisive place in Christian theology.

The place of the kerygma, therefore, has come to the forefront of the controversy. It was in fact the formula, kerygma = Jesus' history and selfhood, which identified James M. Robinson's thesis. Thus it was argued by Robinson that the long standing stalemate over the question of Jesus' self consciousness finally was to be broken.

Jesus claimed no messianic titles. Such claims were totally unnecessary for, as Robinson and others point out, in Jesus' words and in his acts, "is implicit an eschatological understanding of his person which becomes explicit in the **kerygma** of the primitive Church."¹⁰

Now let us examine Robinson's proposition that the Jesus in history and the Christ of the kerygma are continuous and identical. Cobb has rightly concluded that this first principle of the new quest makes Jesus a Christian. But this is nothing new. It simply means that once more the Johannine and Pauline interpretations of the meaning of Jesus have been superimposed upon the Synoptic portrait. It is perhaps true that prewar liberal scholarship exaggerated the non-historicity of John in contrast with claims for historical perspective in the synoptic gospels, but the conclusion drawn by these scholars that there were significant differences between the Synoptics and John on the question of Jesus' self awareness seems entirely consistent with all of the evidence. The simple unassuming response of Jesus, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone,"¹¹ for example, is certainly not characteristic of God's son in the Fourth Gospel, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," "He who has seen me has seen the Father,"¹² etc. To insist that these two statements are identical is to force a well-developed Christology out of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and no less serious, it is to lift the person of Jesus entirely out of the Jewish context and setting into which he was most certainly born and raised and against which his life and contributions are to be understood.

If Bultmann's proposal to demyth is taken at all seriously, it ought to have

¹⁰James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1959), p. 16.

¹¹Mark 10:18.

¹²John 14:9, 10.

⁹S. Ogden, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

made clear first of all that in context Jesus was a Jew not a Christian, especially not in the theological sense claimed by the primitive Christian community. Jesus was nurtured in a Jewish socio-political, religious environment; his ideas were built upon the hopes and aspirations of the Jewish people centering in a messianic figure. He differed from some Pharisees and some Jewish officials in his estimate of the things which mattered most, but his intention was clearly to reform popular and official notions in line with the prophetic tradition. In all essentials Jesus was a Jew but this fact in itself needn't imply rigidity and restriction. Jesus was a creative person in his own right. His attempt to return to the heart and spirit of the Law and his willingness to cut across externals to establish the worth and dignity of individual persons regarded by many as radical and dangerously progressive may be cited as evidence of his insightfulness, creative capacity and courage. These qualities possessed by the historical person, Jesus, undoubtedly provided the momentum which carried beyond the end of his own life and into the life of the early church. I would agree, up to a point, therefore, with the formula presented by Morton Scott Enslin that the Jesus of history was "the cause of the Christ of faith."¹⁸ But Enslin's choice of terms, "inevitable cause, all-embracing figure," etc., implied to me a compromise which I felt was neither essential to the liberal position nor warranted by the evidence. The claim by those of the new quest that Jesus' creativeness derived from his self understanding and that self understanding was involved in his choice of a life's undertaking seems amply justified. The second half of the claim, however, that self understanding meant to Jesus Godhood in

the sense proclaimed by the Gospel of John or by the early church is clearly a dogma of faith rather than a statement of historical fact.

IV

To this point, then, I should say that (1) Bultmann and Post-Bultmannians, on the one hand, and liberals on the other differ in their intention with respect to demythologizing. As Buri, Ogden and others have pointed out, Bultmann's insistence upon the preservation of the kerygma with its mythical saving event in Jesus Christ is a compromise of his demythologizing thesis. It would seem that both are caught in the same contradictory position of proposing a radical demythologizing and at the same moment of granting immunity to certain New Testament elements which have become the core of the traditional Christian theology, namely, the doctrine that God acts in human history and its corollary the doctrine of resurrection as the saving event in Jesus Christ. In view of Ogden's position, the title of his book, **Christ Without Myth**, seems somewhat puzzling. Wouldn't the title be more consistent if it were stated as a question? Perhaps it should read **Jesus Without Myth**.

(2) It has been said that liberal interpretations of the New Testament modernized Jesus. Further, it was implied that since optimistic liberalism shared the light and carefree mood of the prewar period, its treatment of the New Testament was really quite superficial. There is of course some truth to the charge of modernization, but the conclusion that 20th century scholars have moved beyond superficialities and moods to something finally substantial and that today by means of new methodology theologians can browse in pastures lush with hidden meanings and deeper realities seems entirely unjustified. To equate Jesus of Nazareth with the Lord of faith is

¹⁸Morton S. Enslin, "The Meaning of the Historical Jesus For Faith", *The Journal of Bible & Religion*, Vol. XXX (July, 1962), p. 220.

most assuredly a latter-day theologian's modernization.

It may be true that New Testament interpretations do change with the moods and the needs of a given period. Modern analyses of the New Testament, it would seem, are no less vulnerable in this regard than were liberal interpretations of the prewar period. Barthian and Bultmannian doctrines of salvation with their emphasis upon God, for example, seem to reflect a mood of despair and a post-war disillusionment with regard to potentialities in man. Liberal thinking undoubtedly reflected the easy going optimism current in the early 20th century. Existential and neo-orthodox interpretations on the other hand reflect contemporary currents of pessimism and stress man's condition of fallenness and absolute dependence upon God. The latter interpretations undoubtedly appeal to many persons in our age of unrest and insecurity.

(3) The charge of ambiguity which Robinson levels against the liberal's use of the term, "historical Jesus," is surprising in view of his own use of oblique and inflationary terminology. The following is a criticism of Bultmann by the British analyst, Ronald W. Hepburn, which I believe has cogency for our discussion:

The pith of my criticism is simply this: that Bultmann's methods and terminology tend to insulate his claims against the possibility of verification . . . that this happens not in conjunction with a reasoned assertion that theological disagreements are by nature unsettleable, but by default through ambiguities and confusions in crucial terms, which effectively prevent the question of validity being raised as it ought to be raised and even deny the language whereby this could be done.¹⁴

This criticism could apply equally well

to representatives of the new quest, for one thing religious existentialists, Bultmann and Post-Bultmannians share is their use of dramatic, somewhat obtuse language. Robinson himself is a good case in point. If anything, the dramatic, emotional quality of his phraseology seems even more heightened and intensified. "We operate below the terminological level of meaning," Robinson says, "within the deeper level of meaning"; "the language of the kerygma must become transparent."¹⁵ It is his use of the expressions "below", "within", and "become transparent", which halfway convince the reader that he is about to take hold of something tangible, but one soon discovers that the heart of the matter is literally enshrined in a language of myth and poetry. One can only conclude with Hepburn, therefore, that this terminology really is as mythological as the New Testament cosmology from which the whole demythologizing thesis is attempting to deliver us.

My criticism at this point does not call into question the legitimacy of Robinson's use of poetic, dramatic language as such. Poetry is the language of religion. Great literary works of the Western world, biblical and non-biblical, employ poetic expressions, symbols and imagery. The issue in this particular instance concerns the claim made by exponents of the new quest that their "new method" provides historical ground for these poetic terms, a ground beyond that which could have been established by earlier historians.

The liberal scholar has been attacked from all sides in this debate. Preliminary comments in the works of Bultmann, Bornkamm and Robinson all point to the same conclusion, namely, the inadequacy, and in Robinson's case, the illegitimacy of prewar liberal interpretations of Jesus. Much of this criticism, so far as it relates to the conclusions drawn by liberal scholars

¹⁴Ronald W. Hepburn, "New Essays in Philosophical Theology", *Philosophy of Religion, A Book of Readings*, Geo. L. Abernethy & T. A. Langford, editors (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962), p. 320.

¹⁵James M. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

is undoubtedly justified. However, one should be reminded that the liberal tradition in its better moments has stood for a method of approach rather than the assertion of any particular position. While it is true that the liberal movement has produced its own brand of dogmatism, the central stream of the tradition is still to be identified primarily by its commitment to historical method. Now it is precisely this claim for historical method which also characterizes the new quest and it is to this claim that I should like to direct your attention.

In the opinion of Robinson, nineteenth century historians, bound as they were to the recording of cold facts, failed to grasp a deeper dimension of meaning which a new historiography has brought to light.

The nineteenth century saw the reality of the 'historical facts' as consisting largely in names, places, dates, occurrences, sequences, causes, effects — things which fall far short of being the actuality of history, if one understands by history the distinctively human, creative, unique, purposeful, which distinguishes man from nature. The dimension in which man actually exists, his 'world', the stance or outlook from which he acts, his understanding of his existence behind what he does, the way he meets his basic problems and the answer his life implies to the human dilemma, the significance he had as the environment of those who knew him, the continuing history his life produces, the possibility of existence which his life presents to me as an alternative — such matters as these have become central in an attempt to understand history. It is this deeper level of the reality of 'Jesus of Nazareth as he actually was' which was not reached by 'the reconstruction of his biography by means of objective historical method.'¹⁶

"The clear implication," Robinson maintains, "is that 'Jesus of Nazareth as he actually was' may be consider-

ably more than or quite different from 'the historical Jesus'.'¹⁷

Almost any historian could agree with at least two aspects of Robinson's statement: (1) that the actuality of history is more than the chronicling of names, places and dates; and (2) that most men are likely to be more than or different from the so-called "brute facts" about them. But the real issue goes beyond this. How can anyone "know" the person of Jesus as he was subjectively given any kind of historical method? For that matter, how can we know any person as he actually was, or is? What precisely are the fundamentals of this new historical method by which one claims to know the "more than" or the "deeper reality" of which Robinson bears witness and why in the case of Jesus must this "more than" take for granted godhood, why not prophethood or just plain manhood? How does one get at "the stance" from which Jesus viewed the world and his own destiny? What new elements in historiography could bring one to the subjective Jesus so as to reveal or to mediate his, that is Jesus', self understanding? Could anyone but Jesus have known such intimate detail? Clearly the assumption drawn by those of the new quest concerning Jesus' self awareness and the meaning of his selfhood for us today is supplied by the testimony of faith. There is in fact no new element in Post-Bultmannian research other than the faith or the fancy which the theologian brings to his investigation.

Robinson's dismissal of nineteenth century scholarship with the observation that 'the historical Jesus' comes really to mean no more than 'the historian's Jesus' should also include the observation that the kerygmaticized Jesus of the new quest comes really to mean no more than the theologian's Christ.

The contributions of Bultmann and

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 28, 29.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 31.

others who have followed his lead are truly significant. Demythologizing so far as it went was an important step forward in making New Testament literature intelligible to the modern reader. Criticism of liberalism at many points was certainly needed. It should be remembered, however, that the historical approach, as obnoxious as it is to some people, is still the only corrective we have; without it theology

becomes pure fancy. Prior to any declaration of the meaning of Jesus for the church is the application of responsible historical method. The latter is the prerequisite of the former and not the reverse and the needs of the time do not alter this order. Faith is still faith; to call it historical method is only to confuse the tasks of theologians and historians.

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