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A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

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# GOSPEL STUDY AND OUR IMAGE OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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IT HAS long been evident that one cannot entirely separate the NT writings into two parts, the gospels as telling of the life of Jesus, the other books as a source for knowledge of the early church. Though that is a natural division, each part has some bearing on the other period. The epistles can be searched for some knowledge of the historical Jesus. Less obviously the gospels are usable for knowledge of the apostolic age.

This second relation has been emphasized by some aspects of modern biblical study. Form criticism of the gospels began by trying to explain these books, at least as far as their literary form was concerned, by assuming that form was determined by the use of this material within the early Christian movement. It showed the marks of oral transmission between Jesus and the gospel writers. The four evangelists and their predecessors had reported the life and teachings of Jesus not quite in the same way that his contemporaries had first witnessed and heard them. They had adapted their record for use in a later situation when it was part of the message of their own propaganda. It seemed necessary therefore for modern students to conjure up as nearly as possible the conditions of the later transmitters.

Of the life of these early Christians we have from Acts and elsewhere some impression and we can imagine more. These sources do not establish clearly that the life and teaching of Jesus, or memory of his character and career, played much part in the thought of early Christians. Neither what we know of their missionary message nor what we hear of their community life or worship suggests the importance of reminiscence. Much of their outlook was focused on the present and the future. The reminiscent material about the life and teaching of Jesus has appeared to be a kind of epiphenomenon, gratuitous and unexplained by the image of the early church otherwise given us. Our problem has been not why the epistles and Revelation and even Acts, though written by the author of a gospel, said so little of the facts of Jesus' life, but why Mark ever came to be written down at all, and to be followed by two similar collections like Matthew and Luke, and others like the Gospels of John, Peter, and Thomas.

The modern situation in theological study has in part reversed this attitude. The gospels as an enigma in our thought of the church have been made instead a key for us — not indeed that we really have any new light on why or when the first Christians employed so many anecdotes of the Jesus who in other sources seems so little remembered. What form criticism attempted to tell us is how the reminiscences were selected and altered if they were to be used at all.

This rôle of form criticism still makes sense. It makes more sense than the original intention of finding in the literary formulation of the units of the gospels a clue to the occasion of their use. Their classification into miracle tales, controversies, memorable sayings, parables, etc. is simple and natural enough for at least some of the less complicated contents of the gospels. On the negative side the observation that neither chronology nor pure antiquarianism has played much part in the formation of the gospels is also correct. Form criticism has led us to deal with the gospel units as separate pieces and to observe in them a motivation in the way they are told, or rather a variety of motives which are easily attributed to the interests of postresurrection Christians.

All this is very plausible and probable, but it does not disclose about the early Christians as much as we should like to know. It may account for features of the gospels that make them so obscure as satisfactory accounts of Jesus. The concerns of early Christians may well be responsible for features of the gospels which are hard to refer to the career of Jesus and to his thought. In fact, the rise of form criticism has a connection in time, if not in cause, with the sense of defeat in the quest of the historical Jesus.

It would be a happy exchange if we could account for our ignorance of the first stage by a new knowledge of the second. Yet there is obvious danger that our so-called new knowledge is only inference, and that we shall be found arguing in a circle. We are likely to suppose that if features of the gospels do not make a trustworthy and consistent portrait of Jesus they must be due to perversion by the early church and that our portrait of the early church must be altered to explain them. In so doing we shall be near the position of those who proceed *per ignotum ad ignotius*.

There is convenience in this procedure. We have by form criticism acquired a plurality of opportunities for explanation. We can imagine the church as more manifold in its development than an individual's life. It had sundry positions and interests at different times and places. Its variety makes possible the contrasts, contradictions, and paradoxes of the gospel material. For example, it was the church, not Jesus himself nor even one of the evangelists, that was both as Judaistic and as anti-Jewish as the Gospel of Matthew alternately seems to be.

Unfortunately this is not the prevailing direction in the current

study of the earliest Christianity. On the contrary, that study is marked by an imagination of greater unity at the beginning. A consensus of the early Christians is assumed. They agreed, we are told, from the first on certain emphases, selections, approaches.

The "kerygma" is the modern title of one of these assumed original agreements. Its creedlike articles are believed to have been a few uniformly accepted ideas. Similarly it has been supposed that the early Christians' knowledge of OT scripture was concentrated especially on a few favorite passages. But the content of the kerygma is far from settled, and the Christian quotations from scripture do not conveniently stay inside a list of limited *testimonia*.<sup>1</sup>

This picture of early Christianity does not stem from a new appraisal of the gospels. It resembles a long-standing assumption of uniformity in the early church. It ignores much of the variety implicit in the church's NT, not to mention the greater variety we can suppose existed when the literature included some rejected or largely lost writings not in the final canon. Perhaps we need to exercise our imagination rather to expand our thinking towards the unrecorded proliferation of Christian thought and practice. Instead of moving from identity to variety, from similarity to difference, from initial likeness and formality to anarchy, perhaps Christianity moved just the other way. Was the new community ever more multifarious than in this formative stage?

Indeed the very idea of one Christian community is more concrete than I think our sources warrant. There was some merit in the old theory that the several gospels represent different localities. Furthermore, the noncollective aspect of Christianity is easily overlooked.<sup>2</sup> In life, thought, and even in influence it was a congeries of independent individuals or cells. Of course, the written gospels, like all books of the time, were more often read aloud to a group than silently by an individual, but not necessarily to a regular group or as a formal exercise. This is even more likely for their contents when still only in oral circulation.

The relation of the New Testament to "the church" is frequently emphasized today, and nowhere more insistently and repeatedly than in Robert M. Grant's *Historical Introduction to the New Testament*. He finds it implied when it is not named, as "in the oral tradition embodied in the gospels, as well as by the existence of the gospels themselves. Specifically when Mark (4, 34) writes that Jesus explained everything privately to his disciples, he implies the existence of a community in which the explanations are available; when he writes as he often does

<sup>1</sup> See A. C. Sundberg, Jr., "On Testimonies," *Novum Testamentum*, 3 (1959), pp. 268-81.

<sup>2</sup> A step in correcting this overemphasis on the corporate or collective understanding of the NT is taken by C. F. D. Moule's article, "The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel," *Novum Testamentum*, 5 (1962), pp. 171-90.

that the disciples did not understand the meaning of what Jesus said, he implies that such understanding is now present. . . . Everything in the gospels is an expression of the Church's life."<sup>3</sup> John Knox in his latest thought of the "Christ Event" as being conjunct — Jesus plus the emergence of the church — has even more reason to call the gospels "Church books."<sup>4</sup>

I am persuaded that much in our current image of early Christians is reflected from our own traditions and interests, more than from the early Christian documents themselves. This is sheer anachronism. We assume that there were forms of worship, of catechetical instruction, and of theological standardization because in our day we inherit them. Even the new awareness of variety and the feeling of tolerance in the ecumenical movement, so hesitating and hard won, cannot overcome this unconscious tendency. There is as much danger of modernizing primitive Christianity<sup>5</sup> as there is of modernizing Jesus.

Here are some of the caveats that I would advise if we are from our reading of the gospels to escape a lopsided view of early Christianity. Avoid thinking of their contents as connected with church worship or formal instruction. The words "liturgical" and "catechetical" are not very applicable to them. We have no evidence that they were read in worship collectively or systematically before the time of Justin Martyr, still less that their contents while still oral were so used. Personal, individual, or occasional interest would account for this material. Not even their account of the Last Supper points to its recitation at the eucharist. It may indicate what they did. Paul in an emergency (I Cor 14), like Justin, could tell why they did it and repeat the substance of one of the traditions about it. But that is not the same as regular oral recording of the story. The order in the gospel sections is not more due to the Christian calendar than to the actual sequence of events in Jesus' life. Probably it is not much due to either.

The gospels became a depository and later a quarry for the most diverse interests and occasions. Long ago two classical writers on the apostolic age found in Jesus' instructions to the Twelve (or the Seventy) a primary source for our learning of the method of the later mission,<sup>6</sup> — the method as distinct from the content of the message. Yet that other, and perhaps less correct, sense of the Greek *κήρυγμα* has been generally assumed to be represented in the gospels, at least since the writings of

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 397, 398.

<sup>4</sup> *The Church and the Reality of Christ*; e. g., pp. 15 n., 51 f.

<sup>5</sup> A good example of psychological anachronism is discussed by K. Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR*, 56 (1963), pp. 199-215.

<sup>6</sup> C. von Weizsäcker, *The Apostolic Age*, I, pp. 28-32; J. H. Ropes, *The Apostolic Age*, pp. 40-43.

Dibelius and Dodd.<sup>7</sup> Parts of their contents were useful for answering the personal and social ethical problems of believers; parts too were useful for keeping individuals courageous and faithful, even in the face of martyrdom. I can accept the idea of a martyr motive in Mark, but that the book was originally intended, or used except casually, for social control seems unlikely. There is in the gospels very little explicit reference to readers (or hearers). Such references as there are, e. g., Mark 13 14 (which may mean readers of Daniel), Luke 1 1-4, John 20 30 f., by no means indicate all that is read out of them.

The synoptic parables have lately been used particularly to guess the early Christian situation. Yet they are very ambiguous as to the *Sitz im Leben*. Some of them could fit the situation of Jesus as well as some later one, or indeed as well as various later ones. We may note how the parable of the lost sheep is quite variously used in our sources.<sup>8</sup> Parables are illustrations, and illustrations are notoriously unanchored.

Perhaps the earliest known use of the recitation of gospel pericopes is one that would not occur to us today. Origen says:

It is not by incantation that Christians seem to prevail over evil spirits but by the name of Jesus, accompanied by the recital of the narratives which relate to him; for the repetition of them has frequently been the means of driving demons out of men, especially when those who repeated them did so in a sound and believing spirit.<sup>9</sup>

The retention in Mark of words of Jesus in Aramaic is probably pre-literary evidence of the use of these traditions for early Christian cures or prayers. In such acts wording in the original language is especially important.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps one thing is most conspicuous to us about the gospels: No matter how much they reflect the next generation rather than the actual life of Jesus, they disclose readers who kept the theory if not the substance of depending on the link with a historical person. In spite of all temptations to live in the present or the future, or in the imaginative detachment of myth, as perhaps some gnostic Christians may have done, the gospel writers (even John), their informants, and their readers maintained the claim of some kind of link with their central hero in the past.

This link may well have been closer in theory than in fact. I am not persuaded by Gerhardsson's *Memory and Manuscript* that any artificial or abnormal processes were at work to transmit with unexpected fullness

<sup>7</sup> Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*; C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, ch. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 15 4-6; Matt 18 12-13; Gospel of Thomas 104 (Leipoldt) = 107 (Quispel); and the two rabbinic parables cited from midrashim in B. T. D. Smith, *The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 190 f.

<sup>9</sup> Origen, *c. Celsus* i, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 5 41; 7 34; 14 30; 15 34.

or accuracy the historical facts of Jesus' career and teaching. The theory of specially faithful oral tradition is not new. If it is revived, that may be more to satisfy our historical religious desire than because it is based on the probabilities of the situation. Probably the thoughts and interests of the early Christians modified their memories of Jesus as much as the remembrance of Jesus determined the thoughts and interests of the early Christians. What I would repeat is that an assumed connection had not disappeared when the gospels were written.

Indeed an assumed connection has never disappeared, but it has not always been the same connection. Therefore I am not persuaded by the contention that memory of the moral and spiritual character of Jesus such as ecclesiastic piety today would predicate goes back continuously to the first Christian generation. What the early church had in common with the historical Jesus may have been many other things. Its remembrance, even the *ἀνάμνησις* at the eucharist, may have been futurist, rather than past, that is, anticipatory, eschatological. In any case, the appraisal of Jesus retrospectively was, in successive generations from the first, quite varied. To suppose that a present-day awareness of the miraculous unity of Christ with the church is an accurate revival, or rather a continuous survival of the earliest Christian feelings, may be thoroughly unhistorical, even though some NT phrases seem to justify the modern Christian feeling of the relation between ourselves and the person remembered in the gospels.

This identification of our own piety with that of the early church is likely to be followed by a conviction that we can derive from the latter some light on the historical Jesus. At the same time we are trying to derive an image of the early church from the gospels. Each process must in the circumstances be used with caution, and not both together in a circle.

Just as the quest of the historical Jesus from the gospels was doomed to failure partly because it sought too directly a figure usable for modern authority,<sup>11</sup> so the search in the same gospels for a usable early kerygma may prove equally futile. Let us begin by asking in each case what the synoptic gospels suggest by their general content to have been the prevailing interests that the reported words of Jesus met or fitted — those in his own thinking or in that of the writer and reader. Are they not too varied to be reduced to a homogeneous whole? But are they not plainly related to the gamut of problems confronting a first-century Christian who wishes to do the will of God amid the vicissitudes of personal life? Their miracle tales served one such purpose, their ethical advice another. Their predictive words of Jesus may be connected with

<sup>11</sup> Cf. N. A. Dahl, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Kerygma and History*, ed. by Braaten and Harrisville, p. 156.

other forms of interest or of curiosity in the apostolic or postapostolic age. Is not any theology and Christology implicit rather than explicit, and secondary to the moral and ethical and social concern of the speaker, the narrator, the recorder, and the reader? It has been said to the historian that "the interest in as accurate as possible [a] reconstruction of the words and deeds of the historical Jesus separated from the picture of faith drawn by the early church is certainly our interest, which no one of the authors of the New Testament had."<sup>12</sup> Conversely it may be said to the biblical theologian that a picture of the faith which the early church had, whether mythological or demythologized, separated from the words and deeds of Jesus, was not the real concern of the synoptic writers.

Looking backwards one can see that biblical study passes naturally and unconsciously through successive stages. A recent pattern has been the transfer of scholarly interest from the historical Jesus to the preaching of his followers. This is signaled by form criticism, biblical theology, and the discussion of kerygma and myth. Such a transfer is not in itself unfortunate. When we are in a new stage, it is hard to recognize the limitations of the contemporary style. We need not avoid it out of mere nostalgia. We may paraphrase the poet's wish by desiring to see ourselves as others *will* see us. Even if we are correcting today some errors, oversights, or excesses of the past, we are not to assume that we are not one-sided in another direction. Thus the most justified revisions of our image of the early church may be accompanied by other features to which our sources, including the gospels, give scant support. The purpose of this article is to challenge where challenge is needed the image of early Christianity that is sometimes read into as well as out of the gospels.

<sup>12</sup> E. Schweizer in *Chicago Theological Seminary Register*, 54, 2 (1963), p. 4.