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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Mar., 1952), pp. 1-9

Published by: [The Society of Biblical Literature](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3261842>

Accessed: 09/04/2012 10:32

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THE INSPIRATION OF NEW TESTAMENT RESEARCH*

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IN MY final report as Editor of our *Journal* in 1942, a report printed in 1943, I made a brief statement from which I have had many comments: I shall take this opportunity to return to it and discuss it at greater length. I said at that time that one of the difficulties in editing the *Journal* was that not only in America, but the world over, research in the field of the New Testament had sunk to a nadir, so much so that even the conducting in the *Journal* of a regular section for reviews of works on the New Testament forced one often to discuss books which were really not worth much notice. This I did not elaborate, and need not do so now in the sense of decrying what is being done. I may assume that you will agree with me that the appendix to Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* which brought it up to date could mention few books of such creative importance as those he originally had before him. Schweitzer had recounted the works of giants whose thought profoundly affected the course of civilization: it can be simply said that New Testament scholarship has no such importance for our day. Sometimes we seem to me to be children playing at war on historic battlefields. I speak, of course, of historical criticism, what used to be called higher criticism. The field of lower criticism, the collecting of manuscripts and the approach to an ideal presentation of the Greek text, was never so systematically cultivated as now. Yet speaking as a higher critic I may seem supercilious (I do not remotely intend to seem so) when I say that I doubt if the course of civilization will be appreciably changed by the production of the absolutely ideal New Testament text, or indeed would be deeply affected by the discovery of the complete set of New Testament autographs. I should imagine that if we had Paul's letter to the Romans in its original form the problem of what he meant to say in it would be just about what it is now when we read it in Nestle's text. And the question of the relevance for modern man of whatever Paul may have said would certainly be exactly what it is. It was a feeling that it made a profound

* The Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis on December 28, 1951, at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

difference to us what Paul and Jesus said that brought us oldsters to our teachers, and still more that brought them to their teachers. And this was the inspiration of the older, the creative, period in New Testament study, the hope that one might find out things in such study that really mattered, now and always, for mankind. Few young men in these days want to become students in the biblical field (and let the Old Testament scholars not hear me too complacently), for somehow there are few young men who feel that biblical scholarship has much that is creative to give them. I do not decry the young, they still have eager pressure to find creative truth, but it is not at our doors but at the doors of natural scientists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and theologians that they are knocking. This, rather than my offhand reference to the nadir, is what I want to discuss with you.

The young men are right: we have at the moment as a group no such vital and creative wares to offer as men in other fields. The pressure of contemporary problems is too great for it to matter much whether Q was in one piece, or was a series of disconnected leaves, pericopes, some of which Luke and Matthew had in common, while each had leaves unknown to the other; or whether there ever was a Q at all or not. Perhaps one of my students was right when he said on an examination that Q was Luke's German source. Of course I should be enormously proud to be able to announce a definitive solution of that problem: but I doubt if many people would change their way of living as a result of such an announcement, while what psychologists, sociologists, and theologians are saying is changing people's lives. Does this mean that we are, as a group, doomed to be superseded like the old herbalists? Frankly I think it does mean that, if we propose to continue on the old lines of study, asking the questions, thinking in the framework, set in the nineteenth century. We cannot be alchemists endlessly repeating the same experiments. For a man's scholarship is vital only when it is part of his total vitality. The only excuse for biblical scholarship, like all scholarship, is that it promises to tell men, directly or indirectly, something important for their way of life.

The hope in all biblical study of the past was that by it man would go beyond speculation and ignorance into revelation, into the security of final and unquestioned knowledge of life's foundation, meaning and destiny. Before the eighteenth century, and often still today, biblical study was essentially the study of God's Word to men. This study was not, and still is not, what we now call "critical" study at all. It was and is study of a document, or series of documents, antecedently declared to be beyond human criticism, documents composed by the one omniscient Mind, given men, verbally, infinitesimally, indisputably, to be the guide and norm of all their thinking, the basis of their security. Study of such documents is essentially a matter of reverent comprehen-

sion. As a young man when I belonged to this group myself I was counselled, as many of you have been, that the best way to read the Bible was to read it when on my knees, and this, whether the actual physical knees or not, describes the attitude of such readers from Thomas Aquinas, Thomas à Kempis, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley to the devout fundamentalists, Catholic and Protestant, of our own day. Probably there are a number in this room who still read their Bibles in this way. I have no word of reproach, no slight innuendo, to apply to such biblical reading. That as you all know I no longer do so myself has not made me forget the values of such reading. I now simply no longer believe that the books of the Bible were any such direct product of omniscient composition, and with that most of you, perhaps like me somewhat to your sorrow, will agree.

In the eighteenth century the new critical spirit which was to produce the modern age of science turned itself to the Bible but only to reject the Bible, mock it, in that youthful exuberance which was the basic inspiration of the Enlightenment. Men of that time, Voltaire and Tom Paine, for example, read to us like cocky sophomores in what they say about Christianity and the Bible. They could do nothing else, I suppose. Critical study of the Bible was not born, and they faced a world in which it was militantly asserted that their new astronomy was discredited by the biblical statement that Joshua had stopped and then started the revolution of the earth, or of the sun round the earth. The new science was discarding all authorities, such as Galen and Ptolemy, discarding the very concept of an authority; certainly the new scientists could not be confined to the scientific knowledge of the biblical writers. The result was impatient, often shallow, revolt.

Few now want to continue that old fight, or feel that the value of the Bible is essentially negated, or even affected, by the fact that we look elsewhere for our knowledge of natural science. Here, however, is where our immediate ancestry as a scholarly group began. For in the late eighteenth century, much more through the nineteenth century, men took up the challenge of the historical criticism of the Bible. Believing in the divine origin of their Bibles, and at the same time in the new methods of historical criticism which Valla had so brilliantly demonstrated, they felt that when the irrelevancies of temporal contingencies had been removed the Bible would seem all the more valuable: only the divine metal would be left when the ore was purified. For the early scholars of Old and New Testament believed at the same time in the new science of history, if I may call it that, and in the old truth. They heartily believed that a true understanding of the Old Testament would show God working through man to bring him out of ignorance to the light of truth: that if details showed the fallibility of the human instruments, the totality showed the infallibility of the divine plan of

revelation. Biblical criticism was essentially inspired throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the conviction that better critical scrutiny would bring deeper revelation of what lay behind the human writers in the divine Mind itself, deeper certainties. In New Testament study, especially, the motive was very clear. It was splendidly epitomized in the English title to Schweitzer's classic, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. For relaxation, conscious or unconscious, of the tension between the need for certainty and the belief in historical criticism seemed possible if one could appeal from a fallible record to an infallible, an authoritative, Person behind the record. Once one had found this object of quest, the historical Jesus, it was felt, one could recover the sense of certainty, find it through historical criticism itself. It was this desire which brought me into such studies, and I do not think I am simply projecting my own emotional problems when I say that this seems to have been the driving force from Reimarus to Wrede, to Schweitzer, Harnack, Bacon, Ropes, and now to Bultmann. To limit such a roll call is invidious. All I am saying is that magnificently loyal as these men have all been to their faith in, and the demands of, historical criticism, New Testament criticism has been for a century essentially a means rather than an end, and the end has been the quest of that historical Jesus, in whom men hoped to find the embodiment of their ideals, the basis of their certainty. It has not been the past for its own sake men have sought, or which pupils like us went to their masters to learn: it was that past in which we thought was the eternally present, the true social gospel or whatever was the problem of the day which most concerned us. This statement of motivation, like all statements of motivation, is drastically oversimplified; the motive as described would not account for interest in the Pauline problem, for example, or in apocalyptic. The basic idea I am presenting stands, however: that the drive behind the New Testament scholarship of the past was first a sense of its immediate and contemporary importance; secondly the hope that man would know better how to live in the present if he could understand the secret of early Christianity, because a man would have a base of certainty for his judgments and hopes; and thirdly that the new methods of philology and historical criticism would reveal this secret to him. In terms of these objectives of the generations of scholars just passed, New Testament scholarship has failed. I remember as a young instructor at Yale I once asked my senior, Benjamin Bacon, why he did not write us a life of Jesus. He said that that had been the goal of all his study, and that he intended to do so. But he never wrote it. I suspect that the reason he did not try to do so was that he was quite aware, as most of us here are aware, that a book on the life and teachings of Jesus would be so full of subjective judgments, or so studded with question marks, that it would

not be worth the effort. It would be only a confession of failure in our quest for certainty. So we have now come to direct our thoughts and our students to smaller and smaller details of criticism, until we find that the students decide to major in some other field.

The position is on the whole clear. In view of the profound part Christianity still plays in the structure of our society, I see no reason to abandon hope that a better understanding of early Christianity will be of great contemporary importance. But if we are to seem to our generation to be challengingly creative we cannot go on simply with the old philological techniques, asking questions we know now we shall never answer, questions in which society has lost interest. We must begin afresh.

It seems to me first quite obvious that we must not look for the wrong things, for what is not there, in the early records. The problems of social justice in the modern sense, of international relations, labor relations, even of ecclesiastical organization, it is an anachronism to try to solve by New Testament proof texts. Much more direct is the light to be thrown on the whole question of the nature of religion and its place in human life. The fact beyond dispute is that in the teachings of early Christianity people of the ancient world came to see a new light. Their groping uncertainty ended in the crucified and risen Jesus; at first a small group, then the majority of the whole dying Roman civilization turned to the Cross, and this was the only substantial and immediate bequest of the ancient world to the medieval. There was a continuity in architecture and pictorial techniques in the basilica and the mosaics, but classical literature, law, and science had in the West all to be rediscovered by later scholars: only the religion of the last centuries of the Roman world became an important part of the early Middle Ages.

Now for a religion to have any appeal it must seem to answer the questions of the people who accept it. If we are to understand Christianity and its appeal, then, we must understand much more than Christianity: we must comprehend the problems of the ancient world, the sort of questions they were asking.

The study of Paul's letters is an excellent example. For to follow the arguments of Paul, we must understand the mentality of those for whom he wrote the letters quite as much as the mentality of Paul himself, which has been the almost exclusive concern of Pauline scholarship. The "Romans" for whom Paul wrote his greatest single letter were obviously a group of people who knew the LXX intimately, were quite ready to admit the inadequacy of paganism, but stubborn to defend the prerogatives of the Jewish people, and this latter Paul had elaborately to deal with. He had to deal with it in a way which did not challenge his readers' pride in the Jewish law, which had value, he

assured them, "much every way"; but he had to lead them out into allegiance to a greater and higher law, the law of the Spirit which had been brought man in Jesus Christ. That is, Paul was writing to Jews in Rome, and asking them to go out from their tribal law to a more universal, unwritten law, the true law of God. Yet he can throughout assume that his readers will understand without definition the existence and nature of this higher unwritten law. The higher law he takes thus for granted is based upon a sharp distinction between flesh and spirit, the perishable and the eternal, the material and immaterial, a contrast essentially Orphic and Platonic. When the writer to the Hebrews assured his audience that only the things which could not be seen by the eyes of the flesh were eternal he assumed the same Platonic axioms. The great contribution of Paul, as of most early Christianity, was essentially this declaration that in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ Christianity presented men with a bridge over which they could pass from the fleshly to the spiritual. That was not a new claim, we now go on to learn, but precisely the thing which men had been seeking in their idols, in their divine kings, their sacred enclosures, their initiations, their amulets, for by all of these means they had hoped to find the divine, the immaterial, in the only form they could imagine experiencing it, in the material itself. So the message of early Christianity was not a new philosophy of the immaterial versus the material, but the declaration that this old search for the spiritual in the material had been ended. For Christians declared that in Jesus Christ that immaterial reality which was alone real in pagan history, *σὰρξ ἐγένετο*, had become flesh, material, available, and that through this miracle man had the bridge he sought, so that he could pass on through Christ from matter to spirit, from death to life. All of this philosophy is assumed in the writings of Paul. He simply denies that Judaism and paganism have met this need for the immaterial. He asserts that the incarnation of the Spirit-Law in the Letter of the Mosaic Code was ultimately as inadequate, as fallacious, as the claims of pagans to find it in their idols, for both were dead, the letter as dead as marble. Only in the incarnation of Christ, he boasts, as underscored by the Resurrection, was the incarnation a *living* embodiment, and hence powerful to save men. This new claim the Roman world finally accepted as true, and, in the ritual of the Church, or in the Christian Neoplatonism of the fourth to the seventh century, became the basis of hope and certainty in the chaos of a crashing civilization. Paul does not explain all this philosophy, I repeat, he simply assumes it, and his letters are quite unintelligible without knowing that this is what his readers were looking for, and what his words about Christ meant to them.

Again he writes passionately about the fulfillment of this hope, the personal experience of its realization, as being *δικαιοσύνη*, a new regi-

mentation of man within himself, whereby the mind can rule the flesh. He never stops to say that this is what he means by *δικαιοσύνη*, but assumes that this is what the word means to his readers. That is, again he is assuming the Platonic-Pythagorean concept that the mind is or should be a charioteer ruling the horses, or a king ruling the bodily state, and that no man can have inner peace, harmony, what this school called *δικαιοσύνη*, when such rulership was not effective. Paul takes it for granted that the greater objective of the "Romans" for whom he wrote was this *δικαιοσύνη*. All he is telling them is that the higher law, to which the mind looks and by which it can alone rule the passions, has been made available, not as the law incarnate in the King, or the Torah, but as the Law of the Spirit incarnate in Christ Jesus, so that now when we die with Christ we may live as new creatures in the Law of the Spirit, without further guilt or condemnation. Paul does not define *δικαιοσύνη*; he only tells his readers it is at last to be achieved in Christ. To not every man in the ancient world would such *δικαιοσύνη* have seemed important. Most men then as now were content with a "rice" religion, one that would give them prosperity in this life, and security from catastrophe in death, and they wanted that security with as little fuss as possible. Paul was writing to a group of highly intelligent, and quite sensitive people who not only knew and loved their LXX, but who had adopted the finer distinctions of the more thoughtful pagans, so that they took it for granted that true religion would mean release from this "condemnation" of the fleshly by the spiritual within them, release from their sense of futility in the struggle for a "purer," less fleshly, life. Paul and Christianity, I repeat, contributed not this philosophy of life, this sense of need for *δικαιοσύνη*, but its solution in the risen Jesus. Paul did not have to send a Professor to Rome to hold a seminar for those who first read his letter so that they could know what he meant by *δικαιοσύνη*: they had known that word, and the desire for the experience, long before Paul, on the road to Damascus, had found it in the Christ of that vision. When we come then to reducing the letters to their human value in terms of the men of the Roman Empire, we find that we are approaching their universal, timeless, value. For the *δικαιοσύνη* which is a state of "no condemnation," of the putting in order of the whole gamut of man's motives, drives, and desires, begins to sound amazingly like the desire which we now call "adjustment," freedom from "inferiority complex." And we begin to see that if modern man is properly in quest of peace of mind, Christianity gave this to its early adherents in startling measure. We do not then need to begin to read castration complexes and "Oedipus" into the letter to the Romans, but we do see that Paul has in mind an eternal and unchanging element in human problems and aspirations, and can ask ourselves the very pertinent question of what in the old

answers and techniques for solving those problems still has validity. I strongly suspect that a teacher of the New Testament who began thus considering the New Testament would lack neither pupils nor publishers.

I have been giving some examples of the sort of light to be thrown on the origin, and with it on the character, of Christianity by a method of approach not at all that of my teachers. The method is first that of intensive study of the thought-ways of the world into which Christianity came, the aspirations, vocabulary, and symbolism, of the pagans and Jews of the first centuries before and after Jesus, and then the fresh turning to early written and graphic Christian documents, as documents addressed to people with such vocabularies and symbolisms. If we study Christianity as the ancients saw it, that is as one religion among many, the one which finally won out because it offered the deepest gratifications, we shall, I am convinced, for the first time be in a position to isolate, and so go on to the second duty, to evaluate the unique contribution of Christianity.

For all our study is aimed, consciously or not, at evaluation. And our age will expect evaluation not only of the religion of the New Testament for the Roman world, though that must come *first*. It will then ask us what good the religion of the New Testament is for the mid-twentieth century. It will demand an answer not in Greco-Roman terms, but in its own vocabulary, will be interested in Christianity in so far as it seems to answer its own antecedent problems and fill its hopes, as Paul showed how Christ brought the *δικαιοσύνη* the Greeks and Romans wanted. The problem of the value for our generation of the teachings of Jesus, or of Paul, or of the Fourth Gospel, or of the creeds, is one which we historical critics must face if anyone is to do so. We must be able to see the New Testament in its historical setting, read it as it was read by those for whom it was written, with their background, aspirations, and problems clearly in mind. What the New Testament writers said to these people was their message, and it alone. We must then be able to see the universal elements in these ancient problems, and in the solutions the writers of the New Testament offered to them. We can then, and then only, be in a position to restate those ideas intelligibly for our generation. If, in the words of one of my most distinguished predecessors, we can neither "modernize Jesus," nor "archaize ourselves," the relevance and vitality of New Testament study seems at first questionable. It can be no more than antiquarianism until we learn thus to translate the message of the New Testament into modern terms. What is of value to us in the New Testament and what not, can be judged only after such a translation: for interpretation is only extended translation. Modern psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, as well as popularizers of all sorts, are often only too

eager to make these judgments for us. If interpretation is to have any validity, however, it must begin with such an understanding of historical civilization, texts, and symbols as only we historians can hope to supply.

For the study of no period or subject is worth doing if the end is merely factual knowledge. Not the theologians, I believe as an historian, but we historians ourselves, must so understand the past that we can bring its value into the present. Not by turning the clock back, or by stopping it, as authoritarians want to do, can we bring to our generation the values we have found in New Testament study. We can as little do so by denying the validity of the course of man's adventures through time which it is now the style to sneer at as "history." People who talk in this way speak not the general language of our day, but the language of escapists who would evade human responsibilities in the world of empirical reality. New Testament study has tremendous opportunity in this age, if we take the greatest single event in human history, and, by a historical study which uses the new techniques of our age in the way Strauss used those of his age, show in what its greatness consisted, and in what ways it can still consist. To do this we must know the documents of the New Testament, but know also the methods and findings of the history of religion, of psychology, and of many other modern studies. It is a large challenge, to say the least. But only as we try to meet it can we take exegesis from becoming in fact as antiquarian as is the old term itself by which we still call our Society. I trust my original statement may turn into a prophecy, and that the present state of New Testament study may indeed prove a nadir, one from which we rapidly rise to the heights plainly before us.