Faith or Fact?

by Joseph Blenkinsop, S.D.B.

In 1825, while still at Oriel, Newman brought out his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* which he had first written as an article in the now forgotten *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana*. In it he examined the claims made on behalf of a remarkable first-century contemporary of Jesus whose birth was accompanied by portents of various kinds, who quickly achieved great fame as an ascetic and philosopher, to whom many miracles and exorcisms were attributed and who, after a holy death at an advanced age, ascended, so it was claimed, bodily into heaven and was afterwards seen by certain persons who had entertained doubts about the future life. The first full account of this extraordinary person was written by a certain Philostratos, one of the smart literary set which foregathered in the *salon* of the Empress Julia Domna whose husband, one recalls, had trouble with the Scots and died at York. This accomplished woman had got hold somehow of the *Memoirs* of a disciple of Apollonius called Damis. She handed them over to Philostratos inviting him to write up a biography, making use as occasion demanded of any other sources available. This he did and his work is still extant. Newman's study, as also his *Essay on Miracles* which appeared in the same year, was given over to a large extent to refuting the claims made on behalf of Apollonius. This was a perfectly legitimate undertaking but it raises the question: here you have two contemporary figures of whose existence we can have no reasonable doubt and about whom certain writings have come down to us (Justin also calls the Gospels *Memoirs*). Surely we have the right to try to get behind the interpretative overlay, whether of faith or illusion or falsification or whatever, in order to see both as they really were?

This attempt, which perhaps can be traced back with reference to Jesus to the English Deists, became of overriding importance for nineteenth-century liberal theology. The Romantic poet Herder had familiarized theologians with the idea of an oral tradition which lay behind the written gospels, a view which promised interesting developments. Then in 1835 there appeared the explosive *Life of Jesus* of David Strauss. Strauss held, briefly, that the gospels, which come from the second century, were the end-product of a mythopoeic process going on in the primitive community. Following Hegel whose ideas he had imbibed at Tübingen, he read the gospels as incorporating not so much events as ideas, the working out of a Christ-myth.

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This meant that the thirty-odd years which elapsed (according to a more orthodox reckoning) between the death of Jesus and the first gospel-writing were suspect, to say the least. This had the effect of drawing more traditional scholars and liberal theologians to explore other approaches. Since oral tradition had been torpedoed they looked, to change the metaphor, for hard-sited documents immune to surprise attack. In this way the Two-Source hypothesis, which received its mature formulation in the work of Wernle and which still, despite some recent body-blows, holds the field, was evolved. Its nineteenth-century expounders believed that with *Mark* they were in possession of a work which approximated, allowance made for the limitations of the age in which it was written, to the kind of history-writing of which von Ranke and Momssen could approve, which had for its object to reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen.*

It is well known how this liberal quest for a historical Jesus was destroyed by Wrede and Schweitzer in the early years of this century. They demonstrated convincingly that *Mark* was just as theological and overlaid with presuppositions as any other New Testament writing and that consequently trying to work back to a historical nucleus free of interpretative theological overlay was about as rewarding as peeling an onion in order to find something inside. Unfortunately, however, they had nothing convincing to put in the place of the liberal Jesus of history the search for whom they had shown to be illusory.

The first World War, with its revelation of the unabated strength of the regressive and destructive tendencies in individual and society, brought down once for all both the liberal theology and christology and the pseudo-christian ethos which went with them. When the smoke cleared away, it was noticed that the theological scenery had changed quite a lot. New Testament scholars, in particular Dibelius, Bultmann and Karl Ludwig Schmidt, taking over where Wrede left off, demonstrated how *Mark*, equally with the other Synoptics, was composed of a number of sub-sections for which the author had provided a certain framework. The Form-critics believed that these had been transmitted during the period of oral-tradition in obedience to the laws of popular non-literary composition and had already reached a state of relative fixity or crystallization before being incorporated in the gospels. This seemed to them to provide a means of beating the stalemate reached by Wrede, of working back beyond *Mark* to an historically reliable primitive Jerusalem tradition. In general, however, the results were meagre. For Bultmann, anything in the tradition which can possibly have originated in hellenistic Christianity or be explained with reference to the life of an early community, especially its liturgical and catechetical practice, was excluded as secondary. The extant sources show no interest at all in the life and personality of Jesus and there is no evidence that he believed himself to be the messiah. That Jesus himself is historic-

ally in some way the originator of the tradition is indeed overwhelmingly probable but not a certain conclusion immune to revision. In short, Bultmann concluded, in his *Jesus* first published in 1926, that of the life and historical reality of Jesus we learn from the gospel-record *so gut wie nichts*.

Today, forty years and another world war on, much has changed but Bultmann is still there and his presence still dominates the debate. Despite his detailed sifting of the synoptic tradition he has always been basically uninterested in historical reconstruction as a propaedeutic to faith. In the proclaimed message of the Christian fellowship God confronts the man of today and offers him, if he is capable of making the decision to accept, an entirely new possibility of existence. All that we need to know is that Jesus existed (and 'Jesus' can be just a code-name for the message contained in the record) and that in him God is active unto salvation.

The interest in history, could not, however, be so easily stifled under cover of the danger of falling back into the narrow historicism of the liberal theologians. This was shown in the inter-war years and after the second world war, if in very different ways, in the work of scholars like Dodd and Stauffer. There was also the stimulus given to further background research by the discoveries made at Qumran and Nag Hammadi and the new approach to the Fourth Gospel. In 1953 the 'new quest' of the Bultmannian school was launched by Käsemann in a paper entitled 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus' read to the Marburg circle. The methods and aims of this new quest will be familiar to English readers from J. M. Robinson's *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* published in 1959; it implied, briefly, the abandonment of the old subject-object type of historiography and attempted to show, by means of the non-kerygmatic material in the gospels, that the early Christian *kerygma* really corresponded to what Jesus thought of himself and his mission. By doing this the post-Bultmannians did not intend to provide a springboard for the leap of faith; they simply aimed at showing that in listening to the Christian proclaimed message we are placing ourself in contact in some way with the person of Jesus himself.

It is at this point that a recent book by James Peter, an Australian professor of theology, comes in.[1] In a first chapter he examines the various interpretations of the Jesus of the gospels from the Myth school through the Form critics. While no sane person has ever seriously supposed that Jesus did not exist, there have been some highly original and imaginative ways of getting round the resurrection-story, those expounded by George Moore and Robert Graves for instance, which one feels would have been grist to the writer's mill at this point. Not to mention the political interpretations, especially that of Eisler who conscripted the 'christian' passages in

[1] *Finding the Historical Jesus*, A Satement of the Principles involved, by James Peter. Collins, 21s.

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Josephus, as well as recent studies by Brandon and Schonfield – and one might speculate that if Professor Driver's dating of the Judaean Scrolls with reference to the Civil War (66–70 A.D.) ever gains acceptance we may have to take more seriously the political aspect of the gospels. At any rate, the main point of the author is to break the dichotomy between history and faith by showing that the former is never 'objective' and that the latter presupposes some facts. The historian collects facts but the facts can never encompass the event. He is not 'outside' the object of his enquiry and the picture which emerges is always conditioned by what Bultmann calls his 'life-relationship' to his enquiry. That history consists of selected facts presupposes a principle of selection and therefore of interpretation which differs from one person to another. History is therefore radically different from the natural sciences which must pursue an objective line of enquiry. All this has of course already been said by one or other of the post-Bultmannians, but Peter gives a full and detailed report on the new historiography, filled out with ample quotations, and this ought to be useful

Against this background he states his main contention: since historiography should be open to any kind of event it should be open to what is unique in Jesus and the claims made on his behalf, and since there is no history without personal involvement in the past, the Christian historian's 'life-relationship' with Christ does not necessarily invalidate his judgement. It is at this point that we feel the inconsistency in Peter's apologetic since from this we cannot conclude, as he states near the beginning, that 'the Christian's picture is as accurate a picture as can be had of the historical Jesus' (p. 18) but only that 'the Christian historian has as much right as any other to enter a judgement on this matter' (p. 120). The new quest of Käsemann, Conzelmann, Robinson and the others set out to re-establish the link between the *kerygma* and what historical method can teach us of the consciousness which Jesus had of his own person and mission (though in fact Bultmann claimed that he had never broken that link). They presupposed more or less the same concept of historiography and faith which Peter expounds at length here and therefore to that extent they are working together – though Peter makes curiously little reference to the post-Bultmannian discussion. Where they differ is in the evidently apologetical approach of the author.

One good thing about this book which, despite the breadth of its approach is basically unsure and unsatisfactory, is that it brings to a head the whole question of the desirability or even possibility of an apologetic treatment of the historical phenomenon with which the New Testament is concerned. Its contention is that the enquiry, by discovering and establishing facts, points towards the event as the spokes of a wheel point towards the hub, but that what is there at the centre can be grasped as event only by becoming an event for

the enquirer, when he experiences what the author calls its immediacy. The standard apologetic approach as we find it in the tractate *De Revelatione Christiana* begins with the existence of Jesus as Peter does, then the claims made by Jesus for himself and by others on his behalf, proving that these were justified by reason of 'the moral miracle' of his character, his miracles, the prophecies fulfilled in his person and mission, above all by the Resurrection as a miracle worked by Jesus himself to prove that he was divine. Now apart from the technical deficiencies of the apologetic method in the interpretation of texts and the failure to take account of the traditioning community, it suggests that the event of Christ can be apprehended by a logical process of argument rather than encountered as a disturbing reality, accepted on evidential grounds rather than by personal decision. This is not what emerges from the New Testament. Its authors do not argue with us; they present us with a reality with which they had already entered into a life-relationship, a reality which we can either accept or reject.

We opened our discussion by referring to Apollonius the prestigious contemporary of Jesus and the miracles which he was alleged to have worked. The question of miracles puts into sharpened focus the relation between historical enquiry and the event which it seeks to encompass; and it has been dealt with in two recent publications of very different quality. The first, a comparative study by an American, Robert D. Smith,[2] eschewing theoretical discussion, presents us with a wide coverage on the miraculous including Lourdes, Mohammed, a selection of twenty-two of Buddha and twenty-seven of Christ. Apart from oddities of expression on nearly every page (who were, for example, the non-Catholics or separated Christians of the first centuries of Christianity, on p. 169?) there is throughout a remarkable naiveté in the application of the apologetic method. The author walks with light-hearted step over the mined battlefields of New Testament scholarship. The prophecies about Jesus must have probative force because they were certainly made much earlier than the time of Jesus, unlike those about other religious figures. The miracles of Jesus can be accepted confidently since they were never questioned by pagan or Jew. The author does not add that neither were those of Apollonius or any of the other numerous itinerant thaumaturgs of the first century. With regard to Apollonius, Fr Smith provides us with a list of twenty-five of his alleged miracles and then proceeds to dispose of the claims made for him on the grounds that the *Life* was written some time after he died without the benefit of objective sources and that he is not mentioned by contemporary writers such as (*sic*) Tacitus and Suetonius. The drawback of the apologetic method can be seen in that these are precisely the objections made against the gospels as historical records.

[2]*Comparative Miracles*, by Robert D. Smith. B. Herder Book Co., 22s.

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The second is something quite different. It is presented as the result of a symposium of Cambridge scholars and students on the philosophy and history of miracles edited by Professor Moule.[3] In the Introduction the editor states with admirable clarity the range of possibilities of understanding a miraculous occurrence, conceived as a break in consistency, within a consistency or world-view. The two brief philosophical essays by G. F. Woods and Mary Hesse bring us up against the problem of historicity and faith-relationship and the correlative question of the possibility of an apologetic approach with which we have been concerned up to now. It is not just that the idea of a miracle as a violation of a mechanical system no longer makes sense in a post-Newtonian universe characterized by irreducible indeterminism but that, as with one's understanding of the Christian phenomenon in general, objective evaluation can never be dissociated from presupposition. As Professor Woods says: 'It cannot be denied that the evidential value of the miraculous is closely interwoven with the metaphysical views of those to whom the evidence is offered'.

The question of whether in fact the gospel miracles were ever meant to be evidential is taken up by the youngest symposiast, M. E. Glasswell, in what is perhaps the most penetrating contribution, certainly the most relevant to the subject we are discussing, *The Use of Miracles in the Marcan Gospel*. He deals a telling blow to the standard apologetic treatment at once by laying down the principle, obvious but often overlooked, that the first object of study is to determine the function of miracles for the gospel-writer (and, by inference, the Church in and for which he was writing). This will tell us the basic thing about them and their place in the gospels, the significance of which will remain even if we feel obliged to explain some of the occurrences differently today from the way in which they would have been explained in the first century. Mark does not present Jesus as working wonders to produce faith; in this gospel there is a consistent refusal of signs, and the messianic secret can be interpreted from this angle as guarding against 'believing' in Jesus for the wrong reasons. The miracles are the power of God released in the world of suffering humanity, in the whole created consistency, through the perfect obedience of Jesus. They are experienced as 'the spiritual energies of the age to come' (Heb. vi, 5), as is clear from the way Jesus answers the puzzled delegation sent by the Baptist. They are like the charismatic gifts exercised in the early churches; it would always be possible to put a different interpretation on them seen from the outside, such as that the charismatics were crazy (1 Cor.xiv, 23) or just drunk (Acts ii, 15). In like manner the miracles of Jesus were, for his relatives and fellow-townsmen, something of a scandal. Mr Glasswell states this very clearly: 'The miracles are

[3] *Miracles*, Cambridge Studies in their Philosophy and History, ed. C. F. D. Moule, Mowbray, 30s.

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questionable and without any independent force until brought into relation with the Gospel proclamation of Jesus' authority and then they become kerygmatic', 'There remains a choice for the hearers of the Gospel from which neither history nor miracle absolves us'. It is not miracle *and then* faith, not anyway as an intrinsically ordered sequence, which occurs in a degenerate form in the kind of supernatural conjuring trick found in the apocryphal gospels which produced faith as an automatic reflex in the bystanders, when it did not prove lethal to them. A miracle can be known historically; but it cannot be *perceived* unless there is already, at least inchoately, a life-relationship, which is the same as a faith-relationship. That is why Jesus could do no miracle among his fellow-villagers.

There are other essays in the collection which are worth reading including two by G. W. H. Lampe, a rather original one on the non-miraculous activity of the Baptist by Ernst Bammel, a rather radical one by Fr Barnabas Lindars mainly on Old Testament miracles, and four on extra-biblical views on the miraculous; but I have stressed the contribution on the Gospel of Mark not just because of its intrinsic merits but because it sharpens for us the problem of historicity with which we set out. Historical knowledge about Jesus is the necessary precondition of the gospel and of faith, yet historical knowledge cannot encompass Jesus. The very centre of the gospel is the resurrection and the resurrection is not a historical fact which can be 'proved' to have happened like the battle of Waterloo. It is an event beyond historical enquiry, though the empty tomb and the appearances point towards it. The death of Christ, like the death of anyone else, is a fact patient of historical enquiry and therefore verifiable. The resurrection is not. The resurrection is the death of Christ *seen from within, perceived.* It is therefore essentially an interpretation of the death, and faith in the resurrection an acceptance of the meaning of the death involving a life-relationship to it. There will always be other interpretations, from the outside, like that of Reimarus according to which the loud cry made in pain and isolation is the outcome of the final agony of disillusionment. It is a question of perception not proof.

Next month in *New Blackfriars*
Père de Vaux discusses Professor G. R. Driver's book on
The Judaean Scrolls.

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