

**JESUS AND THE GOSPEL TRADITION**, by C. K. Barrett. *S.P.C.K.*, 1967. 25s.

This book is a rather fuller form of the Shaffer Lectures delivered at Yale in 1965. Much of the material was used again for lectures at the Faculty of Theology at Hamburg in 1966. Three chapters on The Tradition, on Christ Crucified, on Christ to Come, and a postscript, make the book as we have it now.

Professor Barrett stresses from the outset that he has embarked upon a difficult subject. We cannot help thinking that he has magnified his difficulty and made of it a theme which pervades the whole book. 'The gospels are neither pure history nor pure fiction' (p. 6) is a first general statement which is re-echoed all through. All through too runs, as it were, the haunting doubt: Did Jesus really say this? Did Jesus really do that? Jesus is placed on one side, the gospel tradition on another. It would seem that anything like continuity in essentials of content and teaching between the two is looked upon as unthinkable.

It is easy to agree in the main that 'historical tradition was handed down in a context of free interpretation and not with a concern for verbal accuracy' (p. 12). And yet, even this needs to be qualified, for we have at times, almost certainly, even verbal accuracy, as when St Paul tells us how the Lord Jesus used to say: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20, 35). So, too, Professor Joachim Jeremias has set out the incontestable linguistic characteristics of the *ipsisima vox Jesu*.

No one would deny that the gospel accounts of Jesus belong to two separate contexts, that of his ministry and that of the Church after the Resurrection. Few, however, seem willing to recognize that there was a minimal time interval between the two. On this point so much New Testament scholarship seems to fall down. Must we call it a failure in historical imagination? Thus Professor Barrett enthusiastically quotes Gilbert Murray on the *Iliad*, and goes on to say that Murray's comments on the *Iliad* could be applied to the gospels, and that

'most would agree' about this. Most perhaps, but that is the pity of it! For the *Iliad* was no doubt recited orally for several centuries before achieving its written form: our written gospels are barely two generations away from Jesus himself. In the time sphere, the gospels are to Jesus as an older man of today is to his parents in their youth or to his grandparents. And it is quite possible for a man of today to remember striking events told by grandparents of their younger days—and then to relate them quite clearly.

This important point must very considerably modify any view of form criticism in the gospels. There is hardly time for the various forms to evolve. At best we can envisage them in their incipient stages only.

The gospel tradition was not something one or two stages clearly removed from the words and deeds of Jesus: much more, we suspect, was it something arising from those words and deeds. Then, as Professor Barrett has seen so well, 'the figure of the historic Jesus . . . was of such overwhelming importance'. This would make for yet more loving care in handing on the tradition of words and deeds of Jesus in all essential matters if not with meticulous literalness.

The crux of the question is over the degrees of literalness that we expect of a gospel text. A certain over-literalism of attitude (could it resemble Pascal's *esprit de géométrie*?) will obviously make for difficulties which need not be. Thus it is hard to see why the story of James and John asking for first places in the kingdom (Mk. 10, 35) and the asking put on their mother's lips (Matt. 20, 20) constitute 'a formidable historical difficulty'. It is surely no more of a difficulty than to stoop down and untie sandals (Mk. 1, 8) and carrying sandals (Matt. 3, 11). Such variants in gospel redaction in no way detract from the veracity and efficacy of the gospel, 'power of God unto salvation'.

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