

The present volume is based on a series of lectures delivered to theological students at Holzhausen in 1976; Gerhardsson sets himself the task of sketching in a brief compass his own view of the way in which the traditions about Jesus contained in the New Testament were formed and transmitted. Gerhardsson argues that the Twelve orally preserved and handed on this material in the manner of the rabbinic academies which ultimately produced Mishnah and Talmud. He emphatically warns that such a process involved "interpretative adaptations" (p 85), but he insists "that in the synoptic Gospels we hear not only a whisper of the voice of Jesus, but are confronted with faithfully preserved words from the mouth of Jesus and reports which in the end go back to those who were with Jesus during his ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem" (p 90). This position amounts to a challenge to the supposition (commonly found in form critical studies) that the early Church exercised a creative autonomy in asserting what Jesus did and said.

Gerhardsson refers the reader to his earlier books, especially *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (1961, 1964) and *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (1964), for fuller treatment of the evidential basis for his viewpoint, and contents himself here with explaining the sort of considerations which led him to develop his understanding of the formation of the gospel tradition. In the opening chapters (1-3), he discusses the importance placed by Judaism, particularly rabbinic Judaism, on Torah as an orally preserved and expounded possession of Israel, and he points out that there is clear evidence in the New Testament that first century Jews were participants in this expository process (chapter 4). Paul is then treated as a Christian rabbi who handed on tradition in the same way (chapters 5-7); Gerhardsson argues that Paul delivered a Jesus tradition so fixed as to merit the designation "text", and that he did so

orally. Gerhardsson then goes on to characterize gospel tradition generally in much the same terms: it is passionately concerned with "Jesus' earthly ministry" (p 46, chapter 8), it concentrates on Jesus at the expense of the disciples in a way which suggests their selfless devotion to transmitting the words and deeds of their master (chapter 9), it runs in a "straight line which proceeds from this [sc. Jesus'] situation to the situation after Easter" (p 53, chapter 10), it is controlled by those who personally knew Jesus (chapter 11), it is clearly distinguished from the New Testament letters, in which "we find practically no direct quotations of what Jesus had said or reports of what he had done" (p 67, chapter 12). In a summarizing conclusion (chapter 13), Gerhardsson recapitulates "why I believe that the Gospels essentially provide us with an historically reliable picture of Jesus of Nazareth" (p 79).

Gerhardsson freely admits that he has done "no more than sketch my position regarding the historical credibility of the Gospels" (p 90). Nevertheless, the book has important implications for those who teach and preach the New Testament. The author's basic contention - which recent discussion has not vitiated - is that the source of the gospel tradition is Jewish and is therefore to be understood within the categories of Jewish tradition. In such a context, glib generalizations about the importation of mythical material from the Hellenistic world or about the free creative activity of the Church in respect of the words and deeds of Jesus sound dilettantish unless and until they are backed up by evidence. As a contributor to scholarly discussion, Gerhardsson, along with such writers as Harold Riesenfeld, Jürgen Roloff, Heinz Schürmann and Thorleif Boman (whose work, unfortunately, is not discussed in the present volume), has made us think again about the nature of the gospel tradition. With the publication of this book, teachers and preachers can no longer be excused from giving the matter a second thought.

The difficulty about second thoughts

is that they can degenerate into a reactionary negation of first thoughts. In the present volume, we are warned against a Bultmannian understanding of myth as the engine of kerygma because it does not rest on an adequately "detailed analysis of the traditional Gospel material" (p 52). Having granted this point — on which I suspect most New Testament scholars would agree — where are we left? Logically, we are left to describe, as best we can, the nature of the gospel tradition. But we are most emphatically not in a position to assert that because tradition is not mythical (in Bultmann's sense) it must be "historical" (whatever we may mean by that). In fairness, I must repeat that Gerhardsson himself, in acknowledging the place of interpretative adaptation in the Gospels, is far from maintaining that the Gospels are a stenographically descriptive account. But when he speaks of "faithfully preserved words of Jesus" and of narratives which "go back to those who were with Jesus" (see the above quotation from p 90), readers of a literalistic persuasion may imagine they are expected to derive comfort from Gerhardsson's position. For this reason, it seems wise to explain why it would be illegitimate to press Gerhardsson's claims in that direction.

In the first place, every student of rabbinic literature knows that rabbis cannot be described as historians. We read in Talmud that one rabbi said something, only to find the same logion ascribed to another rabbi elsewhere; rabbis who lived centuries apart are commonly presented as contemporary partners in dialogue, heavenly voices, appearances of Elijah, healings, exorcisms, nature miracles and other prodigies are associated with several rabbis; at one point Jesus himself is portrayed as executed by stoning (Sanhedrin 43a). Of course, there are historical elements included in Talmud, as in other rabbinic works, but one could scarcely characterize Talmud as historical in intent or as primarily historical in its value. It is essentially a compendium of opinions on various

matters which grew out of and was designed to serve rabbinic discussion, whose basic purpose was to discover how to keep the Torah. The failure to characterize and cite the rabbinic sources on which he builds so much must be seen as a weakness in Gerhardsson's argument.

If the Gospels could be described as akin to Talmud, that would be no basis on which to assert their historical reliability. Moreover, Gerhardsson has yet to reply convincingly to the objections raised by Morton Smith and Jacob Neusner to the assumption that the rabbinic discussion after 70 A.D. provides an exact model for techniques used by Jesus and his followers to hand on tradition (cf. pp 22f.). In addition to this chronological difficulty, one might observe that rabbinic literature is the child of intramural rabbinic discussion; the Gospels, even as read among the baptized, are not essentially designed to be of academic interest. Gerhardsson himself observes that their concentration on a single individual distinguished the Gospels from Jewish literature (p 48); does not such an observation suggest that Charles Talbert's thesis that the genre of the Gospels is to be explained in terms of their Hellenistic environment may be correct?

These criticisms are not just peripheral niggles. They rather suggest that Gerhardsson's thesis is flawed at several key points: (1) he has not shown that Jewish tradition in the time of Jesus was the same as rabbinic tradition, (2) he has not shown that the Gospels are essentially like any Jewish document, (3) he has not shown that Jewish tradition in the time of Jesus was "historically reliable" (to use his own phrase). He has compelled us to consider that Jewish techniques of handing on tradition, not the imagination of the Church, may be the source of New Testament data about Jesus. But until more is learned about the nature of early Jewish tradition, it is premature to speak on this basis of the general reliability of the Gospels.

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