The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method

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No single issue has so taxed and fascinated students of early Christianity as the quest for the historical Jesus. Yet on no other issue have such prodigious efforts led to more inconclusive results. Some of the causes underlying this nagging impasse are obvious, others less so. Among the former are the status of Christianity in Western culture and the role of the New Testament within Christianity. In its broadest terms, the issue is the unresolved and often unrecognized tension between history and religious belief. Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*[1] and more recently Van Harvey's *The Historian and the Believer*[2] have chronicled the various ways in which rigorous historical method has been subordinated to religious and theological concerns. With dogged regularity, the desire to reach authentic Jesus material has led questers to sacrifice methodological rigor or to minimize the difficulties posed by the sources. Thus Schweitzer's judgment that "the historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest"[3] applies not just to motives for the quest but inevitably to the manner in which it is carried out. To justify this situation, as some have done, merely by observing that no historian approaches the subject with total objectivity is unacceptable. In addition to the normal problems of any historical topic, this quest poses special difficulties and demands special precautions.

Beyond this, the status of the New Testament as sacred scripture has long fostered a parochial attitude toward specific issues of methodology. Working hypotheses have tended to become methodological dogmas and hence immune to critical reassessment. Thus the tendency to focus on the Synoptic Gospels as the primary and often exclusive

[1] New York, 1959 (first English translation, 1910).
[2] New York, 1966.
[3] Schweitzer, p. 4.

sources for information about Jesus has been reinforced by their canonical status. And in other cases where cognate disciplines (e.g., anthropological work on the origin, behavior, and function of oral traditions) might have opened up a methodological deadend, questers have rarely seized the occasion to move beyond the inherited conventions of their own discipline.

These are, I admit, arguable observations. To substantiate them, I propose to examine three central issues in the quest—the selection of sources, the oral tradition, and the definition of criteria for identifying authentic words and deeds of Jesus. I will argue that previous attempts at the quest have proceeded on unexamined assumptions with respect to one or another of these issues and that prospects for a responsible quest must remain pessimistic until new foundations can be formulated and laid down.

Which Gospels?

At the very outset, the quester must settle the issue of sources. What documents are most likely to yield reliable information about Jesus? In theory, the answer should be that any reported saying or deed, no matter what its present literary setting, merits at least initial consideration. In practice, the answer has been that only the Synoptic Gospels qualify, despite the existence of numerous noncanonical Gospels and the occurrence of isolated sayings in other types of literature; for example, Paul cites a "word of the Lord" in 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 and Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200) quotes another saying in his *On Baptism* (20.2). Here, then, is a serious question of method. On what grounds can one justify this drastic reduction in the number and type of possible sources, especially with respect to the noncanonical or apocryphal Gospels? The answer would appear to lie in the canonical status of the Synoptics. Their religious authority as sacred scripture has been extended to cover their historical authority as well. More often than not this transfer of authority seems to have taken place unconsciously, for one rarely finds arguments to the effect that these particular Gospels attained canonical status because of their greater historical reliability. On the contrary, recent studies of the prolonged process which led to the present New Testament canon have emphasized that historical accuracy was not a major factor in the process. Apostolic authorship, wide usage (catholicity), conformity with accepted teaching and practice—these were the major forces behind the emergence of the

canon.[4] From the third to the fifth centuries, the canon served to reinforce a Western, and particularly Roman idealization of Christian beginnings and to bolster the arsenal of emergent orthodoxy in its struggles with numerous "heresies." The long-term effect of the canon was to enhance the *historical* authority of the Gospels and, not coincidentally, to hasten the demise and disappearance of noncanonical Gospels. But the original intent of the canon, as of the individual writings that comprise it, was certainly not to preserve an accurate historical record of Christianity's earliest decades. Once we begin to disentangle the historical problem (what writings qualify as sources for the quest) from its nonhistorical setting (the canon as the reflection and product of theological and ecclesiastical needs in the early church), the question of sources becomes at once broader and more complicated. But we may not apply nonhistorical criteria, for example, the fact that a given writing is noncanonical, merely to simplify the task of identifying sources.

Quite recently there have been indications of a movement away from the situation as outlined above.[5] In an important article on the Gospels and their sources, Helmut Koester has subjected the entire issue to a thorough reexamination.[6] In relation to the quest, his most important insight is that the canonical Gospels represent but one literary form, one whose "perspectival image" of Jesus is determined by the significance of his suffering and death In contrast to the prevailing consensus, Koester portrays the noncanonical Gospels not as reworked versions of the Synoptics but as independent distillations of pre-Synoptic sources, each expressing a distinctive purpose and perspective. Thus canonical and apocryphal Gospels are no longer opposed to each other as if the latter alone were shaped by theological motives and biases. Both, or

[4] For recent literature see P. Feine, J. Behm, and W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, Tenn., 1966), pp. 334–58; E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia, 1963), 1:28–60; and esp. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, "Prinzipien der Sammlung und Ausscheidung bei der Bildung des Kanons," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 61 (1964): 404–20.

[5] See, for example, N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York, 1967). Perrin regards the Gospel of Thomas as probably independent of the Synoptics and treats it on a par with the canonical Gospels in carrying out his form criticism. For a similar judgment about the Gospel of Peter, see Benjamin A. Johnson, "Empty Tomb Tradition in the Gospel of Peter" (Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1966).

[6] "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, ed. J. M. Robinson and H. Koester (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 158–204. An earlier and somewhat different version of the essay appeared in *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 203–47.

rather the several types of Gospels (Synoptics, collections of sayings, aretalogies, revelation discourses) and their sources are molded by their respective images of Jesus.

For my purposes, Koester's considerations indicate the need for a new procedure in defining the literary sources for the quest: "The honor of having continued and developed the tradition about Jesus' original works and words must go to the more primitive gospel sources and to the apocryphal gospels. The continuation of Jesus' teaching is present in the gospels which preserve and expand his sayings (Q and Thomas). . . . But the gospels of the church cannot claim and should not be understood to reflect the preaching and works of the earthly Jesus in a straight line of tradition."[7] Initially this means that the Synoptic Gospels and their sources can no longer serve as norms for assessing the reliability of non-Synoptic materials. Thus, if we conclude that a document like the Gospel of Thomas rests on independent sources, we must then consider all of its sayings, not just those with Synoptic parallels.

In short the present literary setting of a saying or story is largely irrelevant in determining whether it contains reliable information about Jesus. The fact that a Gospel is noncanonical (Gospel of Peter) or that it represents the views of a community which later Christianity came to regard as heretical (Gospel of Thomas) tells us nothing about the value of its sources as potential contributors to the quest. Once we have ascertained that a Gospel could have had access to independent sources, that is, that it is not merely a revision of an earlier written Gospel, we are faced with the identical problem in every case: can we distinguish the views of Jesus from those of the group(s) which produced the Gospel?

Through the Gospels to Jesus

Ultimately, then, every Gospel is a potential witness for three major moments in the history of early Christianity. In its present form, it is primarily a source for the community and/or individual that produced it. By examining its characteristic structure, thematic development, and

[7] Koester, "One Jesus" p. 203. On p. 175, Koester indicates that "perhaps all [of the parables in the Gospel of Thomas] are original words of Jesus."

literary style and by distinguishing insofar as possible between traditional material and its reinterpretation, we can sketch the thoughts and practices, the concerns and presuppositions, which underlie it. This is the task of literary or *redaction criticism.*[8] At a second level, it is often possible to move from the Gospel as it stands to collections of material (sayings, miracle stories, passion narrative) that circulated independently before being brought together in the written Gospel. In fact this process involves two discrete tasks: *source criticism*, which focuses attention on collections of material,[9] and *form criticism*, which traces the history of individual pericopes through various stages of growth to their earliest discernible form.[10] Thus the final goal of redaction, source, and form criticism is to lay bare the history of the Gospel tradition from beginning to end and to indicate how the function (*Sitz im Leben*) of the material at each successive stage has influenced its growth and development. Only when we have reached this point is it possible to ask the third and final question: does a given saying or act accurately reflect a moment in the career of Jesus? But before we reach this tremulous plateau, we must pause to examine a fundamental tenet of all Gospel criticism—the oral tradition.

A. THE ORAL TRADITION

From the eighteenth century, when the Gospels were first subjected to critical analysis, the hypothesis of an oral tradition has played a major role in the study of early Christianity.[11] H. Koester has used it to

[8] See N. Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia, 1969). Among recent redaction-critical studies, the best known are W. Marxsen, *Mark, the Evangelist* (Nashville, Tenn., 1969); J. M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark* (London, 1957); G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia, 1963); and H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York, 1960). Of the somewhat older, pioneering literature, see R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (New York, n.d.; the book represents the Bampton Lectures of 1934), and H. J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (New York, 1927).

[9] See the important studies of J. M. Robinson, "Logoi Sophōn: On the Gattung of Q," in *Trajectories*, pp. 71–113; and H. Koester, "One Jesus" (n. 6 above).

[10] The classic work on form criticism is still R. Bultmann's *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen, 1921). An English translation of the third edition (1958), *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York, 1963), has been produced by J. Marsh.

[11] For a discussion of information on oral traditions in early Christian writers, see B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund, 1961), pp. 194–207.

explain the variant forms of Gospel sayings in the apostolic fathers.[12] P. Gardner-Smith[13] and C. H. Dodd[14] have appealed to the existence of a reliable oral tradition behind the Gospel of John to justify their claim that the Gospel contains reliable information about Jesus. And B. Gerhardsson, partly in response to widespread skepticism about the reliability of the Gospel tradition, has proposed the bold and highly controversial theory that the earliest Christian teachers, like first-century rabbis and their pupils, memorized and transmitted sayings under such carefully controlled conditions that their reliability is beyond doubt.[15] While Gerhardsson's theory has not found wide acceptance, scarcely anyone would question the notion that "doubtless a period of oral tradition did precede the writing down of the gospels."[16]

For all of its prominence as a working hypothesis, however, the oral tradition has never received the careful scrutiny which it deserves and needs. Once established, the basic assumptions about the character and behavior of the oral tradition have survived with virtually no review or revision. My intention is not to undertake such a review here, but rather to suggest where and how traditional assumptions may have led us astray.

One recent study offers a solid base from which to begin. Jan Vansina, in his *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, has undertaken a comprehensive survey of oral tradition in preliterate societies of Africa and elsewhere.[17] His general aim, like mine, is to observe the behavior of oral materials in order to determine whether and how they may be used as sources for the past. Vansina notes initially that

[12] *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (Berlin, 1957); see Gerhardsson's comments in *Memory and Manuscript*, pp. 198–99.

[13] *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 96 ff.

[14] *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 424.

[15] *Memory and Manuscript*, p. 328. For negative reactions to Gerhardsson's thesis, see M. Smith, "A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Tradition," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963): 169–76; W. D. Davies, "Reflections on a Scandinavian Approach to the Gospel Tradition," in *Neotestamentica et Patristica. Freundesgabe Oscar Cullmann* (Leiden, 1962), reprinted in Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 464–80; and Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (n. 5 above), pp. 30–32. These reactions prompted Gerhardsson to answer his critics in *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund, 1964). See also the important essay of Jacob Neusner, "The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before A.D. 70: The Problem of Oral Transmission," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 22 (1971): 1–18.

[16] Feine et al. (n. 4 above), p. 38.

[17] Chicago, 1965.

oral tradition functions quite differently in literate and preliterate societies.[18] "Oral tradition in such [literate] societies is limited to the exchanges that take place in the course of everyday conversation, and consists of traditions which are handed down from generation to generation in a random fashion, without the aid of any special techniques." [19] Thus while laws of transmission appropriate to a preliterate society may be relevant in a literate one, we should not assume that they are identical. In this connection, it might prove interesting and fruitful to determine whether the early proponents of form criticism developed their image of the oral tradition from literate or preliterate societal models.

Vansina further observes that different types of material obey different laws of transmission. Of particular relevance for us is the category of "official tradition," which deals with matters of social and cultural importance for the entire community. Given the significant social function of such material, the content of official traditions is controlled by people in positions of power. "Hence facts which do not help to maintain the institution which transmits the tradition are often omitted or falsified." [20] At the same time, however, such traditions are entrusted to trained specialists, whose public recitations are subject to close public supervision and whose failures of memory may occasion harsh sanctions.[21] Thus an "official tradition is less trustworthy as a historical source . . . insofar as it is official, but more trustworthy insofar as it is much more carefully transmitted." [22] In the case of Gospel material, where we might plausibly designate certain strands as analogous to Vansina's "official tradition" (initially, perhaps, sayings of Jesus and the passion narrative), we would have to approach them in terms of this double law: more trustworthy as to care in transmission, less so as to historical reliability.

In assessing the reliability of oral material as sources of historical

[18] Ibid., p. 6.

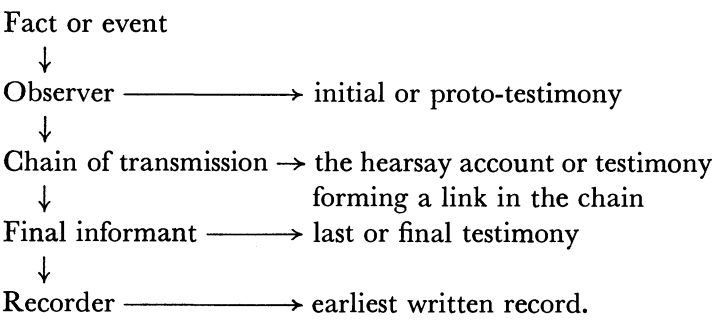
[19] Ibid. One important and relevant exception to this statement is the transmission of legal material (*halakah*) in the rabbinic tradition.

[20] Ibid., p. 84.

[21] Ibid., pp. 33–34. Here one is reminded of the hostile exchanges between early Christian writers concerning alleged distortions of sacred traditions; see 2 Peter 3:16: "There are some things in them [the letters of Paul] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures."

[22] Ibid., p. 85.

reconstruction, Vansina sets forth a schematic view of the transmission process:[23]



For my purposes several additions are needed in order to bring the schema into conformity with the prevalent view of the gospel tradition: (*a*) the translation of primitive material from Aramaic into Greek, normally thought to have taken place during the stage of oral transmission; this factor would fall within the "chain of transmission"; (*b*) a written stage prior to the "earliest written record," since it is commonly assumed that smaller written sources preceded the written Gospels; and (*c*) a final stage involving competition and mutual contamination between the written gospels and the ongoing oral tradition; this may be a matter of textual variants or of new material entering the Gospels from the oral tradition (e.g., the story of the adulterous woman which appears in John 7:53–8:11 in some manuscripts, after John 21:24 in others, not at all in others, and after Luke 21:38 in still others).

As to factors that produce distortion and must be taken into account if we are to utilize oral material for reconstructing the original fact or event, Vansina treats them under three groupings: first, the individual psychology of the initial observer who "gives, either consciously or unconsciously, a distorted account of what happened"[24] and who often provides interpretations of what he has seen and heard; second, the conscious influence of private interests (power, prestige, persuasiveness, etc.) at each link in the chain; and third, the unconscious influence of cultural values such as idealization of the past, peculiar notions of historical causality (e.g., the belief of early Christians in miracles and

[23] Ibid., p. 21.
[24] Ibid., p. 76.

demons), and ideas of what constitutes truth (e.g., the truth is what the tradition says or what the majority believes).

Taking into account these numerous factors as they have shaped the tradition and given one final condition, Vansina concludes that it is possible to proceed backward through oral material to an approximation of the original event. But this final condition is critical. The historian must possess "thorough knowledge of the culture and of the language" and must be in a position to "make a sociological analysis of the society in which the traditions are found." [25] Herein lies the rub for the historian of early Christianity. Vansina and other students of oral traditions are treating living societies out of which the anthropologist can develop the requisite "thorough knowledge" and against which his insights can be checked by independent observers. By contrast, the historian of early Christianity enjoys none of these advantages: no direct access to oral material, no information about the initial observers or about subsequent links in the chain, no knowledge of the social institutions, no independent data about the historical figure who is the object of the quest—in short, no "thorough knowledge" of the culture during the period of the oral tradition.

As a complement to the work of Vansina, we must also consider insights from the perspective of the psychology of memory and rumor transmission. Initially it may seem farfetched to liken Gospel tradition to rumor, but in their work on *The Psychology of Rumor*,[26] G. W. Allport and L. Postman propose two definitions which suggest the contrary. Rumor they describe as a "specific proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure

[25] Ibid., pp. 183, 86. In this regard it is of considerable interest to read the following comments of Oscar Cullmann, written in 1925: "There needs to be a special branch of sociology, devoted to studying the laws which govern the growth of popular traditions. Form criticism will only be able to function profitably if conclusive results can be established in this area. In fact, a serious defect in [form critical] studies which have appeared thus far is the absence of any sociological basis. This is what gives to Bultmann's book [*Synoptic Tradition*] such a hypothetical character" ("Les récentes études sur la formation de la tradition évangélique," in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 5 [1925]: 573; my translation). Apparently no one has heeded Cullmann's warning in the subsequent development of form criticism—this despite the fact that Cullmann's essay is mentioned and applauded by Bultmann (*Synoptic Tradition*, pp. 1, 4–6) and M. Dibelius (*Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* [Tübingen, 1966], p. 57, n. 1). I might add that Cullmann's special branch of sociology, i.e., anthropology, was already in existence in 1925 and by that time had produced several studies on oral traditions; see the literature cited by Vansina, pp. 216 ff.

[26] Originally published in 1947 (New York) and reissued in 1965. See also T. Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (New York, 1966).

standards of evidence being present." [27] Later they define legend "as a solidified rumor . . . an unusually persistent bit of hearsay which, after a prior history of distortion and transformation, ceases to change as it is transmitted from generation to generation." [28] In fact, both definitions indicate clear parallels between rumor transmission and oral tradition in early Christianity and suggest that study of the former may shed new light on the latter.

Allport and Postman emphasize the processes of perceiving, remembering, and reporting as well as the factors which produce distortion in them. Their general conclusion is that distortion in perception occurs in proportion to the ambiguity of the topic and its importance for the individuals involved.[29] Given the presence of these two factors, perception of the environment in general and rumors in particular will be governed by three laws of distortion: (*a*) *leveling* or a tendency to grow shorter and more concise, especially as concerns details not deemed relevant to the basic issue; (*b*) *sharpening* or the selective perception, retention, and reporting of details and motifs, again as they seem relevant to the basic issue; and (*c*) *assimilation* of the material according to normal expectations, linguistic habits, emotional states, cultural stereotypes, occupational interests, self-interest, prejudice, and the like.[30] Even if we assume some degree of incongruity between rumors and Gospel traditions, the work of Allport and Postman suggests that form critics and questers cannot disregard their final statement about the question of reliability: "So great are the distortions that come from the embedding process (that is, leveling, sharpening, and assimilation to personal sentiments) that it is never under any circumstances safe to accept rumor as a valid guide for belief or conduct." [31]

In a recent article E. T. Abel has called attention to the importance of these results for the study of the Gospels.[32] Of particular significance

[27] Allport and Postman, p. ix.

[28] Ibid., pp. 162–63.

[29] Allport and Postman express their thesis in the formula "that the amount of rumor in circulation will vary with the importance of the subject to the individuals concerned *times* the ambiguity of the evidence pertaining to the topic at issue" (pp. 33–34). The same formula is later applied to the amount of distortion in the transmission of rumors (pp. 44–45). For a more detailed analysis of distortion factors, see D. T. Campbell, "Systematic Error on the Part of Human Links in Communication Systems," *Information and Control* 1 (1958): 334–69.

[30] Allport and Postman, pp. 75–158.

[31] Ibid, p. 148.

[32] "The Psychology of Memory and Rumor Transmission and Their Bearing on Theories of Oral Transmission in Early Christianity," *Journal of Religion* 51 (1971): 270–81. While I cannot share Abel's optimism that "hitherto impossible quests may

is his observation that "contrary to the conclusions derived from Form Criticism, studies of rumor transmission indicate that *as information is transmitted, the general form or outline of a story remains intact, but fewer words and fewer original details are preserved.*" [33] In other words, laws that apply to the transmission of written texts do not apply in the process of oral transmission.[34] Written texts tend to expand, whereas oral texts, *at least* in matters of details, tend toward contraction and assimilation to familiar patterns.[35] Thus, the fact that we are limited to written texts means that we can never reconstruct changes which occurred during oral transmission.

But the cumulative effect of recent studies on oral tradition, rumor formation, and the psychology of perception, memory, and reporting take us well beyond Abel's proposed revisions in the laws of form criticism. They indicate that students of the Gospels have given virtually no attention to systematic issues relating to the two basic processes involved in the oral tradition: its *formation* on the basis of events as perceived and remembered by eyewitnesses, and its *transmission* through subsequent links in the tradition. We have already seen the sorts of difficulties which these systematic studies create for traditional assumptions about the transmission of oral sources. Equally serious, however, are the implications for the formation of these sources at their point of origin. By and large, questers have assumed that eyewitness accounts will provide reliable data about the figure of Jesus. Thus, as we shall see, material which passes the criterion of dissimilarity is normally deemed to be authentic. Yet even our brief consideration of factors that produce distortion in the perception and reporting of

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become less formidable" (p. 281), his observations represent nonetheless an important reappraisal of traditional assumptions about the origins of the Gospels. For further criticisms, see also H. Teeple, "The Oral Tradition That Never Existed," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 56–68.

[33] Abel, pp. 275–76 (his emphasis). See also Allport and Postman, pp. 80–86, on the limits of leveling.

[34] Abel notes (pp. 276–77) that earlier form critics, including V. Taylor in *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London, 1935) and Cadbury (n. 8 above), had reached similar conclusions but that their voices had not been heard.

[35] This result is to be contrasted with the standard assumption, illustrated by the following quotation from R. Bultmann (in *Form Criticism*, ed. F. C. Grant [New York, 1966], p. 32): "When narratives pass from mouth to mouth, or when one writer takes them over from another, their fundamental character remains the same, but the details are subject to the control of fancy and are usually made more explicit and definite." In this regard we should note Allport and Postman's remark that so-called "inventions are nearly always instances of assimilation" (p. 119).

external events, that is, in the formation of oral traditions, suggests that such eyewitness accounts are by no means reliable, accurate, or authentic in the intended sense. They, too, are subject to leveling, sharpening, and assimilation. What is seen and remembered, what is heard and reported, is very much a function of the seer and the hearer. At the very least we must not lose sight of the fact that so-called authentic sayings of Jesus are tantamount in all cases to eyewitness reports and that their authenticity may pertain as much to the reporter as to Jesus himself.[36]

At this point we can perhaps return to the work of Gerhardsson with greater appreciation for his line of attack. He has correctly perceived that the hypothesis of the oral tradition represents a situation of high gain–high loss: high gain if he can demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the culture which nourished the tradition, high loss if he cannot. At present one can only report that his efforts have not attracted a large following. Apart from the numerous inconsistencies in the Gospels which his theory should not allow, Gerhardsson has finally not proven that early Christianity offered the institutional or social conditions that would have promoted careful memorization and controlled transmission of oral material. And without strong evidence to the contrary, any theory of a fixed oral tradition will remain highly dubious.

Having said this much, however, we must now confront the high-loss alternative. To the extent that the nature of the available sources makes it impossible for us to meet Vansina's conditions, to that same extent we cannot but admit the extremely tenuous nature of any effort to write the history of the Gospel tradition or, failing that, to move through the

[36] In this respect, the recent quest has been strikingly loose in its definition of authenticity. Thus, for instance, J. M. Robinson claims that "a saying which Jesus never spoke may well reflect accurately his historical significance, and in this sense be more 'historical' than many irrelevant things Jesus actually said" (*A New Quest for the Historical Jesus* [Naperville, Ill., 1959], p. 99, n. 3; compare the second edition of the German version, *Kerygma und historischer Jesus* [Zurich, 1967], p. 184, n. 12). Apart from the fact that such a statement presupposes some perspective (e.g., a biographical-chronological framework) from which it is possible to judge what was relevent or irrelevant for Jesus, it ignores the equally important question, raised by the psychology of perception and memory, "historically significant for whom?" Robinson's claim would be valid only if we could assume in all cases that eyewitness reports conveyed precisely Jesus' own sense of his historical significance. The Gospels themselves repeatedly assert that the disciples *mis*understood Jesus' intentions. Thus even "authentic" material may tell us more about the observer than about Jesus himself.

Gospels to trustworthy information about Jesus. If the considerations of Vansina, Allport and Postman, and others are at all pertinent to the Christian Gospels, we must conclude that all previous attempts at the quest have proceeded on ill-founded and misleading assumptions about the oral tradition.

B. CRITERIA OF AUTHENTICITY

In turning to the quest proper, that is, to the task of reconstructing "authentic" saying and acts of Jesus, our mood will hardly be one of unbounded optimism. Beyond what I have stated above, the basic difficulties have long been familiar. The Gospels are the final products of a long and creative tradition, and the earliest Gospel (for most Mark, for some Matthew) is customarily dated about forty years after the death of Jesus. During these years not only was old material reworked, expanded, collated, and reinterpreted, but new material was regularly interpolated.[37] Eschatological pronouncements of Christian prophets,[38] ex post facto predictions, Old Testament proof texts,[39] and ethical maxims[40] were attributed to Jesus and thereby "authorized" for believers. Thus our task is to decide whether and how it is methodologically feasible to disengage "authentic" Jesus material from the Gospels, given our knowledge of their genesis. Specifically, are there criteria according to which we may reasonably attribute a saying or act to Jesus rather than to the tradition itself? Recent discussion has focused on the criterion of dissimilarity.

1. *The Criterion of Dissimilarity*

Norman Perrin presents the criterion and its justification in two brief theses: (*a*) "the earliest form of a saying we can reach may be regarded as authentic if it can be shown to be dissimilar to characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and of the early Church";[41] (*b*) "the nature of the synoptic tradition is such that the burden of

[37] See the brief but excellent summary in Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 22 ff.

[38] See E. Käsemann, "Sentences of Holy Law in the New Testament," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (London, 1969), pp. 66–81.

[39] See B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (Philadelphia, 1961).

[40] See J. P. Brown, "Synoptic Parallels in the Epistles," *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963/64): 27–48.

[41] *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 39.

proof will be upon the claim to authenticity. . . . This seems to many to be too much to ask, but . . . there is no other way to reasonable certainty that we have reached the historical Jesus."[42] Two points in Perrin's formulation of the criterion deserve mention. The statement that a saying will be authentic if it differs from characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and the early church seems unnecessarily complicated. To be sure, the early church was "indebted at very many points to ancient Judaism."[43] But the only channel for this influence was Christianity itself, and it would be incongruous to assume that Christians borrowed concepts from Judaism which differed from their own views. In other words, a saying which is not consonant with the early church may be regarded as authentic, whether or not it is consonant with first-century Judaism. Thus the wording can be simplified to read "dissimilar to characteristic emphases of the early Church."[44] A second problem is Perrin's further claim that "if we are to seek that which is most characteristic of Jesus, it will be found not in things which he shares with his contemporaries, but in the things wherein he differs from them."[45] This is obviously a questionable assertion, based as it is on an implicit and unexamined model of human personality. The criterion of dissimilarity cannot guarantee that its results will reflect the kernel of Jesus' teaching. It can only promise to yield "authentic" results.

Aside from these two points, neither of which touches the basis of the criterion, it is difficult to see how else one might proceed responsibly to distinguish between "history" and "tradition" in the Gospels. Neither the problem nor the proposed solution is unique to early Christianity. They arise wherever the historian must work with traditional material, whether written or oral. Vansina, for instance, remarks of African historical traditions that "features which do not correspond [i.e., are dissimilar] to those commonly attributed to an ideal type . . . may usually be regarded as trustworthy."[46] In another area, the principle of dissimilarity offers the only hope of disentangling fact from legend in the enormous body of literature about the Buddha. In his *Recherches sur la biographie du Bouddha*,[47] André Bareau uses a norm like

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] So also M. Hooker, "Christology and Methodology," *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970/71): 482 ff.
[45] *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 39.
[46] Vansina, p. 107.
[47] Paris, 1963.

the criterion of dissimilarity to differentiate between the few original elements and the mass of later accretions. His norm is that material which appears not to serve the needs of the authors or communities through which it passed may be accepted as authentic.[48] Of interest, too, is his conclusion that the total amount of authentic data can be reduced to no more than a meager handful of isolated names and incidents. All the rest falls either into the category of pure legend or into the penumbra where history and legend are indistinguishable.[49]

Other criticisms appear to stem from a misunderstanding of the criterion itself. The assumption is often made that material which fails the test of dissimilarity is therefore inauthentic. Implied in this assumption is the view that the Gospels contain only two types of material: authentic saying of Jesus and inauthentic creations of the early church. But it would be foolish to suppose that Jesus' views did not overlap at numerous points both with contemporary Judaism and with Christian beliefs. The amount of overlap is uncertain, but its existence seems undeniable except on dogmatic grounds. The criterion of dissimilarity presupposes just such an overlap and states that wherever it exists we cannot claim that a given saying originated with Jesus rather than with the tradition. In speaking of the Son-of-man sayings in Mark 2:10 and 28, which have often been treated as inauthentic, Morna Hooker comments that "the fact that a story has a setting within the life of the early church does not necessarily mean that it could have no place in the life of Jesus as well."[50] Here we can only agree. The proper use of the criterion cannot allow the claim that such a story is inauthentic, merely that we can never be confident of its authenticity under the circumstances.[51] Thus we need to expand our categories from two to three: one for material which is probably authentic; a second for material, like the Son-of-man material in Mark 2, which falls in the overlap and could derive equally from Jesus or the tradition; and a third for material which is probably inauthentic because it so clearly reflects the concerns of the Christian community.

A more serious problem is the patent circularity of the method in dealing with the Gospels. Apart from Paul, who says precious little about Jesus, the sources for our knowledge of early Christian com-

[48] See "L'histoire et la légende," in ibid., pp. 379–85.

[49] Ibid., p. 379.

[50] *The Son of Man in Mark* (Montreal, 1967), pp. 175–76.

[51] Here one should perhaps add, in response to Hooker, that subjective, inconsistent, or incompetent application of a given method is no argument against the method itself.

munities are identical with the sources for the quest itself. This judgment applies not just to the "author" of a written Gospel but also, and more problematically, to communities through which the tradition passed *prior* to the written gospels. How, then, are we to control the process of transmission? In the case of Q (normally defined as material common to Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark), it may be relatively simple to define the source and its special characteristics. In all other cases, however, the search for sources has proved to be notoriously elusive. To put the same problem in somewhat different terms, our knowledge of Christian communities before A.D. 70–90 is severely limited. Thus even when we can affirm that a saying differs from what we know, there is no assurance that it differs from the views of a community about which we know nothing. It may well be the case, in the words of Hooker, that "if we knew the whole truth about Judaism and the early Church, our small quantity of 'distinctive' teaching would wither away altogether." [52]

In the end, these comments and criticisms indicate no reason to question the criterion of dissimilarity as the sole methodological basis for the quest. The only circumstance that would justify abandoning or even loosening it would be a dramatic shift of consensus concerning the reliability of the Gospel tradition. Even then, were we to assume something like 90 percent reliability, the principle of dissimilarity would still offer the only means of isolating the 10 percent of inauthentic, tradition-produced material. The appropriateness and necessity of the criterion derive from the nature of the sources, and only a different understanding of the sources (not a desire to achieve more "positive" results) can dictate a change of methodology.[53]

2. *The Criterion of Coherence*

Perrin proposes a second criterion as follows: "Material from the earliest strata of the tradition may be accepted as authentic if it can be shown to cohere with material established as authentic by means of the criterion of dissimilarity." [54] Briefly, it is not easy to see how this

[52] Hooker, "Christology and Methodology," p. 482.

[53] So stated forcefully by Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 43: "But the brutal fact of the matter is that we have no choice. There is simply no other starting-point that takes seriously enough the radical view of the nature of the sources which the results of contemporary research are forcing upon us."

[54] Ibid., p. 43.

principle follows either from the preceding one or from the character of the sources. To allow a saying that is simply consistent with or does not contradict another saying is to open a floodgate, for the range of such a criterion is virtually limitless.[55] The point is that a great deal of material might cohere with a given view but still reveal special emphases. Thus it seems only just to insist that if a passage fails to meet the fundamental criterion of dissimilarity, there is no warrant for passing it on the slender grounds of coherence.

3. *The Criterion of Multiple Attestation*

In Perrin's words, "this is a proposal to accept as authentic material which is attested in all, or most, of the sources . . . behind the synoptic gospels."[56] Perrin himself admits that it will be of greater use with general motifs (e.g., Jesus' special concern for tax collectors and sinners) than with individual sayings. In any case, the mere fact that a saying or motif appears in several early traditions will not establish anything beyond its early date. The next step will require once again that we apply the test of dissimilarity. If, in the case of "tax collectors and sinners," it could be shown that the motif reflects the special concerns of an early Palestinian community, we would then "dismiss" it on grounds of dissimilarity.

4. *The Criterion of Aramaisms*

J. Jeremias and others have maintained that the presence of Aramaisms, that is, constructions or diction that make sense only as awkward translations from Aramaic into Greek, point toward authenticity.[57] This particular principle creates new problems. Apart from wide disagreement as to what constitutes an Aramaism, given the limited knowledge of first-century Palestinian Aramaic, it is generally assumed that Aramaic was the native tongue not only of Jesus but of Palestinian Christianity in general. Thus even an uncontested Aramaism may not indicate an early date.[58]

A more hopeful question is whether we can use the criterion in a

[55] So also Hooker, "Christology and Methodology," p. 483.

[56] *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 45.

[57] *Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 118 ff.

[58] So D. G. A. Calvert, "An Examination of the Criteria for Distinguishing the Authentic Words of Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971/72): 218.

negative fashion. If a saying shows no sign of Aramaic grammar or diction, the burden of proof thereby shifts to the claim for authenticity. Conversely, if a saying reflects acceptable Greek usage, it can be said either that it originated in Greek and is therefore inauthentic or that the supposed Aramaic original cannot be reconstructed with precision and is therefore inaccessible. In this sense, the negative use may be of some value in the quest, but the positive use is of no value at all.

C. SOME TEST CASES

At this stage in our examination of the quest and its vagaries, we should be clear about what we can and cannot expect. Basically, it will not be possible to write a biography of Jesus. For this we lack all of the essential data. We know virtually nothing of his parents, siblings, early years (childhood, adolescence, early adulthood), friends, education, religious training, profession, or contacts with the broader Greco-Roman world. We know neither the date of his birth, nor the length of his public ministry (the modern consensus of two or three years is an educated guess based largely on the Gospel of John), nor his age at death (Luke 3:23 states that he was "about thirty when he began"). Thus even an optimistic view of the quest can envisage no more than a collection of "authentic" sayings and motifs devoid of context. How, then, can the historian hope to interpret this material and construct even a sketchy image of Jesus in the absence of these fundamental data? This, after all, is the goal of the quest.

But before we assault the greater barrier of interpretation, we must confront the lesser though not inconsiderable hurdle of reconstruction. In so doing our goal is not to survey every item in the Gospels but instead to test our methodological observations against typical examples.

1. *The Baptism of Jesus by John*

Jesus' meeting with John the Baptist at the river Jordan inaugurates his public career in several of the extant Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Ebionites, and Hebrews). Throughout early Christianity and in the modern quest as well, this event is understood as the dramatic turning point in Jesus' understanding of himself within the context of divine history.[59] The central passage is Matthew 11:11 (paralleling Luke 7:28): "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there

[59] See Robinson, *New Quest* (n. 36 above), p. 118.

has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." James Robinson regards the saying as rooted in a genuine word of Jesus and concludes that "Jesus did in fact see in the coming of the Baptist the shift of the aeons . . . the figure through whom the old aeon had been brought to its end and the new aeon had been introduced." [60]

Now, according to the criterion of dissimilarity, this encounter with John meets the test only in part. It is true that their relationship, implying as it does that Jesus submitted to John's authority and that he stood in need of repentance, was a persistent source of embarrassment among early Christians.[61] According to Matthew, John shows great unwillingness to baptize someone whose authority and status far exceed his own. He accedes only when Jesus insists, rather ambiguously, that "it is fitting in order to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:13–15). The Gospel of John goes to even further lengths to remove any doubt concerning John's role as merely a forerunner of Jesus (John 1:8, 15, 26–27, 29–37) and leaves in doubt whether John baptized Jesus at all. And in Luke, John and his mother Elizabeth confess Jesus as the promised savior of Israel while Jesus and John are still in the womb (Luke 1:39–56)! In these passages, the episode clearly differs from the "characteristic emphases" of the Gospels and therefore passes the test of dissimilarity. But in Mark, the incident appears very briefly and with no sign of embarrassment or editorial "improvement." Thus we can only surmise that the story represents early tradition and that it created difficulties in some circles. If Mark had shown clearer signs of discomfiture, we could be more certain that the story, from its inception, was dissimilar to the views of those who preserved and transmitted it. As it stands, however, the story fails the criterion and thus the rigorous test of authenticity.

One critic, M. S. Enslin, has taken the case a step further by construing "the whole story of the contact of Jesus and John as the creation of later Christian thinking." [62] For Enslin all of the details are Christian inventions: the kinship of Mary and Elizabeth, John's confession of

[60] Ibid., pp. 118–19.

[61] See, for example, a fragment from the Gospel of the Hebrews, preserved by Jerome (*Against Pelagius* 3.2): "The mother of the Lord and his brothers said to him, 'John the Baptist baptizes for the forgiveness of sins; let us go and be baptized by him.' But he said to them, 'In what have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless, perhaps, what I have just said is a sin of ignorance.'"

[62] *Christian Beginnings* (New York, 1956), p. 156.

Jesus' superior authority, and the baptism itself.[63] The motive in each case was the fact of serious competition between the disciples of Jesus and the followers of John. The enormous popularity of John—as witnessed by Josephus and Christian literature (e.g., Mark 11:27–33 and Acts 19:1–7)—as well as the editorial reworkings in the Gospels point to an intense rivalry between the two groups. Thus, Enslin concludes, it "appears not unlikely that the incorporation of John into the Christian picture was a deliberate and studied attempt by early Christians to vanquish an embarrassing rival."[64]

Whether or not we accept Enslin's argument in every detail, we cannot deny that he has provided a plausible historical framework for understanding the relationship between Jesus and John as the product of early Christianity. In the process he has also generated a model case for testing the criterion of dissimilarity. The result, to repeat what we have said earlier, is not necessarily that Jesus and John had no contact with each other but that such contact might well have been invented within Christian circles.

2. *The Chronology of the Kingdom*

Here we are not concerned with the numerous similes and parables about the kingdom and the manner of its coming but with a specific cluster of sayings that treat of the eschatological timetable:[65] (*a*) Mark 9:1—"Truly I say to you there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power" (cf. Matt. 16:28 and Luke 9:27); (*b*) Mark 13:30—"Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place" (cf. Matt. 24:34 and Luke 21:32); (*c*) Matt.10:23b—"Truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel,

[63] Enslin notes that the one non-Christian source for John, the Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.5.2), makes no mention of his eschatological message or of Jesus.

[64] Enslin, p. 152. It might be objected that Matt. 11:11 ("Truly, I say to you, among these born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he") speaks against Enslin's view in that Jesus here praises John. In fact, however, the structure of the complete thought presupposes a dramatic discrepancy between John and the least of Jesus' disciples (the Christians). In this sense, the words represent a form of damning with faint praise.

[65] For a detailed exegesis of these passages, see Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 16–20, 199–202.

before the Son of man comes." Again we are dealing with material that most critics hold to be authentic on the principle of dissimilarity. Despite differences in wording, each saying promises a speedy fulfillment of eschatological expectations, and in each case the chronology is quite specific. The argument for authenticity contends that to imagine the sayings as Christian products would mean that the prophecies were already *unfulfilled* at the moment of their creation.

Such was the view of Norman Perrin when he published *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* in 1963.[66] But in his more recent book (1967), *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, Perrin admits to a change of heart.[67] According to this later work, Mark 13:30 is seen as the product of a pre-Marcan prophet, created as an ending to the apocalyptic discourse in 13:3–27. Mark 9:1 is also a Marcan construction, using 13:30 as a model, and designed to conclude the important christological-eschatological section in 8:27–9:1. Its specific function is to provide encouragement for believers during a time of persecution. Similarly, Matthew 10:23b is the work of a Christian prophet and reflects a time of both mission to the Jews and eager expectation of the kingdom. Taken by itself, Perrin's change of heart is not of overwhelming significance, since others, most notably R. Bultmann, have long classified the same sayings as inauthentic. What makes the reversal relevant for our concerns is the reason behind it. Once it became possible for Perrin to envisage these sayings as emerging within a situation of the early church (mission, response to persecution), the criterion of dissimilarity ruled that they could no longer be treated as unquestionably authentic. They could be authentic. But in Perrin's words, "*could* is not the point."[68]

3. *The Future Son of Man*[69]

Of the many Son-of-man sayings in the Gospels, those which have attracted the most attention among questers are the so-called apocalyptic pronouncements where Jesus speaks of the Son of man in the *third* person: (*a*) Luke 12:8–9—"And I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the

[66] Pp. 137 ff.

[67] P. 20, n. 1.

[68] *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 16 (his emphasis).

[69] For recent literature on the Son-of-man sayings, see H. E. Tödt, *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1965), and Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (n. 50 above).

angels of God" (cf. Matt. 10:32—"So every one who acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but . . . "); (*b*) Mark 8:38—"For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (cf. Luke 9:26).

At first approach the authenticity of these pronouncements seems indisputable. The speaker clearly distinguishes between his own activity in the present and that of the Son of man in the future. Inasmuch as Christian belief identified Jesus with the Son of man (note that Matt. 10:32 reads "I" for "Son of man" in its version of the saying), the passage in its present form clearly meets the test of dissimilarity. While this view has had its defenders, including Bultmann [70] and H. E. Tödt,[71] it has also had its detractors, among them E. Käsemann [72] and H. Conzelmann.[73] Käsemann, in particular, has argued that kingdom of God and Son of man are mutually incompatible ideas and are never linked in Jewish tradition.[74] "The fact of the matter is surely that while Jesus did take his start from the apocalyptically determined message of the Baptist, yet his own preaching was not constitutively stamped by apocalyptic but proclaimed the immediate nearness of God. I am convinced that the man who took this step cannot have awaited the Son of man." [75]

One cannot help but detect a note of futility in this argument, for someone did in fact create these sayings by fusing the expectation of the kingdom with the figure of the Son of man. And the result, as Käsemann notes, is unparalleled in Judaism or elsewhere in early Christianity. What one would need in order to disqualify these pronouncements is evidence that some Christians regarded the Son of man as distinct from Jesus. Otherwise, the probable originator will be Jesus himself.[76]

[70] *Synoptic Tradition* (n. 10 above), p. 112.

[71] *Son of Man*, pp. 55–60.

[72] "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," *Journal for Theology and the Church* 6 (1969): 40.

[73] "Gegenwart und Zukunft in der synoptischen Tradition," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 54 (1957): 277–96.

[74] See the discussion in Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 185–87.

[75] Käsemann, "Beginnings of Christian Theology," pp. 39–40.

[76] When Perrin (*Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 198) concludes that Jesus could not have spoken these sayings because "no such concept of a coming Son of man existed to be referred to in this way," one can only judge that he has abandoned his strict adherence to the criterion of dissimilarity. See also the telling comments of Hooker, "Christology and Methodology," pp. 483–85.

In fact, there is no evidence for such a view apart from the sayings themselves. Thus we are driven to defend the authenticity of these pronouncements precisely because they differ, whether in their present form or in Perrin's reconstruction of an earlier form,[77] from characteristic emphases of what we know about early Christianity. In this instance, the criterion has yielded an important result: Jesus announced and anticipated an eschatological figure, the Son of man, distinct from himself yet related in terms of divine authority and judgment. As the people of Jesus' time related to him, so would the Son of man relate to them in his capacity as advocate and prosecutor before God. Whether Jesus expected this final act of assize in the near future, that is, in traditional apocalyptic fashion, is less certain. Perrin remarks that "although he [Jesus] spoke of the future, he gave neither specific form to his future expectations . . . nor did he express it in terms of a specific time element."[78] But the claim that this view reveals a spectacular difference between Jesus and the general expectations of the first century is unfounded. This would be true only if the sayings in Mark 9:1 and 13:30 and Matthew 10:23b could be shown to be inauthentic, and that, as we have seen, is neither the purpose nor the result of the criterion of dissimilarity.

4. *The Parables*

Of all the literary forms in the Gospels, the parables alone enjoy virtually unanimous acceptance as authentic words of Jesus or at least as his most characteristic form of public teaching. "The parables represent by all odds the most markedly individualistic characteristic of the teaching of Jesus; both in form and content they were highly original and strongly stamped with the personality of their author."[79] In light of this overwhelming consensus I should perhaps simply concur that the parables must indeed serve as the foundation for any reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Still, as I have come this far, I may as well linger for a moment even here. In so doing my intent is not to assail the consensus as such but to test the warrants on which it rests.

As a preliminary question, we might ask how it is possible to distin-

[77] See his arguments in *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 187–91. It should be noted that he prefers the form *without* the reference to the Son of man as the original version.

[78] Ibid., p. 204.

[79] Ibid., p. 22.

guish between parables of Jesus and those created in the tradition. Initially, the presence or absence of Aramaisms may be of some help. Thus a parable which reflects no Aramaisms will bear a heavier burden of proof than those which do. The same would apply to parables which presuppose non-Palestinian conditions. A second point is that the parables, in their present form and setting, are products of the oral and written tradition. J. Jeremias, in *The Parables of Jesus*, lists the following secondary elements: embellishment, change of audience, hortatory application, allegory, collection, collation, and change of setting.[80] Thus, before we can ask the question of reliability, we must be able to recover the original form of the parable. Jeremias is confident that this can be done, but the obscurity of the tradition at almost every point has led others to a less optimistic view.[81] In many cases, the original form, setting, and thus the original point of the parable are lost. Finally, there is the matter of Jewish parables. One sometimes receives the impression that Jesus invented the form, but this is obviously not so. In his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Bultmann lists numerous Jewish parallels and concludes that a number of the Gospel parables came not from Jesus but directly from Jewish sources and traditions.[82] In other words, there is no reason to assume a priori that parables as such offer a greater promise of reliability. We have no independent image of Jesus, or of his characteristic mode of expression, that would justify the frequent assertion that they represent his chosen medium, if not his basic message. By the same token, the parables as a group cannot function as a norm for settling the authenticity of other material.[83] Like all other types of material in the Gospels, they must be subjected individually to the test of dissimilarity.

As examples I cite a series of parables treated by Perrin in his *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*.[84] In Matthew 20:1–16 (the laborers in the vineyard), the point of the parable is that God accepts individuals on the basis of his mercy rather than their merit. Thus laborers who receive one denarius for a day's work have no ground for complaint when the same sum is paid for one hour's work. The setting in Jesus' life, according to Perrin, is "the offence caused by his acceptance of 'the tax collectors and sinners' who responded to the challenge of the

[80] *The Parables of Jesus* (New York, 1955), pp. 20–88.
[81] See Hooker, "Christology and Methodology," p. 486.
[82] *Synoptic Tradition*, pp. 202–5.
[83] So also Calvert (n. 58 above), p. 218.
[84] Pp. 116 ff.

forgiveness of sins."[85] Now, the motif of "tax collectors and sinners" is basically a standard form of social polemic employed by an established religious group against new claimants to power and authority. This kind of criticism, that is, that Jesus and his followers represented the most unworthy elements in society, was by no means unique to the life of Jesus.[86] The anti-Christian polemicist Celsus, writing about A.D. 180, charges that Christianity attracts only "the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, only slaves, women and children."[87] In short, social jibes, often reinforced by religious insults, accompanied early Christianity throughout its early development, whether in Palestine or beyond. And in response early Christians regularly undertook to justify their social constituency. Thus the thrust of Matthew 20:1–16, which is not to reject the charge but to turn it against the accusers, could have originated at numerous points along the way. The same situation prevails in Matthew 21:28–32 (the two sons) which concludes with the pronouncement, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you." More generally, all of the anti-Pharisaic passages in the Gospels could reflect a setting in debates between Jews and later Christians as well as between Jesus and his contemporaries.[88] The problem is perhaps most apparent in Perrin's discussion of Luke 10:29–37 (the good Samaritan). He first admits that the account "has a natural *Sitz im Leben* in both the ministry of Jesus and the life and work of the Church," but then cites "the vividness and power of the story" in favor of its authenticity.[89] Here one can only observe that Perrin appears to have abandoned the criterion of dissimilarity. In so doing he brings to light again the basic, if quite insubstantial, argument against the criterion. When applied with rigor and consistency, it unveils precious little material that can meet the canon of authenticity. And in contrast to traditional views, our

[85] Ibid., p. 116.

[86] Perrin's comment (ibid., p. 120), in connection with Matt. 11:16–19 (children playing in the market place), that the "designation of Jesus as a 'glutton and a drunkard' belongs to the polemics of the controversy surrounding Jesus' earthly ministry during his lifetime, rather than to the circumstances of the controversies between the early Church and Judaism" is without foundation in fact. The *Toledoth Yeshu* and the dialogue between Jesus and a Jew in Celsus's *True Doctrine* (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.28–2.79) indicate that it was common practice among Jews to criticize Christianity through attacks on the figure of Jesus.

[87] Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.44.

[88] Most recently discussed by J. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), pp. 67–80.

[89] Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 123.

survey suggests that this "pessimistic" judgment applies as much to parables as to other literary forms in the Gospel tradition.

Reconstructing the Historical Jesus

At this point I turn from the sources to the recent history of quest itself. Initially one observes that consensus has never been reached on matters of fundamental significance. If some attempts to recover Jesus of Nazareth have foundered on unexamined assumptions about the Gospels, others have failed for want of clarity about the possibility and limits of historical reconstruction itself.

Recently Van Harvey has suggested that many of the uncertainties in recent research on the life of Jesus stem from confusion about the term "historical Jesus." Four uses in particular seem to recur, sometimes interchangeably, in the literature: (1) the actual Jesus, or Jesus "as he really was"; (2) the historical Jesus, or what can be reconstructed of him through historical means; (3) the memory impression or perspectival image of Jesus as preserved and transmitted by the first eyewitnesses; and (4) the biblical Christ, or the image of Jesus as molded by the views of a particular community or individual, for example, the Johannine Christ.[90] Of these, the first is inaccessible in theory as well as practice: in theory, because the very concept "as he really was" is a methodological fiction when dealing with any historical figure, and in practice, because the sources cover such a limited period of Jesus' life. As for the various biblical Christs, they are the acknowledged products of a long tradition, and thus not the end but rather the starting point of the quest. The second sense, that is, what can be known of Jesus through historical reconstruction, is probably the most common. But it may also be the most misleading in that it fails to convey exactly how little can be known, even under optimal conditions, of Jesus' life and teaching. Our ignorance is so much greater than our knowledge that to designate the results as "the historical Jesus" seems inappropriate.

Harvey himself focuses on the third sense, the memory impression or perspectival image, as the key element in the quest. While recognizing that such an image is highly selective, excluding as it does every point of view except those of early Christians, and that it will have eliminated many important details, he nonetheless affirms that it has exercised "some restraining influence over the obvious tendency to remold and

[90] Harvey (n. 2 above), pp. 265–75.

recast the central tradition." [91] And he concludes that this (we should really say these) perspectival image is in some sense the historical Jesus. To the objection that this third sense seems arbitrary and that it takes us beyond the proper use of historical tools, he replies that "a perspectival image is not necessarily less true because it was not arrived at by modern historical research; otherwise we would have to discard most of the memory-impressions of our families and friends." [92] But the problem with this attempt to save the possibility of the quest is that it begs the very question that demands an answer. To what extent has a memory impression of Jesus, rooted in the perceptions of eyewitnesses, restrained the creative impulses of the tradition? Has the eyewitness perhaps misunderstood a saying or action? To what extent does an eyewitness report reflect the reporter's perception rather than Jesus'? How can we detect and differentiate the one from the other in the light of what we have said about the origins of the Gospels? Furthermore, while no one would recommend that we discard memory impressions of family and friends as part of an enterprise to produce a biography, no historian would accept these impressions as a substitute for a critical reconstruction.

Despite these criticisms of Harvey's proposal, it must be acknowledged that he has not sought to minimize the difficulties of reconstructing and interpreting "authentic" Jesus material. In this respect his efforts are typical of a recent trend which insists on the possibility of the quest even while admitting that the yield of reliable material is not great. In rather different fashion, the so-called new quest in Germany and the United States expresses the same trend. In his important book *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus*, James Robinson declares that the old quest was historiographically impossible, in part because the sources simply do not provide sufficient information to write a biography of Jesus but even more importantly beause it utilized an inadequate and outmoded concept of doing history.[93] The new quest attempts to redeem the situation by turning a necessity (the lack of biographical data) into a virtue (such data are of little importance to the modern historian). The goal is no longer to produce an external biography but to discover "the act of intention, the commitment, the meaning for the participants behind the external occurrence." [94] The selfhood of Jesus,

[91] Ibid., p. 268.

[92] Ibid., p. 267.

[93] *New Quest* (n. 36 above), pp. 66–72.

[94] Ibid., p. 67; cf. p. 69: "Now that the modern view of history and the self has become formally more analogous to the approach of the kerygma, we need no

his understanding of existence and his self-understanding, "can be deduced from his intentions revealed in his sayings." [95] Thus "in the higher sense his life is a possible subject of historical research." [96]

Theoretically, Robinson's program has much to commend it, though it in no way represents the full range of contemporary historiography. In practice, however, it fails just at the point of its highest promise. Harvey's cogent critique of the new quest uncovers serious soft spots in the theory itself, but the most telling weaknesses arise at the point of practical application: [97] "(1) Can the existential selfhood of any person in the past be grasped except by inferences drawn from so-called external data among which it is important to establish chronological relationships? (2) Are not the warrants which license conclusions about 'deep-lying intentions' of past persons such that, in the nature of the case, these conclusions should be made with the greatest caution and, in some cases, not at all?" [98]

In answer to the first of these rhetorical questions, it becomes immediately apparent that the new quest requires precisely that kind of biographical data which, according to Robinson, the Gospels cannot provide. To cite but one example: How can we be certain that Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist represents a turning point in his career, the emergence of a new self-understanding, if we know nothing of Jesus prior to the episode, and how do we know, in the total absence of biographical data, that he did not suffer yet another change of heart? [99] As to the second question, the outlook is even more pessimistic. Here the absence of hard data becomes the final stumbling block. Harvey illustrates the problem with an example from American history. "If historians are unable to decipher the mystery of Abraham Lincoln, even though they possess volumes of authentic sayings, intimate letters, and the accounts of eyewitnesses, are we to believe that we can encounter the real Jesus of Nazareth on the basis of a handful of sayings preserved in no chronological order by a community that was especially anxious to prove that he was the Messiah?" [100] Thus

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longer consider it disastrous that the chronology and causalities of the public ministry are gone."

[95] Ibid., p. 70. Here one would do well to consider the extent to which sayings may mask as well as reveal an individual's self-understanding.

[96] Ibid., p. 72.

[97] See Harvey, pp. 179–203.

[98] Ibid., p. 188.

[99] Ibid., p. 190.

[100] Ibid., p. 193.

he can conclude that "the new quest, insofar as it concentrates on Jesus' existential selfhood, tends to corrode the balance of judgment which is the *sine qua non* of critical history . . . by soliciting the heaviest possible assent to a historical judgment which, in this particular case, is most tenuous." [101] If, in the view of most critics, the old quest finally proved to be impossible, the same must be said of the new quest, though for different reasons. Even on its own terms the new quest requires a substantial amount of solid biographical and chronological information. Lacking this, it can produce little more than an additional chapter in the modernization of Jesus.

By now it has become clear that there can be no quest for the historical Jesus in any meaningful sense of the phrase. We are led to this position not just because the amount of retrievable information is so slight but also because the consequent task of interpreting it is almost impossible. Perrin wisely cautions that "we must always set the teaching of Jesus in the context of the circumstances and situation of his ministry" and adds that "no understanding of the teaching of Jesus is possible without the recognition of the significance of its original historical context." [102] As a counsel of methodological wisdom, this admonition is indisputable. But in our situation it looks more like a counsel of frustration, for the "circumstances and situation of his ministry" are largely beyond recovery. Without them, we are left with a body of isolated sayings and motifs whose original meaning, whether for Jesus, his unsympathetic hearers, or the initial informant in the chain of transmission, is subject to the exegetical fancy of every interpreter.

Beyond these immediate observations, which stem from assumptions within the recent quest, I have argued that the assumptions themselves are often ill-founded and misleading. Whether it be in selecting sources, in defining basic categories, or in tracing the formation and transmission of oral tradition, past attempts at the quest have failed to subject traditional procedures to critical scrutiny and have compounded this failure by refusing to consider insights from other disciplines. My present view is that when these failures have been remedied, the result will be greater rather than less skepticism about the possibility of the quest. But in any case there can be no new quest at all until the old foundations have been shaken and reestablished on firmer ground.

[101] Ibid.

[102] *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 52.