

## REALGESCHICHTE: OLD AND NEW IN INTERPRETATION

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To understand Scripture one must travel the road of interpretation. In this journey, however, the large number of routes and the variety of starting points and destinations tend to confuse rather than assist the traveler. This study attempts to take into account variant schools of interpretation from this century and also to suggest another approach, hopefully to help (1) in understanding the meaning of the Scriptural record, (2) in strengthening the assurance of its trustworthiness, and (3) in enlivening the communication of its truths for our generation.

Objection may well be raised that too many roads have already been laid out and that still another is out of the question. In reply one needs to point out that in our century negative criticism has so dominated the pages of scholarly Biblical studies that the attention of conservative as well as liberal scholars has become absorbed in controversial fringe areas and that the heart of Biblical teaching has been skirted rather than emphasized. The beliefs of the early Church have replaced the words of Jesus. Interest in literary genre has curbed excitement over the content of the message. Form and structure has allowed the frame to cover rather than enhance the setting of the picture.

The proposal given in this study to help meet our present dilemma is a barest beginning. It is an outline and in no way a full treatment. This is more of an effort to point in a direction than to lay out a road. The only reason suggestions are given in as concrete a form as they are is in the hope that others will agree to the direction and lay out roads far better than envisioned here.

At the outset a review of the network of twentieth-century approaches to NT interpretation is necessary. This will be helpful in several ways: to show the shifting areas of emphasis, to trace the variant courses and goals pursued, and to note various points that will reappear in the present proposal as well. Once one begins to travel from his starting point toward a specific destination, at some point or another he finds himself crossing the paths of all the different schools—even those of such radical scholars as Schmiedel, Bultmann and Marxsen,<sup>1</sup> or of liberal exegetes such as Burkitt, Cadbury and Kümmel,<sup>2</sup> as well as of rabbinic

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<sup>1</sup>P. W. Schmiedel, "Gospels," in *Encyclopedia Biblica* (London: A. & C. Black, 1901); R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1963); W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

<sup>2</sup>F. C. Burkitt, *The Gospel History and Its Transmission* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911); H. J. Cadbury, "Mixed Motives in the Gospels," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 95/2 (1951) 117-124; W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972).

authorities like Zeitlin and Sandmel,<sup>3</sup> not to neglect conservative representatives such as Ramm, Mickelsen and Marshall.<sup>4</sup> After a brief review noting directions of former interpretations, the principles and methodology of the present work will be spelled out. Finally one passage of Scripture will serve as an example of the use that can be made of this approach to interpretation.

Actually nothing new can be claimed for this treatment. All has been used before, but only the selection and emphases are different. The purpose is to suggest a means to traverse the span between events and sayings of Scripture in themselves, to the understanding and application in the life of the reader—to provide an approach that can be used either as a bridge over the labyrinth of interpretive theories or as a path through them, whichever one chooses to take.

## I. TWENTIETH-CENTURY APPROACHES TO INTERPRETATION

1. *Religionsgeschichte*. At the turn of the century great interest in the many religions of the world was manifest. In the Biblical field especially those religions close to the time and place of Christian beginnings were studied, along with their relationship to one another.<sup>5</sup> Whenever similarities were found, some would claim borrowing had been done. The alleged borrowing was then used to cut into the claims that Scripture makes for special revelation. More and more theories were proposed to explain Christian beliefs simply as a product of the Hellenistic world. A turning point came at a time when a major but brief study was published by A. D. Nock, an eminent scholar in Greco-Roman religion.<sup>6</sup> Just at a time when liberal scholarship expected confirmation from their liberal colleague in the history of religions' field, he declared conclusions to the opposite. Indeed, he had found similarities, but of such a nature that borrowing in vital areas could not be maintained. Nock concluded:

We have briefly reviewed early Christian cultus, and have found that, while it had much in common with what was around, the driving forces in its development came mostly from within. This development was not *in vacuo*, but in the Hellenistic background; it involved give and take. The evidence as we have reviewed it does not seem to justify the supposition of substantial borrowing by Christianity: if it did, the development of the new faith would still be the development of something not only individual, but consciously individual.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>S. Zeitlin, "The Halaka in the Gospels and its Relation to the Jewish Law at the Time of Jesus," *HUCA* 1 (1924) 357-373; S. Sandmel, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970); A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); I. H. Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

<sup>5</sup>J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1946), 2. 156 ff.

<sup>6</sup>A. D. Nock, "Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background," in *Essays on Religion and The Ancient World*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard, 1924, 1972).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 119.

In answer to the questions why Christianity won out in the conflict of religions, Nock answered:

It offered a cultus in which the individual found his own personal needs and the desire for brotherhood in worship satisfied. This cultus shared with others the merit of giving the realization of the means of salvation; it was superior in that the Saviour was not merely a figure of unique attraction, but also a recent historical figure invested with deity—not a mythological personage encumbered with legends which to many thinking men were positively offensive and to others were at least in need of defence.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Nock found in putting together a vast number of ancient notices, both Christian and non-Christian, that the historically real Jesus is the heart of understanding Christianity in its beginnings and not any alleged borrowings from other religions.

2. *Quellengeschichte*. The attention of scholarship shifted. If one would imagine himself on a subway line traveling from station to station, he could note the route of the twentieth-century Mr. Average Scholar. He got on the subway at Reader's Point where everyone boards. Then he got off at the All-Nations' Station where he spent a long term touring *Religionsgeschichte*. He got back on the subway when the crowd decided to go still further on the line. On the way they passed the Text Station. Few got off there. After all, Westcott and Hort had covered that territory so thoroughly that nothing was left for a person passing through to add. The next station was passed also. It had to do with the authors of Scripture. Some on board denied the names of the authors, but the crowds were more interested in the signs for the next station—the sources for the writings. This was labeled *Quellengeschichte*.<sup>9</sup>

Here the literary scholars studied mainly the similarities in the synoptic gospels. The fourfold gospel was abandoned, and two sources were given prominence: the early Mark, and a hypothetical document created by definition and labeled "Q" (*Quelle*, "source"). This latter source represented the places where Luke and Matthew have similar material that is not treated by Mark. Some felt that the differences were too great in the sum of these passages for one author to have copied from another, but the similarities were too close for them to have been independent. So a source was reconstructed to solve the difficulty as it was seen.<sup>10</sup> If this is the surest conclusion produced by NT scholarship in this century, as some claim, this is a sad commentary on a century of work. All do not agree,

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>9</sup>B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924); W. A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); E. de W. Burton, *Some Principles of Literary Criticism and Their Application to the Synoptic Problem* (Chicago: University Press, 1904); B. C. Butler, *The Originality of St. Matthew* (Cambridge: University Press, 1951); W. R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1964); E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969).

<sup>10</sup>A. Harnack, *The Sayings of Jesus* (New York: Putnam's, 1908).

however.<sup>11</sup> Parallel to the time the sources were being posited, a search for the historical Jesus was going on.<sup>12</sup> Eventually any hope of an historical Jesus was traded for a literary reconstruction based on the beliefs of the early Church.<sup>13</sup> At last, when they realized Jesus had slipped through their fingers, announcement was made that the historical Jesus was a figure who must remain unknown.

3. *Formgeschichte*. Word circulated that something more could be gained if the scholars traveled further toward the beginning of their subway line to the Tradition Station. This would be an earlier state of the gospel than the written sources behind the canonical gospels. After the guns of the First World War had ceased, Dibelius stepped forward with a new approach to engage the efforts of the interpreters.<sup>14</sup> If one could identify the form of the tradition material in the individual blocks of gospel accounts, then he could determine whether the story should go in the "tales" basket, or the "legends" or the "mythological interpretation" basket, or several other identifiable forms. Bultmann labeled his baskets differently, but he advocated the same methodology of *Formgeschichte*.<sup>15</sup>

4. *Redaktionsgeschichte*. By the end of the Second World War another call was heard. Most were ready to move on. Since they were close now to the beginning station, one might hope they would go from their studies in the traditions back to what was actually said and done, to a focus on the real, live people and the true situation the NT is telling about. But the majority said we have gone as far as we can go in that direction. We cannot penetrate further than the beliefs of the early Church. We are told we cannot determine what was actually said and done.<sup>16</sup> So they crowded back on the train and headed in the direction they had come from, away from the actual beginnings. This time they stopped at the Author Station they had passed some years before. But they could no longer call them authors. The baggage they had accumulated at the source and tradition stops led them to refer to the hand or hands who put "the finishing touches" on the narratives as redactors, not authors.<sup>17</sup> The last time they had gone through the station they had gone to a study of the sources and had emphasized the similarities of the synoptics. But now the differences are suddenly brought to light. In each difference an indication of the peculiar theology of the redactor is

<sup>11</sup>L. A. Foster, "The Q Myth in Synoptic Studies," *JETS* (Fall 1964) 111-119.

<sup>12</sup>A. Schweitzer, *Quest for the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

<sup>13</sup>L. A. Foster, "Bases for the Historical Jesus," *JETS* 6 (1963).

<sup>14</sup>M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Scribner's, 1934).

<sup>15</sup>Bultmann, *History*; see also W. G. Doty, "The Discipline and Literature of New Testament Form Criticism," *ATR* 51 (1969) 257-319; E. V. McKnight, *What Is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. G. H. Clark, *Historiography: Secular and Religious* (Nutley: Craig, 1971) 177-178; cf. pp. 368-371.

<sup>17</sup>N. Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (London: SPCK, 1970).

found.<sup>18</sup> Since these differences are found throughout each of the synoptics, it would seem that the writers would be more than redactors.

5. *Structural analysis.* Some deserted *Redaktionsgeschichte* to travel to the Text Station that had been neglected. These were interested not so much in the main study of the Greek text as in the structure of the writing. They wanted to find parallel structures in the OT or NT and plot the similarities on specially devised grids.<sup>19</sup> Then when these passages are put together the meaning is supposed to be enhanced. This type of study can scarcely be called a study of the text itself where the MS readings and textual decisions were being listed.<sup>20</sup> The structuralist approach could be referred to as a subway spur line off the main trunk. Structural analysis has developed a highly sophisticated nomenclature and processes that require its own glossary of terms to extricate the proposed meaning.<sup>21</sup>

6. *Semantics.* Several more spur lines were rapidly laid from the Text Junction. One approach has to do with the study of "meaning," not simply the basic, root meaning of the words. The contextual meaning of the passage is found to be more significant than the history of a single word's development.<sup>22</sup>

7. *Rhetoric.* Another distinctive approach begins with a study of the theoretical concepts underlying classical rhetoric and then proceeds to identify different categories for the application of rhetorical criticism: Determine the rhetorical unit, then the rhetorical situation with the unit, next the rhetorical problem, and finally the arrangement of material.<sup>23</sup> Whereas one grows in appreciation of the

<sup>18</sup>W. Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus. Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1956, 1959) = *Mark the Evangelist* (New York: Abingdon, 1969); J. Rhode, *Rediscovering the Teaching of the Evangelists* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

<sup>19</sup>D. O. Via, Jr., "A Structuralist Approach to Paul's Old Testament Hermeneutic," *Int* 28 (1974) 201-220. "Structure, properly speaking, is the hidden or underlying configuration that can offer some explanation for the more or less visible or obvious pattern in the text" (p. 202). "One entailment of adopting and adapting structuralism for the purposes of biblical interpretation is that the long revered historical approach, while not being rejected in principle and while being regarded as one legitimate and limited perspective, will be quite marginal; and individual historical considerations will be only coincidental" (p. 201).

<sup>20</sup>See n. 29 below.

<sup>21</sup>A. M. Johnson, ed., *The New Testament and Structuralism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1976); A. M. Johnson, ed., *Structuralism and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1979); A. M. Johnson, *A Bibliography of Semiological and Structural Studies of Religion* (Pittsburgh: Clifford E. Barbour Library, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary).

<sup>22</sup>A. C. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," in *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. Marshall) 75-104.

<sup>23</sup>A. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (London/New York: SCM/Harper, 1964); G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984).

possible design found in the rhetoric of the NT, the compelling force of the truths does not grow apace.

8. *Word power.* Ebeling is interested in still another side of words: "We do not get at the nature of words by asking what they contain, but by asking what they effect, what they set going."<sup>24</sup> In this, however, the concern is to look at the NT text, not so much to understand it correctly but to use it creatively. What appears to be true in the wishes of the reader becomes truth for him. This type of approach is not interested in understanding history but feels exonerated by attempting to make history.<sup>25</sup> In fact a feeling of frustration arises when history is limited to one interpretation. In this type of hermeneutic the research is looking for the new way a passage can be made to speak—how the passage can be made to single out the individual and grasp him. "The text is meant to live."<sup>26</sup> Thiselton points out the danger here: too subjective and too selective, emphasizing some Biblical truths and entirely omitting others.<sup>27</sup> This, however, is not a move to make the NT happening less real but to make it more real—at least for now.

Ebeling affirms: "The kerygma . . . is not merely speech about men's existence. It is also a testimony to that which has happened."<sup>28</sup> This approach claims close relationship to the words themselves.

9. *The text.* Meanwhile activity has been picking up at the main Text Station. The work of Westcott and Hort is being challenged. The majority of the NT MSS are from the middle ages and in general are classified as one general text type that differs from a variety of text types found in the earlier period. Why does one find variety early and more uniformity later? If the uniformity and majority win out in the middle ages because they are closer to the original, where were they in that earlier period when there was such a variety of text types? This is true textual study—the effort to come as closely as possible to the wording of the original autograph.<sup>29</sup>

10. *The new hermeneutic.* The existentialist studies the Bible with one question in mind: "What does this passage mean to me, here and now?" This is a good goal in application, but too often it is approached by a shortcut. One cannot neglect the first important question: "What is the meaning originally intended

<sup>24</sup>G. Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 187.

<sup>25</sup>P. Henry, *New Directions in New Testament Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 120-152.

<sup>26</sup>E. Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1964).

<sup>27</sup>A. C. Thiselton, "The New Hermeneutic," in *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. Marshall) 308-333.

<sup>28</sup>G. Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation* (London: SCM, 1963) 38.

<sup>29</sup>B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Introduction and Appendix* (New York: Harper, 1882); W. N. Pickering, *The Identity of the New Testament Text* (Nashville: Nelson, 1977); H. A. Sturz, *The Byzantine Text-Type: New Testament Textual Criticism* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984); B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: University Press, 1968).

by the inspired author?"<sup>30</sup> Only when we have gained that answer are we ready to apply it to ourselves. But this requires a trip to the one station that has been neglected in all of these travels back and forth on the subway line. The first, beginning point has been avoided in the formal focus of studies. Bible-believing individuals have always trusted in the words and truths of the Biblical text. They have used this stop in an uninhibited way for years. But they have been criticized for never leaving home base. Old methods of interpretation from former generations are still used. Can one travel the whole line and still use the first station? Can one return to this beginning station after traveling so far from home base? And can he carry the message to the other end of the line—to the reader—as well? This is the suggested role of *Realgeschichte*: to study the Scriptures as factual in the beginning station and to take the message to Reader's Point.

## II. REALGESCHICHTE

1. *The term.* A word concerning the choice of the title is in order. One may say, "You chose a German word because you wanted it to sound like all the rest." Wrong. This word was chosen because there is nothing in English that has all of the implications so appropriate to the particular set of problems in Biblical interpretation. This will become evident when we survey the suggested nuances of the term *Realgeschichte*. Another may say, "You chose the word because you believe in the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture—you accept it all *a priori* as real and true; the term is loaded." Wrong in part. I do accept the Bible as infallible and inerrant and the very Word of God, but this does not mean I regard it so simply because I declare it so—without evidence or thought. I accept the claims of Scripture and corroborating evidence from many quarters. True, "real" has a positive connotation, just as "myth" and "redactor" have negative overtones. I prefer a positive approach and a term that indicates my stance in this regard—but this does not preclude examination of the evidence. And all this was not the reason for the choice of the term. Still another may say, "You chose it because you think this is the real interpretation, the final word." Wrong again. This is no established approach to interpretation, let alone anything final. This is only a label written over some suggestions to help clarify what is intended.

The reason for choosing the term is associated with pertinent meanings to several compounded forms of *real*.

(1) *Realenzyklopädie*. This is a combination denoting an encyclopedia that is comprehensive, thorough, holistic. A dictionary or encyclopedia is helpful, but a *Realenzyklopädie* is compiled to cover the whole subject in an all-inclusive, detailed way. An important aspect of interpretation is its agreement with context, not just the context of the passage but the context of the whole epistle or gospel, and not just the context of the book but of the whole NT, or of both Testaments. A still wider context of the time and place of writing cannot be neglected. A thorough exegesis calls also for reinforcement from other disciplines, such as history and philosophy, sociology and psychology. Truth corroborates truth in whatever

<sup>30</sup>Cf. P. B. Payne, "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author's Intention," *JETS* 20 (1977) 243-252.

area it is found. The goals of *Realgeschichte* include the full, comprehensive approach to the understanding of a passage.

(2) *Realpolitik*. The combination of *real* with *Politik* has various uses—some good, some bad. Basically it means to take a situation as it is. It is a word used at the arbitration table, but unfortunately it has been associated with brute force. On the other hand, it is associated with viewing a matter realistically and not expecting to read one's own interest into a treaty without considering all sides of the issue. An important element is included here for the exegete. He must realistically take the Bible saying or situation the way it is, not twisted to serve a theory—whether literary form, theological overtones, historical reconstructions, or philosophical presuppositions. The search must be conscientiously undertaken to take the passage as it was intended when it was written—*Realgeschichte*.

(3) *Realerkenntnis*. *Erkenntnis* means "knowledge," "perception." Joined with *real* it means factual knowledge of the actual in contrast with the fanciful. This is gravely needed in Biblical interpretation. Frequently in the last fifty years appeals have been made for the place of *Sitz im Leben* in interpretation—the true life setting of the day and place the Biblical record was describing. To understand the meaning in its true life situation is important. Too often, however, philosophies and forms from our own *Sitz im Leben* are superimposed on the Biblical text, nullifying the very *Sitz im Leben* called so important. *Realgeschichte* attempts to deal with the Biblical record as a trustworthy account of what actually happened, following the intent of the original author. This is not an *a priori* leap to the literal at all times but allows the original author to make clear his use of the figurative and does not go beyond his intended bounds. Areas of uncertainty are comparatively few and do not give excuse for a blatant "demythologizing" of the narrative.

(4) *Realwert*. Another significance of *real* is seen in the area of real estate. Monetary prices go up and down with inflation and depression. But in real estate, to assess the *Realwert* of a property is important—the actual, abiding value of the land. Once again helpful application to the interpretation of Scripture is plain. Not that we would stamp comparative *Realwert* on each of the sections of Scripture, but we should study Scripture striving to determine the intended emphasis of the passage and the best application to our lives today. What is the real thrust of the teaching? This facet of *Realgeschichte* presents a challenge to determine the emphases found in Scripture and the attempt to preserve these emphases. To discover the underlying motifs of a work that holds it together is a part of the *Realwert*. In turn the relationship of the individual passages to the recurring themes of the book enhances the appreciation of the parts. To find these currents beneath the surface does not destroy its historicity but helps to understand its message.

2. *The methodology*. Is this term *Realgeschichte* indicative of the starting point, the goal, or the methodology of the interpretation? Truly, all three match the concept of *real*. Our primary interest is what was really said and done. Important to understanding this is the factual nature of the record and the plan and purpose of the writers. The significance of all this to the life and involvement of the reader must become real also. *Realgeschichte* looks for the actual in the happening, the factual in the recording, and the compelling in the application.



The way we propose doing this is to follow popular procedure in addressing questions to the text<sup>31</sup> and dividing the results into categories that will help us understand the meaning, test the trustworthiness, and find the application. Just as *Formgeschichte* divided material into separate baskets labeled tales, legends, myths, etc.,<sup>32</sup> we will have baskets labeled verisimilitude, the unexpected, and the key message.

Before explaining these categories, one brief example will serve to indicate how they are to be used and will make the definition more apparent. The episode is Jesus' trip to Jerusalem when he was twelve years old (Luke 2:41-52). Abundance of verisimilitude is present—those details that particularly fit the time and place being described. The family trip to Jerusalem from Galilee,<sup>33</sup> the Passover observance, the milestone in a Jewish boy's life at the end of his twelfth year,<sup>34</sup> the experts in the law and their teaching in the temple, the concern of Joseph and Mary—all of this provides a fitting setting and lends assurance that this reflects true experiences of the time. But there are unexpected elements as well: Jesus' separation from Joseph and Mary, the long period before they found him, the place where they located him and the occasion, and Jesus' reply to Mary's reproof. Although unexpected items might possibly make suspect the historicity of an account, at times the nature of the unexpected strengthens the feel of reality rather than detracting from it. And what is the key message? Some might point to the picture of Jesus as a precocious child foreshadowing what he would become later. Others might emphasize Jesus' being subject to Joseph and Mary as stated in the last lines of the episode. Although these points are helpful to our understanding, they are not the key message of the account. The *Realwert* is pronounced in Jesus' own words when he parried Mary's rebuke by saying, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Luke wants his readers to know that even at this early age Jesus knew he was God's Son, he claimed to be God's Son, and he was God's Son. In Jesus' reply he not only points to his relationship to God but acknowledges his personal duty to his Father in heaven and his eventual freedom from answering to any human authority.

Notice how restrained Luke's description is of the scene in the temple. He did not say that Jesus was instructing the teachers of the law or that he knew more than the experts. He simply states that Jesus was listening, asking, and that those present were amazed at his answers. The narrative tells of something actual, it records it in a factual way, and its truths are compelling to the readers. Luke wrote "that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (1:4). See the example of family; note the faithful observance of God's

<sup>31</sup>Bultmann's *Fragestellung*—formulation of a question—is a common introduction. The way the question is asked will often determine how it is answered. R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York: Meridian, 1960) 346.

<sup>32</sup>R. C. Foster, *Studies in the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971) 88-122.

<sup>33</sup>J. Mann, "Rabbinic Studies in the Synoptic Gospels," *HUCA* 1 (1924) 331-335.

<sup>34</sup>We are warned against claiming too much. "Sometimes this is viewed as if Jesus was here preparing for *bar mitzvah*." S. Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 75. (The earliest extant use of the event was a thousand years later.)

law; mark the son's returning in dutiful obedience; and prepare to receive the Son of God both then and now.

Three steps are suggested in the approach to interpretation via *Realgeschichte*.

(1) *Find the verisimilitude*. Verisimilitude is defined as something having the appearance of being real and true. This definition could be misleading if one emphasizes "appearance" instead of "real." Usage of the term in this approach to interpretation denotes how well the happenings and words of Scripture match the time and place being described. When the description matches the setting, it gives credence to the account in general. Jesus does not speak in the gospel narratives like a Roman statesman or an Athenian philosopher but reflects the context of the time and place he lived out his earthly days.

F. C. Burkitt is remembered for his emphasis on the verisimilitude of the Jesus recorded in the synoptic gospels. He contrasts this with the Oxyrhynchus "Sayings of Jesus," which combine Jesus and Greek philosophical thought.<sup>35</sup> Although he is not one to accept the infallibility of the Scriptures, Burkitt sees the synoptics as historical accounts of what happened and was said. He condemns Schmiedel in his skepticism, for example where he conjectures composite source theories to explain Mark 4.<sup>36</sup> Burkitt concludes: "I confess that I find these elaborate exercises in mosaic work [Schmiedel's theories] somewhat lacking in verisimilitude."<sup>37</sup>

Sandmel, the rabbinic scholar who has made a reputation with his studies of Christianity, has come to similar conclusions regarding the verisimilitude of the gospels. It must have been an author (Mark) from the time and place of writing to have produced the gospel accounts because of their "relatively high general reliability."<sup>38</sup>

Cadbury, after spending much of his early years of scholarly work on the volumes of *The Beginnings of Christianity* (Foakes-Jackson and Lake), toward the end of his life published a smaller volume summing up rather detailed information drawn from Jews, Romans, Greeks, Christians and their relationship with the material in the book of Acts.<sup>39</sup> In the preface he disclaims any motive of providing apologetic material from his findings. He is decidedly liberal in his theology, but his findings, after a lifetime of study in Acts, led him to emphasize the verisimilitude of the details that leads to the feeling of the reality of what is recorded.

Establishment of verisimilitude in a passage helps in two directions. It helps one to see Jesus in his true setting, but it also assures the reader today that the authors of the gospel narrative were not adding later material, putting words in

<sup>35</sup>F. C. Burkitt, *The Earliest Sources for the Life of Jesus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910) 27-28.

<sup>36</sup>Schmiedel, "Gospels" col. 1866.

<sup>37</sup>Burkitt, *Gospel History* 85.

<sup>38</sup>Sandmel, *First* 191.

<sup>39</sup>H. J. Cadbury, *The Book of Acts in History* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), preface and pp. 3-7. He has coined the phrase "contemporary colour."

Jesus' mouth and inserting later interests, or else the verisimilitude would not have remained intact. In other words verisimilitude can help both to understand the meaning of a text as well as contribute to the assurance of its trustworthiness. In its broader meaning, "true to life," it also lends itself to the application of these gospel truths for today.

(2) *Note the unexpected.* Is all the subject matter characterized by verisimilitude? Does one find any material that goes against the grain of the thought and culture of the day? Yes, indeed. The gospel accounts are filled with the unexpected, contrary to the smooth flow of time and place. A study of Jesus' use of the introductory exclamation translated in the past as "verily" ("verily, verily" in John<sup>40</sup>) is of interest. True, this introduces statements when Jesus wants to demand strict attention. He uses the words to assert special authority. True, the matter that follows is invariably of high importance. But there is another element common to all the passages introduced by "verily" in the gospels: The affirmation that follows runs counter to popular thought. It affirms the unexpected. The teaching of Jesus is frequently against the current.

In Schmiedel's article referred to above he denies the historicity of one saying after another, of one happening after another in the life of Jesus. He did, however, accept a few as reliable, known as Schmiedel's pillar passages.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, what Schmiedel took to provide basis for those statements he approved as authentic was the unexpected. They all had one element in common that gave them historical weight. Each of these statements was detrimental or limiting to the person of Jesus. They would not have been invented because they did not make Jesus a hero. For example, the Son of Man does not know the day or hour of his return (Mark 3:22); his relatives thought he was out of his mind (3:21); he could do no mighty work in Nazareth (6:5). This is almost as skeptical as a person can get—accept as valid only what is unexpected, uncomplimentary, without reason for invention. But once one has started on this road of looking for the unexpected and honoring its historicity, why limit it to the unexpected that is detrimental to Jesus? Why not some other "unexpecteds" as well? They would not be invented and inserted if they were hard to accept. A thing would not be put there deliberately to be out of joint. In some cases it may be the best explanation—and the only one: The unexpected is there because it happened that way. To be insistent in this direction, however, may throw suspicion on the value of our verisimilitude. How can one look to verisimilitude, finding evidence here that the account is trustworthy, and then at the same time look to the unexpected, finding here also an indication that the real has been put down in the record? But at times this is indeed the case. The very combination of the two makes the strongest possible grounds for the assurance of the actual reality. With verisimilitude alone, one might insist it was a deliberate invention to match the time and place; or with the unexpected alone, one might say it was entirely a misfit to history and reason. But with a combination of the two, one has the clearest picture of the way it really was.

<sup>40</sup>E.g. John 1:51; 5:19; 6:26; 8:34; 12:24.

<sup>41</sup>Mark 10:57; Matt 12:31; Mark 3:21; 13:32; 15:34; Matt 12:39; Mark 6:5; 8:14-21; Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22. Schmiedel, "Gospels" cols. 1881-1883.

Here is an example. The Jewish world was looking for a Messiah. His coming had been predicted. The Jews believed he would come. They had ideas about what he would be like. The time was ripe, the place was right, and verisimilitude can be seen. But when Jesus came he was not the Messiah they expected him to be. Whoever would dream of a crucified Messiah? They expected a kingdom, but not the kind Jesus taught about. This is a combination of verisimilitude and the unexpected. The truth in this combination has been compelling to acceptance through the ages.

Schonfield entirely ignored this combination.<sup>42</sup> He claimed that Jesus deliberately arranged a plot to establish himself as the Messiah. All he did was study the OT and deliberately try to match the messianic prophecies he knew about.<sup>43</sup> Even this crucifixion was part of a plot that included keeping him alive with drugs, but the thrust of the soldier's spear thwarted the plot—so Schonfield conjectures—and Jesus died. What Schonfield does not consider is that if Jesus was looking in the OT to find ways he could convince the people he was the Messiah, then he would have proceeded to fulfill the prophecies the way the people expected. But he did not; he was not the Messiah they expected. His death was not a plot to deceive but the plan of God to redeem, and it was as real as his resurrection.

But the presence of the unexpected should not surprise us. If this is the work of God, it is unlikely that man would anticipate him at every turn. Not that all uneven differences are divine or that all smooth verisimilitudes are human. God is not limited to the unexpected. He can work in the same way as the culture of a given time. But since God is as high above our ways as the heavens are above the earth, one fully expects the unexpected from God at times.

On the other hand, some of the “unexpecteds” can be purely human. One of the startling elements in the gospel accounts is the difficulty the disciples had in understanding what Jesus was telling them. They were told of Jesus' coming death and his resurrection, but they could not accept the possibility. They argued with one another about who was the greatest and chose to do this at the worst of times. One episode after another is recorded leaving the disciples in a poor light. Why? Numerous suggestions have been offered as to why this might have been invented,<sup>44</sup> but none is so plausible as simply that that is the actual way it was, and that that is what is told—*Realgeschichte*.

(3) *Determine the key message.* Besides verisimilitude and the unexpected in *Realgeschichte*, to determine the “key message” of each passage is important. This phrase is used to indicate several concerns in exegesis.

(a) *Central truth.* If one can determine the main thrust of a passage, he is well on his way to proper interpretation of its individual parts. Usually the central truth is summed up some place in the block of material. Just as a parable has one central lesson, most other sections also give clues for the basic reason for their inclusion at a certain point. This is the *sine qua non* that cannot be omitted from

<sup>42</sup>H. J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot* (Bernard Geis, 1965).

<sup>43</sup>S. Sandmel, *First 215*, compares Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth* to Schonfield's *Passover Plot*: A difference in degree, “but is there a difference in kind?”

<sup>44</sup>W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Greenwood: Attic, 1971); Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism* 46-48.

the passage without its loss of vital meaning. The understanding of each part gains in significance if its relationship to the key message can be discerned. Sometimes the key message—e.g., “the first shall be last and the last shall be first”—appears in succeeding passages and serves to explain the order of the blocks as well (Matt 19:30; 20:16).

(b) Author motif. When a number of key passages are found to be related, the reader must conclude he has discovered a theme that the author chose to pursue. Cadbury elected to look deeply for the author’s motives:

Were one to distinguish the stages of criticism by the usual type of nomenclature one would be tempted to coin the term “motive criticism.” For as has just been remarked, recognition of motive may be fully as important as recognition of form. The sequence of study should be: motive criticism, form criticism, source criticism and, only after these, historical criticism.<sup>45</sup>

Cadbury proceeded to point out mixed motives in the gospel writings and assessed their relationship to the historical. He disallowed Schmiedel his right to declare even his pillar passages as historical. Schmiedel did so because these passages ran counter to the motive of presenting Jesus in a good light, so the material must have reflected an actual happening since any invention of them would be contrary to the motive for writing. Cadbury, however, maintained that there was always a variety of motives present and that one motive may have overridden another to prompt use of the material; so nothing could be concluded about its historicity on the basis of motive. Cadbury wrote:

But who will say that the motives they represent keep them more faithful to history or incapable of invention, as has been claimed?<sup>46</sup>

Whereas Cadbury was concerned about allowing the absence of motive to assure the historical, one ought to be equally anxious about his tendency to consider suspect any material that could possibly have a motive. He assumed that if there was motive enough the account was liable to be invention rather than history. But another factor must be included. How trustworthy is the record as a whole? What does the combination of verisimilitude and the unexpected testify? Is it not possible that a trustworthy individual may have a motive and record the truth both at the same time? This is where Cadbury’s later conclusion that Luke is recording the real in Acts is important. An individual who is trustworthy to record the truth can do so whether his motives are apparent or not. Although motive may not be conclusive for final historicity, its presence may well contribute to the understanding of a passage.

(c) Impelling application. The significance of the key passage includes the important role of today’s application. The summary truth of a passage is extended in its significance to our present situation and becomes the heart of its meaning in the individual’s life here and now. This is a bridge that continues to extend itself to each succeeding generation of readers.

<sup>45</sup>Cadbury, “Mixed Motives” 117-124.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

### III. EXAMPLE PASSAGE

For an example of how *Realgeschichte* could be employed in interpreting Scripture, Luke's description of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth has been selected (Luke 4:14-30). Only an outline of the suggested study can be given.

Is verisimilitude found in the account? Yes. (1) True to life: going back to one's home town. (2) True to custom: attending the synagogue (synagogue worship, asked to speak, read Scripture, gave remarks).<sup>47</sup> (3) True to expectations: speaking well of their local young man (4:22).

Is the unexpected found in the passage? Yes. (1) They looked on him with favor at first, but then they tried to kill him. (2) The placing of the event is not expected—first episode of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, but Matthew and Mark have it much later, and Luke himself indicates its occurrence must have been later because of Jesus' reputation and work at Capernaum (4:23). (3) He did not do the miracles in Nazareth he did in Capernaum. (4) Jesus indicated he was the Messiah. (5) Jesus gave examples chosen from the Gentiles in the time of Elijah and Elisha.

What is the key message? "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Since the passage Jesus referred to was a messianic prophecy from Isaiah he was plainly saying, "I am the Messiah."

One must inquire about the purpose and motives of the passage. Obviously Jesus is not just starting out in his ministry, so why does Luke place it here? (1) To give an introductory description of the type of ministry Jesus was conducting in Galilee through the words of Isaiah's prophecy. (2) To present this messianic claim of Jesus early to the reader. (3) To give an example of synagogue preaching (especially for the Gentile readers) that Jesus was doing in this period. (4) To show that all was not popularity in Galilee. (5) To prepare the reader for resistance that led to death in Jerusalem. (6) To show the Gentile world that Jesus included them in his preaching. The chronology is not important, but the account is used to leave the reader as knowledgeable as possible with the total situation. Acceptance turned to rejection in Nazareth because: (1) Jesus stepped out of the little niche where the people of Nazareth had put him ("No prophet is accepted in his home town," v 24). (2) He refused to please them with miracles ("Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum," v 23). (3) He claimed to be the Messiah, v 21. (4) He used illustrations of God's preferring to help the Gentiles rather than Jews, vv 25-27.

The key message speaks to today. What happens when Jesus comes to our times? Jesus does not fit the little place we make for him. Jesus' work is curtailed by lack of faith. Jesus proclaims good news. Jesus serves. Jesus shows God's love to all people, not one race above another. Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus is rejected by many. Each reader is compelled to make a decision about what to do about Jesus. He is real. His message is real. The decision is real.

<sup>47</sup>D. Hill, "The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30)," *NovT* 13 (July 1971) 161-180.

## IV. CONCLUSION: A POSSIBLE DIRECTION

1. *Negative criticism.* A rapid survey of scholarly Biblical criticism in this century leads to the conclusion that the work attracting attention has largely focused on subjects, used starting points, employed methods, established goals far less than ideal for the understanding of the meaning of Scripture and the faith of the Christian.<sup>48</sup>

2. *Another approach.* The present proposal has urged that we go to the record of Scripture itself and treat it as an account intended to communicate what happened and what was said. Despite the impossibility of coming to ultimate fullness in understanding of the event or saying in itself,<sup>49</sup> despite the popular relativism that trades the event for any reconstruction one pleases to call meaningful, at least one can face toward the factual material in the content of the record. This factual beginning with the record is a legitimate starting point for all.

3. *Verisimilitude.* Begin with the verisimilitude of the account, seeing how it fits into the time and place of the occurrences being described. The primary purpose in bringing this to the surface is not for apologetic reasons. Once one sees how it fits, he will be able to grasp more of the meaning of the passage. But the apologetic value will not be wasted.

We will look also for the "true to life" for today.

On the other hand, what if the verisimilitude is not there? What if evidence is at variance?<sup>50</sup> Further checks are necessary. Could it be that our ignorance accounts for the missing pieces? Is it actually contradictory? Can we expect some differences?

4. *The unexpected.* Some differences from the usual are anticipated. Some "unexpecteds" substantiate the real. The people of Jesus' home town tried to kill him; his own disciples could not understand him. He was Messiah-king, but they crucified him. To study the "unexpecteds" helps in understanding the new kingdom and Jesus' teaching. There are things that our reason would not anticipate, but when they are made known they are not unreasonable. There are things that we cannot verify historically, but this does not make them unhistorical. The very way the accounts record the verisimilitude alongside the unexpected strengthens an assurance that it happened that way and that the writers have been faithful in recording the actual.

5. *The key message.* Included in the initial studies must be an appreciation of the overall purpose the author had in writing; the motive he had in selecting the

<sup>48</sup>R. C. Scharfe, "Bultmann's Methods of Formgeschichte," in *The New Testament Student at Work* (ed. J. H. Skilton; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 2. 257.

<sup>49</sup>G. H. Clark, *Historiography: Secular and Religious* (Nutley: Craig, 1971) 126-178.

<sup>50</sup>D. G. A. Calverts, "An Examination of the Criteria for Distinguishing the Authentic Words of Jesus," *NTS* 18 (1971) 209-219.

individual blocks of materials he included in his narrative; the order he chose to unfold his gospel; the central truth he wanted to bring out in a particular passage. The thread that holds all these matters together are the key messages found in each of the episodes, whether sermon or miracle, an event or a saying.

6. *The element of faith.* If *Realgeschichte* requires translation, the rendering might be "factual criticism." The complaint is justified that *Geschichte* does not mean "criticism," but for example the term *Formgeschichte* has been popularly rendered "form criticism." The term *Geschichte* has been retained to give assurance that no claims are being made toward a *Realhistorie*. One cannot arrive at Kant's "Ding an Sich" any more than at von Ranke's "wie es eigentlich gewesen." What we are speaking of is still an interpretation and not the ultimate event. However, *real* is still combined with *Geschichte* to face the word in the direction of the factual. This is quite different from combining interpretation in the frame of myth, tales and legends or from stressing redactors instead of authors. All this reflects different presuppositions. It is sad to find those using tools imbedded in a direction that denies one's own belief. Those same tools can be used in believers' camps but without the onus of facing toward the denial of Scriptural truths.<sup>51</sup> Information gleaned from variant approaches can be utilized. *Sitz im Leben* is given special attention. The form, both literary and narrational, should be studied. The author's motifs and his plan occupy essential places in *Realgeschichte*, but all these matters are approached with a frankness of belief and are aimed at goals closer to the original happening or saying than the third or fourth stratum of tradition. This need not be less objective but tries to be more objective than the skeptically oriented approach. God in his wisdom chose to reveal himself in an historical figure, Jesus Christ. He came to live on the earth just one time in the past, but he will come again. This demands faith, but it is not a blind faith. The events were actual, the records are factual, and the truths are compelling.

<sup>51</sup>See G. Osborne, "Preaching the Gospels: Methodology and Contextualization," *JETS* 27 (1984) 27.