PART I

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: PROBLEMS AND METHODS

THE study of the teaching of Jesus has close affinities with two of the main branches of modern theological investigation, for, on the one hand, no attempt to write the life of Jesus, or even to sketch his likeness, could be considered complete without some account of his words: and, on the other, any work on New Testament Theology must necessarily take as its foundation the Theology of the Founder of Christianity. The study of the teaching of our Lord is a branch both of Biblical History and of Biblical Theology. These two disciplines are essentially modern: they were begotten by the Reformation, though they did not actually come to birth until the eighteenth century. In principle they were already present when Luther transformed faith from the mere acceptance of ecclesiastical dogma into a personal living trust in God through Jesus Christ. This transformation necessarily involved a change of method in dealing with Scripture, particularly the Gospel narrative, even though the extent of the change was not fully realised until a later date.

It has been said that the Reformation merely set up one infallibility in place of another, merely substituted an infallible Bible for an infallible Church. If this charge were true, it would be a serious matter: for it would be no real emancipation at all, which freed the plain man from the bondage of Scholastic metaphysics merely to deliver him into an equally rigorous servitude to a new Scholasticism made by philologists and rabbinical exegetes. Faith would still be a *fides implicita*, an assent to the uncomprehended—only instead of being the intention to believe what the Church believes, it would become the intention to believe what the scholars think. All that would happen

would be a change from the tyranny of the Church to the tyranny of the School.

But so far as such a result did follow from the Reformation it has to be said that it was due to a failure to grasp in its completeness the cardinal principle of the Reformation: and this failure in its turn was due to the influence of prejudices and prepossessions carried over from the pre-Reformation era. From such prepossessions Luther himself was not free, his frank criticisms of some books of the Bible notwithstanding,[1] and his followers continued to use the Scriptures in the old way, as a *dossier* of proof-texts (the so-called *dicta probantia*) for new doctrinal constructions.

Only towards the end of the eighteenth century was the right of Scripture to say something on its own account, and not merely to be called in to ratify the decisions of Oecumenical Councils or Assemblies of Protestant Divines, openly proclaimed by Gabler.[2] From that time onwards Biblical Theology came into its own as a discipline whose object is simply to set down in as orderly a fashion as possible what doctrines are, as a matter of fact, taught in the Scriptures. The Theology of the New Testament forms an obvious division of the whole: and within New Testament Theology the teaching of Jesus takes of right the leading place.

A parallel development took place in the study of the life of Jesus. From the earliest times to the end of the eighteenth century, such Lives of Jesus as were written were composed not as historical works but as treatises for edification. So long as the essential truth concerning the Lord was given by doctrinal formulae, the Gospel narratives could only serve to embellish the figure provided by those formulae. The work of Reimarus[3] and his successors

[1] For a collection of these cf. P. Smith, *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther*, ch. XXIII.

[2] *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae*, 1787.

[3] In some matters—rationalisation of the Gospel miracles for example—Reimarus merely followed the English Deists in forcing a philosophical theory on to the Gospel narrative. His true originality comes out only when he treats the Gospels as historical documents and endeavours to place the events recorded in them in their historical context.

changed all that and effected a Copernican revolution in this branch of theological enquiry. What was implicit in the Reformation was brought out into the light of day: this namely, that if Christ be in truth the centre of Christianity, then the formulation of the faith must be made to conform to Christ and not Christ to the formulation. Hitherto the portrait of the Master had been painted to fit into the frame provided ready-made by the creeds and confessions: now it began to appear that the proper procedure is to paint the portrait first and then make a frame to fit it. The dangers of this method are obvious. One was that the biographers of Jesus would find in the Gospels just what they were looking for, that to the Rationalists he would be a Rationalist, that, in fact, every man would make Christ in his own idealised image. Another was that every man would bring with him his own general view of God, man, and the world, in a word, that in place of the one Procrustes-bed of dogma every biographer would produce a bed of his own devising on to which the 'historical Jesus' would somehow be fitted. This was and still is a real danger; but it is one which must be faced. For theology to-day there is no possible line of retreat, and the only way of safety is to go forward in the face of dangers, in the faith that the truth as it is in Jesus will disclose itself like all other truth to patient enquiry and religious insight.

The study of the teaching of Jesus is thus of vital importance both to New Testament Theology, of which it is the kernel, and to the study of the life of Jesus, a life in which, more than in any other, word and deed are united in indissoluble harmony. But the study of the teaching has an independent interest of its own and a definite task of its own, namely, that we use every resource we possess of knowledge of historical imagination, and of religious insight to the one end of transporting ourselves back into the centre of the greatest crisis of the world's history, to look as it were through the eyes of Jesus and to see God and man, heaven and earth, life and death, as he saw them, and to

find, if we may, in that vision something which will satisfy the whole man in mind and heart and will. Thus stated the task seems simple enough. We only realise its magnitude and the difficulties that lie in the way when we consider that it has fascinated—and more often than not baffled—some of the acutest and best-equipped of theological enquirers over something like a century and a half, and that to-day the results which may be considered to be firmly established stand in sadly small proportion to the labour expended.

Some of the difficulties lie on the surface for anyone who reads the Gospels with care: others have only been brought to light during the course of research, and the doubts and fears aroused by them have hardly passed beyond the narrow circle of learned debate. Typical of the former group is the problem raised by the Fourth Gospel: of the latter the controversy concerning the 'Son of Man'.

The material for our study is contained in the four canonical Gospels. And at the outset a difficulty presents itself. The first three Gospels immediately group themselves together, while the Fourth stands alone. 'The modern student cannot but feel that to turn from the Synoptics to the Fourth Gospel is to breathe another atmosphere, to be transported to another world.'[1] So it comes about that the very Gospel which seemed to Calvin to be the key to the other three[2] has to be set apart as a special and highly complex problem on its own account. This fact is the justification for confining the present work to what is contained in the Synoptic record.

But even the Synoptic Gospels present problems of their own, though many of these have been solved or are on the way to a solution. First and foremost is the question of the relation of the three accounts to one another. It is now

[1] H. Latimer Jackson, *The Problem of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 82. Chapter v of this work contains a convenient summary of the points of difference.

[2] 'Dicere soleo, hoc Evangelium clavem esse, quae aliis intellegendis januam aperiat'—*Argumentum in Ev. Ioannis*.

generally admitted that certain main results of the study of this problem are firmly established: and these may be briefly summarised at this point.

(*a*) Mark is prior to both Matthew and Luke: and the two latter have borrowed freely from Mark. Between them they reproduce the whole of Mark with the exception of some 31 verses.[1] Nine-tenths of Mark is transcribed in Matthew and rather more than half of Mark in Luke. The position is thus that 'Matthew may be regarded as an enlarged edition of Mark; Luke is an independent work incorporating considerable portions of Mark'.[2]

(*b*) Where Matthew and Luke have matter in common which does not appear in Mark (about 200 verses), they are both dependent on a source now lost (usually referred to as Q).[3]

(*c*) The subtraction of Marcan and Q material from Matthew leaves a residue of matter peculiar to that Gospel: and the same is the case with Luke. The analysis of the three Gospels thus leads to the differentiation of four main sources of information designated by the symbols Mk, Q, M, and L. Mk is our second Gospel: Q is the lost document which lies behind the matter common to Matthew and Luke: and M and L stand for the sources of matter peculiar to Matthew and Luke respectively. For the story of how these sources have been combined to produce the Synoptic Gospels reference may be made to works dealing specifically with the Synoptic Problem.[4] What is important for our present purpose is that we have to deal not simply with three canonical Gospels but with four documents which perhaps represent the Gospel tradition as it was current in four leading Churches of the Apostolic age.

[1] Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, p. 195, where the list is given.
[2] Streeter, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
[3] A list of non-Marcan parallels in Matthew and Luke is given in Streeter, *op. cit.*, p. 197. His reconstruction of Q containing additional matter found only in Luke runs to 272 verses and is given in the same work, p. 291.
[4] E.g. Streeter, *op. cit.*

Canon Streeter[1] suggests the connexion of Mk with Rome, Q (in its Greek dress) with Antioch, M with Jerusalem, and L with Caesarea. One of our Gospels—Mark—corresponds with the document Mk, but the other two are composite works, Matthew being built up out of the elements Mk + Q + M, and Luke out of Q + L + Mk.

These considerations determine the first task in such an enquiry as the present—to get behind the Gospels to the sources embodied in them. It is this fact which gives to Mark the pre-eminent position which it rightly has: for Mark is not only a Gospel, it is a source for Matthew and Luke. From this, two conclusions follow immediately. First, that where Mark is the source of Matthew and Luke we have the evidence of one witness only—Mark. That of Matthew and Luke becomes, as it were, hearsay, and cannot add any weight to what is already embodied in Mark. The second conclusion is that no variation from Mark in their versions of Marcan matter can affect the testimony of Mark. The copies cannot be used to check the original: rather Mark can and must be used to check the other two. By a comparison of Mark with the Matthaean and Lucan versions of Mark we can gain valuable information about the editorial methods and personal idiosyncrasies of St Matthew and St Luke,[2] which may be of service when we have to attempt the restoration of documents which have survived only in their pages.

But even if we could, by some fortunate discovery, be presented with the documents Q, M, and L to set alongside the Mark which we do possess, we should still have the largest and most difficult part of the task before us. For, even in their present condition, it is obvious that there are differences between them quite as striking as their general agreement. A single example will show what is meant. In Mk. xiii we are given a picture of the last things. The

[1] *Op. cit.*, pp. 223–235.
[2] I use St Mark, St Matthew, etc., to indicate the Evangelists; Mark, Matthew, etc., to indicate the books.

prophecy of the destruction of the Temple (*v.* 2) leads up to a description of the premonitory signs of the end: wars and rumours of wars, persecution of the disciples, utter desolation in Judaea, the rise of false Messiahs and false prophets, signs in heaven, 'and then (*v.* 26) they shall see the Son of Man coming with clouds with much power and glory'. Compare this with the account in Q (Lk. xvii. 22–37) where the day of the Son of Man is likened successively to lightning, the Deluge, and the destruction of Sodom.[1] In the one case the final act in the drama is preceded by a host of premonitory signs, and the parable of the Fig Tree (Mk. xiii. 28 f.) makes it clear that these signs will be an indication that the end is very near even though nobody can tell the exact time of its coming. When we turn to Q we find the end conceived as a bolt from the blue, something that comes without warning and bursts into the daily routine of the world as utterly unexpected as the crashing chords that open the Seventh Symphony.

Instances could easily be multiplied, but one is enough to show that the evidence offered by our documents needs to be carefully weighed and sifted. We have, in fact, to realise that just as there is a personal equation, of which we must take account, in the work of St Matthew or St Luke, so there is probably a personal equation in the work of the writers of the original sources. The whole Synoptic Problem arises out of the simple fact that the closest verbal agreements and the strangest verbal differences stand side by side in the parallel columns of a synopsis of the Gospels. But suppose that problem solved, we should forthwith have on our hands another of the same kind. We could do with our four documents what we have already done with our three Gospels—arrange them in parallel columns. We could set the Marcan account of the preaching of John alongside that of Q; we could do the same in other cases, that of the Parousia cited above, for example. Then we should have a problem similar in kind to that of the restora-

[1] A similar view is presented in I Thess. v. 1–3.

tion of Q, except that we should not be in search of a lost document but rather trying to recover from the different witnesses the actual sayings and doings of the Lord.

Here, again, a single example will suffice. The saying of Jesus concerning the unforgivable sin is contained in Mk. iii. 28 f. The Q version of the same saying is given in Mt. xii. 32 and Lk. xii. 10. The task of the Synoptic critic is to restore, so far as he can, the original Greek text lying behind Matthew and Luke. If we suppose this accomplished, the next step is to place the recovered Q alongside Mk and attempt to recover, not a document, but the words of Jesus himself; to get behind the primary written records to the spoken word.

At this point a new problem—the linguistic—arises. Up to this point we are dealing with Greek Gospels, and, in two cases at least, with Greek sources. Mark lies before us in Greek: and the amount of verbal agreement between Matthew and Luke makes it certain that Q lay before them in Greek also. But the mother-tongue of our Lord and the Apostles was not Greek but Galilean Aramaic,[1] so that, even if we could push the analysis of the Greek evidence to its farthest limit, we should be left with the hazardous enterprise of retranslation[2] in order to get back to the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus; and, at the end, we should have no certainty that anything more than an Aramaic Targum of the Greek had been produced. More than that, it may be questioned whether the result would be worth the labour

[1] I say 'mother-tongue' rather than 'language' in order not to prejudge the question whether any of our Lord's words were uttered in some other dialect than Aramaic. It seems not impossible that some of his words may have been spoken in the language which is preserved in the Mishnah and the older Midrashim. The disputes with Scribes and Pharisees occur to one in this connexion, for it is just in such contexts that we find words and phrases which go most naturally into the Scholastic Hebrew. I have no doubt that this language was spoken and regularly used in learned debate (cf. Moore, *Judaism*, I. 99 f.) and it would not be surprising if Jesus knew and used it in his controversies with the scholars. For a fuller discussion of this question see Chapter III.

[2] For essays in retranslation see Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* and *Jesus-Jeshua*, and Burney, *The Poetry of our Lord*.

involved. Our ultimate aim is to comprehend the thought of Jesus, and this fact sets strict limits to the profitable use of retranslation. There are many cases where the meaning of the Master is perfectly clear in the Greek or, for that matter, in the Authorised Version: in such cases there is little, if anything, to be gained by adding another version to those already existing. In other instances, however, retranslation clears up obscurities in the Greek or explains differences between the documents. For example the saying, Mt. viii. 20 = Lk. ix. 58 (Q): 'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. Retranslation could add nothing to our understanding of the first half; but the moment we put the second part back into Aramaic we are brought face to face with one of the most baffling problems of interpretation of the teaching—the meaning of the phrase 'Son of Man'. Similarly in the case of the saying about the unforgivable sin cited above, it is by retranslation that the clue is found for the harmonisation of Mk and Q.

All that has been said up to this point has to do with what are essentially preliminary investigations. Could we imagine the whole programme successfully carried out, we should be in possession of a true text of the recorded sayings and doings of Jesus, but the task of comprehending them would still lie before us with all its own peculiar difficulties. And it must be admitted that if we were to adhere strictly to the programme, the ultimate goal—the comprehension of the teaching—would recede into the far distant future. This programme, however, represents only the logical order of investigation. Theoretically the correct procedure is (1) textual criticism and recovery of the true text of the Gospels; (2) Synoptic criticism and recovery of the original sources used by the Evangelists; (3) comparison of the sources and recovery of the primary tradition concerning Jesus; (4) study and interpretation of this material. But in practice these stages of the enquiry are not suc-