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J. K. Mozley

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

The New Testament Background

The lectures which are now brought together in this book deal with the broad lines of the development of Christian thinking during a period of nearly three hundred years. They will avoid those side-tracks which afford to the technical scholar fascinating avenues for exploration, but may be confusing to those who are travelling, perhaps for the first time, through this particular region. I shall try also to avoid controversy, although it is not possible to treat such a subject as this without any presuppositions. Christianity, like every philosophy which provides guidance for life and affects man not only on the intellectual side of his nature but through and through, can never be regarded as a branch of archaeology. The greatest scholars approach the study of its history, its institutions, its ethics, and its theology with some kind of attitude of approval or disapproval, of attraction to it or reaction against it. That is the result, partly of the manner of their acquaintance with it, and partly of the view which they take of the world and of life as a whole. But where the impartiality of great scholarship shows itself is in the presentation of facts as truly, as objectively, as possible. Differences of opinion will still remain as to the meaning and the interpretation of the facts, but those opinions should be based on knowledge, as clear and certain as may be, of the facts as they happened, and of the reasons why they happened in the way they did.

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And the first business of anyone who speaks or writes on such a subject is to give the facts, not to argue a case. So he may hope, if not entirely to eliminate, yet largely to reduce, the element of controversy.

In this book I am endeavouring to give a survey of Christian theology during a particular period. The history of the growth of the Christian Church and of its relations with the Roman Empire, of the nature and development of its institutions, will be left on one side, and touched on only where that is necessary in the interests of clearness. There is a sufficient reason for this concentration on the theology. I know that the word theology is not a very popular one. It is not at all uncommon to find 'theology' contrasted, very much to its disadvantage, with 'religion'. But, after all, theology stands simply for that ordered thinking about God and man and the world and the relations between them which is implicit, and necessarily tends to become more explicit, in all religion. In the most primitive form of worship a theology was latent. Man has an unquenchable desire to understand the scheme of things in which he finds himself. It is this intellectual curiosity, which, from the psychological standpoint, underlies theology. What, I think, some people fear, is a divorce of theology from life. I will not say that theology has never been presented to them in such a form as to make such a fear justifiable. But a wider knowledge of any theology, and a deeper penetration to its roots, would show that any such detachment from life has indicated a debasement of theology and is no mark of its true nature. One of the means of correcting such a misunderstanding is a study of the his-

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tory of theology. That is certainly the case with regard to Christianity. By means of the history we come to know, not vaguely, but with that definiteness which belongs to all true historical knowledge, what the doctrines involved in the theology are, and how they attained the forms in which they have come down to us.

At the outset, I must give some account of the background of all later Christian thinking. It is in that light (not the only possible light) in which I wish to regard the New Testament. For, apart from the New Testament, the subsequent theological developments cannot be understood. So we must try to appreciate the general character of the New Testament and especially those features of it which have special relevance to later movements of Christian thought.

From the first, one fact needs to be realized. For the early Christians, about the middle of the first century of our era, when the New Testament books began to be composed and to be read in different Christian communities, there was one and only one collection of sacred books. That was the Old Testament. And it prejudices in no way the question of inspiration if one says that the writers of the books of our New Testament had no idea or intention of compiling what we may call a second volume of sacred books. The notion of a New Testament alongside of the Old Testament was in no way, as far as we can see, in the mind of the writers. This is not unimportant. If the New Testament had been deliberately compiled as sacred literature or as a manual or text-book of doctrine, I think we should be very naturally surprised both by some of the things it

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contains and by the fact that there are other things which it does not contain. The key to the understanding of what is in the New Testament and of what is not is to be found in the right attitude to the New Testament as literature.

But before any discussion of the character of this literature, there is a previous question to be asked and answered. How did it come about that this literature was ever written? The answer to this question may not tell us anything about the particular and special circumstances under which the various books were written, and yet may explain the literature as a whole. Such an answer is forthcoming: the literature itself is grounded in, and grows out of, a theology. The New Testament which is the background of later Christian theology has its own background in an already existing Christian theology, that is, in a teaching about Christ already proclaimed and accepted. Two references will make this plain. First, consider what St Paul says in the opening verses of the fifteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians, which form the prelude to the long statement and argument about the resurrection. I take Dr Moffatt's translation:

Now, brothers, I would have you know the Gospel I once preached to you, the Gospel you received, the Gospel in which you have your footing, the Gospel by which you are saved—provided you adhere to my statement of it—unless indeed your faith was all haphazard.

St Paul then goes on to tell his readers how he 'passed on' to them what he had himself 'received'—Christ's death 'for our sins', His burial, and His resurrection

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on the third day. It is obvious that while special circumstances caused him to write to the Corinthians when he did, and on the various subjects which find a place in the letter, he would never have written to them at all, had they not been persons to whom he had once preached the Gospel and who had received as true that Gospel when he preached it, and had he not himself at an earlier time ceased to be simply Saul of Tarsus and become instead Paul an Apostle of Jesus Christ. This first Epistle to the Corinthians has, therefore, behind it, and presupposes, a Gospel or good news about Christ. And while it is true that a distinction may be drawn between the good news and a theology, the distinction is only relative and provisional. This good news inevitably involves and expresses itself in a theology, in ordered notions about God and the world and men, with which the good news about Christ is most intimately related.

The second reference is to a passage which occurs in the preface to Bishop Westcott's book *The Gospel of the Resurrection*. In it that great teacher was concerned to state what he held to be of the very essence of Christianity in respect of the personal attitude to Christ. He says:

the earliest known description of a Christian is 'one who *believes on Christ*, and not one who *believes Christ*'. Or, in other words, a Christian is essentially one who throws himself with absolute trust upon a living Lord, and not simply one who endeavours to obey the commands and follow the example of a dead Teacher.

It was this attitude to Christ which explains the existence of the literature of the New Testament. People

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sometimes speak as though the substance of Christianity were to be found in the Sermon on the Mount, and Christian discipleship meant trying to live up to the level of the revelation of the moral ideal given in the Sermon. Now, as to the relative importance of different elements in Christianity, or as to what constitutes the essence of Christianity, there are differences of opinion; but I would claim that it is not a mere opinion, but a practical certainty, that we should never have known anything about the Sermon on the Mount, or about the Jesus who in that Sermon spoke words of such amazing moral beauty and power, unless the first Christians had been men and women who, in Westcott's words, believed on Christ, and trusted Him absolutely as the living Lord who by His resurrection had overcome death. It was in that faith and trust that Christianity and Christians were born and nurtured. Apart from it we have no reason to suppose that there would have been a Christian religion, or that a literature would have come into existence to make known to subsequent ages the existence of a great Jewish moral teacher, called Jesus, who had been put to death by order of a Roman Governor. But from within a community, scattered in different parts of the Roman Empire, which believed that Jesus had risen from the dead, and was convinced thereby of the unique and unparalleled importance of His Person, came the books which we know as the New Testament.

When this fact is overlooked there is a danger lest all that we owe to modern scholarship for the light it has thrown on various problems connected with the New Testament books may result in our failing to see the

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wood for the trees. The wealth of information on all sorts of points of not unimportant detail can obscure what still remain the simple lines of this literature in regard both to origin and object. Origin and object and the union between them are discernible within the New Testament in the words which the author of the fourth Gospel uses at the end of the twentieth chapter of his book. St John is explaining the selection he has made out of a much larger material of 'signs'—to use his own word—wrought by Jesus, and this is what he says:

These were written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life in his name.

But that motive was no personal idiosyncrasy of St John's. In one way or another, *faith*, actual or to be awakened, in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, was the bond uniting the writers of the New Testament books and those for whom they wrote.

It is in this that the unity of the New Testament is manifested. Here are these twenty-seven books, in many ways very diverse: diverse in authorship, in place and occasion of writing, diverse in type and quality of writing. Yet this assemblage, this little library of books, is not a casual collection, united by the fact of being bound up between two covers. There is an internal unity, a unity in the books reflecting a unity existing prior to the books. That unity is not to be understood except in relation to its centre, Jesus Christ. Great historical personalities are sometimes, though not always, forces making for some kind of deeper unity and becoming themselves the centres of

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unifying movements extending outwards into one or more departments of human life and thought. If we look for instances in the ancient world, we shall find them among the Hebrews in Moses and David; in Greece in Socrates, both in what he essentially was and in what he became as interpreted by Plato; also in Alexander the Great; in Rome in Julius Caesar. What is true of them is true also, in this respect, of Jesus Christ. He meant the appearance of a new centre of unity. Those who 'believed on Him' found that to be so from the first. Statements expressing that unity, making its rational grounds clear, and tracing out its consequences, abound in the New Testament. There is an atmosphere of freshness and wonder, the sense of an entry into a world of truth and power in which 'old things have passed away: nay, they have become new', and the dweller in this world is himself a new creation. This atmosphere is one of the most remarkable features of these books. There is no single word more truly descriptive of primitive Christianity than the word 'Gospel'. Christianity *was* Gospel, that is good news. It was good news for men because it was good news about God and His Kingdom. And it was good news, not in the way in which a philosophy might be good news as throwing light upon the mysteries of existence through the processes of human discovery and reflexion. The stress did not fall upon that side of the matter, though obviously that side has always to be taken into account. But the stress fell on the movement from God to the world, on what God had given and done in His love. This is what the New Testament writers have in mind when they speak so often of 'grace'. This is why there

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is so deep a spirit of gratitude revealed in what they write. It is the explanation of certain sharp turns of thought as when St Paul says 'but now having known God', and immediately corrects himself with 'or rather having been known by God'. It is the background of phrases which cause not a little difficulty when they are taken and interpreted by themselves, and not viewed in the light of their whole context, as when St Peter addresses his Christian readers as 'elect according to the foreknowledge of God'.

Now, when the first Christians, and, later in the first century, the New Testament writers thought of God's gifts and grace and used the phrase 'the Gospel', they thought also and necessarily of Jesus. The good news came through Jesus: but, more than that: to arrive at the full weight of primitive Christian thinking one must say that the good news was Jesus: He was not on the circumference of their thoughts as a witness or herald or prophet of good news might be; He was at the centre of their thinking, because for them He was at the centre of the good news. The titles used of Jesus in their thinking about Him make this central position of Jesus plain. There is room for different opinions among scholars as to the exact implications of these titles and as to the way in which they came to be attached to Jesus, but not one of them would have been used of Him, unless it had been believed that He was the centre of religion in a way in which neither Moses nor any of the great prophets of Israel was central. He was the Christ, that is the Messiah on whose coming pious Israelites had set their hopes; the Servant of the Lord, that is the suffering Servant whose voca-

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tion and destiny to bear the sins of others was written in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah; the beloved and only Son of God; the Lord. This last title, whatever its origin, could not fail to recall to Greek-speaking believers, who knew the Old Testament in the Greek version, the phrase *ὁ Κύριος* 'the Lord' used in that version as the translation of the sacred personal name of the God of Israel—Jehovah or Jahweh. All this may be regarded as bearing witness, in the first place, to primitive Christian thought about Jesus and not to what scholars have called the self-consciousness of Jesus, that is to what Jesus thought about Himself; yet there is abundant ground for the belief that those titles, either actually or implicitly, go back to Jesus Himself, and truly represent His mind, so that in using these titles of Him the primitive Christian community and the New Testament writers were not striking out a new line.

It is this fact which makes any search for a religion in the New Testament, which shall avoid theology, so unprofitable and so certainly doomed to failure. It is not the question of the presence or absence of technical terms or of something in the nature of a creed. Such terms are to be found, and the confession 'Jesus is Lord' is of the nature of a creed. But underlying that is the fact that in the New Testament Jesus is not so much the Teacher of religion as the object of religion. For that reason, any detachment of the Gospels from the rest of the New Testament is an unscientific procedure and likely to lead to a misunderstanding of the Gospels themselves. No books, and I am thinking especially of the first three Gospels, have ever been