

# Scholarship and Interpretation: or How it Strikes a Contemporary

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What questions is a non-professional critic entitled – indeed, bound – to put to the scholars concerning the current debate about the New Testament? What kind of comments is he entitled to offer? The studies in question are complex and specialized; they involve languages which he does not know and disciplines which he has not practised. The complexity is such that individual scholars will tell you that no one of them can master it; one has to concentrate, for example, on a single topic, such as textual study, or on only a part of the New Testament material. Communication between the scholars has become difficult, as it has in other learned disciplines, and perhaps no conspectus of what is being done in the field as a whole is possible. And yet the layman cannot leave it to the experts, since the debate concerns the documents which purport to record the events from which his faith derives, and the reactions of those who witnessed them. It is the recognition of this that leads some people to protest that the questions that scholars feel bound to ask should not be asked at all. It is felt that they undermine the faith of those who do not follow the debate but are aware of its repercussions when they reach a wider public, probably in some over-simplified and distorted form. I assume that the questions which scholars (or others) feel bound to ask ought not to be repressed: that intellectual honesty demands this, whether they are answered well or ill. I assume, equally, that the layman should not simply accept the answers that the experts offer him. He could, in fact, hardly do so, given the diversity of opinions which obtains among them. The notion of a consensus of the faithful is important, if Christians are to believe that they are, in some sense, one in Christ; but it cannot, in our present situation, be founded on a consensus of the scholars. So what is he to do if, on the one hand, he cannot ignore the debate while, on the other, it provides him with no firm and indisputable conclusions?

The problem is not peculiar to theology. The increasing specialization of our knowledge produces, in one field after another, the familiar phenomenon of the layman confronting the experts whose conclusions he cannot accept without scrutiny, since they affect his understanding of the world in which he lives and the life that he may expect to lead in it. The complexity of the knowledge varies, from the recondite abstractions of physics to the arts, where we all have our opinions and do not hesitate to differ from the experts: from fields in which we pay perhaps too much respect to them to fields in which we pay too little. It is not easy to place New Testament studies and the theology to which they relate on this spectrum. They clearly involve complex linguistic and historical studies. On the other hand they are not conceptually difficult; the methods of study resemble those of other kinds of historical and literary scholarship, and the interpretation of his material often takes the New Testament scholar outside any field in which he can claim special expertise.

But whatever the relative accessibility of the subject-matter there are two kinds of question which the layman is entitled to put, and with which I shall be concerned. The first is about methodology. What *kind* of debate is it? What kind of questions are being asked? How do they compare with the kind of questions with which other disciplines concern themselves. What are the prospects of answers, given the nature of the questions? Do they seem to be the right questions, or are they being asked in the right way? The second kind of interrogation concerns the assumptions from which the experts set out. Whether they recognize it or not, New Testament scholars are *engaged*, and the nature of their engagement (as has been observed, for example, in the debate over the *The Myth of God Incarnate*) is reflected in the ways in which they interpret the evidence.

So in this paper I shall be concerned, not with the details of recent New Testament criticism (which would mean writing something much longer and would involve the kind of specialized expertise which I cannot claim) but with these two kinds of question, the ways in which they interact and, especially, with the prospects of enlightenment that the debate seems to offer us. How much can the critics help us? This is a question that the layman is entitled to ask, both because New Testament criticism is not an intellectually isolated discipline, and because its results are of peculiarly great concern to the believer, or would-be believer. The layman with some experience of other disciplines can at least offer the kind of comments which may help to clarify the debate. This may both help his fellow-laymen to understand what the critics are up to, and where it may lead; and the critics to see how their

concerns look to the lay eye. So I address this paper to both.

## II

Certain obvious characteristics strike the observer as to the material and the study that has been devoted to it. The first is the limitation of the subject-matter. The New Testament itself contains perhaps 200,000 words; the Gospels perhaps 80,000 – fifty or sixty thousand when we have allowed for the repetition of near-identical material in the individual gospels. There is material from contemporary followers, recorded in those writings which have not been included in the canonical gospels. New material on the contemporary religious situation, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, may always be discovered, as may material on the historical situation generally. But any expectation that our knowledge could be transformed by the discovery of new material of decisive importance seems unrealistic. No such material seems likely to emerge on what one may call the phenomenon of Jesus, since his followers did what they could to record, sift and preserve the material; and since no one else was sufficiently concerned with the events to do likewise. The task of the New Testament scholar seems likely to be one of ploughing over the same ground.

The ploughing has been thorough. Probably no body of writings of comparable extent has been subjected to anything like the same degree of study. Nor is this surprising in view of the importance of the issues with which it is concerned and the uniqueness of the revelation that it has been held to provide. For a long time it was held that the evidence was so uniquely important that it was not to be questioned at all; it had, in a literal sense, been dictated by the Holy Spirit. But, once it came to be admitted that the texts had reached us through human agencies, the questions could not be resisted and the texts have therefore been subjected to the most intensive study: the texts of the individual gospels and their relationship to each other; the purpose or purposes that they were intended to serve, and the way in which the material was shaped to that end; the differences between the evangelists in what they make of their material and what picture of Jesus they give us.

Three reflections occur to me on this study. The first concerns the sheer weight and complexity of what, in other literary or historical studies, would be described as preliminary work: the establishment of the text; the relationship of any given text to its possible sources and the relationship of different texts or different works to each other. Shakespearean criticism, for example, includes all these things. It tries also to place the play in the possible context in which it was written; to identify the significance of contemporary events or concerns; to consider what motives Shakespeare may have had in writing that play at the time when he may

be deemed to have written it. It tries, more broadly, to relate the play to contemporary thought and belief: to contemporary ways of looking at the world. But all this, however necessary, is preliminary to the business of trying to interpret what the plays themselves express; nor would it be worth doing except in order to enable that task to be done better. Yet it is these preliminary studies that have, so far, been the main preoccupation of New Testament scholars.

A second reflection is that it would be unrealistic to expect that we can ever reach firm and indisputable conclusions on these matters. We can never be certain that we have the authentic text of *Macbeth* (perhaps we can get no further than a suspicion that the text that we have may be incomplete); how much truer must this be of the gospels. Judgment about sources and the relationships of texts to each other must always remain judgments: there is no way of proving them. We are always dealing, at best, with probabilities. The use of common material, not included in Mark, by Matthew and Luke has led to the postulation of the Q document, on which it is assumed that both drew, but this can never be proved. The critics are in the position of detectives trying to solve a murder in the absence of a body that they can never hope to discover. There are obviously other ways of explaining the phenomenon; it is argued, for example, that Luke had Matthew's Gospel before him when he wrote, but had access to other material as well. The nature of the evidence is such that no conclusions can have a more secure status than that of more or less informed and persuasive interpretation. Anyone who wishes to claim more for the prospects of study of the texts and their relationship to each other must ask himself how he would apply to his conclusions Popper's challenge that he should show how they could be falsified. If this cannot be done, they can only be based on surmise, however closely that surmise may be related to factual evidence.

A third reflection is to ask what would be settled if, *per impossibile*, any final account of the origins and inter-relationships of the Gospels could be provided. We should, no doubt, have a clearer understanding of the ways in which different writers and editors had interpreted original material that is now lost to us; and this would help our understanding of the variety of reactions to what had been, in its origins, a common experience, and the variety of uses (e.g. proclamation, teaching, worship) to which they felt moved to put it. We should not have discovered the 'historical Jesus' whom the scholars in Schweitzer's book were seeking. We should still be confronted with the New Testament records of what certain Jews in first-century Palestine made of Jesus, their compatriot. Those who produced the Gospels and, no doubt,

those whose material they used differ in personality and culture, in how they see Jesus and therefore what they have to tell us about him. We have to compare their testimony, to allow each to enrich the others, sometimes to reconcile them as best we can. But witness at first, second or tenth hand is all we have. Nor would this situation be radically changed if the sources were accessible to us. We should merely have moved back a stage or two in the testimony with which we were dealing.

### III

To say all this is to say no more than is familiar to historians: that there can be no finality in historical scholarship, though there are, of course, degrees of difference, which vary according to the difference between the amount and reliability of the evidence available to the New Testament scholar compared, for example, with that available to Namier and his followers, when they investigate the intricacies of eighteenth-century British politics. It is reinforced when we consider the kind of witness that the New Testament writers thought themselves to be offering.

We use the term 'witness' in two senses. The function of a witness in a court of law is to help to establish what actually happened in a given case; this is the meaning that matters when we are trying to establish the factual truth of the events to which the gospels refer: to pursue the quest for the historical Jesus. In the context of religious experience people bear witness to what has happened to them. External events matter only in so far as they have been the cause of it, and they will be interpreted in the light of it. Nor will the witness wish to restrict himself to reference to them: he is concerned, rather, with an experience which has changed his life and with his reactions to it. The importance of the first kind of witness varies a great deal among the New Testament writers, from the writer of the First Epistle of John who insists that 'we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we have looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands, and it is of this that we tell' (I Jn 1:1 NEB) to Paul, who refers hardly at all to the events of the life of Jesus, but is wholly concerned with his belief that Christ has manifested himself as a saviour to Paul himself and to all who will receive him. The importance of witness in the second sense is common to all: if they had not wished to bear it they would not have written at all.

The distinction reinforces the conclusion (which no doubt most scholars share) that there can be no question of discovering the historical Jesus. There are several reasons why this should be so. There is the sketchiness of the evidence and there are the differences between the accounts. There is even the inconceivability of imagining what a complete and reliable account would look like

of a life for which such astonishing claims were made. There is certainly the fact that the witnesses did not understand at the time what was happening (as Mark shows with particular force); and that what we have is reports of their later recollections of what happened, as they thought that they had come to understand it. This implies further problems of interpretation; they are concerned not merely with the events but with their meaning. Event and meaning are not to be separated; nor was it the intention of the evangelists to separate them. They tell us what they do in order to convey a meaning. Their wish to do so can and does shape the way in which the events are narrated, and even the claim that certain events occurred. (We can perhaps see this working in the accounts of some of the miracles.) There is, moreover, a certain criterion of *appropriateness* which seems to have operated powerfully, because their attitude to evidence itself, like that of their contemporaries, was governed less by judgment as to what *had* happened than by feelings as to what *ought* to have happened. The criterion of appropriateness expresses a feeling that things should have happened this way, in order to give due honour and status to the person with whom they were concerned, in the religious context in which they see him. The extent to which it has operated is a matter of judgment; but it obviously affects, e.g. references to the Old Testament, especially to prophecy. It must affect the accounts of everything prior to the actual ministry of Jesus, for which no contemporary evidence would have been recorded.

One might say that New Testament studies have passed two crises: the first when it came to be accepted that whatever has been revealed to us came through human agency and was therefore open to critical study, like any other historical material. This led to the quest for historical truth. The second came with the realization that historical truth, here as elsewhere, is unattainable. We are left, inescapably, asking ourselves not merely what actually happened but why the witnesses tell us what they do; what they are actually saying; what different things they are saying. What are they trying to convey?

We begin to see the complexities if we think of the different uses of language that are involved: the different language-games that are played, as Wittgenstein would have said. There are a number of different ones which apply to those parts of the gospels that appear to be in narrative form. There is, first of all, a certain amount of recognizably straightforward narrative, when the writers are referring to events in public knowledge, such as any historian might relate: for example, Luke's attempt to date the birth of Jesus (ch 3) or the account of the death of John the Baptist. But most of what appears to be in narrative form raises more complex

problems. There are the miracle stories, in which the normal laws of physical cause and effect appear to be set aside. These are not properly described as myths (as Bultmann argued) since they do not refer to events for which no evidence could be adduced; they are stories which could in principle, be verified or falsified by evidence, even though that evidence was not sought and is no longer available. We therefore have to ask what happened and how it happened; what powers Jesus possessed, how he used them and why he was moved to do so. But the primary question is why the story is told, since the evangelist tells it because he wants to convey an essential truth about Jesus. He is less concerned (he may never have put the question to himself) about what actually happened.

All these uses of language occur within what may be called the mythological envelope in which the gospels are enclosed; the envelope of language that we may use to describe, in terms which imagination supplies, what lies beyond knowledge, but of which we may feel that we need to speak in order to come to terms with our world; to give some account in order to make sense of what has happened, what happens, and what will happen. Such is the language about First and Last things: indeed, any language that attempts to describe eternity.<sup>1</sup> There is, of course, a connection between the language of myth and that of miracle; since those who readily use the one will be relatively willing to accept the other. In neither case do they look with the eye of the sceptic at the evidence or lack of it.

The complexities become much greater when we add the uses of language that are not concerned (at least on the face of it) with events; not with what is done but with what is said: with teaching, with moral exhortation, with prayer – even without taking account of the theological disputation and exposition that are so prominent in John's Gospel, and with which the Epistles are largely concerned. The ways in which language is being used here vary enormously in complexity, from simple moral exhortation, through the evocative use of images ('I am the good shepherd') to the parables which may, in their simplest form, be little more than a single image, but which may set out to invoke a response by telling us a story of greater or lesser complexity. Two obvious problems pose themselves, and have been much discussed: What sort of teaching is this? and how much has been changed or added by the Church to the original teaching of Jesus? These are questions about the substance of Christian doctrine to which adequate answers could hardly be given. Questions about the relevance of detail in the parables, for example, are always matters of judgment; questions about the meaning of the Kingdom, with which so many of them are concerned, cannot be answered in specific terms at all; the answer can

only, in Wittgenstein's phrase, be shown. And this collection of language-games does not merely add its own complexities; event and meaning are not separate: they are fused together.

Finally, as Houlden has recently reminded us,<sup>2</sup> the New Testament offers us not one but several portraits of Jesus, which are determined by their preoccupations. Mark was concerned with the death that we must all share; Paul with the death and resurrection, understood as a kind of cosmic drama. Luke with prophecy and fulfilment; Matthew with the achievement of a greater righteousness; John with the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the extension of this relationship to all believers. These different concerns affect the ways in which we interpret what they offer.

#### IV

When scholars come to recognize even some of these complexities and ambiguities, one can see that they react in alternative ways. One is to seek certainty by reverting to the pre-critical assumption that the Bible (and the New Testament in particular) expresses truth (and especially truth about the action of God in history) in a way that we can come to understand but not to question; there is a framework of Biblical truth which is simply to be accepted. This was the basis of the 'Biblical theology' which was so influential after the Second World War. Its influence declined after a decade or so, as James Barr observes; and his own comments and those of Dennis Nineham explain in detail how this happened.<sup>3</sup> In effect, it proved impossible to show, in the midst of the problems of interpretation that criticism had revealed, that certain statements or a certain view of history must be regarded as privileged. Once you have admitted that critical study is legitimate it has to be applied without reservation. To put it another way, Biblical theology found it impossible to show how its assertions were justified outside the framework of assumptions within which it operated. Such a conclusion does not deny the unique significance of the Biblical material; it does insist that that significance cannot be established by a kind of fiat.

The other alternative was to accept that we have, inevitably, to *interpret* what the witnesses have to say to us; and the work of interpretation has gone on side by side with the more specialized studies relating to the text and its redaction. It is not pursued exclusively by New Testament scholars, who sometimes complain that those who practise it do not take sufficient account of the findings of New Testament criticism.<sup>4</sup> It offers a bewildering variety of interpretations, not obviously related to each other.



It is perhaps significant that the specialized term 'hermeneutics' should be considered necessary to describe what in other disciplines (for example, literary criticism) would be described simply as interpretation. Nor is the case for it made out, to the sceptical eye, by Thiselton's argument that it 'begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: *the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition*',<sup>5</sup> or with Gadamer's observation (quoted by Thiselton) that 'there must occur an engagement between two sets of horizons . . . namely those of the ancient text and those of the modern reader or hearer', since the same could be said of the historian or literary critic; and this is only one of the problems that arise in critical interpretation. The implication that there is a special science of New Testament interpretation is understandable, in view both of the peculiarity and the importance of the subject-matter; but we do not appear to be offered more than a variety of individual approaches, theoretical or practical, to the problem of interpretation. Even so interesting and significant a study as Thiselton's provides no unified picture, but a number of studies in the thought of different individuals (Heidegger, Gadamer, Bultmann, Wittgenstein) which are relevant to the problem in very different ways.

What we get under the general heading of hermeneutics seems to comprise at least four different kinds of writing. One is discussion of the general problems of interpreting the complex material, remote from us in time, with which the Bible presents us. Individual approaches vary, but the central problem is that of cultural relativism: whether and how we can derive timeless truth from this testimony, rooted, as it is, in a remote culture.<sup>6</sup> A second is the attempt to show the way in which the thought of individual modern writers (e.g. Heidegger) can help us towards a contemporary understanding of Biblical truth. A third is the individual interpretation offered by particular critics, such as Moltmann. This includes the kind of interpretation offered by the individual critic on behalf of a social class or racial group, and forming one of the kinds of political theology which appear in such variety today. A fourth is the investigation of the relationship between language and the experience that shapes it, which Thiselton derives from Wittgenstein.

All these are clearly legitimate forms of critical writing, though their diversity and the lack of any clear relationship between them illustrates the fragmentation of our attempts to interpret the significance of the New Testament material. (I do not refer, moreover, to the different but related enterprise of trying to define the interpretation in terms of ontology and metaphysics – the task with which the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* were princi-

pally concerned.) The question is how *useful* they are individually in helping us to grasp the specific but elusive reality of the material. Discussion of the general problems of interpretation may help us to approach the text with greater sensitivity, but it leaves us with the task of dealing with it in its concrete particularity. In particular, to interpret the material simply as documents of the time involves us in insoluble ambiguities as to the reasons for our interest in it; the possibility of understanding it; the way or ways in which we are to interpret it, and the beliefs that we are to found on it: in other words, with all the substantive issues of Christian theology. To understand the world of Heidegger may help us to understand the relevance of the gospel today, by showing us the kind of challenge, the kind of need to which it has to respond; but we have to go on to show how it does so. And this is, of course, one man's world. We should hear much less of Heidegger if he had not had so great an influence on Bultmann.

Bultmann, indeed, shows how one can combine a number of these approaches to interpretation very dramatically, without reaching the point of offering any concrete interpretation oneself. He bases his position on cultural relativism, by insisting that we cannot discover the historical truth, not because of the lack of evidence or its ambiguity, but because the evangelists live in a world so remote from our own that no account that they can offer can be regarded by 'modern man' as anything other than mythology. There is, nevertheless, a saving truth about God's relationship with man which is indissolubly linked with Jesus and which modern man, living in the kind of world that Heidegger describes, needs. But that truth is somehow independent of anything that historians can discover: 'His history (*Geschichte*), his Cross are not to be questioned on the grounds of their historical (*historischer*) basis; the meaning of his history emerges from what God wishes to say to me through them'. When we are confronted with the Word of God 'we cannot put questions as to its legitimation; it merely asks us whether we wish to believe it or not'.<sup>7</sup> This is not an arbitrary decision: it opens up to us the possibility of understanding ourselves, of finding the freedom that (in Heidegger's language) we need. What matters happens between the individual and his God; but *how* it happens, without recourse to history or myth, remains unclear.

Later German theologians have been more ready to offer their interpretations of what they make of Jesus in terms of religious experience, and of what we are to do in the world. Thus Moltmann – perhaps the most vivid of them – can undertake both to answer the question 'What does the Cross mean for God himself?'<sup>8</sup> and to insist that 'Christian theology will in the future be-

come more and more a practical and political theology<sup>9</sup> and to interpret the gospel in these terms. All this has been found challenging; since it has become highly subjective its value depends on the spiritual sensitivity of the individual interpreter, and the breadth of his horizon. But clearly no such interpretation, determined as it is by the personal and perhaps the political outlook of the critic, can be more than illuminating or suggestive. It is at best one interpretation of the many-faceted truth of the gospel.

## V

The layman who has taken note of all this activity may well conclude, not that his simple faith has been destroyed by the scholars and critics, but that they have reduced him to confusion. It might seem that, left with a free choice between these various positions (including that of Biblical theology) he is justified in interpreting the New Testament material to suit his own commitments and assumptions, and in making for it whatever claims may seem appropriate to him. But, unless he can ignore the very different interpretations of others, he may not feel very confident in doing so. In an age like ours, when all forms of thought and the authority that imposes them are questioned, a diversity of approaches and interpretations is to be expected. But it ought not to be an unlimited diversity, which fails to take proper account of the disciplines which the material itself imposes, and which simply uses it as a starting-point for the expression of the concerns of the interpreter. So I think that there is a need for much more concreteness in dealing with that material, and that this will help us to see the diversity of material in better perspective, and offer the believer who does not immerse himself in New Testament studies something to hold on to: something that gives reality to the notion of a consensus of the faithful, even if it cannot be as simply expressed as was once thought possible. What suggestions might one make to this end? The requirement should, I think, express itself in a number of ways, which supplement each other.

The first is that, for all the obscurities, the ambiguities, the different portraits of Jesus, we have to do with a single phenomenon, with which we are driven to concern ourselves. Whatever the differences in the accounts, whatever the difficulties in making out what he actually said and did, it is hardly in question that all the New Testament writers are concerned with a particular person, with the impact that he made during his lifetime and (as the writers would claim) after his death, and with what they subsequently made of it in prayer, thought and action. Further, there is a certain logic in the situation with which we find ourselves confronted if the claims that they were led to make for him are justified. If he worked in the way that he did as a local evangelist and teacher,

it is not surprising that the evidence should be scanty and mainly limited to what was recorded by his followers. If the truth was for the hearers to work out for themselves, it is not surprising that so much was left apparently unclear; that whatever claims he made for himself were (in the synoptic gospels at least) left ambiguous. If that truth, or the beginnings of it, came to his followers with such force after his death, it is not surprising that they should have remembered and recorded the story in such a way as to emphasize it. (*Of course*, that is how it must all have happened!) Nor is it difficult to understand why the different New Testament writers should have seen him in different ways. We do this with ordinary human beings: how much more with someone who conveyed far more to them than any ordinary human being. But the same New Testament scholar who has drawn our attention to these differences concludes that:

The logic of the doctrinal work of the New Testament writers seems to be that each of them, from his own standpoint, with his own intellectual and religious formation and his own special pressures of circumstance, applied to all necessary matters the implications of a theism shaped and defined as the result of Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, it is the tradition of this 'theism shaped and defined as the result of Jesus' that links us with his first followers. To claim this, of course, raises problems of evidence and its interpretation; problems concerning the ways in which the tradition has been interpreted at various times and in various places by those who have claimed to represent the Christian Church; and the ways in which this has reflected the desires and expectations that the Christian faith has aroused; problems concerning our own desires and expectations, our own prejudices, our own assumptions. Nevertheless the argument is that, if we can speak of something called the Christian faith, there is something that we can identify, within the various forms in which it has been expressed, when we have allowed for all the alien elements that have associated themselves with it; when we have recognized, indeed, that it cannot be adequately expressed at all. It is, we may say, what links Christians together, whenever and wherever they live and have lived, in so far as they *are* linked together. It is what makes it possible to speak meaningfully of the Christian Church. It is what justifies the work of theologians by identifying the subject matter of Christian theology.

These two affirmations seem to me logically irrefutable; but they do not help, on their own, to discourage a diversity of free-ranging interpretations, any of which may claim to express the single valid interpretation of the truth that the New Testament

conveys. They need to be supplemented by a third suggestion: that we need to pay closer and more discriminating attention to what is actually being said. The text has, indeed, been studied with an intensity that must be unique in scholarship; but, as I have noted, a great deal of that study has been devoted to work that is only preliminary to critical interpretation, while the work of interpretation has been overshadowed by the notion of 'pre-understanding', which seems to place too much emphasis on the outlook of the critic and too little on his ability to submit himself to the disciplines of the material. His outlook will manifest itself inevitably, since no critic is impersonal; the point hardly needs emphasis. We can have too much theorizing about how the job is to be done; too much assertion of the right of the interpreter to interpret according to his own outlook and concerns; too much interpretation in the light of the assumptions and prejudices which he brings to the text. What he has to do in the first instance is to attend to what is before him. Here, if anywhere, Wittgenstein's dictum applies: 'Don't think, but look!'.<sup>11</sup>

What might this mean in practice? If, as it seems to an outsider, New Testament criticism is only at the beginning of the practice of genuine critical interpretation, it probably needs all the help it can get in order to avoid methodological inbreeding. Nineham has reminded us of C. F. Evans's comment that Christian theology is not a discipline which can be profitably carried on by itself, in isolation from other disciplines.<sup>12</sup> It is often said that New Testament scholars need the help of literary critics and philosophers, the former because of what James Barr calls 'the poetic, aesthetic or mythopoeic quality of the Bible as a literary work, just as it is',<sup>13</sup> the latter to help to analyse the very diverse uses of language that the text contains. Of these two suggestions the second is logically the more comprehensive, since it relates to *all* the different ways in which language is used, and to whatever unifying intention or attitude may relate them to each other. And that intention is not to create a literary work, though the skills of the literary critic may often be helpful in interpreting parts of it. The New Testament often uses the language of the poet and the story-teller, but those who compiled the gospels did not think that they were writing poems or stories. Their over-riding preoccupation could not adequately be described in such terms.

It is here that the philosophers can help, and especially Wittgenstein, since he is so peculiarly sensitive to the ways in which we use language and the context in which it is used. No summary of the approach that he shows us in his later writings could be adequate here — and he himself would insist that it could *only* be shown. He is important precisely because he offers no theory of

'pre-understanding', no generalization about the techniques of interpretation, but 'assembles reminders' which compel us to look more closely at the material and see what the writer is trying to communicate. He tells us that we are or should be concerned to understand what is in plain view; not to interpret for ourselves, but to see how people use language in order to communicate in the context of their 'form of life' – the kind of life in which a community participates.<sup>14</sup> The relevance of all this to the diverse uses of language in the New Testament and the diversity of actions which inspires them needs no emphasis. What he does is not to offer a philosophical theory but to inculcate a habit of mind and to show how it works.<sup>15</sup> It is a habit of mind which can help us only up to a point; Wittgenstein ruled out the possibility of comparing, and therefore of judging between the 'forms of life' of which he spoke.<sup>16</sup> And all the work has to be done by the individual critic; Wittgenstein gives no direct help and was no theologian. But he brings us back, insistently, to the problem of the concrete.

Where do these questions, these critical comments and suggestions leave me? First, with the reflection that the study of the New Testament is even more complex than I suggested at the outset, since we have to superimpose the problems of interpretation on those of factual enquiry. It involves a range of skills and sensitiveness such as no individual is likely to possess in equal measure: those of the textual critic, the student of language, the historian of religion and culture, together with the kind of philosophical sensitivity that can bring them together. Secondly, that it is not the kind of study that can hope to achieve definitive results, both because of the limitations of the material and because it has to be interpreted. Thirdly, that any encounter with the New Testament ought to be an encounter with it as a whole, with the totality of the experience that it represents, in so far as we are capable of apprehending it. And this wholeness has two aspects. One is the totality of the material, of the evidence, of the witness, with all its differences and its discrepancies. The other is the varieties of experience that are expressed in the different language-games that are played, and what they all add up to. For whatever the differences and the need to recognise them, language is used in these different ways by people who use them all: in whose lives all these uses are significant. It means trying to see what the different witnesses have to offer as what it is and not another thing: seeing it in all its variety, making the necessary distinctions and yet seeing it as a whole, as the experience of the witnesses and of the community in which they were held together by the things concerning Jesus. It means recognizing their remoteness from us, and yet also the community in which we are held together, and in which

we concern ourselves with them.

But, finally, this kind of encounter is not, of course, merely for the scholar; it is equally for the layman. He might not express it in these terms, but the blend of complexity and simplicity, of variety of experience, of unresolved questions and of basic conviction, which perhaps cannot even be clearly stated, is something that most of us, perhaps, would recognize as the stuff of Christian experience.

- 1 I have discussed the definition of myth (with particular reference to *The Myth of God Incarnate*) in my article, 'Myth and Truth', *Theology*, July 1980.
- 2 *Patterns of Faith*, 1977, pp 66ff.
- 3 *Explorations in Theology* 7, 1980, especially Ch 1. *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, 1976, especially Ch 4.
- 4 cf. Houlden, *Patterns of Faith*, Ch 1.
- 5 *The Two Horizons*, 1980, p 11.
- 6 Nineham is much concerned with this problem (*Use and Abuse of the Bible*.) He believes that we can only try to understand how men interpreted their religious experience within particular cultural 'totalities' (in Troeltsch' terminology), though clearly he does not think that their experience (however expressed) is altogether alien to us. But whatever we can say may need to be expressed in new terms ('a new story'), and we ought to be open-minded as to how the stories that we might tell (p 252ff) would relate to those of traditional Christian doctrine; whether they could be given a single meaning, and whether they could be reconciled with each other.
- 7 'Neues Testament und Mythologie' in *Kerygma und Mythos*, ed. Bartsch, Hamburg 1951, ET Vol 1 1953, Vol 2, 1962, pp 41, 46. Bultmann produced a good many later essays and papers on the subject without, so far as I can see, significantly modifying his opinion.
- 8 *The Crucified God*, 1972, p 201ff.
- 9 *The Experiment Hope*, 1975, p 11.
- 10 Houlden, *Patterns of Faith*, p 70.
- 11 *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 66.
- 12 In *What about the New Testament?* ed. Hooker and Hickling, 1975, p 143.
- 13 *The Bible and the Modern World*, 1973, pp 61-2.
- 14 *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 127, 89, 23.
- 15 Thiselton offers a helpful exposition and a demonstration of how the method can work in practice in Chrs 12 and 13 of *The Two Horizons*.
- 16 *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 127, 121, 124.