

Jesus and the Gospels in Recent Literature: a Brief Sketch

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"No one is any longer in the position to write a life of Jesus," begins Günther Bornkamm in his own reconstruction of Jesus' life and thought.¹ Such a categorical statement may be discouraging to the Latter-day Saint who—his interest aroused by the gospel doctrine course of study—turns to modern non-LDS Bible scholarship to learn more about the Savior's life and times. Bornkamm ascribes this state of affairs to the "devoted prodigious" efforts of New Testament scholars, in particular German scholars, whose research, he says, has freed not only the study of the gospels but also the gospels themselves "from all embellishment by dogma and doctrine." Bornkamm, along with many other scholars of the New Testament, assumes that the original stories about Jesus have been added to and expanded during a period of oral transmission before they were written down in the four gospels. Thus, to recover any semblance of the real story of Jesus underneath layers of tradition is a task beset with difficulties. Indeed, if one appropriates Bornkamm's position he must finally admit that almost nothing can be known of the man Jesus: the real story of the Jesus of history has been almost totally obscured by tradition which was shaped by the earliest Church's faith in the glorified exalted Christ.²

For many, including myself, this stance is far too radical. Bornkamm and his colleagues, particularly the students of Rudolf Bultmann, are open to criticism regarding both their method³ and the theological presuppositions which underlie their method, and their radically skeptical posture has been challenged repeatedly, especially by British and American scholars.⁴

Despite my reservations as to Bornkamm's approach, however, I think he has put his finger squarely on the reason for the recent dearth of attempts to reconstruct the life of Jesus. It was Albert Schweitzer's 1906 work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*,⁵ which pronounced the "funeral oration" on such attempts. Schweitzer demonstrated the glaring inadequacies in the research of the nineteenth century on the life of Jesus.⁶ And in light of this critique, few then ventured to write an account of Jesus' life and thought. Instead, the intervening decades have witnessed a shift to investigations of the individual gospels. These studies have focused attention primarily on the features distinctive to each gospel writer's portrayal of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Among the numerous studies on the gospels, there are, I believe, a few which may be especially appropriate for Latter-day Saints beginning to explore the world of Bible scholarship, since they are reasonably sound without demanding the technical background required to wade through more specialized and thorough works. One of the better commentary series for laymen is the Daily Study Bible.⁷ William Barclay provides a clear and fairly sensitive commentary which is based on his own translation of the gospel texts. Another is the Cambridge Bible Commentary, published by Cambridge University Press and based on the translation of the New English Bible. The commentary on each gospel is done by a different British scholar.⁸ The stated purpose of this series is to provide the lay person with a very basic introduction to the gospels. A third series is the Pelican Gospel Commentaries,

based on the Revised Standard Version and available in paperback from Penguin Books.⁹ These commentaries are directed slightly more towards the specialist than the other two series mentioned above. One feature which may be somewhat offensive to Latter-day Saint readers is the fairly consistent appeal to the canons of higher criticism in the Pelican series. Of these, however, I have personally found the commentaries by John Marsh on John and by George B. Caird on Luke often profound, full of insight, and written from the viewpoint of one who believes Jesus to be the Christ.

For a person who can spend more time and energy studying the gospels, I would recommend three volumes. The first is William F. Albright's work on Matthew.¹⁰ Albright brings to this very Jewish gospel a wealth of knowledge of both the Old Testament and the ancient Near East, and his commentary and notes on Matthew are among the most comprehensive ever written. His ability to illuminate the early background of Jewish customs and practices makes his commentary especially valuable. A second work is Leon Morris's *The Gospel According to John*.¹¹ Morris's commentary exhibits a scholarly caution and care from an outlook of faith which is refreshing when one compares it with some of the more radical and skeptical approaches to John's gospel. Probably the most thorough commentary on the fourth gospel in English is *The Gospel According to John* by Raymond E. Brown.¹² Like Morris, Brown approaches his task with great care. His study is one of the first to take account of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the light which that discovery sheds on the world of Jesus and John, the gospel writer. For this reason alone, his work possesses great value.

For those who still want to read a life of Jesus (and I do not share Bornkamm's great skepticism about attempts to reconstruct the Savior's life), I am happy to recommend the three most important sources used by James E. Talmage for his *Jesus the Christ*. They are Cunningham Geikie's *Life and Words of Christ*,¹³ Frederic W. Farrar's *The Life of Christ*,¹⁴ and Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*.¹⁵ Although each of these monumental works has its own special strengths, I am impressed most by the work of Edersheim. A Jew who was converted to Christianity, he sketches a clear portrait of the Jewish world in which Jesus lived. Even though numerous significant archaeological discoveries have been made and important scholarly strides taken since Edersheim wrote, the value of his work for the Jewish atmosphere of the gospels has not appreciably diminished.¹⁶

⁹*Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 13. This is a translation by Irene and Fraser McLuskey of the third edition (1959) of *Jesus von Nazareth*, first published in 1956 by W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart.

¹⁰See Bornkamm's introductory essay, "Faith and History in the Gospels," pp. 13-26. In a modest sense, this should not be all that surprising since the gospel writers themselves tell us that only after Jesus' resurrection and exaltation did the disciples understand fully the significance of many things Jesus said and did. See, for instance, Luke 24:8; John 2:22; 12:16; 13:7.

¹¹Bultmann and his associates have been deeply influenced by a short study done by Axel Olrik, "Gesetze der Volksdichtung," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, vol. 51, 1909, pp. 1-12. Olrik concluded that there are certain "laws" operative in the transmission of stories, especially in an oral state. Although Olrik brought together examples from European folk stories to illustrate his point, the same kind of "laws" are not clearly evident in the gospel writings as Bultmann would have us believe. See Bultmann's *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (second edition, New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 179ff.

¹²One of the best overviews of this kind of approach is Harvey K. McArthur's "From the Historical Jesus to Christology," *Interpretation*, 23 (1969), 190-206. Among the theological tenets of the radical