

## Jesus and the Gospels in Recent Literature: a Brief Sketch

S. KENT BROWN

"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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 method<sup>3</sup> and the theological presuppositions which underlie their method, and their radically skeptical posture has been challenged repeatedly, especially by British and American scholars.<sup>4</sup>

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*,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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*.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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*,<sup>13</sup> Frederic W. Farrar's *The Life of Christ*,<sup>14</sup> and Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*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.

<sup>2</sup>See 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.

<sup>3</sup>Bultmann 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.

<sup>4</sup>One 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

position are (a) there is nothing in the gospels or their immediate sources which was written by an eyewitness; (b) anything with specifically Jewish flavor or (c) Christian tendencies must be secondary. McArthur notes a number of studies which argue for eyewitness accounts in Matthew and/or John and for accounts deriving from Peter in Mark's gospel. Among them are T. W. Manson, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 28-45, 65-87; Donald Guthrie, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content* (London: Tyndale Press, 1965); M. C. Tenney, *The New Testament: A Survey* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953); E. J. Goodspeed, *Matthew: Apostle and Evangelist* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1959); R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1961).

<sup>5</sup>(New York: Macmillan, 1961). This is a reprint of a translation done in 1910 by W. Montgomery from the first German edition (1906) of *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*.

<sup>6</sup>Even though Schweitzer displayed penetrating criticism in dealing with earlier lives of Jesus, his own reconstruction was very artificial: the best portrait of the Jesus of history derives from a combination of Mark's gospel and chapters 10 and 11 from Matthew's gospel.

<sup>7</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (2 vols., 1959); *The Gospel of Mark* (second edition, 1956); *The Gospel of Luke* (1956); *The Gospel of John* (2 volumes, second edition, 1956). The Daily Study Bible is published by Westminster Press, Philadelphia.

<sup>8</sup>Aubrey Wm. Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1963); Charles F. D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark* (1965); Ernest John Tinsley, *The Gospel According to Luke* (1965); Archibald M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to John* (1965).

<sup>9</sup>John C. Fenton, *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (1963); Dennis E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (1963); George B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (fourth reprint, 1972); John Marsh, *The Gospel of St. John* (1968).

<sup>10</sup>William F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971). This volume is one in the Anchor Bible series of commentaries.

<sup>11</sup>(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971). This work is part of the New International Critical Commentary on the New Testament and is based on the 1901 translation of the American Standard Version.

<sup>12</sup>(Two volumes, Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966 and 1970). Like Albright's book, Brown's work forms part of the Anchor Bible series of commentaries.

<sup>13</sup>(Two volumes, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1879).

<sup>14</sup>(Two volumes, Albany, N.Y.: R. Wendel, 1875; the second edition appeared in one volume, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1893.)

<sup>15</sup>(Two volumes, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962). Edersheim's work was originally printed in 1883.

<sup>16</sup>The major flaw of Edersheim's study concerns his rather free use of Rabbinical materials from a period much later than Jesus for illuminating Jewish life in the first century A.D.

## Living Room: A Personal Review/Essay

GARTH N. JONES

In scholarly terms I cannot improve on Kenneth E. Boulding's superb review of *Population Resources and the Future* (*Dialogue*, 8 [Autumn/Winter 1973], 159-163). However, I feel that I can face the issue more squarely and with more deep concern than he could. I am a born Mormon. I doubt that I would have been a Mormon otherwise, but nevertheless I've never renounced my faith nor do I intend to do so. I am proud of my Mormon heritage, but this does not preclude my questioning within my cultural upbringing about the world, or worlds, in which I live.

I wish that I could accept the basic premises advanced by the editors and writers of *Population Resources* that the world is not faced with a serious population question, that there is no need to curtail population growth, that the major need is to change only living styles and establish new distribution patterns. I admire the faith expressed in the first paragraph of the Introduction—that man, through continual processes of enlightenment, can control his future. That is much like the faith I held back in 1956 when I went abroad, as one of several thousand Americans, to par-