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Canadian Journal of Theology

A QUARTERLY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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The Background of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Critique of Historical Methods

The problem of determining the historical background for the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel has long preoccupied many New Testament scholars. There have been repeated efforts at forging a research method by which an historical setting for the Prologue could be established.¹ Scholars have obviously hoped that the best of historical criticism – worthy even of being called ‘scientific’ – could be brought to bear upon this problematical New Testament passage. It is instructive, however, to note that even in the best examples of Fourth Gospel criticism in the mid-twentieth century such a convincing research method has hardly been achieved. Ernst Käsemann says of the general state of affairs: ‘All of us are more or less groping in darkness when we are asked to give information about the historical background of this Gospel ...’² This study is intended to show that a reliable method, by means of which we might penetrate the darkness of the Fourth Gospel, especially with regard to the Prologue, has not been developed.

Both C. H. Dodd and Rudolf Bultmann have attempted to establish the background of the Prologue. Dodd’s *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* and Bultmann’s *Das Evangelium des Johannes* have become classics of Johannine studies, and both contain rather elaborate efforts to survey the extra-New Testament literature in search of a milieu which might best illuminate the Gospel, especially the Prologue. In addition, both critics have written substantial essays, which supplement their longer works: Dodd, ‘The Background of the Fourth Gospel,’³ and Bultmann, ‘Der religionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund des Prologs zum Johannes Evangelium.’⁴ Thus there is a considerable similarity between their respective efforts in this area. With this similarity in mind, it is interesting to note the way in which each of the interpreters, in going about his task, utilizes the evidence with which he is acquainted. A mundane but illuminating starting-point for our study is an analysis of their use of the extra-New Testament passages which are cited in the course of their discussions.

Of the three hundred and twenty citations of primary literature employed by Dodd and Bultmann in support of their respective arguments, only twenty

1. Cf. W. F. Howard, *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism and Interpretation*, rev. ed. by C. K. Barrett (London: Epworth Press, 1955), pp. 144ff.

2. Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 1.

3. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 19 (1935), 329–43.

4. In *EYXAPIΣΤHPION: Studien zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments. Hermann Gunkel zum 60. Geburtstag, dem 23. Mai 1922 dargebracht* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923), vol. II, pp. 3–26.

passages, or a total of six per cent of the passages cited in their studies, are used by both interpreters. It may be useful to break down this total according to the various classes of literature cited in their discussions. There are only three common citations among the sixty-six Old Testament references (four per cent of the total). Three of the twenty-six citations of the *Hermetica*, or eleven per cent, are common. Two of the fifty-eight references to the works of Philo are common (three per cent of the total). We find the largest number of common references in the case of the Old Testament Apocrypha, where out of a total of sixty-four references twelve passages (eighteen per cent) are cited by both Dodd and Bultmann. (Table 1 summarizes the number of common references.)

TABLE 1 Common References

Class of literature	Total number of references in both Dodd and Bultmann	Number of common references	Percentage of common references
Old Testament	66	3	4
Classical	8	0	0
Apocryphal	64	12	18
Pseudepigraphal	22	0	0
Rabbinic	12	0	0
Hermetic	26	3	11
Philonic	58	2	3
Sub-Apostolic	40	0	0
Odes of Solomon and Miscellaneous	24	0	0

Dodd's main areas of attention in his survey of background material would appear to be Philonic, Old Testament, and Hermetic literature, accounting respectively for thirty-eight, nineteen, and seventeen per cent of his references. The Old Testament Apocrypha with twenty-five per cent, the Old Testament itself with twenty-one per cent, and sub-Apostolic literature with twenty per cent stand out as Bultmann's areas of concentration, as far the quantity of references is concerned. (Table 2 below demonstrates the percentage distribution by classes of literature for each interpreter.) The conclusion is inescapable that, even though they have undertaken the same task, there is a striking dissimilarity in the literature which Dodd and Bultmann respectively cite.

When we press the question of the correlation between the quantity of citations and the conclusion of the exegete, several significant observations suggest themselves.

In the case of Dodd, there is an obvious relationship between the number of citations of a particular type of literature and his proposal concerning the background of the Prologue. He maintains that Rabbinic and Philonic materials, together with the *Hermetica*, supply the essentials of a backdrop for the

TABLE 2 Distribution of References

Class of literature	Dodd		Bultmann	
	number	percentage	number	percentage
Old Testament	26	19	40	21
Classical	1	0.75	7	3
Apocryphal	17	12	47	25
Pseudepigraphal	0	0	22	11
Rabbinic	10	7	2	1
Hermetic	23	17	3	1
Philonic	51	38	7	3
Sub-Apostolic	1	0.75	39	20
Odes of Solomon and Miscellaneous	3	2	21	11
Total	132		188	

Prologue. More precisely, he argues that in the Prologue a basic Jewish (Old Testament) theme has been interpreted in the light of the conceptuality of Hellenistic Jewish thought.⁵ In keeping with this hypothesis, the evidence used in his argument is taken in large part from the literature in the appropriate areas; thirty-eight per cent of his citations come from Philo, nineteen from the Old Testament, seventeen from the *Hermetica*, and twelve from the Apocrypha of the Old Testament. Generally, in Dodd's case, there is a correlation between the number of citations from particular sources and the conclusions of his survey. However, even though Dodd contends that Rabbinic thought illumines the Prologue, he cites Rabbinic literature only ten times.

Bultmann's case is rather different. While he suggests that the *Odes of Solomon* represent the best literary expression of the Oriental Gnosticism which he thinks provides the roots for the Prologue, the *Odes* rank fourth in number of citations (eleven per cent) among the categories of literature to which he refers. He more frequently cites one class of material which he finally rejects as crucial for the Prologue, namely, the Old Testament, then the texts which he regards as the primary source for the ideas found in the Prologue – particularly for the Logos Christology. Bultmann's extensive use of the Old Testament Apocrypha and of sub-Apostolic literature is understandable, on the other hand, in view of his contention that these, like the Prologue, reflect the influence of pre-Christian Gnosticism.

From this difference in the degree of correlation between the number of citations and the conclusions reached in Dodd's and Bultmann's researches, a number of conclusions are possible. For example, it is possible to conclude that Dodd is more precise and persuasive in his use of evidence than Bultmann; or it may be argued that evidence is applied in different ways by the

5. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), pp. 133, 278.

two scholars. It is customary in Bultmann's discussion of background materials for him to cite extensively the evidential parallels in a given body of literature, even though he will finally reject it as the framework of thought for the New Testament passage under consideration. Examples of this pattern are found in the survey of the background for the Prologue in both the commentary and earlier article, 'Der religionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund des Prologs zum Johannes Evangelium.'⁶ But this practice is equally evident in comparable studies of other New Testament material.⁷ The very imbalance between the number of citations and the conclusion is characteristic of his method of historical research.

A catalogue of Dodd's and Bultmann's citations demonstrates, furthermore, that in support of their hypotheses both men use material which, in its known literary form, is actually later than the New Testament itself. This is the case with Dodd's extensive use of the *Hermetica*. He clearly believes the *Hermetica* to have been written in large part in the second and third centuries,⁸ but he argues that this material can serve as evidence for the background of the Prologue, since the ideas were common at least a full century before they were given literary form.⁹ Likewise, Bultmann makes abundant use both of sub-Apostolic Christian literature and of the *Odes of Solomon*, apparently assuming the commonly accepted dates for these writings. However, on the supposition that this literature expresses mythical forms current centuries before it was written, he refers to it as relevant to the background of the Prologue.¹⁰ Whatever legitimacy we may grant to this use of historical material, it is common to both of the exegetes. Bultmann has been attacked for his

6. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950), pp. 6f. (rejection of an Old Testament background), 8 (consideration and elimination of Sophia speculation as the immediate background), 9f. (discussion of parallel and divergent elements in the philosophical tradition of the Logos notion. Cf. Bultmann, 'Der religionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund des Prologs,' 6-19, where an elaborate survey of the Old Testament and of intertestamental literature leads finally to the conclusion that all this is not the origin of the myth operative in the Johannine Prologue.

7. Cf. Bultmann's article, 'Der Begriff des Wortes Gottes im Neuen Testament,' in Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1933), pp. 268-93. After a lengthy development of Old Testament backgrounds, the difference between Old Testament and New Testament concepts is explicated on pp. 292f. The same procedure can be observed in *Das Evangelium des Johannes* - e.g. on pp. 66f. (discussion of the expression *ho amnos tou theou*) and 279f. (discussion of John 10). Cf. also Rudolf Bultmann, *Gnosis* (London: A. & C. Black, 1952); R. Bultmann and A. Weiser, *Faith* (London: A. & C. Black, 1961); and other contributions by Bultmann to Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch*.

8. Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), pp. xivf.; *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 11.

9. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 12f.

10. Bultmann's best discussion of this approach is to be found in his pivotal article, 'Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangelium,' *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 24 (1925), 141f.

extensive use of post-first-century material to demonstrate the existence of a pre-Christian Gnostic mythology.¹¹ But the principle itself functions in a hardly less influential manner in the historical method used by Dodd.¹²

It is evident from the summary of citations that Dodd's and Bultmann's surveys both lack any extensive reference to the primary sources for Rabbinic thought. Dodd has ten such citations (constituting seven per cent of his total) and Bultmann only two (one per cent). In most of these references to Rabbinic thought both writers utilize secondary works, primarily the commentary of Strack and Billerbeck.¹³ This procedure is hardly consistent either with Dodd's claim that Rabbinic Judaism is one of the key factors in the Prologue¹⁴ or with Bultmann's contention that Rabbinic Judaism drew on the same background of mythology as the Johannine concept of the Logos.¹⁵ Both critics, then, are liable to the charge that their understandings of the historical background are deficient, in so far as they stand or fall with the accuracy of the representation of Rabbinic Judaism in the work of Strack and Billerbeck.

It is evident from this brief study that the historical methods of both Dodd and Bultmann are not without their difficulties. First, it is amazing that their appeals to extra-New Testament evidence are so radically dissimilar. Secondly, the differences exhibited in the relationship between the sheer amount of evidence and the interpreter's conclusions betray at best vastly divergent criteria for the use of evidence; Dodd apparently operates on the principle that the number of references which can be adduced in support of a hypothesis at least partly determines its validity, while Bultmann, to all intent and purposes, ignores the question of the quantity of material supporting his proposal. Thirdly, both Dodd and Bultmann follow the practice of using later literature as evidence of a thought-form which, in its earlier expressions, presumably influenced those responsible for the Prologue. It would seem that such a principle, if allowed at all, opens innumerable possibilities for claiming an influence on the New Testament for ideas found only in post-first-century literature. Finally, the methodology of both scholars is deficient in its approach to Rabbinic thought. Both Dodd and Bultmann, by their use of secondary materials to document claims of Rabbinic influence, suggest a need for more

11. Cf. e.g. Johannes Munck, 'The New Testament and Gnosticism,' in William Klassen and Graydon Snyder (eds.), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 224-38.

12. In Bultmann's case, of course, there is a general acceptance of, and dependence upon, the research of Richard Reitzenstein and Hans Jonas.

13. Cf. H. L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vols. 1-II (München: C. H. Beck, 1922-4). Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 75, n. 1, acknowledges that he is indebted to this work for the bulk of his quotations from the Talmud and Midrash. The same indebtedness is clear in C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), pp. 24, 106, 111f. Bultmann leans as heavily on Strack and Billerbeck; cf. *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, pp. 7, nn. 8-9, 500, n. 11.

14. Cf. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 275-8.

15. Cf. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, p. 8.

original investigations of this area of the background of the New Testament, with due attention to primary sources.

This brief study has been undertaken to illustrate the necessity of shaping better historical methods for carrying out New Testament investigations. The four weaknesses in the methods of Dodd and Bultmann are indicative of the feebleness of even some of the best historical criticism of the New Testament. It seems to follow that the scholarly community must produce a new and vastly improved historical method, if some of the fine beginnings achieved since the advent of higher criticism are to fulfil their promise.