

A Survey of New Testament Studies—II¹

The Influence of Environment on New Testament Thought

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It may be useful to return to our initial picture of a primitive community of believers, each with his gaze steadfastly fixed upon 'the Man on the other side of Easter Sunday morning', the Man whom we can no longer see except through their eyes. How, the critics ask, can we be sure that they see him truly—that their account of his words and deeds is correct? It was an account formulated by naive and credulous minds, minds already pre-conditioned by the fever of Messianic excitement which marked the closing years of the pre-Christian era, minds that were exposed, consciously or unconsciously, to a whole range of external religious influences, among which those of the Old Testament and rabbinic Judaism would only have been the first.

Within the fold of Judaism itself not only the more orthodox traditions of Rabbinical interpretation have to be taken into account, but the possible influence of enthusiast movements such as Essenism (as attested by the Qumrân writings) and related baptist movements. The outstanding characteristic of these movements is an intense and eager expectation of a personal and apocalyptic advent of God in judgment in the near future, and an insistence on penance and purification in preparation for this event. 'Do penance for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!' is one of the key sayings recorded of Jesus. How far, the critics ask, was it influenced by these ideas? How far was the original message amplified and embellished in terms of them by his followers?

As the Christian movement spreads outwards through the Hellenistic world, and as the original message is deepened and broadened in the preaching of the apostles and the lives of the first Christians, in particular as the Apostle of the Gentiles strives to re-state that message in terms adapted to the needs of his Greek hearers, all kinds of extraneous influences have to be taken into account. The Judaism of the Diaspora

¹The first part of this survey appeared in the March 1962 issue of **BLACKFRIARS**.

(as opposed to that of Palestine) had long been open to the influence of Greek thought. The writings of Philo (c. 20 B.C.-45 A.D.) provide the classic example of a cultivated Diaspora Jew, contemporary with Christ, who deliberately tried to synthesize and absorb certain elements in Greek thought within the framework of his own sacred traditions. He interpreted the Old Testament writings in such a way as to show that in them most of the creative ideas of Greek philosophy had long been anticipated. Numerous and striking analogies have been noticed between the ideas and expressions of this writer, and those of the Johannine and Pauline writings. To some scholars it seems almost as though John and Paul, the theologians of the New Testament, had found in this current of 'Hellenized' Judaism a suitable vehicle for expressing the deeper meaning which they found in the Christian Gospel they were charged to preach.

Again the complex of heterodox Christian movements grouped under the heading of Gnosticism, still more the related movement of Hermeticism, and, to a lesser extent, that of Mandaism, display certain affinities with the language and thought-forms of John and Paul. Some critics have argued for a predominantly pre-Christian Gnostic influence on these writings. Others, more cautiously, have concluded to an influence upon their thought-forms and expressions but not upon their fundamental beliefs. In the case of Paul in particular, more remote environmental influences have also been invoked. Reitzenstein's theory that he drew largely upon the Mystery religions receives scant support today. But possible influences of popular Stoicism and neo-Platonism are still far from being discounted. Other influences, including pagan ones, are also vigorously put forward to explain the thought-forms and language of the New Testament writers, if not as the actual sources of some of their ideas. What seems certain is that long before the advent of Christianity, an intensely complex process of cross-pollination had been taking place between these religious movements—and we have mentioned only a few of the principal ones. On any showing it becomes incumbent on the investigator to explore the possibility that any or all of them may have exerted some influence, direct or indirect, on the thought of the first Christians concerning their Master.

Now within the last twenty years the two epoch-making discoveries first of the Qumrân writings and then of the post-Christian Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt have suddenly made available a whole wealth of extra-biblical material for comparison and assessment. Textual problems apart, probably the most important effect of

these discoveries is the flood of light which they throw on hitherto unexplored aspects of the New Testament milieu. Thought-forms, language, religious interests and customs, and general way of life have all been startlingly illuminated. Scholars are becoming aware of esoteric forms of Judaism hitherto unsuspected but in fact, as is becoming increasingly clear, more akin to certain aspects of early Christianity than the more orthodox forms known to an earlier generation. It is safe to predict that the more important developments in New Testament studies within the next decade or so will be through the deeper understanding of the Palestinian and Hellenistic mind which these discoveries make possible. But the task of assessment and comparison has barely begun. Meanwhile there is a feeling that the discoveries have been almost too swift and too copious to be assimilated. The need for a guide is urgent and manifest.

In this connection a recent work on the New Testament milieu which strikes one as of quite astonishing brilliance is Père Daniélou's *Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme*.¹ Daniélou holds, with a growing number of contemporary scholars, that the fundamental influences on New Testament thought were Jewish rather than Hellenistic. But he distinguishes two trends within Judaism: the first is the type of Judaism which, as we know, was actually contemporaneous with the birth of Christianity, the Judaism of the Pharisees, the Essenes and the Zealots. The very early Judaeo-Christian authors of such apocrypha as 'The Ascension of Isaiah', 'II Enoch', 'The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs', 'The Gospel of Peter', 'The Gospel according to the Hebrews' wrote within this tradition, and their minds were deeply conditioned by its eschaological and apocalyptic ideas and expressions. Barnabas, Hermas, Ignatius and Clement are also representative of this *genre* of very early Judaeo-Christian thought, while a heretical variation of it can be discerned in the writings of Cerinthus, Carpocrates and the Ebionites. A common pattern of belief appears to underlie these writings at several points. P. Daniélou examines their teaching on such subjects as the divine name, the cross, the sacraments, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the angels and the Church. On such points the similarity between the thought and expression of these works and that of the writings of Qumrân and other Jewish parallels shows the extent to which these Judaeo-Christians were restating their Christian beliefs in terms of their own indigenous Jewish tradition. Daniélou distinguishes this apocalyptic-eschatological trend in Judaism from the legalistic

¹Desclée 1958. Tournai 27s. 9d.

rabbinical type which, he contends, arose after the fall of Jerusalem. He also shows—and here too he has the support of a growing number of scholars—that the Gnostic elements in these writings are not Hellenistic in origin, but rather tendentious deformations of the same apocalyptic tradition of Judaeo-Christianity. His examination of the exegetical method characteristic of this tradition is particularly valuable.

For the Qumrân material a most useful aid is *La Secte de Qumrân et les Origines du Christianisme*, the fourth volume in the *Recherches Bibliques* series which have been issuing from Louvain over the past five years.² Among the articles included in this symposium, the following appear particularly useful for New Testament study: 'Voies divines et humaines selon la Bible et Qumrân', by F. Nötscher; 'La Piété des Psalmistes à Qumrân' by J. Coppens; 'Le Ministère cultuel dans la Secte de Qumrân et dans le Christianisme primitif', by O. Betz; 'La sainteté selon la communauté de Qumrân et selon l'Évangile', by D. Barthélemy; 'L'Organisation de l'Église primitive et Qumrân', by J. Schmitt, and 'Influence de Qumrân sur le Nouveau Testament', by L. Cerfaux. It should also be noticed by those interested in Mme. Jaubert's theory of the Qumrân calendar that she here defends her position which has been coming under increasing attack from New Testament specialists.

It has been generally recognized that A. Dupont-Sommer's *Les Écrits esséniens découverts près de la mer Morte* includes one of the closest and best translations of the texts themselves. In translating this work into English with meticulous care, and with constant reference to the originals, G. Vermes has done English readers an immense service.³ Three important supplements have been added to this English version: a fragment from a second commentary on Hosea, two fragments of a liturgical text, and a postscript providing fresh information on the copper scrolls. The chief value of this book consists in the actual translation of the texts themselves. It is safe to say that no English version which has so far appeared is so complete, so accurate, so clear, or so close to the originals. Only minor fragments and works too mutilated to be coherent have been omitted of the texts so far published. The author is a staunch upholder of the view that the Qumrân sectarians were Essenes. In a preliminary chapter he assembles and translates all the descriptions of the Essene movement known from other sources,

²J. van der Ploeg et al: *La Secte de Qumrân et les Origines du Christianisme*, *Recherches Bibliques* IV 1959 Desclée de Brouwer, Tournai.

³A Dupont-Sommer: *The Essene Writing from Qumrân*, translated by G. Vermes. Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1961. 45s.

those namely of Philo, Josephus, Pliny the Elder and Dio Chrysostom. In chapters ix-xi he discusses the main examples of extra-biblical literature, the apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, exegetical, apocalyptic and liturgical works. His explanation of the *peshet* method of exegesis (p. 255 ff.) is particularly valuable here. In chapters xii-xiv M. Dupont-Sommer gives his views on the historical background of the writings, on the Teacher of Righteousness, and on the relationship between Essenism and Christianity. His views on this latter point have not substantially changed, it seems, since the publication of his controversial *Aperçus préliminaires sur les manuscrits de la mer Morte* ten years ago.⁴ He still sees Christianity as an 'Essenism that succeeded' and insists that this is not an original view and that it should not be scandalous. But he is noticeably more cautious in developing his comparison between Christ and the Teacher of Righteousness. In assessing the relationship between the two movements he still seems to concentrate excessively on the personalities involved, The Teacher of Righteousness, John the Baptist and our Lord, and to neglect the far more important similarities of language and thought-forms. But he writes clearly and enlighteningly throughout, and the superlative quality of the translations alone make this book all but indispensable to serious students of the New Testament.

The fresh insights into New Testament thought and language made possible by the Qumrân discoveries do not diminish the value of earlier research into the expressions and ideas of Rabbinic Judaism. It is a cardinal point of Dibelius, one of the two founders of form-criticism, that the two originally independent collections of Jesus, sayings and Jesus' deeds correspond respectively to the two basic rabbinical categories of *Halacha* (oral law), and *Haggadah* (teaching based on the non-legal parts of scripture). D. Daube⁵ and J. W. Doeve⁶ are two relatively recent writers who have shown how closely the recorded words of Our Lord correspond to Rabbinic forms of teaching and disputation, while the narrative sections of the synoptic gospels seem often to be in the style and character of *Midrash*. R. Bloch⁷ emphasizes that all the characteristic forms of Midrash are to be found in the New Testament. The events of our Lord's life are narrated in such a way as to show that

⁴A. Dupont-Sommer: *The Dead Sea Scrolls. A Preliminary Survey*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1952.

⁵D. Daube: *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*. London 1956.

⁶J. W. Doeve: *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts*. Assen 1954.

⁷R. Bloch: art. 'Midrash' in *Supplément à la Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Pirot-Robert ed. Fasc. xxviii. Paris 1955. Letouzey et Ané.

they fulfil the Old Testament. It has recently been argued that the Infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke are midrashic in this sense. Not only are they couched in language that is evocative of the Old Testament, but the actual episodes are dramatized and arranged in a sequence that recalls the sequence of events at the Exodus, etc.

The question of milieu, and of possible external influences on the minds of the New Testament writers becomes particularly acute in the case of the Johannine writings. It is inevitable here to refer briefly to the views of R. Bultmann.⁸ He holds that the unknown author of the Fourth Gospel belonged to a circle of Syro-Palestinian Gnostics, whose ideas corresponded to those expressed in the apocryphal 'Odes of Solomon' and in the later hymns of the Judaeo-Gnostic sect known as the Mandeans. These and other writings testify to the prevalence of a Gnostic 'saviour-myth' describing how the most high divinity sends down into the world a heavenly form of light, his son, his image (eikon) enveloped in a material human form. He is sent to reveal to human souls unjustly imprisoned in the matter of their physical bodies their true origin as celestial sparks of light. His work of revelation completed, the 'saviour' ascends once more to heaven, thereby opening to all who receive his word a way by which they may follow him when released from this material world by death. The author of the Fourth Gospel expresses his own authentic experience of Jesus in and through this myth. Against this view E. Percy⁹ and many others have argued that the so-called 'saviour-myth' formed no part of pre-Christian Gnosticism, but was absorbed into the Gnostic system later and precisely under the influence of Christianity.

C. H. Dodd in his great commentary¹⁰ shows the essential correspondence between the Fourth Gospel and the primitive apostolic preaching which supplies the framework of the synoptic gospels. He argues that the author would have drawn on the traditions of Rabbinic Judaism, Philo, and above all of the Hermetic writings, for the enrichment of his expression and ideas. Boismard¹¹ and Sahlín¹² emphasize the influence of the Old Testament upon this gospel, and attempt to show the special use which this author made of the Old Testament

⁸R. Bultmann: *Das Evangelium des Johannes* 4th ed. Göttingen 1953 with complementary fascicule 1957.

⁹E. Percy: *Untersuchungen über den Ursprung der joh. Theologie*, Lund 1939.

¹⁰C. H. Dodd: *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*.

¹¹M.-E. Boismard: *Le Prologue de Saint Jean*, *Lectio Divina* 11. Cerf 1953, and *Du Baptême à Cana (Jean i 19-ii 11)* *Lectio Divina* 18. Cerf Paris 1956.

¹²H. Sahlín: *Zur Typologie des Johannesevangeliums*. Uppsala-Leipzig 1950.

traditions. C. K. Barrett¹³ and F.-M. Braun¹⁴ conclude that not only Old Testament and rabbinic tradition and Jewish apocalyptic would have influenced Johannine thought, but also a blend of Hellenistic influences in which popular Stoicism, Platonism and Gnosticism or Hermeticism may all have played their part. However they exclude Mandaeism as a post-Christian development. For Barrett the most significant influence would have been that of Hellenistic Judaism, for Braun, the Hermetic writings show particularly important resemblances. It is obvious that the Qumrân writings throw a most important light on the whole discussion of the Johannine thought-milieu. As K. G. Kuhn puts it, the thought of John seems to thrust its roots into the same intellectual soil as that which nourished the speculations of the sectarians.¹⁵ And that soil, as scholars are insistently reminding us, was Jewish and Palestinian rather than Hellenistic.

A most acute and penetrating investigation of Johannine Christology from this point of view is E. M. Sidebottom's *The Christ of the Fourth Gospel*.¹⁶ The main intention has been to see what John himself thought, so far as this is possible in view of the complicated nature of the background. The only way open to us is to examine his language in the light of contemporary (or near-contemporary) usage, and to see in what respects his thought follows that of those who share a common vocabulary' (p. 22). Mr Sidebottom treats of his subject under the following headings: 'The Logos and God', 'The Logos and Man', 'The Johannine Son of Man and his Antecedents', 'The Son of Man as Man', 'The Anthropos', 'The Descent of the Son of Man', 'The Way, the Truth and the Life', 'The Son of God', 'The Fact of Jesus of Nazareth'. He shows immense erudition and a masterly grasp of the whole bewildering complex of first-century religious and philosophical movements and of their characteristic literature. The targumim, the Wisdom literature, the apocrypha and apocalyptic writings, the Qumrân documents etc., are all laid under contribution. On the Hellenistic side the Gnostic and Hermetic writings, Philo and the Mandaeans, popular Stoicism and neo-Platonism etc., are considered and assessed. The author is convinced that the degree of interpenetration between these

¹³C. K. Barrett: *The Gospel according to St John*. S.P.C.K. London 1955 p. 33.

¹⁴F.-M. Braun: *Jean le Tholégien et son Évangile dans l'Église Ancienne*, Gabalda et Cie, Paris, 1959.

¹⁵cf. K. G. Kuhn, 'Die in Palästina gefundenen hebräischen Texte und das Neue Testament'. *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 47, 1950, p. 193 ff.

¹⁶E. M. Sidebottom: *The Christ of the Fourth Gospel* S.P.C.K., London 1961, 275 6d.

various movements is far greater than has been allowed for in the past. This makes his treatment somewhat eclectic. He deals in copious quotations from the various sources rather than in formally constructed arguments. His own style is somewhat elliptical and his judgments are so tentative that it is often rather difficult to understand what his conclusions really are. Indeed, the sensation of having quotations thrown at one, so to say, from all sides, can be decidedly bewildering. Nevertheless Mr Sidebottom's judgment, when one finally arrives at it, proves to be most penetrating, delicate and sure. This is, in fact, a contribution of such immense importance on one of the most difficult aspects of Johannine studies, that it is well worth the labour of reading each chapter three or four times in order to find out exactly what the author really means. Broadly speaking, he takes into account five main influences on Johannine thought: The historical reality of Jesus himself (cf. especially ch. xi here), the individual genius of John, the indigenous Christian tradition represented by the synoptic gospels (cf. p. 168 ff.), the Old Testament (cf. ch. v, vi), and the whole complex of religious movements already referred to, among which Philo, the Corpus Hermeticum and the Wisdom literature appear to be the most important. It is a signal merit of Mr Sidebottom's work that he bears all of these influences constantly in mind, accords to each its due importance, and never once opts arbitrarily for one at the expense of the others.

In his application of the term 'Logos' to Jesus, John was influenced by Jewish speculations on the divine Word, the divine Name, and the divine Wisdom. 'Starting as he does . . . with two persons, Jesus and God, John must needs insist upon the divine unity by drawing upon conceptions which maintain it while suggesting separateness' (p. 47). But in the last analysis John seems to modify these conceptions to express the new and unheard of fact that Jesus is God. Again, 'The difference between John's Logos and that of Philo lies just here, that in John for the first time the Logos is really personal and not merely personified. The reason is obviously because John did not begin with the Platonic Ideas or the Stoic Reason or the Jewish Wisdom, but with Jesus of Nazareth' (p. 67). The hypothesis of the 'Gnostic saviour myth' is superbly handled. 'If John . . . was influenced in his use of the Christian term Son of Man by any speculation about Man, it was most probably through that form of it which was entertained in the Wisdom circles of Judaism. The later Gnostic Saviour-Man is a product of various factors, one of which is the Johannine Christology itself'. (p. 111). Such conclusions, usually arrived at after an intensely in-

volved survey of analogies and quotations from the extra-biblical sources, may serve to indicate the penetration and poise of Mr Sidebottom's judgment. As one reads, one feels how far this side of Johannine studies has developed since the hasty and amateurish identifications of Bultmann's time.

A different area of Johannine studies is investigated by F.-M. Braun in his *Jean le Théologien et son Évangile dans l'Église Ancienne*.¹⁷ Where Sidebottom is concerned to assess possible environmental influences on the thought of John, Braun is preoccupied primarily with the influence of John on his environment. Who was the author of the Johannine writings? What is their relationship one to another? How far and how early did they penetrate into the various fields where the Church had established itself in the course of the first and second centuries? How were they used by the various Christian bodies involved, heretical as well as orthodox? These are the questions which P. Braun sets himself to answer. Again here one is astonished at the breadth of learning which this author brings to his task. He takes full advantage of the most recent publications on Judaeo-Christianity, Qumrân and Nag-Hammadi. Indeed in this last field he may be a little premature in accepting conclusions which are, in my opinion, not yet fully and finally established. For example the identification of the 'Gospel of Truth' discovered in the Jung codex with the Gnostic treatise of that name attacked by Irenaeus, though very tempting, may yet prove to be incorrect. The work is divided into three main parts. In the first P. Braun discusses the interrelationship of the Johannine writings and has some interesting suggestions to offer. The Apocalypse and 'the group of gospel—epistles' are both from St John. Of these the Apocalypse was composed first and was redacted, and perhaps translated by 'a clumsy secretary' during or after the exile at Patmos. The epistles followed in the order third, second, first ('Note to Caius', 'Letter to the Chosen Lady', 'Anonymous Epistle'). These were redacted by another disciple. The gospel followed last of all, and the secretary responsible for its redaction was better qualified than the others. To him should be ascribed certain grammatical corrections, some rearrangements of the material, and several posthumous additions. However the traditions thus incorporated probably had a long prior existence as part of the evangelist's oral teaching. The widespread distribution of the gospel through Europe, Egypt, Asia Minor and its environs is convincingly shown in the second part. P. Braun is particularly helpful in showing how the gospel was used

¹⁷op. cit.

by the Gnostics, and also convincing in his argument that this did not prevent it being used by orthodox Christians too. Yet this part of the book is a little disappointing. One had hoped that more would be said about the influence of Johannine ideas on the theological speculation of the early Church.¹⁸ Too often P. Braun seems content to establish the fact that the Gospel was known and used, and to leave it at that. The third part is concerned with the person of the evangelist, and with the traditions relating to this. He is identified with the 'disciple whom Jesus loved', and emerges from among the group of disciples around the Baptist. The early traditions concerning his life, death and burial are fully investigated.

Much smaller in bulk, but full of penetrating insights is T. F. Glasson's *Greek Influence in Jewish Eschatology*.¹⁹ A proven master on the subject of eschatology, Dr Glasson here reacts against the widespread view that Iranian and Babylonian mythological motifs and ideas exercised a primary influence on the development of Jewish eschatology during the last three centuries before the Christian era. He points out that during this period Palestine was under Greek rule, and argues that Greek ideas (including elements of Orphism) constituted a far more important influence than has generally been allowed for. He finds this influence in the myths of the Jewish apocrypha concerning journeys to the realms of the dead, in the tendency to divide the wicked from the righteous in Sheol, in certain speculations concerning the nature of fire and its effects, and in the later view that at death the righteous pass to heaven rather than to Sheol. He also deals with Jewish speculations concerning the fallen angels and the origin of demons, where he also establishes Hellenistic influence. His conclusion then, which is ably and convincingly argued, independently confirms the point which Mr Sidebottom emphasizes so much, namely that Palestinian Judaism was strongly influenced by Hellenistic speculation during the last few centuries before the Christian era. Mr Sidebottom would also add that the influence worked the other way too, and that Jewish ideas influenced Hellenistic speculations at a number of important points. Thus it now appears with increasing clarity that the old distinction between 'Jewish' and 'Hellenistic' influences on the thought of the early Church was drawn far too sharply, and that it grossly over-simplified the problem.

¹⁸Early theological speculation on the Fourth Gospel has been enlighteningly explained by M. F. Wiles in his *The Spiritual Gospel. The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*. Cambridge University Press 1959. 25s.

¹⁹S.P.C.K. Biblical Monographs, London 1961. 9s. 6d.

Perhaps too as a result of the Qumrân discoveries and of the striking similarities of thought and expression which have been noticed between Qumrân and John, there has been a tendency to over-react against the Hellenistic influences on this gospel in favour of the Jewish ones. Dr Glasson's book will serve as a counter-balance against this sort of exaggeration.

The question of rabbinic influences on the thought of Paul has long been recognized as of central importance. Here an earlier work, W.D. Davies' *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*,²⁰ is still recognized as one of the most valuable treatments of the subject ever produced. Working from the hypothesis that Paul as a former Pharisee would naturally have tended to retain rabbinic forms of argument, this author shows that in fact the categories of rabbinic teaching do supply him with a framework in which to develop his own thought. The ideas of flesh and sin, the 'old man' and the 'new man', the first and second Adam etc., all have their counterparts in rabbinic Judaism. Paul's thought on the question of Jew and Greek is expressed in terms of the old and new Israel. He uses the category of the old and new *Torah* to develop his doctrine of Christ as the Wisdom of God, and so on. Here the situation is still slightly perplexing. Scholars have not been slow in pointing out the resemblances between the Qumrân writings and St Paul, in some cases on these very points. It seems at least that the strong rabbinic influence noticed by earlier scholars did not exclude further influences from the direction of apocalyptic Judaism. This certainly represents a salutary reaction against the exaggerations of the so-called Tübingen school half a century ago. At this time the intellectual riches of the Hellenistic world during the apostolic age were being discovered with intoxicating swiftness, and the whole of antiquity was being ransacked for analogies and precedents. Paul himself was seen as evolving a new and finer 'mystery' religion around the original nucleus of the Christian message. At least one critic did not hesitate to place the disciple above his Master in this respect. Paul was the real founder of Christianity, the author of such doctrines as the Incarnation, Trinity, life of grace in Christ, and the sacraments.

Surveying the more recent trends in Pauline study, one realizes how immense the advance has been since those dark days.

²⁰W. D. Davies: *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* 2nd ed. 1955. S.P.C.K. 21s. An earlier but still invaluable work on the same subject is J. Bonsirven's *Exegèse Rabbinique et Exegèse Paulinienne*, Beauchesne et ses Fils, Paris, 1939.