CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
READING THE GOSPELS AS HISTORY

The four New Testament Gospels are virtually the only source for our knowledge of the acts and teachings of the earthly Jesus. They are received by the church as the work of inspired writers, apostles and prophets who were guided by the Spirit of God to give a true portrayal and interpretation of his life and work, and they are also historical documents whose origin and formation can be investigated and in some measure discovered. Our topic in this chapter raises the question whether these two perceptions of the Gospels are in conflict.

Written some time after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Gospels have been subjected to careful and prolonged study to determine their background and the degree to which they accurately reflect his preressurrection ministry. The historical investigation of the Gospels has mainly taken four routes, (1) the attempt to identify underlying documents (known as ‘source criticism’), (2) the attempt to identify individual literary units and analyse their formation and classification (known as ‘form criticism’), (3) the attempt to trace changes in these units during their transmission prior to their use by the Evangelist (known as ‘tradition criticism’) and, finally, (4) the attempt to identify changes that each Evangelist himself made in composing his Gospel (known as ‘redaction’ or ‘composition criticism’). Each of these avenues of research is perfectly legitimate but, as in other areas of historical study, the results arrived at are heavily influenced if not determined by the world-view with which the historian ap-

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1 There is a brief reference to his ministry by the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus (Antiquities 18, 63f. = 18, 3, 3), and a few additional sayings of the earthly Jesus are recorded elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 20:35) and in other sources. However, with few exceptions apocryphal Gospels, e.g. the Gospel of Thomas, apart from sayings derivative from the canonical Gospels, are of doubtful historical worth. Cf. C. Tuckett, Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition, Edinburgh 1986, 149, 155f. But see J. Jeremias, Unknown Sayings of Jesus, London 1958. H. Koester, Ancient Christian Gospels, Philadelphia 1990, 85, is not convincing in his view that sayings of Jesus in the (fourth century) Gospel of Thomas predate the canonical Gospels. See above, 10ff.
proaches the texts and by his other historical and methodological assumptions.  

**Historical Method**

An assumption that may be addressed at the outset is the view, still held in some quarters, that history writing is an objective science in which the historian is a neutral observer and evaluator of probabilities. This view has been effectively discredited for general history by such writers as Carl Becker and H. S. Commager and, for biblical history, by Alan Richardson. Its fallacies have been illustrated again in the work of John Kenyon on critical historians in Britain.

As Bernard Lonergan and others have shown, the term 'history' has at least two senses, that which is written and that which is written about. Both the Evangelists and modern historians of early Christianity offer history in the former sense. Such history is by its very nature interpretive and modern historians, including of course the present writer, are no less subjectively involved in their reconstructions than the Evangelists were in theirs. As one who very early had to contrast the history of the War between the States received at my grandmother's knee and in Jefferson Davis' *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* with that presented, for example, by Charles A. Beard in the public school text-books, I later read the diverse accounts of the ministry of Christ and the historicity of the Gospels by, say, F. W. Farrar, C. H. Dodd and B. Gerhardsson on the one

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