

## IN MEMORIUM

### CHARLES HAROLD DODD, 1884–1973

As over against the American and the Continental, British New Testament scholarship – it is often said – seems to have the recurring characteristic of allowing itself to be overshadowed by a few outstanding scholars. One can think of Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort, of Sanday and Headlam and of Streeter. Be that as it may, in the lifetime of perhaps most members of our Society, it was Charles Harold Dodd, along with Thomas Walter Manson, who filled such a rôle. But quintessentially British as he was, and pre-eminent within his native shores, C. H. Dodd cannot adequately be measured in any merely national context, and the international world of scholarship recognized in him one of its most creative and influential minds.

The indispensable ground of his achievement was his thorough classical training. He brought to the study of the New Testament the rigour of the classical disciplines. This made him impatient with any merely second-hand acquaintance with the biblical texts and insistent upon a scrupulous attention to the sources themselves. Whenever he dealt with themes the original sources for which he did not command, he was ill at ease and made his limitation clear. Apart from its substantive contributions, *The Bible and the Greeks* (1935) still evokes the keenest admiration for the excellence of its exegesis and dissection. The lexicographical studies based on the Septuagint and other sources (he particularly emphasized the importance of Syriac texts), which are found in so many of his works, are informed by the same linguistic and textual thoroughness. There was in all his writing a cleanliness in the presentation and assessment of data, linguistic and other, which remains the despair of many. The brilliance of his work on the Septuagint and the *Hermetica* helped to integrate the study of those documents – in British scholarship at least – more closely into that of the New Testament, and that with most enriching results.

But in him linguistic purity and concentration were joined to a passionate concern to understand the meaning of documents in their totality. To this concern we owe the illumination which he brought not only to certain central aspects of the New Testament, such as the Parables, the Kingdom of God, the conversion, change and development in Paul, the preaching of the early Church, but also the overall interpretative (as distinct from exegetical) power of his commentaries. His volume on *Romans* (1932) in the Moffatt series had a sustained interest and, in its day, a widespread impact, because of a ‘relevance’ which was very rare for commentaries, while there are few

commentaries so rich in abiding theological and spiritual insight as his on *The Johannine Epistles* (1946) in the same series: it deserves constant re-reading. And how can we do justice to his two great works, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953) and *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (1963)? In these – taken together – imaginative insight, textual rigour, theological and historical sensitivity, and spiritual awareness combine to place the study of the Fourth Gospel on a higher level.

Exegetical rigour and interpretative wholeness were combined with another concern. Before becoming a professor, C. H. Dodd had been a minister. We referred to the ‘relevance’ of his commentary on *Romans* for my generation. Long before the term ‘relevance’ had become a popular slogan, an almost ‘pastoral’ concern marked all that C. H. Dodd did. By this we mean not only that he preached and published sermons which had a lasting impact, particularly on students, or that he lectured, at a famous series at Cambridge, to make clear to undergraduates of all faculties the meaning of *The Bible Today* (1946), and certainly not that such work was in any way lacking in his customary rigour. What we mean is that C. H. Dodd was always engaged in an attempt to bring the Bible home to his contemporaries, that is, with the human dimensions of his task, with what Paul might have called our transformation through the renewal of our minds. This did not in any way at all diminish his critical austerity, but rather accounts for the enduring intensity of his scholarly devotion. His very first book was called *The Meaning of Paul for Today* (1920), and his last years were given to what many regard as his greatest achievement, the successful completion, along with his collaborators, of *The New English Bible* (1970). As the preface to it shows, the intent of that translation was to make the Bible speak in current idiom to modern men. That intent informed the whole of C. H. Dodd’s work at its most technical and most popular, and finally accounts for the breadth and depth of his influence. J. S. Whale, in dedicating to him a work which is itself a classic of interpretation, refers to him as one of the two (the other was J. V. Bartlett, also known for his rigour) to whom he owed most for his understanding of the Christian faith. Many could say the same of C. H. Dodd.

The place of his scholarship, in its change and continuity, as part of and over against the history of our common struggle to understand the New Testament, a history which he did so much to mould, we can only briefly suggest here. One of his earlier works, *The Authority of the Bible* (1928), reveals a broadly ‘liberal’ position, in which a rather bare historical-psychological approach, especially to the Old Testament, was dominant: he seemed then unmoved by the awakening, more strictly theological, concerns of the Continent. But as his inaugural address at Cambridge (1936) made clear, he became increasingly conscious of the fragmentation and theological thinness which historical-critical studies had often introduced into the understanding of the ‘biblical library’, as it was called. One of his achievements was to

deliver my generation from the nemesis of the arid dissection of a dead historicism and from what often seemed like learned triviality. His small but weighty book, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (1939), along with that of Dibelius, was the harbinger of a new departure. Mainly through his emphasis on the kerygmatic unity of the New Testament, a more positive interpretative note began to be sounded in our studies, and there emerged what is usually referred to as biblical theology. Although under the impact of the horrendous events of the thirties and forties, and partly under the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, his work attained an increasingly theological dimension, C. H. Dodd himself never forsook the rigours required for the study of the text, as did some biblical theologians, and he remained critically distant from all the excesses of confidence in this field. But that his contribution was a major impetus to the growth of biblical theology cannot be doubted.

As time went on, perhaps through contact with Jewish scholars in his seminar, and especially with David Daube, he became more and more aware of the Semitic substructure of the New Testament. His chapters on Judaism in *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, on the testimonia in the seminal study *According to the Scriptures* (1952), and on *Gospel and the Law of Christ* (1947), as well as his recognition of the significance of the Qumrân writings, all witness to this. His emphasis on the historical element in Christian origins and his suspicion of Hellenistic gnosis and mysticism, both expressed in *History and the Gospel* (1938), might also be taken to reveal the same tendency. But this would be unjustified. His concern with the historical tangibility of *The Founder of Christianity*, the very deliberate title of his last book (1971), designed to underline this, had other roots in Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort, C. C. J. Webb and Collingwood and in Harnack, and even more deeply in his very understanding of the demand imposed by the Gospels themselves and of the nature of the Christian faith. His essay on 'The framework of Mark' (1932) was an effort to retain that tangibility in some depth. Although capable of a very rare expertise in form criticism, as his study of the resurrection narratives in the *Festschrift* for R. H. Lightfoot (1955) shows, he never acceded to what were to him the excesses of extreme historical scepticism. (Such caution was typical. Apart from his early radical dismissal of futuristic eschatology, all his work was soberly balanced, and this was not simply from common sense: he was wary of extremes.) Moreover his suspicion of gnosis and mysticism must not be taken to be a suspicion of Hellenism. He always remained a Hellenist in sympathy. Critically based as it was, his reaction to Schweitzer's apocalyptic concentration had possibly derived ultimately from this source. 'Realized eschatology', though later modified, was the contribution of a Platonist. To the end he was just a trifle afraid of our 'over-Semitizing' the New Testament. After reading Daniélou's *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (1964) he remarked how grateful he was that Christianity had been Hellenized,

just as, earlier, on his reading the last chapter of my *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1948), he expressed pleasure that I had been able to recognize and emphasize the penetration of the Jewish background of Paul by Hellenism. Critical as he could be of the claims of such a scholar as Reitzenstein, because his studies were not rigorous enough as they bore on the New Testament, his own work on the fourth Gospel can be regarded as the final flowering of the emphasis on Hellenism in New Testament study. In this sense it marks the end of an era. But *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* also shows the encroachment of the Semitic on New Testament scholarship – an encroachment that has grown ever stronger – so that it also reflects new beginnings. C. H. Dodd's writings are a mirror of the transition which has marked our time from a predominantly Hellenistic to a more Semitic approach to the New Testament. In him one world was already dying and another struggling to be born.

The reference to my own work leads me, last but not least, to C. H. Dodd as a teacher. In his understanding of teaching he was Victorian: it was for him a high, costly vocation and, indeed, he would probably strike modern undergraduates as mildly Victorian in other ways. Although he could on occasion, to make his point, use a vivid slang, it was difficult for some students to penetrate the studied dignity of his reserve. He did not wear his heart on his sleeve, and it took time to realize that his reserve was a protection for a deep human sensitivity and warm generosity on which later many of his students came to rely throughout their lives. Even so his reserve could never be forbidding because it was always courteous. The awe in which his students always held him was friendly. The famous pun on Deut. vi. 4, 5 and Lev. xix. 18 (Thou shalt love the Lord thy Dodd, and thy Niebuhr as thyself) was born, not in criticism, but in affection, out of the climate created by his teaching.

And in the lecture room and the seminar, now continued by his friend and distinguished successor, C. F. D. Moule, his reserve gave way. His lectures were lucid, structured carefully, comprehensive and, above all, often penetrating in their newness and, sometimes, lightened by a quick wit. Precise, and master of the right word to an almost uncanny degree, he could also pour forth a torrent of controlled data with an eloquent rapidity that brought into the drabness of the lecture room a vital freshness. It was then, perhaps, that the Celtic strain which had mingled with the English in his veins broke forth – in his peculiar sparkle and almost fiery enthusiasm. For students inadequately prepared his lectures could be baffling, but to those who were prepared they were excitingly illuminating. He once told me that he had learnt most of his method of lecturing from Harnack, who had left a deep impression on him as a student in Berlin. Although he readily recognized the excellences of German scholarship, and was in constant dialogue with it, and especially with Bultmann, to a far greater degree than his writings reveal, one felt that it was also his gratitude to and admiration for

Harnack that made him anxious throughout the years to keep clear the channels between British and German scholarship. His first advice to me as a graduate student was to immerse myself in German. R. H. Lightfoot has testified to the same, as could many others. And he was equally open to French and American scholarship, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, to which he also directed his students.

This openness to outside scholarship was typical of his whole attitude, which was best experienced in his seminar. In this those qualities we have noted, a dignified human sensitivity, expressed in a fine courtesy and easy wit, enabled him to draw out the best in those present, as they also made him a wise and effective guide for our Society and, later, for the committee appointed to translate the Bible. In his seminar, above all, one felt his complete freedom from any dogmatism despite, nay, more probably because of, his massive knowledge, and his unself-conscious openness to all possible positions. David Daube once noted that of all the scholars he had known, C. H. Dodd was the one most ready to admit an error or a possible error and to change. For this reason probably he never formed a school. His students never felt that he expected them to accept his positions and certainly not to follow him. The unexpressed assumption was that we were all together engaged in a high task but each free to pursue it in his own way. It was his freedom within his conscientious dedication that constituted his authority over us and made his seminar so remarkable.

C. H. Dodd was a great scholar and a great teacher. When I last saw him his sharply lined face, illumined by a kindly grace, very unexpectedly reminded me of pictures of the face of Voltaire. I like to think of him *mutatis mutandis* as a Christian Voltaire. The metaphor may not be altogether apt, but it does perhaps evoke the special quality of his contribution. Through a long life, during which he had often to husband his physical strength, he wielded the rapier of a penetrating mind, a brilliant lucidity, a precise eloquence, and an eloquent precision, all informed by grace, with illuminating and constructive effectiveness.

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