DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

The Apocryphal Sayings of Jesus and his Apostles

REACHING into the recesses of one's memory sometimes affords surprising results. Last Christmas I was searching for a special greeting, when I half recalled a long forgotten sonnet, and eventually found it in its author's own *The Poets' Life of Christ*:[1]

WITHOUT AND WITHIN

'If I ascend to heaven thou art there;
There too, thou, if I make my bed in hell;
And if I take the wings of morning, there
Within the sea's most utmost parts to dwell,
Thy hand shall lead and hold me, even there'.
Of old, thy singer thus; and in my heart
I hid myself from thee, long years apart.

'Raise but the stone and thou shalt find me there;
Or cleave the wood and there am I. I say
Wherever there is one alone, yea there
Am I in him'. These thy new words, to-day
I heard, still darkly hid, and looked, and there —
Where I so long had thought thou hadst no part, —
I found thee hiding with me in my heart.

Norman Ault realized well enough that most of his readers (in the early 1920s) would recognize the first stanza from the Authorized Version of the Bible:

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there;
if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me (Ps 139,8-10).

They would not, however, be likely to know the source of 'these thy new words'. Ault, therefore, appended the note: 'the second stanza contains one

of the sayings of Christ from the Oxyrhynchus papyrus discovered in 1897' — a remark that directed this non-specialist reader to *The Apocryphal New Testament* assembled and translated over sixty years ago by Montague Rhodes James, a noted Oxford classical scholar and palaeographer.[2] The papyrus is a mere fragment; and James had (to us) a rather quaint idea: 'In translating my texts I have employed a style meant to remind the reader of the Authorized Version of the Bible' (*loc. cit.*, p xxi). It is instructive to see how James compares with Ault:

> [Jesus saith]: wheresoever there are [two, they are not without] God; and where there is one alone, I say I am with him. Lift up the stone and there shalt thou find me; cleave the wood, and I am there (p 27. *The words in brackets are suggested restorations of missing words*).

From such a chance — or I ought to say providential — beginning, it occurred to me that the considerable body of christian literature, which has come to be known as the 'Apocryphal' Gospels or New Testament, would certainly have pertinent and enriching things to say in the context of this series. Though James appears to have been over-severe in his general judgment on them — 'good neither as books of history, nor of religion nor even as literature', he asserts — he also allows for example, that 'among the prayers and discourses of the Apostles in the spurious Acts, some utterances may be found which are remarkable and beautiful' (p xii). One such, a fragmentary conversation between Jusas (not the Iscariot) and Jesus, from the same Oxyrhynchus papyrus already cited, was restored by Père Langrange, and published in the *Revue Biblique* (1922):

> . . . Judas says: who then are they who draw us up to heaven above, if the Kingdom is in heaven? Jesus replies: the birds of the sky, the beasts, and if there is anything beneath the earth, and the fish of the sea, these are they that draw you unto God; and the Kingdom of heaven is within you; and whoever knows God shall find it; for if you know him, you shall know yourselves, and you shall know that you are children of the Father who is perfect; and likewise you shall know yourselves to be citizens of heaven. And you are the city of God (cf pp 27-28).

'Apocryphal' matters were of course much more black and white for M. R. James, exegetically, doctrinally and certainly devotionally, than they are in our day. He could say quite sweepingly that 'the authors do not speak with the voices of Paul or John, or with the quiet simplicity of the three first gospels' (p xii). Nor did he suspect that The *Gospel according to the Hebrews* might perhaps be distinct from the Gospel of the Nazareans,[3] so beloved of St Jerome. He cites for example, among the fragments of this 'Hebrews', the following comment of Jerome on Isaiah XI, 2 — 'The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him':

> Not partially, as in the case of other holy men, but, as we read in the Gospel written in the hebrew tongue, the book of the Nazarenes: 'There shall be poured out upon him the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit'. . . . In the Gospel referred to above, I find these words: 'When the Lord came up out of the waters [of the Jordan], it happened that the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon him and rested upon him. And the voice spoke to him, saying: 'My Son, in all the prophets I waited for you, until you should come, so that I might rest in you. For you are my rest, my first-begotten Son: you reign for ever'.

It is not to our purpose — whether it be valid or not — to distinguish as, say, Aloys Grillmeier does, between the 'devotion' and the 'theology' (or Christology) of Jerome,[4] important as the distinction may be for the *history* of theology. It is surely of greater import that exegesis and theology should, as with St Jerome, nurture our devotion to Christ. As Ferdinand Cavallera (who belonged to the same generation as M. R. James) wrote of St Jerome:

> Once he had committed himself to the perfect life, Jerome's dedication was centred exclusively on Christ, Jesus. His thoughts were on him when he offered the world to God. It was to Christ he looked for support in his difficult hours. It was his example, his commitment, to which he appealed in order to stimulate others to give themselves more generously. Apart from Ignatius of Antioch, there are no better exponents during his time or before him, of so intimate and so personal a devotedness to the Saviour: his is an affectivity more redolent of the Middle Ages or more modern times. It points up the intimacy involved in a life of personal relationship with Jesus — that passionate and unconditional surrender to him as leader and lover which enables one to share with him joy and sorrow and everything. Christ is always in his consciousness, and every sacrifice becomes an exaltation. . . . St Jerome is lifted on high to a love that is entirely self-forgetful: a truly faithful echo of the one who proclaimed that nothing could separate him from the love of Christ.[5]

It is not surprising, then, that Jerome, unlike so many exegetes and critics after him — ancient and modern alike — should accord the greatest respect to and cite freely from this 'Gospel according to the Hebrews, which is indeed in the Chaldean and Syrian speech, but is written in Hebrew letters, which the Nazarenes use to this day, called *according to the Apostles*, or as most term it, *according to Matthew*, which is also to be seen in the Library of Caesarea'. He is citing another saying of the Lord:[6]

> 'If your brother has sinned against you by word, and has made amends as much as seven times in a day, you must still take him

> back into your friendship'. Simon his disciple replied: 'As many as seven times in a day?' The Lord answered and said: 'Amen, I say to you, as many as seventy times seven. For the sinful word was also found in the prophets, even after they were anointed by the Holy Spirit'.

These, of course, are sayings easily recognizable from our canonical gospels: a point made in the latin version of a Commentary on Matthew's gospel, attributed to Origen. 'It is written', says our text, 'in a certain Gospel which bears the title *according to the Hebrews*: that is, if anyone is inclined to take it, not as authoritative, but at least as throwing fresh light on our consideration here'. (The question concerns the rich young man who went away sorrowful because he had many possessions — Mt 19,22):

> The second of the rich men said to him: 'Master, what good must I do and live?' And he said to him: 'My man, observe the law and the prophets'. And he answered: 'I have done so'. And he said to him: 'Go and sell all that you own, and distribute it to the poor, and come and follow me'. But the rich man began to fidget, because the words were not to his liking. So the Lord said to him: 'What is it that you say — I have kept the law and the prophets? Is it not written in the law: you shall love your neighbour as yourself? And see how many of your brethren, children of Abraham, have only filthy rags to dress themselves in, and are dying of hunger; whilst your house is full of good things, and none of them find their way to these others'. And he turned and said to Simon his disciple, who was sitting next to him: 'Simon, son of John, it is easier for a camel to enter in through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of heaven'.[7]

It is only natural that after form-criticism and redaction-criticism had led so many modern exegetes to be suspicious of everything that might be labelled 'fundamentalist' with regard to the canonical gospels, there should be the sort of reaction typified, for example, in Raymond Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah* or David Stanley's *Jesus in Gethsemane.*[8] Normal, too, that some scholars should be using the same redactional methods to take apart the Apocryphal 'sayings' and books. Furthermore, as Helmut Koester has recently written,[9] the 'Apocrypha' by and large have had a bad press. Many were written in a partisan or heretical spirit, many of them pathetic attempts — at least to modern eyes — to improve on what was generally acceptable before the end of the second century. As Grillmeier has pointed out, in an image worth the pondering:

> In the second century, the Christian tradition is like a young stream, coming down from the mountains, which can now for the

> first time spread itself on a broad landscape and extend into a lake. The landscape becomes wider and more varied, but at the same time less noble. The lake threatens to lose itself at the edges and to form stagnant water. But then at last the river re-forms again, to go on its way more strongly and more swiftly than before. This is the picture which meets us if we investigate the christological beliefs of the many anonymous and pseudonymous apocryphal writings of the second century. . . .[10]

'I, James, wrote this history in Jerusalem during the rioting which followed on the death of Herod; and I withdrew into the desert until the troubles in Jerusalem were over. I glorify the Lord God who has given me the gift and the wisdom to write this story. And grace be with those who fear our Lord Jesus Christ: to him be glory for ever and ever, Amen'. The *Protevangelium of James*,[11] as it is called, is the first of a multitude of 'pious stories', written for the edification of the faithful, not many of whom 'were wise according to worldly standards, not many powerful, not many of noble birth', as Paul said of the christian community at Corinth (1 Cor 1,26-27). It purports to give us the background to the first mysteries of the life of Jesus; in fact, its purpose is to praise and to defend Mary's virginity.[12] The miraculous birth of Jesus, as well as his conception, is thus central to the narrative: and, therefore, subsequently suspect of Docetism. Similarly, the *Childhood Gospel of Thomas*[13] is clearly a gnostic compilation, as the title of one of the manuscript reveals: 'The stories of Thomas the Israelite, the Philosopher, concerning the works of the childhood of the Lord'.[14]

Yet not every gnosis is false. Are we to convict Origen, for instance, of Gnosticism when he says that Christ was seen in different ways by different people not merely subjectively, but that there were variations in the objective bodily appearance of Jesus; on the grounds that such a picture of Christ is far different from that given by the Synoptists?[15] It seems to me, however — speaking as one less wise — that all the examples given — the manifestation of the Spirit at Baptism, the Transfiguration, the 'falling back' of the guard at the end of the Agony (cf Jn 18,6), are quasi-resurrectional. There is one passage from the *Acts of John*[16] — a conversation between the Sons of Zebedee, concerning their vocation, which carries the same sort of ring:

> When he had chosen the two brothers, Peter and Andrew, the Lord came to me and my brother James, and said: 'I need you, come to me'. When my brother heard him speak he said to me: 'John, that little child on the lake-shore who is calling us, what does he want?' And I said, 'What child?' And he said again, 'The one who is beckoning to us'. And I answered him: 'You must be seeing things after our long night's watch on the lake! Don't you see that it is a man standing there, handsome and fair, with a cheerful look about

> him?' Then he said to me, 'I don't see any such man. However, let us go ashore and see what he wants'. We brought the boat in, and he helped to draw it up on to the shore. And when we turned to go away (it was our intention to follow him) I saw him as rather bald, with a thick and flowing beard; but James saw a young man, with his beard just beginning to grow.[17]

From the same *Acts of John* comes this image of the Crucified One:

> He showed me a cross of light, and about the cross a great multitude. . . . And the Lord himself I beheld above the cross, not having any shape, but only a voice: no voice that we knew, but one sweet and kind, and truly of God, saying to me: 'This cross of light is sometimes called by me, for your sakes, word, then, Jesus, then Christ, then mind, then a way, then bread, then seed, then resurrection, then Son, then Father, then Spirit, then light, then truth, then faith, then grace'.[17]

The scholars, of course, have a word for this kind of early christian literature — 'staurology'. It reveals patterns of reflection on the mystery of the Lord Jesus which finds its logical outcome in the doctrinal formulation of the two natures of Christ.[18]

When M. R. James, following Tischendorf,[19] came to treat of the 'Passion Gospels', not unnaturally he gave his main attention to The *Gospel of Nicodemus*, with its alternative title *Acts of Pilate.* The whole corpus, he says, falls into two parts: the narrative of the Passion and of Christ's descent into Hell. Though in every form in which it is preserved, the *descensio ad inferos* is a late addition to the first — 'not', conjectures James, 'before the fifth century', more recent discoveries give us no occasion to cast doubt on his firm conclusion:

> The central idea, the delivery of the righteous Fathers from Hades, is exceedingly ancient. Second-century writers are full of it. The embellishments, the dialogues of Satan with Hades, which are so dramatic, came in later, perhaps with the development of pulpit oratory among Christians. We find them in fourth-century homilies. This second part [sc. the descent into Hell] used to be called Gnostic, but there is nothing unorthodox about it.[20]

This theme became known in Christendom, as it emerged in Europe from what used to be called the Dark Ages, to its demise in the religious wars and persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the 'Harrowing of Hell'. Medieval iconography and architectural sculpture, and western literature from the Old English *Beowulf* to Milton's *Paradise Regained*, would be one-legged without it. What the secularization of western art and literature has done in this area of christian thought and

imagination is largely to retain its grotesque and satanic elements, first in the gothic novel of the nineteenth century, and currently re-created in novels/films such as *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*, which are exploiting to an alarming extent the febrile credulity of post-christian society. In direct contrast, passages like the following breathe the joy and serenity of the christian Easter and its final promise:

> Then the Lord Jesus the Saviour of all humankind, compassionate and full of grace, embraced Adam with loving-kindness, and said to him: 'Peace be to you, Adam, and to your children for ever and ever, Amen'. Then Father Adam prostrated himself at the Lord's feet, rose up and kissed his hands, and in a voice full of tears, said and testified before them all: 'Behold the hands which formed me'. Then he said to the Lord: You are come, King of glory, to set free all humankind, and lead them into your everlasting Kingdom. Then our Mother Eve in like manner. . . . Then all the saints adored him and cried: 'Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord. God the Lord has showed us his light. Amen for all ages. Praise, honour, power and glory because you have come, the day-star from on high, to visit us. And they gathered under the outstretched arms of the Lord, singing 'Alleluia' over and again, and rejoicing together in his glory.[21]

Perhaps James's old-fashioned distinction is still pertinent and helpful to many Christians who have inherited certain beliefs whose origins are to be found in the Apocrypha. 'If they are not good sources of history in one sense, they are in another. They record the imaginations, hopes and fears of the men who wrote them; they show what was acceptable to the unlearned Christians of the first ages . . . what ideals of conduct they cherished for this life, what they thought they would find in the next' (p xii).[22] One such traditional belief is that St Peter was crucified head downwards. 'I beseech you, the executioners, crucify me with the head downwards and not otherwise'. And the text which follows in the *Acts of Peter* is an ancient parallel to the modern theology of the Cross:

> It is right to mount the cross of Christ, who is the Word extended, the One and only, of whom the Spirit says: 'what else is Christ but the Word, the utterance of God?' The Word is the upright beam whereon I am crucified. And the utterance is the cross-beam — the nature of man. And the nail in the middle which fastens the cross-beam to the upright is the conversion and repentance of man. . . . 'To you, Christ Jesus, I give thanks, with the silence of a voice wherewith the Spirit that is in me loves you, speaks to you, sees you and prays to you. Only by the spirit are you perceived: You are my father, my brother, my friend, my bondsman, my steward. You are

the All and the All is in you. You are, and there is nothing else that is save you alone.

'Flee to him, then, my brethren, and if you learn that you exist in him alone, you shall receive those things which he promises to you — which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have they entered into the heart of man.

O Jesus undefiled, we ask for that which you have promised to give us. We praise you, we give you thanks we confess to you and glorify you — we who are powerless. You are God alone and none other. To you be the glory now and unto all ages. Amen.[23]

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NOTES

[1] The *Poets' Life of Christ*, compiled, arranged and decorated by Norman Ault (Oxford University Press, 1922), p 149.

[2] *The Apocryphal New Testament*, translated by Montague Rhodes James (Oxford University Press, 1924). For a description of the find at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, cf pp 22-23.

[3] Cf Hennecke-Schneemelcher-Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1 (London, 1962), p 122 and *passim*.

[4] Cf Aloys Grillmeier S.J., *Christ in the Christian Tradition: from the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*, A.D. 451 (London, 1965), p 316.

[5] F. Cavallera, 'Saínt Jérôme et la vie parfaite', in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, 2 (1921), p 110.

[6] St Jerome's *Dialogue against Pelagius*, III, 2; cf M. R. James, *loc. cit.*, p 6.

[7] Cf M. R. James, *ibid.*, who is here following Lagrange's collection in the *Revue Biblique*, 1922. For an apposite comment, cf J. Bligh, 'Recall to the Scriptures', in *Supplement* to *The Way*, 2 (May, 1966), pp 69-70.

[8] R. A. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London/New York, 1977); D. R. Stanley, *Jesus in Gethsemane* (New York, 1980).

[9] 'Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels', in the *Harvard Theological Review*, 73, 1-2 (January-April 1980), pp 105-07.

[10] A. Grillmeier, *loc. cit.*, p 62.

[11] M. R. James, pp 38-49. Cf *New Testament Apocrypha* I, pp 370ff.

[12] Cf E. de Strycker S.J., *La forme la plus ancienne de Protévangile de Jacques* (Brussels, 1961), pp 147ff.

[13] Cf *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1, pp 388-401.

[14] M. R. James, p 49.

[15] A. Grillmeier, *loc. cit.*, p 83.

[16] *Acts of John*, 87. Cf M. R. James, pp 228ff.

[17] *Ibid.*, p 251.

[18] Cf J. Daniélou, *A history of early Christian Doctrine before the council of Nicaea*, vol 1 (London, 1964), pp 265-92.

[19] C. Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, 2nd ed. (1876).

[20] Cf M. R. James, pp 94-95.

[21] Cf *ibid.*, pp 137-39. For a more modern discussion, cf *New Testament Apocrypha* 1, pp 444-49.

[22] Excellent examples are *The Middle-English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus*, ed. W. H. Hulme (London, 1907); Karl Young, *The Harrowing of Hell in Liturgical Drama* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1910); cf *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, Passus XXI (C text).

[23] Cf M. R. James, pp 300, 334-36; and 'The Dream of the Rood', trans E. Colledge, in *The Way*, vol 9, 1 (January, 1969) pp 74-78.