

Fr. Louis Bouyer

I was recently given an article in a French magazine, *Nova et Vetera, The New and the Old*, by Fr. Louis Bouyer entitled "An Earthquake in New Testament Criticism" * that is really excellent. So I would like to translate parts of it, and comment on it as I do:

It is a fact that all those who are *au courant* [I left *au courant* in French, because it was one of Sister Catherine's favorite expressions.] with recent developments in New Testament criticism, cannot fail to notice what the Americans call an *agonizing reappraisal*. [Father Bouyer left "agonizing reappraisal," in English. This was a *cliché* the media used when they were in the process of losing the Vietnam war for us.] It is indeed remarkable that the critics who in the eyes of badly informed people, which includes most Catholics, such as Bultmann and after him the post-Bultmannians, can still pass for radicals, who continue to presuppose all their more or less hypothetical reconstructions, which are in fact a new orthodoxy, but which for a long time have been considered very doubtful among the experts, that is that they were more solid than the views considered "traditional" in this field. It has even come from some quarters which no one would suspect of any dogmatic prejudice, to ask if indeed they were not more fragile than that which they have pretended to replace.

Let me interject a few brief comments on biblical criticism. It is supposed to be the scientific study of the Bible, and to be scientific you cannot argue from authority. So you cannot go to the Magisterium which is the authoritative teaching of the Bible. Nor can they go to Tradition, because science by its very nature has to be dealing with the latest thing. So they have excluded themselves from both Tradition and the Magisterium. So all they have is *sola Scriptura*, the Bible alone, and their own contemporaries. So they study the biblical languages Hebrew and Greek, but also all the literature contemporary with the Bible, the *Talmud*, the *Kabala*, Babylonian myths, etc. They actually spend more time on this latter thing than they do on the Bible. This is considered very *avant garde*, and has replaced the traditional approach to the Bible, especially among Catholics, who know very little about what is actually going on. Also biblical criticism is an ecumenical movement. Catholics and Protestants are working together and producing ecumenical Bibles. You would think that the Catholic scholars would be on an equal footing with the Protestant scholars, but they really are not. They have a terrible inferiority complex towards them. The Anglicans and the Lutherans are actually setting the pace, and the Catholics are just following along.

To sum up in a few words, these recent researches on very debatable theories repose on two principal certitudes dating from before the First World War. The first is the theory of the "two sources," which supposes the priority of Mark, and explains the differences between Matthew and Luke and the agreement between them, by means of another source, completely hypothetical, called

* Louis Bouyer, *Un tremblement de terre dans la critique du Nouveau Testament, Nova et Vetera*, 1977/4.

Q or the *logia*,=a collection principally or uniquely, of the discourses of Jesus which had already been fixed before the apparition of at least the last two synoptics. The second is the very late composition of the fourth Gospel, impossible to attribute, they tell us, to an immediate disciple of Jesus, because he handed down, they believe, a total re-expression of Christianity in terms of Hellenistic thought.

Nevertheless, since 1914, a certain number of very hard blows have been given to these two presuppositions, so hard, it is true to say, that one is astonished, that already well before the Second World War, they can still be given in all the text books as basic facts beyond discussion. @

Now the two basic doctrines in contemporary biblical studies are the Two Source Theory of Harnack, and the late the second century dating, of the Gospel of John by Abbé Loisy and others. Yet despite these two presuppositions having absolutely no scientific foundation at all, they are presented in all Catholic colleges and seminaries as established fact.

In the first place, it was considered impossible to extract what the *logia*=had actually been, after the two supposedly last synoptic Gospels had been completed. On the other hand, what resulted from what had been so doubtfully established, they say, has been no less difficult to prove Matthew or Luke as we know them, from some combination of Mark, and this enigmatic, if not fantastic, second source.[the Q] From this came the introduction of other hypotheses even more adventurous; first the existence of a proto-Mark, different from the Mark found in all the manuscripts, and which had been the base of the combinations. Then after they had finished working over our Mark, the only one whose existence is undebatable, to make the theory work it was also necessary to add a proto-Luke and to discover a proto-Matthew, in order to arrive at the texts as we know them. @

The two-source theory is from Adolf Harnack, a Lutheran, a liberal Protestant, which means he didn't believe in the divinity of Our Lord. Harnack had Catholic disciples, the early Modernists, most prominently Abbé Loisy. The Two Source Theory claims that the first Gospel was the hypothetical AProto-Mark,@a very short account of Our Lord's public life, which began with His Baptism and ended with His death. There was nothing about His Resurrection, and in it Our Lord did not claim to be God. Then came the *logia*, a Greek word meaning the sermons of Our Lord, that Harnack called AQ.@(They like these letters; Wellhausen has his JEPD.) AQ@is from the German word *quelle* meaning source. This whole thing of the Q rests on a little phrase in St. Papias, one of the Apostolic Fathers: Athen Matthew wrote the *logia*, the sermons of the Lord.@He obviously means that St. Matthew wrote his Gospel, but they want the *logia* to be just a collection of the sermons of Our Lord. Then what we call canonical Mark, was by an unknown disciple who just added the Resurrection to the proto-Mark. This is the first Gospel chronologically according to Harnack. Then came Matthew, an unknown disciple, who used proto-Mark plus the *logia*. Matthew and Luke didn't know of each others work, and Luke also used proto-Mark and the *logia*. So the correct chronological order of the Gospels is Mark, Matthew and Luke. The reason that Harnack wanted to do this was to show that the idea that Our Lord was God, slowly evolved in the Christian communities. In the earliest community Our Lord was not God, then in Matthew and Luke He becomes the Son of God. Finally we come to Loisy who says that the Gospel of St. John was by a late second century

Greek disciple, who was familiar with Greek philosophy. They are worried about **A**In the beginning was the Word,**@** because that makes Our Lord the Son of God who existed from all eternity. This has to be the influence of Platonic philosophy, because the Jews, they tell us, were not supposed to think in abstract terms, but were very concrete.

AAll this became so complicated, so unverifiable, where they were explaining the known by the unknown, which has always appeared to true scientists as the very type of anti-scientific explanation. One must say of this theory of the **two sources**=what was said of the cosmology of Ptolemy, complicated by a piling up of epicycles, when the Copernican revolution arrived to definitely reject it, it then became clear that it was no more than old error blocking the way of all true progress in science.**@**

You remember the cosmology of Ptolemy. To explain the **A**apparent retrograde**@** motion of the planets - as we watch the planets, they appear to be doing a sort of a backward looping motion. Ptolemy had them do an epicycle, a loop the loop. The planets closer to us did only a few, but as you got further out, Mars, Jupiter, he had to keep adding more and more epicycles, so he could predict say, the conjunction of Mars and Jupiter. It worked mathematically, but it couldn't possibly work physically. You can't throw a baseball and have it do a loop the loop. So when Copernicus put the sun at the center, and Kepler made the orbits of the planets ellipses rather than perfect circles, then Newton could work out the physics of it. Then they could see that the old Ptolemaic system had actually been holding back true progress in astronomy. Father Bouyer is saying that in piling up these equivalent epicycles, proto-Mark, proto-Matthew, proto-Luke to make this thing work, they are actually hindering true progress in biblical science.

AConcerning the **fourth Gospel**,= as they call it when they don't want to appear to compromise themselves by appearing to attribute it to John, which they believe can't be by him, is perhaps worse yet. This so-called Greek Gospel in the first place, by its language alone has been found to be closer to Aramaic than any of the first three. Already before the discoveries at Qumran, it appeared to the best specialists in ancient Judaism as the most Jewish of all (after these discoveries any doubt is no longer possible).**@**

Qumran was an Essene monastery near Engaddi on the shore of the Dead Sea that was excavated by Fr. Roland De Vaux, a Dominican from the École Biblique in Jerusalem. The Essenes lived from the end of the first century B.C. to almost the end of the first century A.D. They were a real fanatical sect of super-Pharisees. As father De Vaux excavated this monastery he found baths every few feet. They were so scrupulous that they had to take ritual baths every hour or so to purify themselves from some inadvertent violation of the law. So in no way would any of these men ever have anything to do with Gentiles, because they were Jews of Jews. St. John's Gospel, especially the Prologue, has been found to be very much in the style of some of the writings that have been attributed to these Essenes, especially one of the leaders of the community (they don't know his real name) called the **A**Teacher of Righteousness.**@** He writes in a very abstract style: he speaks about the word, about light, about water, the same way that St. John does. In St. John they claimed that this had been from the influence of Platonic philosophy, now they discover that it is one of the most Jewish of Jewish literary forms.

Finally this "spiritual gospel" which they have described to us, is a work not of an historian, still less of an eyewitness, is revealed as full of precise historical facts (especially geographical facts) concerning Palestine as it was before the fall of Jerusalem, that even Mark himself, to say nothing of the other two, even suspected.

Loisy had said that St. John's Gospel was written by a late second century Greek some where in Asia Minor, but it turns out that St. John knows more about contemporary Jewish customs than any of the synoptics. For instance he knew more about the Sadducees, the party of the high priests, more about the working of the Roman government, more about Pilate - remember he was let into the court of the high priest, because he was known to the high priest. And all these facts that St. John had, have been confirmed by outside sources.

But what must be the *coup de grâce* for this theory as it is presented to us as having been composed around the second half (at least!) of the second century, is revealed after the discovery of an Egyptian papyrus of unquestioned date, already widely circulated from at least the beginning of this century but recognized since then as enjoying an exceptional authority.

This must be the famous *Papyrus 52* at the John Rylands library in Manchester, England. It dates from the early second century and contains John 18:31-33,37. This is the oldest known fragment of a codex of the New Testament, and it shows that the Fourth Gospel within a generation of its composition, was circulating in the distant locality of Egypt. They have been excavating Christian tombs in Egypt, and in them are jars containing prayers and fragments of the Gospels. They can easily date the tomb, since there is usually some reference to the governor or Roman emperor in office at the time of death.

When all this is taken into consideration it is astonishing, to say the least, that all the text books in the last quarter of the twentieth century, continue to present the two theories of which we speak, as "results obtained through criticism."

So you can see that the Two Source Theory can no longer be considered scientific, it is just a mass of *a priori* guess work. Yet this quote ("results obtained through criticism") could have been written by Fr. Raymond Brown, and have appeared in any textbook still being used at Boston College or St. John's Seminary.

It appears even more fantastic that the critics who consider themselves "independent" such as Bultmann and his successors, can continue to construct houses of cards of their own hypotheses on such shifting sands.

The shifting sands are Harnack and Loisy, and the houses of cards are the theories of Bultmann and Brown.

More generally it has appeared in these recent years following the renewal of our knowledge of the

relations between Hellenistic Judaism and Palestinian Judaism, that the Bultmannian hypotheses, but also all those of the old school of Tübingen,...@

Tübingen is the college in Germany where all these Lutheran professors studied and taught, Wellhausen, Gunkel, Harnack, Bultmann, and now a lot of Catholics are studying there.

A...to which these old presuppositions were attached which are absolutely contrary to reality. As regards Bultmann and his successors, all their analysis of the history of literary forms rests on a fundamental distinction of four stratifications of the New Testament materials: one which clearly reveals the mission in the midst of Hellenistic paganism, one which denotes a Hellenistic Jewish context, one which was conceived by a primitive Christian community in the midst of the Palestinian Jews, and finally, one which can be shown to be from Jesus Himself.

AThe supposed sequence of Mark + the *logia*, Matthew, Luke then John, parallels what supposedly came directly from Jesus, followed by the Christian community of Palestine, then the community in the process of being Hellenized, and finally the Christian community arrived almost at a pre-Catholicism=having practically forgotten its Jewish origins.@

Here is Bultmann's theory of literary forms: Buried somewhere in the Gospel is the actual life of Jesus, and His actual sayings, found in the proto-Mark and the *logia*, unfortunately both lost, but we can discover them if we recognize these four layers of the Gospels. We have to dig through them. We are trying to get at the bottom layer, Jesus's life. Then came the Jewish Christian community which is paralleled by Matthew. What is the typical literary form of this community? It is *midrash*, a fictional story, a popular pious story; this would explain Matthew's Infancy Narrative, the Magi, the star, etc. Then came a Hellenized community, a Jewish community where they spoke Greek, and observed a certain amount of Greek customs; this would parallel Luke's Gospel, and could have been written in Antioch in Syria. This would have a certain amount of Greek literary forms, like the myth, which would explain Luke's Infancy Narrative. Finally would come a completely Greek community that would parallel John's Gospel, probably Ephesus in Asia Minor in the late second century, and the literary form would be Greek philosophy, with its abstract terminology like word, life, light, etc. Bultmann says we have to demythologize,@ meaning we have to dig through these successive layers of Greek philosophy, myth and *midrash*, till we finally get to the real life of Our Lord, and what He actually said. Bultmann claims to have done it. He has demythologized the Gospel and tells us that Our Lord was a Jewish man, who was in no way God, and who was caught up in a current Jewish eschatological myth, that the world was going to end in his lifetime.

AAlas! All these distinctions and these oppositions founder on the facts which recent textual and archaeological discoveries have imposed: 1⁰ Palestinian Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism have always lived not in a state of separation and hostility, but of reciprocal and permanent osmosis; 2⁰ the Palestinians from the time of Jesus, - Jesus Himself certainly, and this was true especially of the Galileans who almost all spoke Greek as a second language, and even Jerusalem itself there was at least one synagogue where all the services were conducted in that language.@

So you can see by studying the Bible honestly that it is full of Greek words. Even *synagogue* (bring together) is a Greek word. And they have discovered in the various archaeological digs, a synagogue in Jerusalem where all the services were in Greek. So that is the end of Bultmann's thing about a completely Jewish community.

It is evident then that we have reached a situation in New Testament criticism analogous to that of California, for example, where the geologists assure us that the apparent security of an unchanged daily existence since the beginning of the century, is a deceitful and dangerous illusion. In reality everything is at the mercy of a sudden earthquake, which could wipe out tomorrow everything that seemed so secure.

This is where Bouyer gets the title for his essay, *An earthquake in New Testament Criticism*. This is a reference to the Continental Drift Theory, the notion that the continents are on plates which are drifting on the magma, a sort of fluid, underneath the crust of the earth, and that they are all slowly in motion. Our continental plate is pushing on the Pacific plate, and where they meet is the San Andreas Fault, a crack in the ground that runs the whole length of California. The geologists can actually see the continental plate rising slowly, and they say that it is just a matter of time for a gigantic earthquake to occur and for the whole of California to slide into the ocean. He is comparing these new discoveries of science to the continental plate, which are pushing on the Pacific plate, all these old presuppositions of Harnack, Loisy and Bultmann, and it is just a matter of time before the whole recent New Testament criticism slides into oblivion.

One can ask if this is not what has happened with the publication of the new book by the Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*.

Father Bouyer is asking if this earthquake has not already happened with the publication of Bishop Robinson's book. Robinson was one of the most respected of these biblical critics, and he has repudiated Harnack, Bultmann, *et alia*. He uses as his touchstone the fall of Jerusalem, which we know occurred in 70 A.D. All the synoptic Gospels give Our Lord's prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, and if Matthew, Mark and Luke, or the Gospels whose names they bear, were writing after 70 A.D., as the critics claim, they certainly would have mentioned the fulfillment of this prophecy. The critics, who of course do not believe in prophecy, claim that Our Lord did not make these prophecies, but that they were put into His mouth by the early community and later redactors. But this argument is unconvincing to say the least. I am sure Father Raymond Brown did not even read Msgr. McCarthy's book against Bultmann, because he is not a member of the club. He is a theologian; what does he know about Scripture? But Bishop Robinson *is* a member of the club, and Father Brown will have to read this book. The Catholic Modernists have a terrific inferiority complex towards the Anglicans and the Lutherans, and here is an Anglican member of the club turning on them! Brown must have felt stabbed in the back. Exactly the same thing had happened to Abbé Loisy. He had spent his whole life trying to get Harnack accepted by the Church, and all of a sudden Harnack threw the whole thing over, wrote a book *Back to Tradition*, and turned back to a study of the Fathers. Loisy was just stunned, and eventually died outside the Church. I hope the same thing does not happen to Father Brown.

A...From which only one conclusion is possible: if the authors of the New Testament ignored all the circumstances concerning the fact of a sensational event, and for them of such importance, it can only be because they wrote before it had taken place. This says Robinson would have been the most natural explanation of all the critics, if they had not been hindered by the prejudices of the old school of Tübingen or their actual successors, Bultmannian or not. An examination of the texts made in a spirit of serene objectivity, leads, as he shows throughout his book, to a complete verification of this inference...@

Let me conclude by turning back from the Biblical earthquake of Bishop Robinson's book, which should slide the whole of recent biblical criticism into oblivion, to the earthquake which could slide the whole state of California into the Pacific. Around the same time that Father Bouyer was writing this article, there was a popular comic song by a Chicano group in California on this impending catastrophe. I can only remember two lines:

AThee whole theeng ees shaking away...@

And another:

AThere she goooo!@
