



The Riddle of the New Testament

Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey

This is an old book. I know this, not only because my copy is a bit battered but when I looked through to find the date of publication it said mcmlviii – which I translate as 1958. I also noted the name of an old vicar of mine inscribed in the front. He retired from a church in Shaftesbury in about 1974! How it came into my possession, I have no idea.

Despite the dated form of English employed, the book is written relatively simply in 10 short chapters addressing the problems of language, the text and the assumptions of the New Testament writers. It focuses around what has been called the Synoptic Problem (syn = one, optic = eye). Why are the first 3 Gospels so similar and what is the relationship between them? There is ancient (2nd century) evidence that it was assumed Matthew was written first. But modern scholarship is almost unanimous that Mark is primary and Matthew and Luke copy and amend his account.

Any biographical account will often adopt a model by which to understand a life: was this person a liberator, a dictator, driven by optimism or kindness? And looking in greater detail, the authors here identify “Son of God” as the lens through which Mark tells his story of Jesus. This title is seen most fully expressed in the cross. Matthew and Luke add more material and amend Mark’s story but stick generally to the same theme.

Now, Paul is the earliest New Testament writer; then Mark followed by Matthew/Luke and then John’s gospel and letters – and possibly Hebrews a bit later still. When Paul is writing his purpose, the authors claim, is to put into words his mystical experience of faith in God. The aim of the synoptic gospels is to provide a narrative of a human life that explains the new religion. John is confronting an untethered mystery-religion and wants to relocate that mystery back into history. And Hebrews is battling against Judaism by demonstrating Jesus is the fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Hoskins and Davey are very coy about what can be stated with any confidence about the historical nature of the Gospels (did real events happen as told?) but they believe that the historical Jesus saw himself in a unique relationship with God, that his purpose was to release people from the bondage of evil and illness and that his words and actions herald in a new order based on the assumptions of the Old Testament expectations. More than that, they refuse to commit.

The book is dated. It has an almost Kipling-esque confidence that there is only one Riddle of the New Testament and this book will tell you The Answer. Some of its scholarship has been refined – most commentators don’t now believe Paul wrote all the letters ascribed to him, for example. But for all that, it is remarkable how little many churches (clergy?) today take seriously the biblical criticism which this book assumes to be the norm. A new pious trend has adopted an unhealthy, inaccurate and unhistorical confidence in the text of the Bible which reveals not so much a respect for the word as a fear of the truth. For all its faults, sadly, a book like this is still needed today.