

PLATE XIX



VINCENT TAYLOR

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1887-1968

VINCENT TAYLOR was born on 1 January 1887 in the little Lancashire town of Edenfield, where his father owned a grocery business. In 1890 the family, including Vincent and his two sisters, removed to Accrington, where Vincent spent his boyhood in the pursuit of two interests which in later life he would never allow to be separated, learning and religion. During the week he attended the Wesleyan Day School, on Sunday the Sunday School. His father was a Wesleyan local preacher and there seems scarcely to have been a time when his son did not wish to follow his example. It is recorded that at the age of nine he would stand on a box in the garden of the family home 'preaching' to a congregation consisting of his sisters and children of neighbouring families. He attended Accrington Grammar School, which appears to have done little to stimulate his love of learning until, having resolved to become for a time, and in order to earn money he would need during his training for the ministry, a teacher, he joined a class recently formed at the Grammar School for pupil-teachers, who spent half the week teaching in local schools and the rest in their own studies. It was a mixed class of boys and girls, and one of its members, Elizabeth Alice Harrison, was later to become his wife. She recalls that it was at this time that his love of the Classics was born, and that he would recite passages of Seneca and Virgil.

This late-born, or at least late-nurtured, love of the Classics was strong, but it was less strong than Taylor's vocation to the ministry, and after a year's teaching at Great Harwood, and a correspondence course in Greek, he was in 1906 one of the youngest of the candidates accepted for the Wesleyan ministry. His first year was spent as supply for a sick minister, and in 1907 he entered Richmond College. He hoped while there to take a degree at London University, but found that London did not recognize the only matriculation qualification he had—that of the Northern Universities. In addition therefore to his theological work he went back to his school subjects and took London matriculation. The next hurdle was the Intermediate B.D. examination, which he passed with honours in 1909.

This might well have been the last and greatest as well as the

first and least of his academic distinctions, for in 1910 he left college and was appointed to a circuit, barely half-way to a first degree. With the determination and self-discipline that marked his whole career he combined the work of a minister and the life of a student, took the London B.D. in 1911—and broke down in health, so that his ordination, which should have taken place at the Wesleyan Conference of 1913, had to be postponed, and he spent six months in a sanatorium. But ‘I know’, he said to his fiancée, ‘that I shall get well again. God has work for me to do which no one else can do’.

For about twenty years Taylor carried out, conscientiously and effectively, the duties of a Methodist circuit minister, but there is no doubt that, whether or not this was in his mind in 1913, his life’s work lay in New Testament scholarship, to which he was able to devote himself with undivided attention when in 1930 he was appointed to the staff of Wesley College, Headingley. In 1936 he became Principal and Resident Tutor, and, with the exception of a few years during and immediately after the Second World War, when the college was not used for ministerial training, retained these offices till his retirement in 1953. He was a patient and lucid teacher, and a methodical and conscientious administrator. He was always at the service of his men, though not all of them found it easy to take the first steps in approaching him. Probably he was at his best with the best students, and his junior assistants, of whom the writer of this memoir is proud to have been one, found in him not only an example of exact scholarship, but forbearance with their early efforts as teachers and generous encouragement of their own attempts to write.

It must have been soon after his recovery from the illnesses that hampered his early career that Taylor began his first piece of biblical research, into the historical evidence for the Virgin Birth. In several respects this work (published in 1920) points to familiar characteristics of Taylor’s writing. It is, he emphasizes, a historical study, not because dogmatics is unimportant, or can ultimately be divorced from historical investigation, but because the ground must first of all be cleared by the resolution, by historical means, of all questions that submit to historical processes; when this has been done, and only then, will the task of theology, and its own bearing upon history, stand out clearly. The primary task, tackled here over a limited area, is the elucidation of the primitive Christian tradition: ‘[The author’s] aim is . . . to trace and to define the earliest Christian tradition

upon the subject, and to show the limits and the bearings of the historical question' (p. iii). It follows from this that

Doctrinal presuppositions must be resolutely laid aside; there must be a common desire to ascertain the true facts of the evidence, whatever the results may be. Not that dogmatic considerations have no place in the problem! It is part of the conclusion reached in this book that in the end dogmatic considerations do determine the issue. But it must be 'in the end'; not at the beginning, nor in the middle (*The Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth*, pp. iii f.).

Perhaps one more quotation from this early work may be given.

'Whence come the sources upon which the Evangelists drew?' At first sight the problem seems hopeless. To recover and to describe with objectivity of statement the several sources which the Evangelists employed is a task beset with difficulties: to penetrate still further might well seem impossible. If, however, the problem is faced bravely, with an open mind and an eagerness to learn, it may be that as time passes there will be cause to rejoice over real progress made (ibid. p. v).

It is hardly too much to say that the story of the forty years that followed is the record of an open and eager mind, bravely facing its problems, and in the end registering perhaps as much real progress as one lifetime of scholarship can hope to achieve.

To return to the thread of biography: Taylor submitted his essay on the Virgin Birth to London University as a doctoral exercise. Not only was it accepted, but William Sanday, one of the examiners, went out of his way to encourage the author, and urged him to send his manuscript to the Oxford University Press. It is not surprising that, with this recommendation, it was accepted, and became the first of a long series of publications. But Sanday had done more than facilitate the publication of a Ph.D. thesis, he had given a young man with no university education and little academic background a measure of confidence in his own ability, and from this time Taylor must have known that he belonged to the *universitas litterarum*, and could debate with New Testament scholars in England and abroad as an equal.

The first theme for further study had already been stated: What were the sources on which the evangelists drew? In 1924 B. H. Streeter published *The Four Gospels* in which he carried a little, but not much, further a theory he had already adumbrated in an article in the *Hibbert Journal*. Starting from the belief that Matthew and Luke had both used Mark and a second common source Q he raised the question how the Third Gospel

had been composed, and answered his question in terms of the so-called Proto-Luke hypothesis. The Third Evangelist used in addition to Mark and Q a source peculiar to himself (L), and his gospel was written in two stages: first, Q and L material were combined, to produce a primitive gospel, Proto-Luke; secondly, the evangelist, having discovered Mark, inserted sections of this gospel into the already existing Proto-Luke, thus producing (with a few other additions) the Third Gospel as we know it. The profound significance of this theory—for if it is true it requires a revised estimate of the relative historical value of the various gospel sources—was perceived more quickly by Taylor than by most New Testament scholars, and he immediately undertook a detailed examination of it. Two books were devoted to this study: *Behind the Third Gospel* (1926), and *The First Draft of St. Luke's Gospel* (1927). In the latter book Taylor gave the text of Proto-Luke as he believed it once to have existed. It was not long before J. M. Creed had fired a counterblast in his commentary on Luke, and it is needless to say that the debate, to which, over many years, Taylor himself from time to time contributed, continues. What matters here is Taylor's method: the patient, detailed comparison of parallel passages, the refusal to lose the wood in the trees, and—at the end of the book—the attempt to evaluate the theology of Proto-Luke. Apart from any truth or value the Proto-Luke hypothesis may have, the writing of these books trained Taylor in the handling of detailed linguistic and textual problems, and established him as an expert in the field.

The field itself was, to English New Testament scholars, a familiar one, and in it Taylor was continuing the work of men such as Hawkins, Sanday, and Streeter. He was now to enter a field which, in Britain, was at the time almost an undiscovered country. In his book on the Virgin Birth he had set out to trace and to define the earliest Christian tradition on the subject. This task, in relation to the gospel material in general, had already occupied the attention of a distinguished group of German scholars. The familiar processes of literary criticism can take us back some way from the later gospels towards the events they narrate—to Mark, and, it may be, to Q and to Proto-Luke. But these works, real and hypothetical, were not written on the morrow of the crucifixion; what of the Christian tradition between the events of the life and death of Jesus and the first written productions? Questions of this kind led to the development of the method of *Formgeschichte* by Bultmann,

Dibelius, Schmidt, Albertz, and others. Taylor, casting round for a method of exploring the primitive Christian tradition, came upon their work, and in a course of public lectures given at Leeds expounded, criticized, and popularized it. The lectures were published as a book (*The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 1933) which has been for many British students their introduction to form criticism. It is fair to say that but for the work of the German *Formgeschichtler* the book would not have taken the form that it did, though there is no doubt that Taylor was already interested in the pre-literary stages of the gospel tradition, and manifested critical independence in his use of the method. But his book was in two senses a courageous one: on the one hand, Taylor, though he acknowledged his indebtedness, did not hesitate to dispute with leading German scholars; on the other, he introduced to English-speaking readers an unfamiliar method which must have seemed to many of them to cut the ground from under their confidence in the gospels as historical documents, and in Jesus as a historical figure. Taylor himself was perhaps more confident on these historical issues than his German contemporaries and many of the succeeding generation of British scholars, but he did not stop to ask about the possible consequences of a new historical and literary method. It was aimed at truth and offered a contribution to the stock of human knowledge and ingenuity, and this was a good enough reason—the only good reason—for making use of it.

Taylor once said to me, 'Do you not feel that, even if there were nothing more in it than a literary puzzle, New Testament scholarship would be the most fascinating pursuit in the world?' There is no doubt how he would have answered his hypothetical question; equally no doubt that for him it was a hypothetical question and that New Testament scholarship was a great deal more than a game in which the counters were literary or form critical units. 'In the end', theology. He had given years of study to the literary problems; it was time to harvest the theological results, and within a few years three books appeared, each of them among the most substantial works of biblical theology in its period. Again, as throughout Taylor's life, the progression of his thought was perfectly clear, orderly, and logical. His critical studies had been directed to the gospels, and it was to the theological significance of the gospel account of Jesus, and particularly of his death, that he now turned his attention. The death of Jesus and the doctrine of the atonement have always been at the centre of theological debate: what did Jesus himself

teach about this theme? In *Jesus and his Sacrifice* (1937) Taylor examines all the relevant sayings attributed to Jesus, using the historical and literary methods in which he had become an expert, but now for the first time adds a sustained effort both to provide a theological exegesis of the texts, and to bring them together into a systematic unity. It was an influential book, and if to the present generation of undergraduates it appears somewhat dated, this is because it led to a discussion which has lasted thirty years and attracted contributions from almost all the New Testament scholars of the period. The line of development continued. *Jesus and his Sacrifice* was primarily a study of the gospels, but the gospels are not the whole of the New Testament, and *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (1940) followed, again bearing witness to the fact that along with technical study of New Testament criticism there had gone a good deal of reading in the history of doctrine and systematic theology. This book, expounding an objective doctrine of the atonement, called for a subjective counterpart, dealing with the appropriation of the benefits of the atonement. This followed in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (1941).

This trilogy, which established Taylor's fame as a biblical theologian, marks the conclusion of a stage in his achievement. There follows an interval in the bibliography, due partly to the many distractions of years of war, and partly to the fact that Taylor had embarked upon the greatest single work he undertook, the writing of a commentary on Mark for the series published by Macmillan. During the war the supply of candidates for the ministry inevitably dwindled and eventually ceased. One Methodist theological college after another closed. Administrative and other problems multiplied, in due course Headingley shared the fate of other colleges, and Taylor resumed the duties of a circuit minister. The war ended, the college reopened, and the work of the Principal was increased rather than diminished. Throughout this period, with tough determination, though also with the pleasure of relief from less enjoyable tasks, he worked at the text of Mark, never failing to write at least one page a day. He would speak of the valuable discipline of writing a commentary. 'When you are writing any other kind of book you can choose your own material. When you are writing a commentary you must deal with it all, whether it suits your theories or not.' The commentary, replacing that of H. B. Swete (1898), was published in 1952; there had been no English gospel commentary on the same scale

since Bernard's *John* (1928). Its greatest strength lies in the mass of information it presents. Little of value published within the few preceding decades had escaped the author; small print and economy of diction enabled him to collect material for textual criticism, philological details, and the most important critical opinions regarding Mark's sources, and the historical value of their contents. Taylor did not hesitate to express his own views on the questions raised, these are always well informed and cautious, liberal in manner, for Taylor was always prepared to follow the question wherever it might lead and valued the work of the 'liberals', and often conservative in content, for he made no effort to pursue the novel for its own sake. He believed that it was possible to some extent to reconstruct the materials Mark used, and from them to work back to a trustworthy account of the life and teaching of Jesus—a primitive account of such theological content as to make credible the later development of Christian thought without resort to improbable theories of hellenistic and oriental influence. It has been said that the commentary marks the end of an epoch, rather than a new beginning, and there is point in this criticism, criticism which is adverse only on the assumption that the new era of gospel study is in all respects superior to the old—a judgement whose truth is by no means self-evident. The criticism could be illustrated by comparison between Taylor's commentary, which garners the results of a generation of study of the gospel and adds Taylor's own views, expressed in essentially the same idiom, and Käsemann's *Das Problem des historischen Jesus*, published at approximately the same time (1954). The two would have found it difficult to share each other's point of view, though it is by no means impossible to learn from both.

The next steps in Taylor's work as a scholar were directed to further study of the life, teaching, and person of Jesus, but, not surprisingly, they show few features of what has been called the 'new quest of the historical Jesus', which Käsemann's article may be said to have set in motion. Taylor had never given up the old quest, though he recognized that a 'life of Jesus' of the old-fashioned kind was something that the sources at our disposal did not make possible. It was his election as Speaker's Lecturer at Oxford (1951–6), a gesture of recognition from an ancient university that gave him, who held only external degrees from a modern one, much pleasure, that provided the occasion and setting for his last group of major works: *The Names of Jesus* (1953), *The Life and Ministry of Jesus* (1954), and *The*

Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching (1958). Nothing could more clearly indicate the style of Taylor's work, and the unity that runs through it from beginning to end, than the Preface to the first of these books.

Harnack speaks sarcastically of the way men soar away into sublime discussions concerning the meaning of 'the Kingdom of God', 'the Son of Man', 'Messiahship', and other problems, 'while the "lower" problems, whose treatment involves real scavenger's labour, in which one is almost choked with dust, are passed by on the other side'. . . . These charges . . . are worth recalling today when there is a temptation to enter too quickly into the realms of Biblical theology and to be intoxicated by the lure of Typology. Having spent a considerable part of my life as 'a scavenger' among 'the dust', I can heartily endorse Harnack's warning. I do not think we are likely to make much progress in criticism and theology if we elect to be black-coated workmen. We must certainly have the insight and imagination to discern the larger issues, but we are least likely to be betrayed by the creative urge if we have first patiently collected and sat down before the basic facts (pp. v f.).

From beginning to end Taylor was happy and proud to be a 'scavenger', for he knew that no detail of Scripture was too insignificant to be instructive, and he was impatient with a *kerygma* that did not rest on a solid historical foundation. Perhaps he did not give sufficient weight to the force and variety of the pressures that moulded the Christian tradition about Jesus; certainly we may regret that the necessity of covering a good deal of ground in a few lectures prevented the use of all the material gained in a lifetime's 'scavenging'. For example, Taylor could well have filled all the 175 pages of *The Names of Jesus*, and not a bare 11 of them, with a discussion of the controversial term 'Son of man'. It would not have been such a discussion as Harnack would have deplored, and readers would have valued a full statement of Taylor's mature views on the subject.

Taylor always felt that his scavenging among the details of the biblical texts gave him his right to speak as a theologian. It may be that he was inclined to be intolerant of those who arrived at their theological pronouncements in some other way; perhaps it is not necessary to write books on source and form criticism before venturing into the theological field. But undoubtedly this was the way for him, and he pursued it with indefatigable industry, single-minded integrity, and conspicuous ability. Moreover, he was justified by the results he achieved. Taylor's books are likely still to be read when some of their flashier contemporaries

are forgotten, because the piling up of factual and exegetical observation on which they rest was done with conscientious accuracy, and the deductions he drew from his observations were prompted by a powerful common-sense intelligence. He was essentially a biblical scholar, he had no specialist acquaintance with the non-biblical religions of antiquity, and comparison of his commentary on Mark with Swete's shows diminished attention to the patristic material of which Swete was a master. But what Taylor knew he knew intimately and in detail, and used with great skill. His concentration on the New Testament texts led him as a scholar to the concentration on the figure of Jesus that runs through all his published work, and here too the integrity of the man appears, for in this his learning and his religion were at one. It would be wrong so to emphasize his work in the New Testament field as to overlook his capacity as a systematic theologian. In Christology he revived and defended a form of kenoticism, and justified it as consistent alike with the historical data about Jesus and with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Only on the assumption that the divine attributes are potential rather than active does a true incarnation seem possible. If the Son comes into the world omniscient and omnipotent, His coming is a theophany; if He completely strips Himself of these attributes, He is downgraded to the level of a man. In the one case the humanity is a semblance; in the other the divinity is lost; in neither case is there a veritable incarnation of the Son of God. This dilemma is resolved in a Christology in which these attributes are latent, conditioned in operation by the circumstances of a truly human existence (*The Person of Christ*, p. 294).

He taught a sacrificial doctrine of the atonement that owed much to M'Leod Campbell and Moberly, though it was also independent of them.

The work of Christ is vicarious because it is representative; it is representative because it is sacrificial (*The Atonement*, p. 290).

Taylor began an active retirement in 1953. In addition to being Speaker's Lecturer at Oxford he was Visiting Professor in New Testament Studies at Drew University, New Jersey (1955-6), and much enjoyed the year in America. He became a Fellow of the Academy in 1954, and an honorary Doctor of Divinity of Leeds, Dublin, and Glasgow. The Leeds doctorate was a due recognition not only of his learning but of the contribution he had made to the study of theology in the university from his

position in a theological college associated with it. He received the Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies in 1960.

There were many who found conversation with Taylor difficult, and even daunting, but willingness to speak, however incompetently, about New Testament criticism and theology was a ready passport to his confidence, and to those who knew him he would talk freely and entertainingly on many topics, though he never tired of returning to the themes that were both work and recreation to him. A dry sense of humour was never far beneath the surface. During the war, when theological colleges were closing and government departments had an insatiable eye for unoccupied, or potentially unoccupied, buildings, he had, as a college Principal, to withstand telephonic siege of his premises. 'So-and-so, of such-and-such a department, rang me up today,' he would say with a chuckle, 'but I put him off, I told him I couldn't give him a decision till I had consulted the Resident Tutor'—Taylor himself, of course, under another title! Those war years (when I came to know him) were years when hospitality was a particularly difficult virtue, but not only did the usual round of college entertaining continue; young men giving up part of a vacation to college fire-watching were welcomed warmly into the peaceful and happy home that Mrs Taylor had made for her husband and their daughter. Here he was most at his ease—a fact that must in part be blamed for his reluctance, which many regretted, to take part in public functions; he rarely attended the meetings of the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, which were poorer for his absence, and did not do so even in the year (1954) in which he was its President.

This life of domestic contentment, of patient industry and high academic achievement, and of staunch Christian faith, ended on 28 November 1968.

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