

# The gospel myth of Christian origins

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## Abstract

*In Burton Mack's latest book, entitled "The Christian myth. Origins, logic, and legacy", he raises challenging arguments with regard to those issues of the Christian myth mentioned in the title. The aim of this review article is to by means of this book introduce the reader to his research. In the first part of the article, Mack's viewpoint and argument are summarized and in the second part, it discusses the research of the literarkritische formgeschichtlichen German researchers who paved the way.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Burton Mack's latest book *The Christian myth. Origins, logic, and legacy* traces his intellectual evolution, from a creative analyst of ancient texts, to a scholar searching for the motives and interests of Jesus' followers who composed those texts, and the social logic of the Christian myths they created. Traditionally the gospel is known as the story that documents the origins, reveals the logic, and constitutes the legacy of the Christian faith. With this experiment of Mack (2003:17) he asks the reader of his book to see differently!

The first challenge for Mack (2003:18) to consider the gospel as myth is that the customary direction of cause and effect at the beginning of Christianity will have to be turned around. The gospel will no longer be the document that tells the story of Christian origins. The portrayal of Jesus in the gospels will have to be seen as myth and accounted for as mythmaking. The second challenge has to do with the need for developing a theory of religion that runs counter to the way in which religion is understood by most Christians. It means that, in order to understand the logic of the gospel as myth, one has to reconstruct the social situation in which it first came together. The third challenge is to take a sweep through the legacy of the Christian

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myth for the past two thousand years to ask about the way it has worked and continues to work even in our era.

All people tell stories about their past that set the stage for their own time and place in a larger world (Mack 2003:11). For some reason early Christians came to think of their own stories of the God of Israel and father of Jesus as true in a way that made all of the stories of other peoples false and dangerous. It was not long before Christians used the term “belief” to express their acceptance of the truth of the gospel story (Mack 2003:13). Only the stories of the gods of other people were called myths. The gospel story, by contrast, was referred to as the gospel and it was imagined as “true” in ways that other myths were not (Mack 2003:17).

That it was a story of the gods, in some ways like other stories of the gods and heroes known to all in the Greco-Roman age, is clear. But one of its features that Christians were expected to believe, was that the high god of the gospels had plans to expand his kingdom and rule over the whole world, and that the inaugural event happened “under Pontius Pilate”. This introduced a combination of *mythos* and *historia* which is very tight, and especially so in that the event of importance was definitely dated and of recent, not archaic history. This is an exceptionally odd feature of the Christian myth, and Christian apologists have always used it to claim that the gospel is not “myth,” but “history.” However, Mack (2003:13) made it clear in his book that the “setting in history” of the gospel story is one of its more obvious mythic features.

For long it was taken for granted that the gospels were the confused attempts of early Christians to write a biography, and that the task of the modern scholar was to correct their mistakes by critical reconstruction and rearrangement (Mack 2003:27). But according to Bultmann, it was not possible to know anything about the historical Jesus except for the fact that (*Dass*) there had been an historical Jesus, and that he had proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom of God (see Ashcraft 1972:47). This point of view was unacceptable for a great deal of American scholars, and a new quest for the historical Jesus started.

## **2. MACK AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS**

First Mack acknowledges the work done by scholars such as Robert Funk, Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Richard Horsley, E P Sanders, and Paula Fredriksen. He then criticises them for not producing “any agreement about a textual data base from which to work” (Mack 2003:34). He also points out that “none of the profiles proposed for the historical Jesus can account for all the

movements, ideologies, and mythic figures that dot the early Christian social landscape” (Mack 2003:35).

Mack rejects depictions of Jesus that have emerged from the quest for the “historical Jesus” such as peasant teacher, revolutionary leader, mystical visionary or miracle-working prophet, on the grounds that they are based on a priori assumptions about Jesus, and are therefore contradictory. He argues that these portrayals are untrue to the many images of Jesus produced by the early Christians.

According to Mack (2003:36) then, the link is missing between the historical Jesus as reconstructed by scholars and the many figures imagined and produced by early Christians. It thus means that the quest has failed. The object of the quest has purportedly been to remove the, as Mack (2003:35) calls it “fantastic and miraculous features of the Christ myth and gospel from the ‘real Jesus of history,’” and to account for the diversity of mythic claims about him. But no reconstruction of the historical Jesus has done or can do that.

Another criticism of Mack (2003:36) is that “the link between the teachings of Jesus on the one hand and the story of his crucifixion on the other is missing.” None of the scholars that start with the sayings of Jesus has ever been able to account for the crucifixion of Jesus on the basis of those teachings. When put together, the teachings and the crucifixion should make sense, but they do not.

Mack’s (2003:38) fourth criticism on the quest is that the assumption from the public and the books published were that “Christian faith and self-understanding” could be rectified and rejuvenated by the search for the historical Jesus because an uncontaminated Jesus can provide an account of Christian origins. But it cannot.

### **3. THE QUEST FOR CHRISTIAN ORIGINS**

According to Mack (2003:40) we need to start over with the quest for Christian origins and the place to start is with the observation that the New Testament texts are inadequate for a Jesus quest. They are data for an entirely different phenomenon. The notion that one source accounts entirely for Christian origins must thus be dismissed. The texts are data for early Christian mythmaking and to read them with a historical Jesus interest is to misread them.

Mack (2003:42) argues that the New Testament, far from representing historical facts, is the product of a process in which the countercultural sayings of Jesus were transformed into a universally acceptable myth. He has taken on the daunting task of explaining the social structure of the world in

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which the New Testament was written and how it affected and influenced its writers. Accordingly, Mack takes into account the general influence of the disruption of society by the rise of the Greek and Roman empires, and specifically the influence of the destruction of the Jewish Temple State (Mack 2003:52). These factors, Mack (2003:105) asserts, led to a social need to invent an entirely new theology that could compete in the pagan Roman world of late antiquity, and at the same time accrue to itself the extensive history of the Jews and their religion. Using modern anthropological and social psychological insights as a backdrop, along with his own extensive professional knowledge of the New Testament, Mack succeeds in devising a very credible explanation of a mythology that was capable of raising an obscure Jewish sect into a world-changing power and, as Mack (2003:198) points out, that power is still very much in evidence when one considers the popularity of such phenomena as creationism in modern day America. To that I would add the remarkable staying power of fundamentalism in the face of modern biblical scholarship.

## **4. MACK AND THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Christianity began, according to Christian imagination when Jesus entered the world, performed miracles, called disciples, taught them about the kingdom of God, challenged the Jewish establishment, was crucified, appeared after his resurrection, established the church, and sent the apostles out on a mission to convince the Jews and gentiles to convert into thinking that God had planned the whole thing in order to start a new religion (Mack 2003:59). According to Mack (2003:60) this point of view is no longer sustainable. The time has come to account for Christian origins some other way. A redescription of Christian beginnings is necessary, one that has to account for the emergence of the gospels themselves. It can be done by turning the gospels into interesting products of early Christian thinking instead of letting them determine the parameters within which all of our data find a place to rest.

According to Mack (2003:42), the only items in the gospels genuinely deriving from Jesus are collections of pithy aphorisms, labeled Q by scholars for over a century, that focus on a very this-worldly, social concept of the kingdom of God. Mack (2003:107) envisages the existence of various groups of "Jesus people," such as those whose Jewish influence can be seen in Matthew's Gospel or others, of a distinctly Gnostic bent, who produced the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, discovered in 1945.

The Christianity of the New Testament, we are told, was a sophisticated myth that grew out of the groups' need to show that their kingdom of God movement had the backing of the God of Israel, even though

it repudiated the ethnic exclusiveness of traditional Judaism. Mack (2003:120) argues that Paul's letter to the Galatians is the first elaboration of the Christ myth's logic that gentiles could belong to Israel. In this scenario, the formation of the Christian Bible as a closed "canon" of inspired writings was due to the demands of Constantine, who wanted Christianity to be a monolithic state religion throughout his empire.

Mack (2003:172) hopes that his demythologising the Christian Bible will enable Americans to treat it in a less simplistic way, but some of his premises will alienate many believers, e.g. that Jesus' teachings must have been purely social and that the gospel accounts of his miracles are "preposterous." Although he makes a plausible case, Mack never gets near to actually proving that his version of Jesus lies behind the extant texts.

## **5. THE SOCIAL SETTINGS AS ANSWER**

A new theory of religion, one based on social situations must be launched. Using systematic analysis, Mack (2003:60) seeks to describe and understand the cultural and anthropological influences on the conception and adoption of Christian myths and rituals. This analysis must take into account the conditions in which Christian origins emerged. We need to understand the process of social formation and myth making that underlay the foundation of building a church. Scholars must abandon the "notion of divine intervention miracle" which is such a significant source of how Christians view the world (Mack 2003:104). Instead, the same academic rigor shown in the investigations of other mythologies must be applied to the Christian one.

A major element long omitted from Christian scholarship is the upheavals Eastern Mediterranean society endured. The Jews, subjected to incessant invasions and exiles, were amenable to a healer's voice. Jesus, who probably lived, became the focus of scattered and disparate groups of students recording, discussing and distributing his teachings. Essential to understanding Christian origins are the document known as the "Q" teachings (2003:56). These may have survived for a time as a collection, but incorporated into the Synoptic Gospels in various ways. Fundamental in this process, Mack proposes, is the redefinition of society found in these writings. The redefinition uses four devices to accomplish its goal. Mack (2003:155) calls them the "building blocks of a monocratic mythology." These are the concepts of God, Christ, the church, and the Bible.

By recycling and re-interpreting the Jewish scriptures, the Christians came to the conclusion in their redefinition that Jesus as the Christ (Messiah), and the church as the new Israel, had been the proper goals of the story of Israel all along. The church was exactly what the God of Israel had in mind

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from the creation of the world (Mack 2003:160). Therefore the God of Israel is also the father of Jesus. This can all be read in the Bible, but only if you read the Bible as an allegory with the “true” meaning “hidden” (Mack 2003:161).

Since single ancestral gods are almost a human universal, the transformation of one of these into one, absolute and uncompromising, deity was a major innovation. While the Jews had adopted, and sometimes cast aside, a variety of deities in their history, the writers of the Synoptic gospels declared such indulgent practices unacceptable. Now, using the figure of Jesus as an instrument to lever a local concept into a global one, a new, absolute divinity acts as a canopy over all people. This approach set off the expansion of intolerance unfinished today. Mack (2003:139) declares this monocratic method “audacious” in scope.

In order to further the idea of restructuring society as a divine manifestation, the gospel narratives added the fiction of miracles and resurrection to the earlier “Q” teachings. By building on widely known stories of “kings’ sons” performing prodigious feats, the gospel writers display their knowledge of their intended audiences. Nothing truly innovative was introduced beyond the idea that this god and his son were actually one. The one being the universal deity, however, placed it in a position of universal judge of all humanity. Mack (2003:109) finds the amalgamation and use of miracles as “proof” a “fantastic” stroke of creative writing.

As the various Jesus groups debated just what Jesus said, and what those sayings meant, they exchanged ideas among the neighboring ones. These schools of Jesus, which crossed the recognised cultural boundaries of the Near East, became “communities” of commonly-held views. Having moved “outside” their traditional allegiances, these communities generated a new “super state.” As the gospel narratives were circulated among its “citizens” a new social structure, which Mack labels (2003:159) “imperious” emerged within the Roman Imperium.

Finally, and to Mack (2003:122) a major consideration, the Bible narratives became the tool for completing the social restructuring. It became, he says, “an epic charter” by rewriting history while redefining society. The Jewish Bible was transformed into a collection of forecasts of Jesus arrival. At the same time it condemned the Jews for not reading the signals. This allowed the Jesus movement to abandon its Jewish roots and embrace the Gentile community. The use of textual form granted credibility to this approach. Christian writers were then able to define history to suit their agenda. By declaring their history the only true one, they used this fiction as a bludgeon for conversion.

## 6. AMERICA AND THE MYTH

At this point, Mack (2003:183) narrows his audience to citizens of his own country. He then asks the question: How does the myth building process of Christianity apply to people of the United States? He provides a brief summary of expressions of the bits of the Christian myth. This is followed by how it has been applied there. Tracing its roots is difficult, since the Enlightenment, not Christianity, is usually seen as the more significant influence. Thus, Christianity was considered an essential element in North American society from the theft of the land from indigenous peoples through the hypocrisies of slavery to “manifest destiny.” Mack concludes with the warning that the Christian call for conversion and obedience is invalid in today’s “multiethnic, multicultural world.” It is a caution that needs wide expression and acceptance.

## 7. WHO PAVED THE WAY?

For Mack (2003:112) then the answer to the origin of the Christian myth is the practical situation in society. He boils it down to the congregation of mixed constituency who saw themselves as the people of God. This created a Jewish question which could only be answered with a Greek answer of “faithfulness unto death” and “apotheosis.” The rest of the myth followed this logic.

Mack’s answer makes a lot of sense to me and it explains the whole evolution and growth of the myth and its narratives. But, long before Mack started to search for his answer in the social circumstances of the first congregations, the *literarkritische formgeschichtlichen* German researchers did so as well. They made us aware of the fact that the synoptic Gospels were composed of small self-contained units and they made us aware of these small units’ sociological importance. In the rest of this article I want to concentrate on their contribution, because when understanding their research, one also understands Mack’s conclusions even better.

Form criticism is a sociological approach to understanding a text. A text is only understood when the narrating community is drawn into the exegesis and when the social settings have been recognized. The sociological setting refers according to Gerhard Iber (cf Güttgemanns 1979:54) to a societal reality, which has become customary through its use in a particular culture and which plays such a definite role for speakers and hearers or writers and readers that the utilization of a particular linguistic genre becomes necessary. Therefore, one can state with Dibelius (in Güttgemanns 1979:54) that it was not the personality of the individual evangelist that determines the formalizing of the material, but rather the collective, the congregation, that creates

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particular genres. Form criticism according to Schmidt (in Güttgemanns 1979:53) talks thus about the community out of whose collective life the literature was composed.

Mack argues thus correctly when he uses the text as a window to look through. What one should actually see is the world behind the text. One must always remember, as Gunkel (cf Güttgemanns 1979:237) said that the oldest genres did not originate on paper, but in life, therefore they were brief and short units. It was the expression of particular occasions of actual life. The sociological setting is, according to Bultmann (1963:368) the relation of a literary segment to a general historic situation out of which the genre that belongs to that segment developed. The sociological setting of the gospel narratives for instance was the preaching and life in the early congregations. First, I would say, there was the Easter faith. Where the *kerygma* of the Easter faith was proclaimed, people believed. These believers shared the *kerygma* with others and they also believed. Then, the social need of people who believed the *kerygma* and who want to hear more, caused them to form a congregation. And then, the tradition was born, according to Dibelius (cf Güttgemanns 1979:373) out of the desire to illustrate the preaching. This social situation started a whole evolution. As the congregation grew and an institution came into being, the church needed material for edification, paraenesis, church discipline, propaganda, apologetic, and preaching (Bultmann 1963:368). All of these sociological situations in real life asked for forms. The forms were thus functional for use in the congregations.

The collection of the material, as Mack (2003:48) also said, began in the Palestinian primitive community who created no new literary genres, but took over those long developed within Judaism (Bultmann 1963:368). The small units were arranged within a larger narrative framework and eventually the Christian myth grew out of it.

There were especially three *literarkritische formgeschichtlichen* German researchers who were interested in the *kerygma* of the early church. They were Karl Schmidt, Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann. They were especially interested in the pre-literary stages of the small units of the gospel narratives (Vorster 1982:97), and the *Sitz im Leben* out of which these small units arose.

Since the oral Jesus, tradition was filtered through Christian preaching and worship in a Greek world, form critics concluded that the stories and sayings in the gospels reveal more about the early Christian community than about the historical Jesus himself. Mack (2003:39) underlined this fact as well.



Dibelius, Schmidt, and Bultmann believed that the literary form of the individual pericope was a key to the text's *Sitz im Leben* (Osborne 1984:26). The different *Sitz im Leben* of the early church called for *Gattungen*. The early church was no longer Israel. It was a *kerygmatic* community, who needed *Gattungen* to say that the old had passed, there is now something new. It was a cult formed around a cultic figure, namely Jesus, and the *kerygma* of this cult was the death and resurrection of Jesus. This death-and-resurrection-event made the "new" a reality. It made a new way to live in relationship with God a possibility. This new cult needed texts. They needed an etiological narrative to legitimise their existence. Easter is the bottom line of this narrative. Out of the *kerygma* of Easter developed texts. As time went by some authority was given to these texts. Later, they were united in a collection and they received the status of a canon.

The three *formgeschichtlichen* scholars mentioned above, has each their own theory on how this foundational myth developed into what we today call the gospel narrative. I will, in what follows shortly discuss these theories, because their contributions enrich the viewpoint of Mack.

### 7.1 Karl Ludwig Schmidt

While deconstructing the gospel narratives, Karl Ludwig Schmidt realized that there was a narrative framework in use in the early Church. The *Gattung* of this framework was that of a biography, more specific that of a martyr's biography. This framework consist of the *Erzählung vom Tode des Täufers* and the narrative about the *Tod und Auferstehung und der Kindheit Jesu* (Vielhauer 1981:23). The rest of the gospel narratives can be broken down to isolated pericopes. According to Schmidt (Vielhauer 1981:17), the passion narrative is the oldest unity in the Gospels. These isolated pericopes (*Einzelerzählungen*) were joined together in a narrative by the earliest congregations.

Because the *Sitz im Leben* of each congregation differs, the gospel narrative and the order in which the pericopes were joined, differs as well. The pericopes were joined to the narrative framework like pearls that are laced into a string. If the string holding them together is broken, the pearls may be reassembled in another order without changing the nature of the string of pearls. Thus, the Gospels in Schmidt's (1923:159) view are collections of pericopes loosely strung together by the gospel writers. The narratives are thus *volkstümlicher Literatur* that was shaped by the *Sitz im Leben* of the congregation. Mack (2003:104) stresses the same point when he argues that the origin of the Christian myth was the stories of Israel reinterpreted for a new congregation.

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Schmidt did not try to reconstruct the historical Jesus. He tried to reconstruct the *kerygmatic* Jesus Christ based on the consensus between the *kerygma* and the form in which the gospel narrative was transmitted. This Christological *kerygma* is the *geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit* (Vielhauer 1981:20). That is what the canon is all about. According to Schmidt, the Christological *kerygma* is the canon, not a traditional collection of books. "*Kanonisch ist, was mit dem so gefassten Kerygma übereinstimmt, apokryph, was nicht mit ihm übereinstimmt*" (Vielhauer 1981:22).

Thus, for Schmidt, the genesis of the Christian myth is the Christological *kerygma*. If there were no *kerygma*, there would have been no gospel (Vorster 1982:99). This *kerygma* was transmitted within the framework of the biographical martyr narrative of Jesus and John (Schmidt 1923:159). The evangelist joined all the other pericopes to this framework in the sequence that addressed the *Sitz im Leben* of the congregation the best. The passion was thus the first *Gattung* in the *kerygma* and the rest of the Gospel was a prelude to the *kerygma*.

### **7.2 Martin Dibelius**

Martin Dibelius also recognized that the Gospels are collections of material, which was chosen, limited, and finally shaped by the evangelists but not given by them their original molding. He also laid great emphasis upon preaching in the early church as the medium of transmission of the tradition of Jesus' words and deeds. The materials contained in the Gospels were selected from a much larger mass of recollections that the very earliest followers of Jesus possessed. According to Dibelius (1939:vi) these recollections were handed on because of their usefulness in preaching. In the beginning, Dibelius said, there was the sermon! The actual content of the tradition turns out, upon examination, to be all related to preaching (Dibelius 1971:9). This argument of Dibelius underlines a problem that I have with Mack. The Christian myth is not only a sociological declaration to legitimise a certain type of constituency in society. It is in the first instance a spiritual narrative which relates to a certain group's faith in whom they call God. The myth's first field of operation is thus in the congregation related to the preaching!

Dibelius' analysis of the Gospels' portraits of John the Baptist convinced him that these were not historical reports but passages designed for Christian preaching. The portraits of Jesus were according to him, developed for the same purpose (Dibelius 1971:2). Thus, the Gospels can never be regarded as history.

The gospel writers were according to Dibelius not authors but collectors. They did not fabricate their preaching material but merely polished the elements of previous oral traditions (Dibelius 1929:24). Mack and Dibelius have consensus on this issue. Dibelius insisted that nothing is remembered or communicated without some form and that the form in which something is preserved shapes the content. He distinguished two basic kinds of stories in the gospel namely paradigms and tales (Dibelius 1971:11). Paradigms are example stories designed for preachers, and storytellers for entertainment designed tales or novelle of miracles. In explaining how the Gospels were composed out of paradigms and tales, he insisted that the prime motivation was each writer's own theology of history. Thus, as Mack said, myth reinterpreted to address an issue in society.

The Gospels were, according to Dibelius (1939:xvii), written a generation or two after Jesus. When they arose, the Christian church already had a knowledge of Jesus. Stories about him and sayings from his lips circulated both orally, and in writing, were memorised and were read in public worship. The Gospels were not written by their authors upon their own responsibility and all at one sitting, they were compiled out of these narratives and sayings that were already in use. At first, Dibelius (1939:123) said, that there was no account of Jesus' career comparable to a biography instead; there were only the separate narratives, single sayings, groups of sayings, and parables.

The origin of these earliest traditions is most closely connected with the faith of the early Christians, but not so closely with their knowledge. In spite of the fact that they were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, they did not become biographers. That is proved by the mosaic character of the contents of the Gospels and by the absence of the ordinary biographical data and of every trace of personal recollection (Dibelius 1939:124). The authors of the tradition were according to Dibelius (1939:127) rather preachers than biographers.

For Dibelius Christian faith is Easter faith. It was the Empty Tomb and Emmaus legends that made present and real the Easter faith of the earliest community (Dibelius 1939:181). It was for him in particular the Emmaus legend that made vivid the powerful change that had taken place, from doubt to faith. Out of this legend, the whole Jesus tradition started to develop (Dibelius 1935:75). The Emmaus legend was like a nucleus out of which everything else developed. All the elements for the life of the congregation are present in the narrative, namely the preaching of the prophets, the breaking of the bread, the passion, the resurrection, et cetera.

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But even older than the Easter faith is, according to Dibelius (1949:125) the “*Überzeugung, dass Jesus nicht im Tode geblieben sei, dass er jetzt bei Gott weile und dass er als Messias-Menschensohn wiederkommen werde.*”

According to Dibelius (1939:181) the “how” of the Easter event is left unsaid. It is only the faith in the Risen One that is of interest. That is the content of the preaching. The Christian message does not close with the account of Jesus’ death, but with the witness to his resurrection. It is also important to emphasize that the Christian religion has no account of the resurrection but only various stories relating its effect. The preacher of this message could hardly have been satisfied with such brevity. If he was to substantiate what was thus stated, he must have made use of narrative (Dibelius 1939:131).

Thus, with Easter as the meta-narrative and the Emmaus legend as nucleus the rest of the narrative started to develop on an evolutionistic way. One pericope asked for the next, and so the narrative grew.

The passion narrative seems thus for Mack and Dibelius to be the oldest unity and oldest narrative in the tradition. “*Die Leidensgeschichte ist der einzige grössere Abschnitt in den Evangelien, der Begebenheiten im geschlossenen Zusammenhang erzählt*” (Dibelius 1949:118). According to Dibelius (1939:145), we must assume that the passion narrative was already in existence before the Gospel of Mark was written. The preacher used the narrative. He further gave examples of Jesus’ deeds and mighty works of healing, since it is these that proved that God was with him (Dibelius 1939:131) and this is how authority was given to the *kerygma* of the cult.

The preaching of the *kerygma* asked for more detail. “Those early communities were not concerned with the writing of history, but with the preaching of the gospel – and whatever proclaimed the meaning of that message was welcomed by them” (Dibelius 1939:159). That is why Dibelius (1949:6) could say: “*Die Gesichtspunkte des Glaubens und der Geschichte lassen sich nicht einfach verbinden. Man kann nicht das, was der Glaube sagt, geschichtlich beweisen. Glaube wäre ja nicht Glaube, wenn man ihn jedem anbeweisen könnte.*”

### **7.3 Rudolf Bultmann**

The form critical approach of Rudolf Bultmann does not differ essentially from that of Martin Dibelius. According to Bultmann the aim of form criticism is to determine the original form of a piece of narrative, a dominical saying or a parable (Bultmann 1921:231). He summarised certain presuppositions, which are now to be taken for granted, such as the following: (a) Mark is the oldest of the four Gospels and even Mark is the work of an author who is steeped in the theology of the early church [Mack’s social experimentation (2003:104)];

(b) there is a fundamental assumption that the synoptic tradition consists of individual stories or groups of stories joined together in the gospels by the work of the editors; (c) the distinction between traditional and editorial material in the Gospels is an established procedure; (d) the respective literary form which the form critic assigns to the respective gospel units is a sociological concept and not an aesthetic one, although one piece of the tradition is seldom to be classified unambiguously in a single category; (e) form criticism has to move in a circle, inasmuch as the forms of the literary tradition must be used to establish the influences operating in the life of the community, and the life of the community must be used to render the forms themselves intelligible (Bultmann 1921:241). The immediate historical effect of Bultmann's research was to put the brakes on most research on the life of Jesus for the next half century, because, to analyse the life of any person one needs historically reliable data and a chronologically accurate sequence of material. So, if the gospel stories and sayings were molded by early Christian preachers for situations after Jesus died and, if the narrative framework of the Gospels was created by even later writers, then writing a historically accurate biography of Jesus is virtually impossible.

Bultmann argues that we must allow the tradition of Jesus, as it stands assembled in the Gospels, to speak for itself. The Christian church called by the word and ever and again reconstituted by the word, does indeed need tradition (Bultmann 1955:119). It must say what it has to tell us, especially about the conditions under which it arose. This is also what Mack is interested in.

To understand Bultmann, one has to make the distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. "*Historie* designates what actually happened. It points to those events which take place in the cause-effect and which can be studied by historians employing scientific methods" (Ashcraft 1972:35). By contrast, *Geschichte* designates an event of history, which continues to have influence or meaning on later persons and events. "It deals with the encounter of persons, and its emphasis is on the personal meaning of events, or existential history" (Ashcraft 1972:36). Mack pays attention to both *Historie* and *Geshichte* in his experiment. The *Historie* he traces back to the social settings in the first century of the common era, and the *Geschichte* is still evident for him in present day America.

Bultmann rejects *Historie* as the basis for faith and contends that Christian faith is grounded in the *geschichtliche* event of Christ. The only sources that we have to study the history of Jesus are the Gospels, and in them Christ was presented as the one in which the disciples believed. He was Lord and Savior. They were not interested in the scientific *Historie*, but rather

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in the great events as an event of *Geschichte*, which had profound meaning for their lives (Ashcraft 1972:43).

The basic reason why Bultmann rejected *Historie* as the basis of faith is that he believes God spoke and speaks now to man through the proclamation of the Christ event (Ashcraft 1972:36). It thus all boils down to the *kerygma*.

Of greatest significance in Bultmann's understanding of the historical Jesus are two theological factors. The one is according to Ashcraft (1972:46) that he thinks that the theology of the New Testament deals with the Christ of the *kerygma* and not with the historical Jesus. Secondly, Bultmann thinks that the nature of faith makes the historical Jesus irrelevant.

The theology of the New Testament, largely from Paul and John, deals with Christ of the *kerygma* and not with the historical Jesus. "Paul was not influenced by the historical Jesus directly or indirectly. He based his claim to apostolic authority (Gl 1:12-17) not upon his knowledge of or acquaintance with the historical Jesus but upon an appearance of the risen Lord (see Van Stempvoort 1972:22-25). In all of his writings, he claimed the authority of Jesus' teachings in only two instances (1 Cor 7:10f; 1 Cor 9:14), and these are not crucial for faith" (Ashcraft 1972:46).

Paul preached that Jesus had come, died, and had been raised. This was the proclamation he had heard, and he was thereby forced to decide whether he would acknowledge that God had acted redemptively in this event. When he decided to acknowledge Christ, he proclaimed what he had heard, which were neither Jesus' own teachings nor information about him, but rather *that* the event had happened and that it was God's saving act. Jesus was not a teacher with a new concept of God, nor a hero or an example. The cross was not a symbol according to Bultmann (Ashcraft 1972:47) but a naked fact of history, in which it was claimed God's judgment and salvation came to man.

In like manner, Christ confronts men only in the proclamation of this gospel. The *kerygma* was the beginning of faith and of the New Testament theology. There was no "Christian" faith before it. Therefore, according to Bultmann (Ashcraft 1972:47), the teachings of Jesus are a part of Judaism, not Christianity. To put it another way, a complete historical knowledge of Jesus' teachings and deeds would not be the *kerygma*, or the occasion of faith. Jesus' message is therefore the presupposition of theology in the New Testament. Christian faith becomes possible only when the Christian *kerygma* proclaims that the Crucified and Risen One was the event of salvation. For Bultmann (cf Painter 1987:166) the *kerygma* is the criterion of authentic existence and is accessible only in the faith of the believing community.

Although Bultmann considers cross and resurrection as a single event, an event of redemption, it needs to be remembered, that he does not regard the resurrection as historical or physical (Painter 1992:169). That does not mean that he rejects the resurrection. Jesus really is risen and the disciples did encounter him, not as an objective event but in some other way. The disciples were convinced that he was risen because of the way believing in him transformed their lives and believing that he was risen is not regarded as believing in an illusion. It is a truth available only in faith. Jesus is risen in the *kerygma* (Painter 1987:172). Christ meets us in the preaching of the cross and the resurrection, according to Bultmann (see Ashcraft 1972:72). This can only mean that the proclamation is a part, or continuation of, the saving act of God. Thus, salvation “happens” only in the proclaiming and hearing of the proclamation of Christ (Johnson 1987:239). So, preaching is God’s saving act, not communicating information about past events which may, or may not, be established apart from faith. It is God’s eschatological event of salvation (Ashcraft 1972:74). This proclamation of the *kerygma* happened in the preaching of the gospel. According to Bultmann (1963:370), Christ who is preached is not the historic Jesus, but the Christ of the faith and the cult. Hence in the foreground of the preaching of Christ stands the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the saving acts that are known by faith, and become effective for the believer in Baptism and Lord’s Supper. It thus happened in the cultic life and cultic gatherings of the congregation. Preaching asks for more than just the *kerygma*. It asks for narratives. Thus for Bultmann did “*Mythus und Kultus verbunden und die Evangelien geformt*” (Schmidt 1981:116). The *kerygma* of Christ is thus cultic legend and the gospels are expanded cult legend. They are expanded illustrations of the motifs of the *kerygma* that one finds in, for example, 1 Cor 11:23-26 and 15:3-7.

## 8. CONCLUSION

What I learned from Mack in this latest book of him is the fact that the spiritual needs of people cannot be divorced from their social and psychological reality. Mack’s viewpoint encompasses more than the historical point of origin of the Christian myth. Myths are universal and their meaning is existential. Therefore one can say that the story of Jesus and the Christ is not a new story. It is a new nuance in an old story. Kerygma as phenomenon existed before Christ and provided many people with spiritual guidance.

The main difference between Mack and the *literarkritische formgeschichtlichen* German researchers is that Mack considers the content of the kerygma to be just one foundational myth amongst many others that were created by early Jesus movements and Christian cults. He tries to offer a

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social explanation of all of these. He complemented and broadened thus our perspectives by adding to the results of scholars like Dibelius and Bultmann. Indeed, an insight to take note of!

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