Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung, by Rainer Riesner. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe 7. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1981. 614 pp. DM 59, paper.

Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (first English edition in 1910) left a pall of uncertainty over the gospels. Schweitzer brilliantly demolished assorted critical attempts to reconstruct the life of Jesus—attempts which made Jesus into late nineteenth century molds established by the various critics. But Schweitzer's own proposal, a Jesus who taught "thoroughgoing eschatology" but who was just plain wrong, did not capture sustained support. Schweitzer was widely and deservedly applauded for his demolition job, while his reconstruction was treated with more reserve. The outcome of his work, therefore, was a profound skepticism in many scholarly quarters as to the possibility of saying *anything* of significance about the historical Jesus.

The ensuing six or seven decades have witnessed many attempts to pierce the curtain which seems (at least to many scholars) to separate us from the Jesus of history. One impetus behind the rise of form criticism was the desire to shed light on the "tunnel period" between the events of Jesus' lifetime and the first writing of New Testament documents—even if form criticism in the hands of more radical users contributed to Bultmann's conclusion that the only historical certainty connected with Jesus' life is an evacuated "dass." The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls contributed to the rehabilitation of the Gospel of John and the "new look"; increasingly sophisticated source and redaction criticism gave birth to the "new quest for the historical Jesus." The so-called "Scandinavian School" of Birger Gerhardsson and Harald Riesenfeld caused a stir by comparing Jesus as a teacher to rabbis roughly contemporary with Jesus' day, in an attempt to argue that Jesus used rabbinic pedagogical techniques which would have guaranteed the substantial retention of what he taught, even long after his death. The theory has more to say for it than some of its critics admit; but it exaggerates the points of comparison between Jesus' teaching techniques and those of the rabbis, while ignoring the substantial differences.

Conservatives, regrouping in the disastrous wake of the fundamentalist/modernist controversies, were for the most part painfully slow and poorly equipped to address these questions, but there were many notable exceptions. Donald Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction* is far more detailed and methodologically even-handed on many points that its chief competitor, the work by Kümmel. Ned B. Stonehouse was years ahead of his time, utilizing what was in fact a very conservative and responsible form of redaction criticism long before English-speaking scholars were using that rubric. Contributions by Ladd, Ridderbos, France, Morris, Marshall and others spring to mind, all seeming to restore confidence in the historical accessibility of Jesus.

Today there is no clear-cut "winner," no dominant "school" which makes all others pale into insignificance. Innovations cause excitement, but they do not always endure. Each group defends its own position; but only rarely is genuine progress achieved. Into this controversy comes Rainer Riesner, already known to scholars for several essays, especially his excellent "Judische Elementarbildung und Evangelien-Überlieferung" (*Gospel Perspectives* I, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham [Sheffield: JSOT, 1980] 209-223), a kind of whetting of the appetite for this doctoral dissertation successfully defended before the Evangelisch-theologischen Fakultät of the University of Tübingen. The work was supervised by Prof. Otto Betz; but the foreword also acknowledges the help and influence of many of the more cautious influences on the European theological scene today, notably Martin Hengel. Regardless of the influences,

this book does make some advances.

As the subtitle indicates ("An Investigation into the Origin of the Gospel Traditions"), Riesner is interested in examining how we may reasonably move from the gospels back to Jesus. His methods, unlike form and redaction criticism, are not primarily literary (though he makes many literary appeals, as we shall see), but historical: he attempts to compare Jesus, his teaching and his methods, with the dominant pedagogical, religious and learning patterns of his day, in order to establish the likelihood that what Jesus taught was remembered and passed on, and was so highly regarded that it was not easily tampered with. In other words, Riesner's approach reminds the reader of the work of Gerhardsson and Riesenfeld; but Riesner is more thorough and balanced than his idealogical predecessors.

Riesner begins his work with a lengthy introductory chapter that determines the direction of the rest of the book. He sidesteps the synoptic problem by insisting on tracing out the basic form of the *synoptic* tradition without prejudging which gospel may in any case best preserve it. This position he follows up with a brief critique of form criticism as it is frequently applied to the "Jesus-tradition": there is no new ground broken here, but some thoughtful summary. Riesner proceeds to enumerate and describe the kinds of factors important in assessing the descent of the tradition: the dating of the documents and the related question of the survival of the first witnesses, the value of the synoptics as historical sources, the use of the tradition to the church (thus preserving it), and the way certain traditions were highly prized and therefore nurtured, and so forth. There are some astute observations here: the amazing concentration on Jesus himself in the gospels sets this literature off from rabbinic parallels, and Jesus from the rabbis; and the salvation-historical perspective that, after Pentecost, in some measure sets Christians and their immediate concerns *apart* from Jesus (Where does Jesus discuss the abolition of circumcision or the practice of glossalalia?) yet willingly records and transmits words and teachings of Jesus tied up with an earlier period of redemptive history, testifies to the strength of the tradition. The roots of the "Jesus-tradition," then, go back to Jesus himself—"Jesus as Teacher." Riesner surveys recent literature on this topic, and then proposes to limit himself in the rest of his book to those elements of the Jesus-tradition which pass certain criteria: multiple attestation, diverse literary forms, support from unimportant details, anti-redactional tendencies, coherence and so forth.

The next four chapters constitute the heart of the thesis. In Chapter II, Riesner discusses in considerable detail the contribution of home, synagogue, and school on a Jew growing up in Jesus' day. The discussion includes several excursuses, the most important of which treats *b. B. Bat.* 21*a* and its relevance to Jesus' day. The chapter concludes by outlining the considerable educational advantages Jesus would have enjoyed, even if he never underwent formal rabbinic training. Chapter III treats the authority of Jesus the teacher—the astonishing self-references, his role as prophet speaking the words of God, indeed as the Messiah who would perform certain things (Matt 11:3-6/Luke 7:19-23) and teach messianic wisdom connected with the eschatological age.

The final two major chapters discuss the circumscribed "Jesus-tradition" that meets Riesner's criteria. This tradition is divided into two parts: that which is presented by the evangelists as having been delivered before, respectively, the masses (Chap. IV) and the disciples (Chap. V). This material is not exegeted or analysed in any traditional way, but is scrutinized as to form, language, kinds and techniques of delivery, messianic devices, and the like, in order to assess its "memorableness," its potential for being learned and retained. Into Riesner's analysis go sociological classification, connections between Jesus' actions and words, the question-and-answer technique, the influence of Jesus'

commissions, and much more. He even sympathetically assesses the plausibility of the thesis that one or more of the Twelve took notes during Jesus' earthly ministry.

The results of this substantial study are neatly summarized in a few terse pages near the end of the book (pp. 499-502). Jesus, Riesner holds, had many things in common with other Jewish teachers of his day, but the differences were no less remarkable. Like other teachers, for instance, he was addressed as "Rabbi" and "Rabboni," but unlike them he had never pursued higher education. More important, he spoke with a prophetic authority, in some cases going farther yet and claiming to be the messianic teacher of true wisdom, the one who delivers eschatological revelation. The authority status of Jesus' teaching, a teaching that claims to be revelatory and demands obedience, is not only a recurring theme in the tradition, but constitutes the strongest evidence both that Jesus expected his teaching would be remembered and that his disciples would be driven to do so. Like the prophets, but unlike his contemporaries, Jesus served as an itinerant preacher to *all* Israel, especially the despised and legally-illiterate ("gesetzesunkundigen") "Am-Haarez," the people of the land. To these he developed an increasing number of mnemonically powerful utterances, not least his parables. Like other Jewish teachers, he gathered a "school" of closer disciples around him; but his relationships with them reflected his consciousness of his heavenly origins: it was characteristic of him not only to take the initiative in calling his disciples but also to demand of them a fundamental willingness even to be martyred for his sake. Moreover, Jesus sent out his disciples on short term missions. Part of the disciples' function on these tours was to preach what Jesus preached, to teach what they had learned from him; and this could only have had the effect of fixing firmly in their minds the contours of Jesus' thought and message. The Twelve in particular became a kind of guarantee for the continuity of the Jesus-tradition across the period from before Easter to after Easter; and the evidence shows that the early church was conscious of this responsibility.

Riesner thinks that another under-rated contribution to the formation and preservation of this pre-Easter tradition was the large number of adherents who remained in particular locales and who did not follow him here and there ("die zahlreichen ortsfesten Anhänger Jesu"). They too would remember Jesus' authoritative teaching—but each person would remember it in the context of the specific place and time he heard it, grounding Jesus' teaching in hard history and, no less than the disciples, constituting a crucial link between the periods before and after Easter. Riesner goes farther yet, and utilizing the criteria for a "school" of thought developed by R. A. Culpepper (*The Johannine School* [Missoula: SP, 1975]), thinks it appropriate to speak of the "school" of thought which Jesus founded—a notion which presupposes continuity and the careful passing on of tradition. Finally, Riesner points out that other studies of the transmission of oral tradition insist that the two most important factors in the careful preservation and passing on of that tradition are (1) the mnemonically powerful structuring of the content, and (2) an "esoteric" group which has good reason for passing the material on; and both of these factors are richly met in the case of Jesus and his disciples.

This book is of major importance, and deserves translation into English. It is the most sophisticated and balanced attempt so far to authenticate the teachings of Jesus on the probabilities of history. If the book does not do more, we should be grateful it has done so much, not least because it testifies to a small but growing number of German scholars who are distancing themselves from the radical skepticism of many of their colleagues.

Three weaknesses in Riesner's work stand out. First, he spends so much

time on Jewish background, mnemonic structures, sociological backgrounds and Jesus' authority that some of the most disputed texts are either ignored or treated too briefly. In other words, the sweep of Riesner's work has resulted in a very big canvas, but it would have been better if more detail had been included, more test cases. Second, one or two of Riesner's arguments depend on theoretical structures whose validity may be questioned. Elsewhere I have expressed my hesitancy over certain aspects of Culpepper's argument ("Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel—After Dodd, What?" in *Gospel Perspectives* II, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham [Sheffield: JSOT, 1981], esp. 132-4); but because it suits Riesner's purposes, he uses Culpepper's work without the careful caveats that might have been expected. Third, Riesner rightly establishes the real measure of continuity between the periods before and after Easter; but his methods do not lend themselves very easily to subtle distinctions in the degree of the disciples' understanding. John 2:22 preserves a perspective reflected to some extent by all four evangelists. The judgment of W. Manson is surely sound: the evidence suggests that the disciples during Jesus' ministry remembered better than they understood. Far from weakening Riesner's case, substantial reflection in this area would have strengthened his arguments.

But these are minor points. Riesner deserves warm thanks for his excellent contribution, and suggestions for improvement must not detract from his achievement.

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