

Philip Oakeshott , *The Man that Peter Knew*. Sessions Books, York, 2011. £9.99. ISBN 978-1-85072-411-7.

Reviewed by Lena Cockroft

Philip Oakeshott has shared with us a personal account of his reflections, interpretations and speculations about Mark, the second of our canonical gospels. Mr Oakeshott first studied theology with a view to the ministry, but then pursued a respected career in teaching. After retirement he returns to his first love, the study of the Bible and, specially, Mark's gospel. His book shows the hallmarks of a labour of love – enthusiasm and an obvious devotion to his subject. He has produced an interesting, nicely presented book which should appeal to any lay person who wishes to pursue Bible study beyond the purely devotional approach. There is a slight caveat. Much of the book is based on the author's own ideas and not all of them would necessarily reflect modern academic opinion. I would therefore recommend that the serious student should read it in conjunction with other works on Mark. Many of the references are based on standard textbooks given to Bible students about forty years ago and though still esteemed as good solid classics, may well be considered slightly dated. The book displays the rather annoying habit at the end of each chapter, of giving the author and page quoted, but not the title of the book or article itself, which means the reader must go back and search the chapter to find out exactly where it was first quoted.

Philip Oakeshott's book is based on two traditional assumptions which, I believe, would now be out of favour with most scholars. It was thought for a long time that each of our gospels had direct apostolic input. Gradually this was questioned more and more – the texts were found to be of dates later than the apostles' lifetimes and, generally, of a literary standard which would not fit Galilean fisherfolk. John's Gospel, especially, shows very advanced theological ideas adjudged to come from a later period of the church's development. The one exception, which "the Man that Peter Knew" relies on, is Mark which, so far as I know, is still reckoned as the oldest gospel and there are still scholars who would admit that Peter the apostle may well have had some input. However, I suspect that few would go all the way with Philip Oakeshott's confident assertion that Peter shared his reminiscences with an eager young disciple called Mark, not the John Mark of Acts, during his last days in Rome. He conjures up an idyllic picture of the two men sharing a pint at the end of the day in what may have been the

Rome equivalent of the “Hare and Hounds”, which I suspect owes more to fancy than historical accuracy. The author does not allow for any alternative theory, eg. that the gospel may have been written in Antioch and, while Peter may have had some input, he was certainly not the sole source of the gospel, there were other contributors. Secondly, Philip Oakeshott still follows the quest for the historical Jesus, ie. the conviction that, if only all the miraculous, supernatural parts of the account were stripped away one could trace a logical, accurate biography of Jesus. His journey through Mark includes his efforts to offer explanations for anything beyond human logic, eg. the story of the walking on the water employs the use of a convenient sandbank to explain the illusion. Again the quest for the historical Jesus has largely been abandoned by scholars. It is simply too difficult to extract an accurate picture of Jesus without the legends, myths and miracle stories which surround him: they have become part of the kerygma through which Jesus is perceived. There is also the point that just because something is beyond our experience and knowledge doesn’t necessarily mean it never happened (“more things in Heaven and on earth etc.”) and just because it contains no miraculous element doesn’t mean it **did** happen. For example, the custom of Pontius Pilate, annually releasing, by popular request, a prisoner at the time of Passover appears to have no precedent anywhere in the Roman empire and Philip Oakeshott’s attempts to justify it as a historical event, while ingenious are far from convincing.

For all this the book is a good read. It helped me look at the gospel in a new light. The author’s deduction that the apostles, some, at least, would have been teenagers – surely not Matthew? – because that is the age when people would be most likely to follow a Rabbi and enter his school. Again I found his explanation of the Empty Tomb intriguing, ie. that a small group of the young bloods had removed the body of Jesus and reverently carried it back to Galilee, for burial among “his ain folk” in the hills he loved. Possible, well yes, but a bit whimsical. To his credit, though, Philip Oakeshott does not offer the Empty Tomb as proof of the Resurrection. After all his attempts to make Mark’s story historically credible, he has one last attempt – to explain the Resurrection appearances as something called “veridical visions”, the difference from ordinary visions being that there is contact and encounter between the person envisaged and the seer. He quotes, as evidence, an experience J.B. Phillips had of the recently departed C.S. Lewis, sitting beside him in a chair, discussing a traumatic event in Phillips’ life at the time. However, in spite of his attempts, the author reverts to the opinion that the only validity

for the Resurrection rests in the personal experiences of those who encountered the risen Jesus. This is possibly what we come down to and the fact which this book illustrates so well – that much of this whole sphere of knowledge relies on personal experience and speculation. Just as, if you can accept another person’s testimony, however improbable, you can believe in the Resurrection, so, if you are willing to share another’s ideas without being over concerned about objective proof, you will enjoy this book.

In finishing I would mention Philip Oakeshott’s religious background, Quakerism, to which he refers frequently throughout the book, using it to illustrate the tradition of the devoted disciple just walking off, forsaking all that he has to follow a call. But the most effective borrowing from his tradition comes on the front cover in the illustration of a work by a Quaker sculptor, Gill Ledsham, named “Crucifixion/Resurrection”. It shows Jesus, his face smiling, in the act of leaping down or up from the Cross, reminiscent of Sydney Carter’s “Lord of the Dance” or William Blake’s Albion rising from the mill where he laboured with slaves, while his grounded foot crushes a serpent. For me it helped make the book