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The Bible and Historical Study

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THERE is perhaps no more familiar problem at the present time to those who are concerned with the interpretation of the Bible than the simple chronological fact that we are now living after a century of intensive biblical study, in which learned men (and some others) have wrestled with the question of what the biblical books really meant to the men who were living at the time when they were written. We cannot put the clock back and ignore the effects and profound consequences of this study. The critical movement, as it is sometimes called, is a fact of history which has to be taken into account, and which, if taken seriously, cannot but affect the way in which the Bible is understood and interpreted.

I.

It is the fact that Christianity is concerned not with general or abstract ideas but with a concrete historical event which forces us to regard history with considerable respect. It is the central truth that "the Word became flesh" which forbids any evasion of this issue. If the Incarnation is not to be thought of as a mere theophany, and if the Lord was fully human, then history and the Gospel become closely related to one another so that, for example, such a question as that of the historical reliability of the gospels is not one which can be regarded with indifference by any man. As Dr. Emil Brunner has written, "Incarnation means entering into the realm of visible fact, being the object of police reports, a subject for the photographer, for the commonplace journalist, and other things of that kind. It is a state in which an individual can be touched, handled, or photographed; it is an isolated fact within time and space, the filling of a certain point within time and space which apart from this fact would have remained empty, and which can be filled in with this fact alone; all this belongs to the actuality of the Incarnation of the Word."¹

That, however, is not the point from which the nineteenth century enquiry began. To the men of the period history and historical research were matters of great importance. This interest in history was a direct heritage, not from the Reformation, though the appeal of the Reformers and their successors to the New Testament and the ancient church certainly led to a greater study of early Christian history, but rather from the Renaissance which had rediscovered classical scholarship and with that the study of the New Testament in the language in which it was originally written. The medieval theological tradition broke down in the sixteenth century upon the manifest discrepancy between the original source of the Christian religion and its contemporary form. And what was true of religion was equally true of medieval science. "What the Greek New Testament did to medieval religion, that the Greek of Aristotle and Galen

¹ *The Mediator* (translated by Olive Wyon), 1934, pp. 153-4.

did to medieval science : it revealed the vast size of the accretions, and the startling contrast between the originals and their contemporary representatives. It was not that the fables were false to the facts but that they were false also to their own sources."¹ The significance of the Englishmen who founded the Royal Society in the seventeenth century is in part that they represented the beginning of the modern scientific outlook, the fundamental axiom that knowledge can only proceed by the empirical observation and verification of fact, and not by copying out previous writers who merely collected fabulous traditions. This scientific outlook had its effect in the very different realm of historical investigation in that it encouraged a new attitude to evidence, and so led to the conception of a scientific historiography which distinguished between primary historical evidence and later legendary accretion. Ultimately it was inevitable that the same canon of historical writing should be applied to the biblical documents as well as to the documents of secular history.

The rise of the conception of progressive revelation was another vital factor in the historical approach to the Bible. The story of the Old Testament came to be regarded as that of a gradual education of the world by the divine schoolmaster. In the popularisation of this view the most important influence was that of Lessing, who interpreted the biblical history in this light in his famous little book, *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, published in 1780, which we may conjecture to have had great influence on Frederick Temple's essay on "The Education of the World" in *Essays and Reviews* (1860), not only because of the similar title but also because of the general identity of thesis.²

The notion of the Bible as the story of divine education and of a gradual revelation of God's true nature was not new. It went back to the Greek Apologists and to the Christian Platonists of Alexandria in the second and third centuries A.D. In fact, in his conception of progressive revelation Lessing himself was directly influenced by Origen's exegesis of the Old Testament³ according to which, just as a schoolmaster does not tell the whole truth to a child because he has not the capacity to understand, so also the revelation which God gives of Himself in the Old Testament is only relatively and not absolutely true, and the biblical history is a gradual unfolding of the absolute truth to the extent to which it is possible for man to receive it. But the Christian Platonists of the third century (like all their contemporaries) were almost totally deficient in historical imagination, whereas, on the other hand, the thinkers of the nineteenth century were all profoundly influenced by the Romantic movement. Under this influence the writing of history became not the mere accumulation

¹ C. E. Raven, *English Naturalists from Necham to Ray, A Study of the Making of the Modern World* (1947), p. 339.

² Perhaps Temple had read Lessing in F. W. Robertson's translation which was published in 1858; the subject would thus be fresh in his mind. He does not acknowledge any debt to Lessing, possibly because he did not wish to admit any German influence such as would be the object of orthodox suspicion.

³ This has been pointed out by W. Oehlke, *Lessing und seine Zeit*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1929), ii., pp. 448-9.

of facts and details about the past so much as an attempt to understand the people of past ages as far as possible by re-creating the spirit and atmosphere of their time. The nineteenth century ideal was an evocation of the past in such a way that historical characters were felt by the reader to have really lived because they could be seen against the background of the world of their own age. The historian himself must be dispassionate, and resist every temptation to read back the mental presuppositions of his own age into the mind of an earlier period.

II.

If this brief account of the rise of the nineteenth century conception of history be broadly correct, the phenomenon of the historical criticism of the Bible falls into place as a natural development of the influences at work in the period. The basic principle of all historical interpretation of the Bible is simply that the meaning of any particular passage in Scripture was never better understood than in the immediate context in history when it was written. If we would understand, for example, the prophet Isaiah, it is necessary to exercise the imagination in order to realize the actual situation in which he and the Israelites found themselves and which called forth his utterances. It is the direct consequence of this principle that so much historical work on the Bible is concerned with questions of authorship and date; for if we are to find out what any given passage in a biblical writer meant in its original historical context, it is obviously desirable first to find out who was the author, whether there is adequate foundation for the tradition which ascribes the passage to him, and at what time the words were written or spoken. Frequently it is not possible to give any final and certain answer to such questions; at least, it is noticeable that on many debated points contemporary scholars are considerably more cautious than those of fifty years ago. But it may not be said that such questions are unimportant, or even that it is not right to raise them.

The principle which has been stated may be well illustrated from the problem of the unity of the prophecies ascribed to the eighth century prophet Isaiah. It is well known that the first thirty-nine chapters (except xiii-xiv) make excellent sense in the context of the eighth century B.C. Contemporary history is often referred to, and in fact the chapters are a primary source for the history of the period. But from chapter xl onwards the historical context is that of the Babylonian exile; Cyrus is mentioned by name, and so also the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo. The difficulty of supposing that such references could be regarded as intelligible by Israelites of two centuries earlier has led to the obvious conclusion, first put forward in 1775, that the second half of the book must come from a different author (or authors) who lived in the fifth century.

Such a conclusion is commonplace enough, and so obvious that it is a wonder not only that it was not suggested earlier but also that it took so long to become accepted among orthodox Christians in the last century. One reason for this slowness was no doubt a healthy reserve towards any unnecessary abandonment of tradition. Further-

more, anxiety was caused in orthodox circles by the fact that the conclusions of biblical scholars which did not square with traditional beliefs were greeted with corybantic enthusiasm by people interested in undermining the authority of the Bible. The publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 was important not because there was anything particularly startling in the opinions of the contributors as such, but because it was almost unheard of that such opinions should be held by prominent teachers in English universities and clergymen of the Church of England. Archdeacon Denison of Taunton urged the Lower House of Convocation to appoint a committee to examine the book, saying that it contained "all the poison which is to be found in Tom Paine's *Age of Reason*, while it has the additional disadvantage of having been written by clergymen."¹ That was where the sting lay. Previously the open expression of such opinions had been confined to those who reckoned themselves to be outside the church. But here was treachery from within.

The storm which followed upon the publication of this volume produced a spate of denunciatory tracts and sermons, the effect of which was to increase the hostility towards historical criticism on the part of the clergy and laity, who regarded the book as a confirmation of their worst suspicions. The advance was to come, not from any volume of essays intended as a manifesto of liberal theology, but from three men who set themselves the task of the serious historical study of the New Testament and of the attempt to convince their contemporaries that the Christian Church had nothing to fear from this examination. The Cambridge scholars, Westcott, Lightfoot, and Hort, were the men who undertook this work, and it would be difficult to exaggerate the debt which theological study in England owes to them.² The critical text of the Greek New Testament produced by Westcott and Hort remains to-day the best text obtainable, and Lightfoot's work on the Pauline epistles and the church of the second century is still of fundamental importance. And the fact that in practice if not in theory they were conservative meant that they came to be regarded with confidence by the clergy. They laid the foundation on which historical criticism could proceed to build without fear of interference from authority.

III.

The gradual admission that freedom of expression and liberty of historical study were allowable considerably contributed to the change in the "climate of opinion" in the next fifty years, since it made it impossible to urge in the interests of unbelief the conclusions of scholars in such questions as the unity of Isaiah or the date of Daniel, for example, and thus, as it were, effectively spiked the enemy's guns. Before this time the mere fact that a particular judgment was expressed by an opponent of orthodox Christianity was usually sufficient to discredit that judgment in the minds of the faithful, however well founded it might be. Perhaps we may wonder whether

¹ Quoted by G. K. A. Bell, *Randall Davidson*, i., p. 109.

² For an account of their work see L. E. Elliott-Binns, *Religion in the Victorian Era* (2nd ed. 1946), p. 292 ff.

orthodox theologians such as Pusey would have held with such tenacity to dating the book of Daniel in the fifth century but for the fact that the first person to suggest a second century date had been a vigorous opponent of Christianity, namely Porphyry in the third century A.D. Since Christian controversialists, notably that bitter fighter Jerome, were interested to prove that Porphyry was invariably wrong about everything all the time, from then onwards to admit a second century date was traditionally regarded as a fatal concession to the enemy.

The serious historical study of the Bible cannot be said to have been helped by a noticeable tendency among some writers to strive after originality for its own sake. Nothing has done so much to cast discredit upon historical criticism as the notion in the mind of a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. that it is incumbent upon him to produce a hypothesis the like of which no one has ever seen before. Biblical scholarship has not been advanced by the Privat-dozent at a German university, the burden of whose thesis is that all earlier critics have manifested utter stupidity in failing to see the truth which he will now proceed to demonstrate to a startled world. It is largely the result of this deplorable "cleverness" that the path of historical criticism is strewn with the wreckage of abandoned hypotheses.

Moreover, in the popular mind, if not in that of thinking people, much needless prejudice has undoubtedly been caused by the singular misfortune that the study of the restoration of the original text of a book has been called "lower criticism," and that of its literary problems "higher criticism." The fact that a scholar who discusses such questions as those of authenticity, dating, and integrity, may be called a "higher critic" has led to a widespread popular impression that somehow he regards himself as a very superior sort of person. Equally unfortunate has been the mere word "critic," which has been understood not in its true sense but in its popular meaning to imply that the critical scholar regards himself as competent to pick holes in the Word of God. It is this basic confusion of thought which lies behind the oft-quoted dictum that man should not criticise the Word of God, but rather let the Word of God criticise him. But a literary critic is not necessarily somebody who points out the defects of a document, any more than a textual critic is one who finds fault with manuscripts; the word "critic" is manifestly being used in its more exact sense, not to imply that the critic's task is that of fault-finding, but to express the dispassionate and scientific nature of his historical study.

The truth is that where criticism has failed its inadequacy has been caused by a failure to follow out its own principles with sufficient ruthlessness. The history of biblical criticism is that of an ever-increasing rigidity in applying its own criterion. The true scholar is marked by his ability to study antiquity without falling into the disastrous mistake of reading back into the ancient texts the intellectual presuppositions of his own time. But it is, in fact, extremely difficult not to fall into this error. For the men of the past are dry bones which can only live when revived by our flesh and blood. We are now sufficiently far away in time from the critics of the late nineteenth century to perceive that their work was informed by the mental

climate of the Enlightenment and their theology marked by the prevailing immanentist thought of the period. In the Liberal Protestant search for the Jesus of history the resulting picture reflected closely the ideals of nineteenth century humanitarianism, and in the picture which the critics and historians of 1900 gave of early Christian history they sometimes failed to free themselves from the tendency to impose a preconceived theory upon the documents rather than to allow the documents to speak for themselves. In point of fact the nineteenth century critics often deceived themselves into thinking that they had started without any presuppositions. And others did the same before them. Gibbon would no doubt have been highly incensed if he had been accused of failing to give a dispassionate account of the Christian Empire, and yet such is manifestly the fact.

It is sometimes suggested that, because it is all but impossible to be wholly free from presuppositions in approaching the Bible, it is therefore allowable to have any prejudices we may happen to hold, and that we are on this account entitled to read back into the text any theology whatever. (Admittedly, the opinion is not usually expressed quite so naively, but it surely amounts to the same thing.) To maintain this is practically to commit theological suicide. The last state is far worse than the first. But such an attitude usually arises out of a feeling of impatience towards historical criticism because it is concerned with questions which are not more than prolegomena. And it is no doubt true that historical criticism is not an end in itself. The biblical commentator has not finished his job when he has found the answer to questions of authorship and date, of the influences which moulded the writer's mind, or of the precise meaning of particular Greek words. But it is none the less true that such issues must be dealt with if any satisfactory foundation for our theology is to be constructed. As a propaedeutic, historical study is indispensable.¹

IV.

The most recent criticism has, in fact, gone a stage further in its biblical study by emphasizing the theological framework, so to speak, within which the biblical documents are written. In one sense it is true to say that the wheel has turned full circle. For it is only by means of the critical method that we can discover the theology of the documents by letting the biblical writers speak for themselves, and avoid the dangerous practice of assuming that the questions which lay before them coincide with those of our own contemporary world in the realm, for example, of physical or biological problems. It is constantly necessary to be on one's guard against asking the wrong question when reading the Bible. For to read back into the New Testament the dogmatic theology of our own time is scarcely an advance on the treatment which the New Testament received at the hands of the theologians of the Enlightenment, who supposed that in their critical study of the gospels they could get behind the theological accretions superimposed by the Christian communities of the first

¹ There are some valuable remarks on this point by Walther Eltester in his obituary notice of Hans Lietzmann in *Theol. Literaturzeitung*, Jan. 1943, pp. 1-10.

century and by Paul in particular upon the simple untheological teaching of the Jesus of history. The criticism of the last twenty years has shown that it is impossible to find any trace in the gospels of such an untheological interpretation. In the earliest strands the tradition already stands within a theological framework.

Similarly, whereas the nineteenth century scholars sometimes tended to underestimate the importance of the Old Testament, recent study has shown to how great an extent the New Testament constantly presupposes it, and is unintelligible apart from it. The ethical monotheism of the prophets of the Age of Conflict, for example, is simply assumed as the accepted background; there is no discussion of the matter.

In fact, the theology of the Bible is the concern of the historical student just as much as such questions as the authenticity and dating of the documents. It is his task to discover as far as possible what the writer really meant when he wrote what he did, and this task is not exhausted by the study of the historical situation, or of the linguistic problems which the writer's work may raise; these are means to that end. What is a different question, however, is the relationship between this study of biblical theology and the historian's personal belief in the truth of that theology. It is this distinction which the historian constantly has to bear in mind, and which often makes his work a cause of querulous impatience to those who justifiably point out that, if it is the task of the Christian minister to proclaim the true Word of God, it is a matter of the gravest importance whether in fact the theology of the New Testament is true or not. No Christian can treat the Old Testament or the Pauline epistles wholly as a fascinating field for the study of comparative religion. But the historian as such, if he is going to be loyal to his own principle, is compelled to keep his own convictions from obtruding into his critical study lest he should fail to give an honest picture. So also, *qua* historian, he can never decide if, for example, Paul's vision on the road to Damascus was a vision of the risen Lord indeed, or whether Jesus' claim to be the Messiah was a true one. And again, the truth of the miracle-stories recorded in the gospels is not a question to which the historian can give any decisive answer unless he is prepared to argue on the ground of categories alien to his own peculiar field. Everything will depend upon the philosophical and theological presuppositions with which he approaches the matter; no amount of purely historical research will enable him to reach a decision on this issue, either positive or negative. He can only pronounce upon the historical value of the sources.

The Christian historian has this constant tension in his work. But, although in a certain sense he cannot be dispassionate in the discussion of theology which he profoundly believes to be true, he has the great advantage that he is able to enter with sympathy into the meaning of New Testament theology in a way which is impossible to any critic alien to the Christian faith. For the theology of the New Testament is not a system of thought worked out in cold intellectual detachment, but an attempt to interpret the Christian experience of life in the Spirit; and the interpretation of an experience is best understood

by one who understands that experience from the inside.

If the contention of this brief paper be correct, then the intensive historical study of the Bible during the past hundred years cannot be regarded as a regrettable "episode" in the history of the Church, a disastrous surrender to the enemy of the title-deeds of Christianity. The Christian historian is bound to apply to the biblical documents the same method of study which he uses in examining any other ancient writings. The criteria of historical evidence remain constant. But, as we have seen, biblical criticism is not a question of "finding mistakes in the Bible," but fundamentally a serious attempt to find out what the writers really meant. It is for this reason that we have to be on our guard against any suggestion that such historical study is irrelevant or even blasphemous. For the truth is that only by this method can we find a satisfactory basis on which to construct our theology.

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

(continued from page 171).

into it by God. But the great issues are plain, and the Church is justified in stating them formally in the creeds. Where interpretations are less plain, the Christian seeks the help of sanctified scholarship so that he may reach the plain sense. And then, having the plain sense, he seeks to weld its meaning into his life. For the end of all interpretation is something more than intellectual satisfaction, great though that is. It is the transformation of the life into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ, through the Word of God that lives and abides for ever.