# History, Criticism and Faith

STEPHEN NEILL reviews

**HISTORY, CRITICISM AND FAITH** : Four Exploratory Studies.
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Let no one ever again affirm that conservative evangelicals have no regard for scholarship. Having read these four essays carefully, together with the accompanying foot-notes and bibliographies, I have been caused to feel again how little I really know about anything.

This is a book of the kind that is extraordinarily difficult to review. If the reviewer does no more than summarize the various subjects dealt with by the writers, he is doing less than justice to the care and erudition with which the essays have been written. If he starts to deal in detail with even a small selection of the questions raised, he will soon pass beyond the limits of space which even the most generous of editors can allow. The only solution is a compromise—to indicate the nature of the subjects treated, and to take up one or two questions that seem to be of special interest.

## Myth and History

Undoubtedly the best essay in the book, as also the shortest, is that by F. F. Bruce on 'Myth and History' (pp 79-100). This, as was to be expected, is an elegant and learned study of the term 'myth' and its relevance to the Scriptures. Professor Bruce elucidates carefully the various uses of that much misused word, and has little difficulty in showing the inappropriateness of almost all these uses to the New Testament. My only complaint is that I wish the essay had been a little longer. I reached long ago the conviction, which Professor Bruce shares, that there never was a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer, and that where a redeemer is found in Gnostic sources, this is always due to Christian influence. I could wish that he had given a little more space to the vexed question of Gnostic chronology, and had amplified a little the conclusions with which I entirely agree.

## The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus

In this essay (pp 101-146), Dr R. T. France deals with a subject of capital importance. In many books on the New Testament it is taken as almost common form to assert that the early church saw little difference between the words which the Lord spoke in the days of his flesh and those which he is now speaking through inspired teachers. Dr France correctly points out that this view rests on no evidence at

all and contradicts the evidence that we have. I have myself expressed the same view in the form that, though the doctrine of the ascension is only rarely referred to in the New Testament, it is firmly held by all, as is clear in the sharp distinction maintained between the words of the Lord and the words of his inspired messengers.

I could wish that conservatives did not spend so much time answering other people. Dr France gives a lot of space to Norman Perrin, as a representative of the Bultmann position in a rather extreme form. Now Dr Perrin, who has since entered into his reward, was never a very good scholar and his work is in certain respects already rather seriously out of date. Dr France would have served us better if he had set himself to work out his own criteria of authenticity, and had dealt with such perplexing passages as Matthew 5:17-19 and 17:24-27. This was the method followed by Professor Jeremias (mentioned only twice in this study), whose *Theology of the New Testament* seems to me the most important book published on the New Testament in the last fifty years. Jeremias knew, of course, all that was being written by others, but he just ploughed unconcernedly his own straight furrow and reached his own conclusions. Where Dr France does list twelve objections to the Bultmann methods (pp 117-8), I have not found him entirely convincing. Against three of the twelve I have put a tick of approval; against two the comment 'No'; against one a question mark; and against the others the comments 'too strong', 'weak', 'muddled', 'simplified', 'which proves what?', 'unfair'.

To Dr France's conclusions no exception can be taken. We are told that the gospels are not 'objective records in the sense of detached reports of Jesus' exact words, like Hansard. To make that message as clear as possible, they are prepared to paraphrase Jesus' sayings in a way that brings out the meaning and application of what he taught. . . . We can never therefore assume that we have the *ississima verba Jesu*' (p 129). This is important: until very recent times the conservative contention was precisely that we have the very words of Jesus, with only such modification as would arise through translation from Aramaic to Greek.

## History and the Believer

Dr Colin Brown's contribution on 'History and the Believer' is a massive production of 54 pages with 182 footnotes, and 231 references to books and articles in the bibliography. I have read it four times in the hope of understanding it; even now I am not sure that I have seized the drift of Dr Brown's argument and have been fair to him.

A number of the footnotes are themselves of the length of short essays. If the matters dealt with are of the importance to require such length, they would better have been included in the text. If not, the references tend to impede and confuse the course of the argument.

I find myself regretting that Dr Brown has spent so much space on the question of miracles, an important theme, and one which perhaps demands an essay all to itself. It is not so relevant here. Miracles are only the coral islands appearing above the surface of the ocean, and attesting the great reality of God's care for every single one of his creatures and his total control of the history of the world. If every single miracle could be disproved, it would not seriously disturb the believer's confidence in God as the Lord of history, of which Dr Brown has written so admirably on pp 194-7.

I may perhaps be permitted a word of protest against Dr Brown's treatment of William Temple (pp 186-7). To anyone who knew Temple, the collocation of him in a single sentence with Bultmann and F. G. Downing presents itself as startling. He is accused of laying stress on a contentless revelation. But to Temple revelation *was Christ;* and what is Christ but *the great fact;* how then can revelation be contentless? I hope that Dr Brown will accept my judgement, based on personal knowledge, that he has totally misunderstood what Temple was talking about, and that he may be willing to go back and sit at the feet of that great thinker and great Christian and learn from him. Again I do not think that Dr Brown is quite fair (p 212, note 119) in his treatment of the noble words with which Bultmann ends his Gifford lectures; a work, incidentally with much of which I profoundly disagree. *'The meaning in history always lies in the present . . .* In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.' What Bultmann is stressing is the fact that every single one of us is a maker of history all the time: at every moment there is the possibility of encountering God and of being of service to him, but most of the time we are asleep and let the possibilities pass us by. This is not the only thing to be said about history; but it is true and it is worth saying, and Bultmann has said it in memorable terms.

I have found myself wondering for whom this essay was written. It is too compressed to satisfy the scholar. It seems to me that the ordinary theological student is likely to drown in it. And, if the theological student cannot swim, what will be the fate of the honest enquiring layman who wants to understand his faith?

## History and the Old Testament

I have left to the last the essay with which I have found it most difficult to deal: Dr Wenham on 'History and the Old Testament'. Here I have found a certain amateurishness from which the other essays are

free. There is an almost childish absurdity about such a sentence (even if it is intended to be ironical) as 'Biblical scholars can continue to read the Old Testament on Sundays as the Word of God, but on weekdays treat it as a human production full of all kinds of errors' (p 14). It is surely clear that one who reads the Bible as the Word of God on Sunday will read it as the Word of God on Monday, though perhaps with slightly different concerns in mind; one who reads it on Monday as a human production full of all kinds of errors is not likely to read it at all on Sunday. A kindly editor might well have removed this and similar sentences; this would greatly have improved the quality of the essay and would not have interfered with its contents.

Dr Wenham has dealt with three subjects, each of the greatest significance, and each perhaps demanding an essay in its own right. He is concerned to defend the rights of the critical or, better, objective approach to the Old Testament. In fact he is doing briefly for the Old Testament what Professor G. E. Ladd has so admirably done for the New Testament in his book *The New Testament and Criticism.* Dr Wenham's enemy is space. He himself speaks (p 46) a little sadly but correctly of 'gross oversimplification' as unavoidable. I doubt whether the reader of the less than a page that he has given us on Form Criticism would appreciate the value of that approach, especially to the scientific study of the Psalms.

Dr Wenham is concerned to make plain his understanding of the study of the theology of the Old Testament. Two approaches need to be distinguished from one another more clearly than I think Dr Wenham has done. The two may be associated roughly with the work of Professor von Rad and of Professor Eichrodt, two scholars both of whom I was privileged to know, and the work of each of whom I greatly value. (Each is rightly described in Dr Wenham's bibliography as 'great'.)

The first approach, which alone in my opinion deserves to be called 'theology of the Old Testament', takes the Old Testament just as it is and asks what it teaches about God and man and history. Here there need be no great difference between the approach of the Christian and the Jew. Each, if he does his work well, is likely to find, as von Rad did, that the Old Testament is open-ended—it looks forward to a fulfilment beyond itself. At this point differences begin to assert themselves. Von Rad being a devout Christian finds the fulfilment in Jesus Christ; the Jew rather more vaguely looks forward to something called the Messianic age, however exactly he may understand that term.

The other approach, equally legitimate, and favoured by Eichrodt, Bright and Wenham, may more properly be called 'the Christian understanding of the Old Testament'. Jesus Christ comes in as the

end of von Rad's argument; he comes in at the beginning of the argument of the other three. This was the way in which the early Christians read the Old Testament; it was retained as Holy Scripture because Christians felt that they could see Christ in it (though at times they saw him in rather odd places). And they were right; I suspect that I myself on Sundays incline more than I admit to Eichrodt rather than to von Rad.

With much of what Dr Wenham has written I am in perfect agreement. But I would like the distinction between the two approaches to be made clearer than it is, and I would like greater emphasis on the *rightness* of both approaches. Anyone familiar with the writings of the two great scholars to whom we have particularly referred can see how Christ is glorified in both.

Dr Wenham's third concern is with the contribution of archaeology to the elucidation of the Old Testament. This is indeed a fascinating world. When I was a schoolboy, this perhaps more than anything else enchanted me and drew me to intensive study of the Bible; I fell in love not only with Ur and Erech but also with Urete, Tiryns and Mycenae. Let us agree at once that archaeology has done a great deal to restore our confidence in the general reliability of the Old Testament as history. This is a notable contribution.

But a little precision is necessary. There are two kinds of archaeology. One consists of the recovery of the Code of Hammurabi, the Tel-el-Armarna letters and the Dead Sea Scrolls. These are very far from being silent witnesses; in fact they cry aloud to heaven. As very few documents have been preserved in Palestine, much of the work here has to do with sherds and shards, and these are dumb until they are interpreted. Even with all the modern techniques, dating is still highly uncertain, and in the absence of written records much must remain conjectural. We must be grateful for all the light that the work of Dame Kathleen Kenyon and others has shed on very early days in Palestine. But even Dr Wenham, with all his enthusiasm, is fain to admit that archaeology has yet failed to identify Ai, and to throw light on the story of the defeat and subsequent victory of the children of Israel.

Has he, perhaps, failed to see the direction in which this section of his essay is leading? If I have to wait until archaeology has settled the site and the date and the fate of Ai, before reposing my trust is the God of history and in the Old Testament as a living Word from the Lord of history, am I not in a truly parlous state? Fortunately things are not quite as bad as they might seem. My love for the Old Testament and my experience of it as the Word of the Lord are based on considerations very different from, and very much deeper than, those of archaeology. Archaeological discovery might confirm my faith; it could not create it. Calvin had something when he talked about the *testimonium internum Spiritus sancti.* To this we must ever hold fast.

I hope that I have written enough to show that this is an important book. Its main importance is simply the fact that it has been written. The writers describe these essays as exploratory; every reader will wish them joy and prosperity in their further explorations. It cannot have escaped the notice of these writers that the position which they are setting forth and defending, though of course adorned with many wise saws and modern instances, is essentially the position which has been held and maintained by evangelicals for the past fifty years. Is this a case of happy convergence of minds? I can say with confidence that, if a book of this kind had existed in 1922, there would have been no CMS-BCMS split. It may be said that God has managed to bring good out of the suffering of those days. Those who lived through that period may be forgiven for wishing that the good could have been brought about at a slightly less cost in suffering.

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