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A PLEA FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

THIS is a plea, not for a Systematic Theology, one of whose sources is the Bible, but for a disciplined study of the theology of the Bible itself. Immediately this is said, many will complain, "Is the theologian, then, going to bury our Bible, now that the Higher Critic has cut it up into bits and pieces for us? Surely we are to be left with the lovely stories and stately literature enshrined in our Bible, without their being buried under the lumber of the theologian. Let the theologian stick to his creeds, confessions and philosophies, and leave the Bible for us simple folks who want an unspoiled and untheological religion". To reply to this we need only remind ourselves that, as the Christian religion is theological through and through, so the Bible cannot be understood apart from theology.

There is little need to stress this further. But it may be necessary to insist that there is a need for a new approach to the theological study of the Bible, for it has to be said that, in British Theology at least, we have neglected this important branch of Biblical studies. Our chief interest has been in the historical and literary fields, at the expense of the theological.

I

Let me give some reasons for this plea for Biblical theology studied in, for, and by itself.

1. Readers of Karl Barth will remember his own account of the practical necessities—necessities of the pulpit and pastor and not of the study and professor—which drove him to rethink his theology. He found that what he imagined to be his theology and the theology of the Church was threadbare, with no vital message for him as a preacher and pastor of a congregation of ordinary people. This discovery led to an upheaval in his own thinking and preaching.

That upheaval, whether we think of it as beginning in that Swiss parish or not, affects us all in the theological world and in the Church. It is one of the many upheavals of our own time, and not the least important for many of us. But while the contemporary social, political and economic upheavals are characterised by a wholesale flight *from* the past, the theological

is a flight from the immediate past to a remoter past, the distance back being dependent on the particular branch of the Church to which we belong. We may differ in the distance we go back, but there is little disagreement about the fact of the theological upheaval, which makes Barth go back to Luther and Calvin, Maritain to Thomas Aquinas, and some Anglicans to Hooker. The slogan of liberalism, "Back to the Jesus of History", has given way to the slogans of neo-orthodoxy and neo-protestantism, "Back to Luther, to Calvin, or to Thomas or to Hooker and the seventeenth century".

All this is in keeping with the thesis put forward by President John Mackay, of Princeton, that "the road to to-morrow leads through yesterday", adding the salutary warning, "but all depends upon the yesterday to which men go back for a fresh start!" If this is true, then surely a great deal has to be said for the revival of the slogan, "Back to the Bible".

This, of course, at once raises a hundred and one other questions. Slogans are dangerous, and this particular slogan, interpreted and acted upon by sectarian interests, leads to a distorted theology. There are some who have the happy knack of justifying anything from Holy Scripture, from the justifying of slavery to finding the date when the world will come to its violent end. In spite of this, however, the road to a healthy theology of to-morrow leads through the discovery of the theology of the Old Book of yesterday.

2. A second reason is to be found in the healthy desire that theology should be relevant. But we must ask, "Relevant to what?" The answers of to-day are, relevant to the needs of man and his time, relevant to the modern mind, to the spirit of the age, to the new psychology, and so on, all reminders that theology must be at least understandable. But while we must insist that a healthy theology must always have a living contact with life—each element rising out of a definite situation in the life of the Church—we must also insist that the relevance of Theology goes deeper than a living contact with life. It must be relevant to the mighty act of God in Jesus Christ. And we are told what that divine act is in Holy Scripture. We do not deduce it from the course of nature, nor from the supposed progress in history, nor from the working of the human conscience. We are *told* what that divine act is. Some may consider Barth too exclusive in his theology, but his warning is

timely here: "If anything Christian be unrelated to the Gospel, it is a human by-product, a dangerous religious survival, a regrettable misunderstanding" (*Romans*, p. 36).

3. A third reason is that the time has now come to start building upon the valuable work already done in the field of Biblical studies by the scientific critics. While it would be folly to claim that the work of these scholars is now completed, we can safely assume that they have given us enough material to set about discovering not merely the true text and the variety of sources underlying the Biblical records, but to set about discovering, on this basis, the real message of the Bible. The Bible is not the special preserve of the textual or source critic, valuable and indispensable colleagues though they may be.

II

We come now to the more general question of the Bible and Theology.¹ Few of us would deny that theological thinking should both derive from Scripture and at the same time drive us back to Scripture. Theology is not an intellectual speculation, no flight of "the alone to the Alone". Pioneers have blazed the trail before us, and that trail begins with Holy Scripture. Theology and the Bible are concerned with God. This may seem an obvious thing to say; but is it? We can read Paul and learn only about the social and economic conditions at Corinth! From Genesis we may learn only about Hebrew folk-lore! Men of faith must aim at something more than this. The discovery of this "something more" is the business of the theologian.

In this pursuit it is important to remember that it is the whole Bible that is our concern. We all know Christians who insist that the Gospels are enough for their spiritual nurture; others concern themselves principally with passages from Daniel and Revelation, while others again find the Old Testament superfluous. Even more dangerous is the habit—often quite unconsciously indulged in—of theologians who pick and choose their proof-texts, and by this means attempt to squeeze Scripture into a theological framework of their own devising.

Heinrich Vogel has compared this habit of picking and choosing what are proof-texts for one's own standards and

¹ For this section, I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to a little book not well enough known in Scotland: *Give Heed unto Reading*, by E. Ridley Lewis (Mowbray, 1943).

desires to the ancient Greek story of Procrustes, "who required his visitors to lie on a bed too short, and to make them fit comfortably into it, he cut off their heads. Modern people," Vogel goes on, "who want to crush the Bible into the bed of their own thinking, their ideas and their ideals, resort to the same way of chopping off what does not fit. Were it not for a concern in heaven that they should not remove one single letter from the Bible, the Scriptures would now be so mutilated and adapted as to be quite unrecognisable. What would be the result if each of us inserted in the Bible, or took out from it, whatever seemed good to us? One thing at least is certain, that whoever tries to master the Bible like that is stone deaf. He himself does all the talking. He interrupts God's speaking, and certainly does not come first and foremost to listen" (*The Iron Ration of a Christian*, p. 32).

The outstanding example, of course, of this Procrustean treatment of the Bible is Marcion, who made a drastic selection of the Biblical records to suit his peculiar theology. But as has been pointed out, as soon as we begin rejecting the Old Testament as integral to Christian theology, we find ourselves, like Marcion, rejecting parts of the New Testament also.

Another form of this danger might well be called the "Apostolic Succession" type of theology. To claim that the true stream of Christian theology flows through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Barth, is as fatal as the claim on behalf of some such stream as Leviticus, Ezekiel, "Hebrews", Ignatius, Thomas Aquinas, Newman and Maritain. There is a great danger of fostering a denominational mentality in theological study. There cannot but be an impoverishing of Christian theology if our concern is merely to systematise that part of the Bible which bears the imprimatur of our own sect, an attitude which makes Paul a Calvinist and the Fourth Gospel the peculiar possession of the mystic. The Bible is thus reduced to the status of a commentary on a particular *Summa* or *Institutes* or *Dogmatics* instead of being the norm by which these are judged and corrected.

Christian theology must find its source and norm in Biblical theology. The development of Christian doctrine can be properly understood only when seen against the background of the theology of the Bible. The modern revival of interest in theology is apt to be too much concerned with "Reformed"

theology or "Thomist" theology. There is little interest, to judge from books published and read, in Biblical theology. "Yet doctrine can be studied only with the Bible in hand, not with a view to proof-texts nor with a view to curtailing the riches of dogmatics and philosophy, but because the Biblical idea of revelation and Redemption will be the centre" (A. M. Ramsey, *Jesus Christ in Faith and History*, p. 14).

III

All this at once gives rise to certain difficulties that have helped to obscure the theology of the Bible, and prevent the study of it.

For instance, there is the ever-burning question of the Bible and criticism. How does criticism affect the approach to Biblical theology? This is too big a question to be fully discussed here.

The Biblical critic approaches the Bible with the idea—it may be consciously or unconsciously—that the Bible is just another book like other books, written by fallible men as other books are, by the ordinary process of writing, and according to the rules of literary composition obtaining in the ancient world. Just as ancient historians plagiarised to their hearts' content, unhampered by the laws of copyright, or even by the idea of property-right which underlies them, so, we are told, did the ancient Hebrew historians and the Gospel writers. Just as the early folk-lore of any nation exists in recognisable and stereotyped forms, so we may hope to trace the "forms" underlying the Synoptic gospels. Thus we are taught to approach the Biblical records from the point of view of human documents open to the searchlight of the canons of ordinary criticism, asking how they were written and when they were written.

So much for the documents. It is natural that we should be encouraged to approach the message and meaning of the Bible from the same historical point of view. Just as the primitive Semitic races had certain ritualistic observances and sacred places, so, it is pointed out, do we find these in the religion of Israel. Just as we find the sacramental idea in the religious quests of the Graeco-Roman world, so can we find it in the New Testament documents. Just as there are examples of Apocalyptic and Wisdom literature among the Jews and Egyptians, so it is not surprising to find the same types in our Bible.

None will deny that a study of the Semitic background throws valuable light on the developments of religion in the Old Testament. Source criticism has helped us to understand how the evangelists composed their books. Even Form-criticism may be valuable in clearing up the twilight period of the Oral Tradition. We can almost see the hands that wrote and the minds that composed these documents, so minutely have they been examined by the experts.

But to study the development of the religious ideas of the Old Testament is not of itself to study the theology of the Old Testament, just as the study of the process of the human mind is not of itself the study of metaphysics. The study of the remnants of animism in the pre-Mosaic religion can never take the place of the study of the faith behind the patriarchal stories, just as the study of the ecclesiastical architecture of any period is a poor substitute for knowledge of the faith of the people of that period. How the Gospel writers composed their books is not the last word on why they wrote as they did, as the investigation into the metre of Milton's poems is not an interpretation of these. Light on the twilight period of Oral Tradition does not explain, of itself, why there was a Gospel to preach at all. A study of comparative Religion, the process of the growth of the literature and forms, is worth while, indeed necessary, but the whole lot put together do not "explain" the Bible. That study, when it stops short with its own conclusions, might easily have only an antiquarian interest.

While this has to be said, this does not mean that those devoted scholars who give their time and thought to scientific criticism have only an antiquarian interest in the Bible. Far from it. But their work is only introductory. We must approach the Bible in some other way if we want to know anything about its theology with no less critical a mind, it is true, but with more alertness to hear what God the Lord will say.

The Bible is frequently spoken of as the record of revelation. But there is a sense in which it is itself revelation. Not only is the Old Testament, for example, a record of the history through which God revealed Himself; but it is also a product of that history and of that revelation, and not only a product, but a cause of subsequent history. Again, we are realising now that the New Testament is something more than a record of the life and teaching and death of Jesus, and of the history

of the Apostles and of the Early Church. The New Testament is one result of the faith in and about Jesus held both by the Apostles and the Early Church, and a powerful determinant of the subsequent faith in Jesus Christ.

That is, both the Old and New Testaments were written from a definite theological point of view, with a definite theological bias. It used to be imagined that the business of the Biblical student was to get behind this theological bias to the history of facts and events and persons. Now we are forced to maintain that this is the strongest characteristic of the Bible, indeed the very thing that makes it The Bible.

It is the discovery of this theological point of view which is the chief concern of the Biblical theologian. The source critics, the textual and literary critics, have at their disposal material enough and to spare to keep them busy for a lifetime and more. But always we must remember that the end of criticism is the discovery of the faith behind the records, not merely the discovery of the historicity of the patriarchs or the true date of the Exodus, interesting and important as they may be.

“The Old Testament can be read as one of the sacred books of the east, to enable the scholar to reconstruct a phase of ancient history. It can be read as literature, whether in its original form or in the best modern versions. But we enter most fully into the inheritance which it constitutes only when we see in all its variety of form the different ways in which the Word of God has come to man, and when we still hear Him speaking through it” (H. Wheeler Robinson, *Ancient and English Versions of the Bible*, p. 279).

The approach of the historico-literary critic, then, is different from that of the theologian, as well as his purpose. The one seeks to understand the material and human mechanism of revelation; the other seeks to understand the divine revelation itself.

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