

# Are there distinctively Christian approaches to Biblical Studies

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## *Why ask this question?*

It has been assumed for many years that people will understand and interpret the Bible more accurately if they have taken an academic course in Biblical Studies and

gained a diploma or degree. This is one of the reasons for including academic courses in the training of ministers. At the same time the validation of such academic studies is in the hands of university teachers and academic studies in universities have been thought to be based on

the objective pursuit of truth based on human reason, uncontaminated by the bias of personal faith.

This understanding of Biblical Studies goes back to the Enlightenment, if not earlier,<sup>1</sup> when scholars broke free from the dogmas of the church and worked on the basis of autonomous human reason and a belief that the universe is a closed system of cause and effect. The consequence was that explanations could be given only in terms of the natural world or what could be seen to work within this closed system. So Johnson argues correctly that intellectual elites smuggled metaphysical naturalism into their criteria of what constitutes reasoning.<sup>2</sup> Scholarship then operates on the basis of an epistemology which excludes God. It is not surprising that Christian students have often had to struggle with their academic studies and that the contribution such studies make to preparation for ministry in the Christian church is sometimes questioned.<sup>3</sup>

Two recent developments make our question timely. One is the cultural shift which is widely detected in the last decades of the 20th century from that rationalist picture of academic work described above, to what is termed postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> The other is a demand from the churches that the interpretation of the Bible should be seen at home in the churches, rather than the academy.<sup>5</sup>

Postmodernism is a term intended to indicate that the reign of modernism is over. 'Modernism' is the term used to describe the ways of thinking fostered by the Enlightenment. It was also used for different styles of art and architecture. Jencks borrows the phrase 'the architecture of good intentions' to describe the application of reason to the solution of social problems and comments that 'there are a lot of pleasant white housing estates and machine-aesthetic hospitals to prove that the intentions were not altogether misguided'.<sup>6</sup>

But the idea of inevitable human progress through the application of reason to solve human problems has been undermined by the atrocities of world wars and ethnic cleansing, exploitation of people and destruction of the environment. Some tower blocks like Ronan Point in London collapsed, others were blown up because for all their scientific design, no-one wanted to live in them. Confidence in the scientific method has been undermined by developments within the sciences themselves, particularly quantum physics, wave or particle theories of light and Einstein's theory of relativity. The writings of Michael Polanyi, himself a distinguished research chemist, showed that there is no impersonal knowledge or truth in scientific research. Personal factors influence the scientists' work at all points. Sociologists have argued that the use of reason and claims to knowledge are socially conditioned and some go on to write of the social construction of reality.

The upshot of all this is that it is now widely recognized that there is no one objective truth waiting to be

discovered by all mankind. People with different world-views think and talk about the world differently. Human reason is limited and knowledge is shaped by local, cultural, social and subjective factors. Part of the out-working of this is the appearance of different theologies: feminist, liberation, Marxist, gay, etc. So why not Christian? And why not Christian approaches to Biblical Studies?

The second reason that it is appropriate to ask about Christian approaches is the demand from the churches to retrieve the Bible from the academics. A conference held at Northfield Minnesota June 6-8 1994 co-sponsored by the Centre for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, argued for the church to reclaim the Bible as authoritative Scripture. 'The methods of critical reason have tended to take over the entire operation of biblical interpretation, marginalizing the faith of the church and dissolving the unity of the Bible as a whole into a multiplicity of unrelated fragments. The academy has replaced the church as the home of biblical interpretation . . . it is possible to show that historical critics approach the texts with their own set of prior commitments, sometimes linked to ideologies alien or hostile to the faith of the Christian church.'<sup>7</sup> Among the contributors, Alister McGrath wrote about 'the Babylonian captivity of scripture'; 'the study of scripture has become exiled from its homeland . . . As a result it is in bondage . . . Scripture has thus become subservient to the needs and requirements of a fragmented academic community.'<sup>8</sup>

### *What might distinctively Christian approaches be like?*

In the first place Christian approaches would be based on Christian presuppositions. This means they would work within the acceptance of fundamental Christian beliefs about God and the world. The universe is not, on this view, a closed system of cause and effect, but open to God's coming in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. This includes an acceptance of the reliability of the God-given worldview in the scriptures.<sup>9</sup> Christians are committed to such a worldview.

Secondly, presumably, the Christian scholar regards the books which purport to give some sort of account of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, that is the gospels, as giving a reliable account.<sup>10</sup> This at least is what is presupposed in the chapels of seminaries, in the churches these ministers-to-be are going to serve, and among other Christian believers. This means some access to Jesus, not just the faith of the evangelists, if that is thought to imply something less. The evangelists for all their differences, are thought of as reliable witnesses. Christians are people who share their faith.

Thirdly, Christian approaches are inclined to accept

the general reliability of the rest of the Bible, due attention being paid to questions of different literary genres. What is meant by 'general reliability' here? That the Bible is not misleading, that it can be approached via a hermeneutics of trust instead of a hermeneutics of suspicion. That hermeneutics of trust is based upon the trustworthiness of God himself and of those through whom the Bible came to be. This entails among other things a readiness to accept miracles as historical events, as acts of God which actually happened even though the accounts are expressions of faith. This brings us directly up against the problem of history.

### ***The problem of history***

The science of history was established in the 19th and early 20th centuries on the basis of the secular rationalism of the Enlightenment referred to above. Among other things this naturally excluded appeals to God or divine providence as explanations of events. The essence of true history was circumscribed by the three governing principles formulated by Ernst Troeltsch.

1. the principle of criticism, that historical enquiry can establish only probabilities which are always open to revision;
2. the principle of analogy whereby only what has an analogy in our lives can be accepted among those historical probabilities; 'the universal power of analogy' rules out unique events in the past;
3. the principle of correlation, that all historical events are to be accounted for within a web of historical causes and effects.<sup>11</sup>

Some Christian historians accept these secular principles as defining the practice of history, much as the rules of chess or basketball define what is permitted and what is not allowed in particular games. So, for example, Prof. Erie Ives writing to fellow historians who are Christians says,

The modern academic history in which most of us, I imagine, have been trained is essentially a technique for acquiring, assessing and interpreting evidence. It is a system closed by the parameters of data, positivist in being preoccupied with archivally substantiated fact, dominated by the rational criteria for analysis, occupied with limited problems and concerned to establish cause and effect in as concrete a fashion as possible. . . .

The system is intrinsically secular, has little time for 'meaning' and wholly excludes the numinous and still more any participation of a deity in history. . . .

We are under compulsion to establish the ground of the [Christian] faith within and by the rules of the secularised, restricted discipline which I have described.<sup>12</sup>

Other writers question whether history must be so narrowly defined. In his book *Proper Confidence*, Lesslie Newbigin, following Polanyi, argues that there is no human knowledge without some prior personal commitment to that which cannot be proved. Consequently even rationalism rests on faith. The historical principles of Troeltsch are in fact prior commitments. They cannot be shown to be true. They are 'elements in the creed of modernity' and part of a worldview itself now under attack.<sup>13</sup>

William Abraham has attempted to show that it is possible to maintain a sound historical method and combine it with the view that God has intervened in history.<sup>14</sup> Abraham distinguishes a narrow and a wider sense in which the principle of analogy can be used. Narrowly it refers to the historian's personal experience, more broadly to the experience of people currently alive. But neither of these senses is adequate, Abraham argues. In the first place no historian has a wide enough personal experience to make that the criterion of what is historically possible. In the second place no historian is in a position to know all the experiences of all people currently alive. In any case, not everything which is claimed by people who are alive today is accepted as reliably reported, partly on the basis of what historians know about the past. On occasions then, the past is used to judge claims in the present.

Abraham goes on to refine the principle of analogy, arguing that it must be set within a context of background beliefs. This takes us to the principle of correlation and the difference between those who accept divine intervention and those who rule it out. Abraham argues that claims about direct actions of God occur within networks of wider accounts which help to explain what happened. It is interesting to notice how often in the Bible perfectly ordinary circumstances are suddenly and unexpectedly interrupted by something unusual [e.g. Ex. 3:1-15]. This does not mean that Christian historians will constantly appeal to providence. They may at times adopt the more limited secular framework of history in order to enter into effective dialogue with rationalist colleagues. But that does not rule out a framework of belief for themselves, a framework which will safeguard them from reductionist histories. Christian frameworks then can actually lead to more adequate explanations in history.

Colin Brown points to Wolfhart Pannenberg's redefinition of the use of analogy in terms that 'it teaches us to see contents of the same kind in *nonhomogeneous things*'.<sup>15</sup> In other words Pannenberg recognizes that different events have their own unique features and are analogous only in part. This expands the scope for the historian enabling him/her to deal with an unusual event which 'bursts analogies with present experience'.<sup>16</sup> The world is a stranger place where surprising

things happen of which we would not dream if restricted by positivist forms of historiography. For example Brown goes on to quote Wilhelm Dilthey,

The possibility of experiencing religious states in my own existence is narrowly restricted for me as it is for most people today. But when I run through the letters and writings of Luther, the reports of his contemporaries, the records of the religious confrontations and councils, and his activity as a minister, I experience a religious process of such eruptive force, such energy, in which it is a matter of life and death, that it lies beyond all possibility of actually being lived by a man of our time. But I can relive it . . . man, bound and determined by the reality of life, is set free not only by art — as has often been argued — but also by the understanding of history.<sup>17</sup>

If this can be true of the study of Luther what can be the impact of studying biblical history!

It seems to me that when this debate is set within the contemporary decline of Enlightenment modernism and rationalism the door is open for Christians to argue for a broader understanding of the nature of history, one in which it is not forbidden to refer to God, even if in secular company those references may need to be qualified by, 'Suppose. . .'.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively historians can set the larger Christian vision before their readers by articulating the experiences of Christians in the past in terms those Christians themselves used and Dilthey's experience may come to many.

Mark Noll has gone further to argue that a Christian approach to history can rescue history itself from the acids of contemporary postmodernism.<sup>19</sup> Recognition of the political nature of all history writing and the rejection of the possibility of detached, purely objective, rational scientific inquiry have created an epistemological crisis. But Christian historians can show that the Christian faith rescues history itself. The doctrine of creation affirms the reality of the world and the past as something distinct from human minds and assures us that it is possible for human beings to know something truly about that world. At the same time this claim confirms that human knowledge is relative to a particular point of view, in this case one based on faith in God's creation and sustaining of the world. The relativity of historical knowledge is also reinforced by the doctrine of the Fall and human sinfulness, and, Noll argues, on the positive side there is much to suggest that 'God intends historical understanding to be relative to specific times, places and circumstances'. But relativism in a Christian perspective does not mean scepticism. Noll goes on to argue for reliable knowledge of the past based on the Christian doctrine of the unity of humanity which means differing views will not be absolutely different, and the fact that human beings are created in the image of God means they are to some extent

capable of recreating the past, even though their knowledge is always 'through a glass darkly' and in need of revision.

Today then, Christian historians are being encouraged to emerge into the secular arena of academic history with insights from their Christian faith leading them to make significant contributions to the advancement of historical knowledge.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that Christians working in Biblical Studies have even more reason to read biblical history from a Christian perspective.

### ***What are possible implications?***

I readily acknowledge that there is more to biblical studies than questions of history. Childs has pointed out: 'Historical description is not enough, but it belongs to the central task of exegesis to move from the witness to the reality of which Scripture speaks . . . the God and Father of Jesus Christ.'<sup>21</sup> In other words, theology is important too. I appreciate also many of the advances which have come from the application of literary criticism to books in the Bible. However I have concentrated here on the problem of history because this is in some ways the most difficult issue of all. If Christian scholars too readily resort to faith statements they will not communicate with the wider academic audience to whom, presumably, they have a Christian vocation. They will be regarded as not playing the game according to the rules. At the same time it would seem to be a disservice in the training of ministers-to-be to remove God from ordinary history into a special category of holy history/ salvation history<sup>22</sup> and give much attention to studies which undermine confidence in the reliability of biblical history. It may be that we should distinguish the kind of history and biblical studies we teach according to the 'interpretive interests' of the people we are teaching.<sup>23</sup> But this raises acutely the question, what are the interpretive interests of students?

It would seem plausible to stand neither with the secular rationalist reductionism of the professional academic, working within an Enlightenment paradigm, nor with the extreme relativism of postmodern writers. Neither of these obviously accords well with Christian beliefs. This does not mean that Christian students should never engage with these views. Day excursions outside their presuppositions will benefit Christian students much as foreign travel can extend their horizons. It will enable them to understand others, consider the strength of the opposition and come to an honest faith of their own in relation to some of the views they have read. The unreflective need to stretch the faith they have, not disengage or compartmentalize. But they need a Christian place on which to stand and some kind of constructive Christian realism would seem best.<sup>24</sup> This gives them some overlapping agendas with those who are not Christians and points at which to engage

with the secular world, but standing securely within Christian commitment and convictions.

Perhaps we can argue that the word 'academic' is not to be used as if it stood for one professional approach to which all who aspire to higher education should attain, but rather in the sense that it describes methods of study which can be deployed in the interests of different worldviews including the rationalist and the Christian.<sup>25</sup> Such methods include the disciplines of the biblical languages, the study of society and culture and events which form the background to biblical narratives, the analysis of the structure and argument of different biblical books, etc. In practice here are a range of approaches to the Bible which for some scholars will admit the supernatural while others exclude that dimension.

On particular matters there will be differences of view among Christians who have agreed that Christian approaches are desirable. Thus issues such as an early date for Deuteronomy, some exilic material in Daniel, Paul's authorship of the Pastorals, are matters of debate. But the significant point is that these issues should be addressed within a constructive Christian framework. I do not wish to contend for a narrowly conservative view of prescribed answers on points of detail but a broader confidence in the methods and goals of teachers who themselves are committed to living the Christian faith. When we talk about 'critical studies' we mean making judgements not from the point of view of some mythical disinterested reason, but Christian judgements. These can be reasonable too.

One final characteristic of Christian approaches will be to see more unity than diversity within the Bible, unity of message if diversity of forms in which the message is expressed. This does not remove the differences within the canon of scripture at a stroke but it will encourage the search for a biblical theology rather than accentuating the differences between biblical writers and within-biblical books. As Christians we must give some significance to the Bible as the word of God and have some way of understanding what he says in ways which can make a difference to our lives.

### Footnotes

1 See, Aufklärung, ODCC (1957) 104-5, Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and problems of biblical criticism in the seventeenth century* (London: SCM, 1990).

2 *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law and Education* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), reviewed by Francis Beckwith in *Themelios* 22.1 (1996): 68.

3 e.g. Mitzi Minor, *The Spirituality of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster/JohnKnox Press, 1996), ix, Eta Linne-

mann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990).

4 see e.g. J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth is stranger than it used to be* (London: SPCK, 1995).

5 Carl E. Braaten, Robert W. Jenson, eds *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

6 C. Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (London: Academy Editions, 1996), 4th edit., pp. 22-23.

7 Braaten and Jenson, x-xi.

8 Braaten and Jenson, pp. 69-78 [qts.69].

9 cf Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Paternoster, 1995), 2nd edit.

10 This does not mean that everything related in the gospels is to be taken as describing what happened in the earthly ministry of Jesus. It can be demonstrated that some of the gospel material comprises comment from a post-resurrection perspective for example.

11 cf Van A. Harvey, *The Historian & The Believer* (SCM, 1967), pp. 14-15. The quotation is from Troeltsch as translated by Colin Brown, *History & Faith* (IVP, 1987), p. 45.

12 'Modern Historical Scholarship and the Christian Gospel', *Christianity and History Newsletter* 9 (1992): 5-6.

13 *Proper Confidence: Faith Doubt & Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (SPCK, 1995), pp. 79-83 [q.83].

14 See V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Apollos, 1994), pp. 128-135. William Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (OUP 1982); cf Robert Stein, *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* (Leicester: Downers Grove IVP, 1996), pp. 17-24.

15 op.cit p. 45, emphasis original.

16 47 picking up a phrase of Pannenberg quoted on p. 46.

17 q. 59-60.

18 G. M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: OUP, 1997), pp. 52-53, 83-84.

19 'Traditional Christianity and the Possibility of Historical Knowledge', *Christian Scholar's Review*, 19 (1990), pp. 388-406.

20 Marsden, pp. 51-55 and chap. 4 What difference could it possibly make?

21 Braaten and Jenson, pp. 14-15.

22 cf James Barr, *Explorations in Theology* 7 (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 11 although Barr argues for the narrower view of history which excludes divine causation.

23 Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in the Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991).

24 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 81-144; Paul Helm, ed. *Objective Knowledge* (Leicester: IVP, 1987);

of Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking* (London: SPCK, 1995).

25 of McGrath's comments on rationality: 'Patterns of rationality in general . . . are socially and historically located and conditioned. "Reason" must be taken to refer to those frameworks of rationality and perceived notions of self-evident truths appropriate to specific social group-

ings at specific moments in history.' *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p. 94.

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