

## IN THE STUDY

Two recent books<sup>1</sup> on the nature of scripture make useful dialogue partners. Howard Marshall stands in the conservative evangelical tradition. James Barr does not. Part of the fascination of a combined reading is to ascertain at what points, if any, the two positions actually engage one another.

Barr is a demolition expert rather than a builder. Having in an earlier book taken the axe to fundamentalism, he now swings at a different target. He begins calmly enough with an examination of the position of the New Testament church, makes the obvious point that it did not possess the New Testament, the equally obvious point that it made use of an authoritative scripture (roughly to be designated Old Testament), and the less obvious point that the fundamental newness of the basis of its faith meant both that it was not originally a 'scriptural religion' and that it never viewed itself as being under a 'near-absolute scriptural control'. He then turns to the post-Reformation developments, the assumptions about scripture made by Protestant orthodoxy, the Reformation insights enshrined in critical scholarship, the problems of constructing theology while taking the scriptural canon seriously. The introduction of 'canon' leads to a detailed discussion of the issue in historical and contemporary terms which majors heavily on the New Testament's own position and understanding at this point. So far all is, relatively speaking, sweetness and light.

Just here, however, the villain of the piece makes an entrance in the shape of canonical criticism à la Brevard Childs, and the thunder begins to roll. Barr lays about him in all directions, in a sprawling discussion which in sum accounts for almost half the book and which draws blood at a number of points. In between whiles we are provided with some perceptive comments on the essential character of modern biblical research.

While Barr is diffuse and scarifying, Marshall is measured and urbane. Conscious that there are those who will have his head if he is judged as selling scripture short, he seeks to sail between Scylla and Charybdis with all the transparent honesty for which he is renowned. He asks what the biblical writers say about scripture. He plots the various explanations of what 'inspiration' in this context means and what its implications may be. He weighs the values and weaknesses attaching to the practice of biblical criticism. He examines the necessary movement from original biblical meaning to contemporary biblical significance. He assesses the nature of biblical authority.

The position he advances is that the Bible is indeed inspired, infallible and (in a real sense) inerrant. By 'inspiration' he understands an activity of the Spirit which

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1 *Biblical Inspiration* by I. H. Marshall. Hodder & Stoughton, 1982. £3.95.

• *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* by J. Barr. O.U.P., 1983. pa. £5.95.

is 'concurrent' with the fully human activity through which scripture was written. By 'infallibility' he understands that the Bible is completely trustworthy for the purposes for which God inspired it. By 'inerrancy' he understands freedom from any error that would contradict scripture's intended purpose. He accepts historical study of the Bible that uses the full range of scholarly tools in order to assess language and context and to shed light on the meaning of the biblical text. He rejects historical-critical method in so far as it operates with presuppositions which rule out the miraculous, affirm that all events are in principle similar, and put a premium on scepticism of approach to historical statements.

In terms of clarity and constructiveness it is Marshall rather than Barr that impresses. His heart is obviously in the right (rather than the left) place. Yet what we are given is very much a soft sell which uses the 'orthodox' words while rather drastically redefining them. Inspiration and infallibility with a wave to inerrancy seems faultless enough - until the small print is read. And the small print is really rather important. For Marshall is clear that scripture contains major discrepancies. He is clear that evidence must be followed even where it tells against hallowed theories. He is clear that genuine historical mistakes may be found in scripture and that historical reporting cannot be insulated from theological interpretation. And he seems to suggest that (e.g.) a biblical belief in demons is not necessarily mandatory for the modern Christian. In sum, to talk of a belief in the Bible's 'entire trustworthiness for its divinely intended purpose' is to say a great deal but is also to puncture at crucial points the impregnable chain-mail of a good deal of traditional fundamentalism and to open most of the practical issues all over again.

Perhaps what really separates Marshall from Barr is the distinct *de fide* stance that the former adopts. At the crucial points he confesses that he believes: he cannot prove; he can however advance supportive reasons. Those reasons obviously become of crucial importance. Two in particular bear scrutiny. One is the argument from Christian experience: the believer finds that the Bible is God's word to him. The other is the argument from within the biblical witness: Jesus, the prophets, the Bible itself, testify to a particular understanding of the nature of scripture.

The first speaks less clearly than might at first appear. It is the old problem of fact and interpretation, treasure and container, reality and embodiment. If children grow in an environment which expects early conversion and baptism, it is then - rather than (say) at adolescence - that this will tend to happen. If church members live in an environment where a sense of particular 'call' is understood to mean the full-time 'professional' local church ministry, then this is how 'call' will be individually interpreted. Similarly, if a certain Christian ethos views scripture in a particular way, then experience of the 'plus factor' of scripture will come framed in those *particular* trappings. Other Christians with other expectancy receptors may have precisely the same sort of experience but 'cash' it differently.

As to the argument from scripture's own self-witness, Marshall will have to come to terms with the much more searching discussion that Barr provides. At exactly this point the former fails to probe to the depth required. Partly the problem is that questions are being put to scripture which it scarcely faces and is not much interested in answering. Partly it is that the whole matter of 'canon' is never properly considered and what passing comments we are offered are dubious. It is agreed on all hands that we must follow the evidence. That surely involves a recognition that the *facts* of the first century situation, so far as we can at present trace them, provide a rather different picture from that assumed by post-Reformation orthodoxy's view of scripture. On this, Barr wins hands down.

It may be that it is time that the term 'inspiration' disappeared from the argument. It is not that it claims too much. It is rather that it proves too little. If you belong to a New Testament church that believes that the Spirit has been poured out, then inspiration is the air you breathe. Arguably, in the early church, a whole mass of writing and utterance was seen as inspired. But such a conclusion hardly helps in defining the *differentia* of scripture. Barr and Marshall notwithstanding, there remains much careful work and restatement to be done. It would be a pity if the concentration were too narrowly on definition and redefinition of hallowed terms or on abstract verdicts about 'nature' and 'significance'. How scripture is to be used and what may - and may not - properly be expected of it seem to be the questions of importance for the health of the Church of God.

Werner Kelber made his initial impact on Markan studies with contributions mainly of a redaction criticism character. His latest foray into the New Testament field<sup>2</sup> thus signals not only continuity of concern but also a striking out along a significantly different path. Radically to distinguish between the oral and the written is to pose old questions in a quite new way and to throw up some fresh ones.

The journey Kelber takes is something as follows. He begins by reviewing the assumptions of form criticism as to the transmission of oral tradition and its eventual deposit in written form culminating in New Testament 'Gospel' record. Attention is then given to the speech forms of the Synoptic tradition in so far as the Markan Gospel gives us access to them, with a view to determining whether or not the pressures moved towards anything like a full 'oral Gospel' which might provide the mould by which the text of Mark is shaped. A negative verdict here provides the springboard for a further examination of Mark as written 'text' and of the nature of its relation to the 'oral' legacy which the Gospel writer inherited. This relationship is judged to be one of heavy discontinuity, involving profound transformation and reintegration, overturning the imperatives of oral tradition and oral authorities and re-orientating basic assumptions about Jesus and the kingdom.

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2 *The Oral and the Written Gospel* by Werner H. Kelber. Fortress Press, 1983. £15.75.

Up to this point Kelber has been wrestling with the pre-Passion material in Mark. We might expect an immediate completion of the study of the whole Gospel. In the event, the Markan Passion narrative is deferred in favour of a move towards the Pauline letters. This might seem a flat digression. It does however provide an area of comparison and contrast. It has long been recognised that in his use of the 'letter' form the apostle tells us a good deal about his disposition towards language and his marked preference for oral address. Attention here serves, among other things, to highlight the counter direction in which the author of the Markan Gospel moves.

So finally and by way of this Pauline detour to Mark's Passion narrative, a rejection of the popular thesis of an older pre-canonical Passion story, a pointing up of the significance of Q which lacks an account of Jesus' death and betrays a firmly oral genre, and some conclusions on the major theme of this Kelber study. If it all sounds a bit rarefied, part of the answer may be that some of it is. Equally, another part of the answer may be that the discussion moves along tracks that are still strange visitants, almost foreign deposits, in the familiar fastnesses of inherited New Testament study.

What is it that Kelber believes he has demonstrated? Partly that there is no continuous, unbroken, gentle, evolutionary development from oral speech to text. Partly that the Markan Gospel, while it is rooted in oral soil, has at its heart a transforming reintegrating thrust which sets it over against, even in opposition to, the dynamics of oral speech. Heavily and controllingly that written text is language in a quite different mode from that of oral address, with gains and losses; but above all with profound distinctions that crucially affect New Testament understanding.

Not all the argumentation is convincing. The strain and artificiality imposed on the interpretation of the Law in the Pauline writings is arguably one of the most obvious points at which fact seems to be sold short in the interests of accommodation to a theory. Nonetheless, it would be foolish to write this strange pilgrimage off as another sophisticated illusion from the groves of restless American academe.

I conclude with two allied reflections for which Kelber must be acquitted of all responsibility. Twenty years ago James Millenbourg, on the basis of a study of the rhetorical 'forms' of the Old Testament, wrote: 'In all the forms we have studied we are listening to words *spoken*... Israel is called to an oral engagement'. The verdict may be lacking in precision; but it surely rings bells in the preacher's ear. If part of the preacher's task is to move surely from a written text (scripture) to an oral address (sermon), must he not be vitally concerned to understand the fundamental distinction and difference between the oral and the textual? Secondly, what strange and potentially damaging understandings are at work where Sunday by Sunday ministers of the Word 'speak' scripture lessons to the congregation in the mode of 'oral address' yet encourage them to pick up the literary text and 'read' concurrently?

What must it mean to live in a religiously plural world? In any multi-racial society, Christians can hardly ignore that fundamental question. In a wide-ranging study<sup>3</sup> Kent University's Anglican chaplain tries to provide pointers to an answer by discussing the Christian theology of religions. Since the spread of theological positions on offer is so vast and sprawling, some classification seems called for. Alan Race opts for three boxes respectively labelled exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, and fits the theologians into one or another container.

Exclusivism, we know. It is where, for most of Christian history, the majority of right thinking churchmen might be presumed to stand. It is the stance of Barth and Brunner, Kraemer and Newbigin (not to mention the recently published Evangelical Alliance discussion 'Christianity and other Faiths'). It pivots on an *a priori* conviction of the uniqueness and finality of Christ involving Christianity as enshrining the divine revelation in the light of which all religions must be judged.

Inclusivism is somewhat more slippery. God is at work in other religions for revelation if not for redemption. Or, more exactly and more generously, all that is true in other religions reflects, is rooted in, and finds fulfilment in Christ. This is the stance of Vatican II, of the famous 'anonymous Christianity' argument of Karl Rahner, of Panikkar and Bede Griffiths. It majors in integration rather than confrontation.

Pluralism is the third box. Yet already it is clear that the containers are far from watertight. It is not always easy to draw absolute lines between what I might call 'soft' exclusivism and 'hard' inclusivism. When we reach the 'soft' inclusivism of a Hans Küng or a John Robinson, definite slippage towards pluralism seems threatened. In any event, pluralism is a characteristically modern phenomenon. We might broadly say that it is compounded of tolerance and relativism yet still tries to take issues of truth and falsity with proper seriousness. It comes in various flavours, as the writings of Tillich, Hick, and Cantwell Smith amply demonstrate.

Alan Race does not surprise us by the revelation that he favours some version of pluralism. What is rather more significant is his concluding discussion which ranges through the significance of belief in the incarnation and the christologies involved in various theologies of religion to the matter of truth and what the search for truth must mean for the sharpened historical sense of our modern age. Here the important questions are allowed to surface.

Yet at the end of it all I found myself wondering how far the classification of options really gets discussion off on the right foot. We love to pigeonhole; and woe betide the thinker

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3 *Christians and Religious Pluralism* by A. Race. S.C.M. Press, 1983. £5.95.

who gets in the wrong box. Cries of 'betrayal' are never far away. Either witness or dialogue. Either Christ the only saviour or many saviours. But suppose one wants to be a spoilsport and cry: 'If that is your "game", I don't want to "play".' That is why it is to be hoped that it will be that part of Alan Race's book which raises key questions that will command attention. When all is said and done we desperately need a convincing and operable Christian theology of religions. And the time should have long since passed when any would suppose that a knockdown quotation of John 14.6 and Acts 4.12 settles anything.

How do you lay firm foundations for a contemporary dogmatic theology? One answer provided by Eberhard Jungel of Tübingen is at last available in English translation. "Geoffrey Wainwright has described it as a 'masterpiece'. We need not quarrel violently with that verdict provided there is recognition that the power of this study lies in the impressive nature of the journey rather than the novelty of the terminus. Many voices have been calling for this sort of theological restatement. Moltmann (whom Jungel treats dismissively) is one of those who has occupied similar ground while taking a different route.

But the journey is the thing, and the reader needs to be warned that it is theologically and philosophically rigorous, and even at times circuitous. 'If thinking is to advance', Jungel muses, 'then it should not resist repetition'. Thus rebuked, we are nerved for discursive plunges into the worldly non-necessity of God (Descartes, Schelling), the affirmation of the Death of God (Tertullian to Feuerbach via Hegel), the possibility of thinking God (Descartes, Kant, Fichte, Feuerbach, Nietzsche), the use of analogy (Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant).

The progression of the argument disallows brief summary. I simply and impressionistically hint at its riches. What is here on offer is a discussion of God that takes with proper seriousness both the metaphysical and the Christian task, both the confessional and the contemporary dimensions. Is God necessary? Is God thinkable? Such fundamental questions were bound to be posed in a new way once the Cartesian 'cogito' irrupted into the modern world. Yet, given the particular metaphysical framework of the understanding of God which had been inherited, the end term of the questioning was inevitably the destruction of metaphysical certainty with regard to God. The Death of God was fated from the beginning.

And yet, and yet, Christian faith was not and cannot afford to be the detached observer, passing negative judgment from the sidelines. Because it shared the metaphysical framework, it effectively connived at the hastening of the incredibility and inconceivability of God for the modern world. Not only so, It also blunted and muffled the impact of Calvary by refusing

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4 *God as the Mystery of the World* by Eberhard Jungel.  
T & T Clark, 1983. E14.95.

to allow death to move from the humanity of Jesus to the heart of deity.

What then is to be done? Christian thinking that is true to its title deeds will restore the thinkability of God by affirming the speakability of God, by recognising the primacy of language over thought, and by grounding the speakability of God in the divine address to man. God is present in his Word; present therefore in a way which provides temporal distancing; present as the one who is absent. It is the metaphysical concept of God's absence that in the world of modern thought drives a wedge of distinction between God's essence and his existence, and powers the affirmation of his non-existence. Conversely, it is the grounding of God's speakability in his Word of address that restores his thinkability and disallows distinguishing between his essence and his existence.

So far, so esoteric, I hear you murmur. There is however more to be said. To take the centrality of the crucified Jesus with proper seriousness is to affirm God as united with perishability (and thus incidentally to side with Luther rather than Zwingli). Yet how can this be? To say 'perishable' is surely to say 'temporal' and thus to launch on the path that inexorably runs out into 'nothingness'. But wait. What if to say 'perishability' is in fact to affirm 'possibility'. And what if 'possibility' is not an ontological minus but an ontological plus, not the evacuation of 'being' but the capability of 'becoming'. Then indeed, without ultimate metaphysical betrayal, God may be identified with the crucified Jesus, and therefore and thereby be named as the one who exists for others, and therefore as love, and therefore as trinity.

All this is fleshed out in a powerful and sometimes moving presentation of the humanity of God. Jungel echoes contemporary preferences in stressing that at its citadel theology requires enunciation in terms of narrative story; but he further strikes a needed blow for the importance of discursive reflection. In terms at once concrete and considered, he expounds 'God is love' against the background of the first Johannine letter and grounds the Trinity (immanent and economic) firmly in the revelatory paradigm which is the life and death of Jesus.

Of course, a familiar problem is still lurking. It is more obviously persuasive and convincing to move to a binity than to take the further leap to a trinity - especially if your controlling compass bearings are provided by the crucified Jesus. 'God's being is in coming'. 'God is in that he comes to himself'. 'God comes from God'. 'God comes to God'. So far, the dynamic relational pattern flows smoothly and strongly. But then the leap to trinity: 'God comes as God'. Enter the Holy Spirit as the third mode of deity. At this point the fuel seems to be something other than christological propellant. It may be that just here we require some fuller integration of other facets of the identification of the Holy Spirit at which

Jungel only briefly hints. .

In any event, he has performed a significant service in exposing the metaphysical stranglehold that has blocked a profound rooting of the Cross in God and led inexorably to the 'Death of God'. That the taking seriously of a christological control in relation to godhead involves the destruction of 'the axiom of absoluteness, the axiom of apathy, and the axiom of immutability' is almost an axiom of contemporary theology. But it has seldom been probed with such precision tools or argued with such skill and dexterity.

NEVILLE CLARK

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#### ANNUAL MEETING 1984

This will be held in the Institute Hall, Westminster Chapel, on Monday, 30th April 1984 at 4.30 p.m. At 5 p.m. the Revd Dr Raymond Brown, Principal of Spurgeon's College, will give a lecture entitled

BAPTIST PREACHING IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

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#### SPURGEON TERJUBILEE

Saturday, 8th September 1984

A Day Conference organised by the Baptist Historical Society to mark the 150th anniversary of Spurgeon's birth will be held at HISTON BAPTIST CHURCH, CAMBRIDGE, starting at 10.30 a.m.

Lecturers include Mr J. H. Y. Briggs, M.A., F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S., Department of History, Keele University; Revd M. K. Nicholls, B.D., Tutor at Spurgeon's College; and Revd J. J. Brown, B.D., Past President of the Baptist Union.

It is hoped to arrange a visit to Isleham Ferry, where Spurgeon was baptised.

The conference fee will be £4-50 inclusive. The conference will finish about 8 p.m. Overnight accommodation available with Histon church members if required. WRITE FOR FULL DETAILS TO B.H.S. SECRETARY.

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