Biblical Studies and Theology: Present Possibilities and Future Hopes

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THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD of biblical interpretation emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century. Biblical scholars, principally those working in Germany, were successful in freeing their work from the need to be subservient to theological dogmas. Instead, they sought to understand the original intention of the biblical writers in their historical setting. This, it was maintained, was a method of study which could be practised objectively and without bias. What was discovered about the beliefs and intentions of the biblical writers would constitute a biblical theology, which could stand in its own right alongside dogmatic theology.[1]

Concentration on the original intention of the biblical writers brought great benefits to biblical studies. It provided added stimulus to the attempts of scholars to establish the original text of the Bible, to understand its languages more adequately, and to rediscover the political, social and economic history of the world of the Bible. Two hundred years later, the results must be described as impressive. There were other additional gains: for example, the prophets could be seen not just as foretellers of the coming Christ, but as men of God with a message for their own contemporaries, delivered in particular historical circumstances.

But if there were gains, there were also losses. First, the more scholarship concentrated on the original intentions of the biblical writers, the more difficult it became to maintain the unity of the Bible. The perception of differing views among biblical writers (e.g. as between the authors of Genesis 1: 1-2: 4a and Genesis 2: 4b ff.) led to the postulate that there were *theologies* within the Bible, but no *theology*. Not only was the unity between the Old Testament and New Testament threatened, the unity of each separate Testament was also put in jeopardy.

The second loss was more insidious. As long as biblical theology was subservient to dogmatic theology, it was at least clear under

which presuppositions the study of the Bible was conducted. However, while one of the attractions of 'intentionalism' was that it was an allegedly objective method, and a method that could be practised without bias, in fact this was far from being the case. For good or ill, the biblical writers believed in a living God, whose relation to the world was such that He could 'speak' to His servants, and show His presence and His will through occurrences in history and the natural world. Against this, the critical scholars of the late eighteenth century were influenced by English deism, or by those currents of thought in Germany usually described as *Neologie*[3] and rationalism. In practice, these critical scholars rejected the supernaturalism of the biblical writers, and practised a crude form of demythologising.[3]

In the years that have passed since the emergence of the historical critical method, the situation has persisted in which what has been alleged to be an objective method of study has in fact been influenced by a variety of philosophical, anthropological and linguistic presuppositions. It was unavoidable that this should be so, and the same thing would have happened if biblical scholarship had continued to be dominated by a supernaturalist world-view. What is disturbing, however, is that critical scholars have rarely been aware of many of their unexamined presuppositions, and that because of the way in which biblical scholars are trained, there is little incentive for specialists to devote much of their time to the study of the methods of biblical studies. The question of the presuppositions of intentionalism and the historical critical method will be taken up again later.

The reactions to the emergence of this historical critical method are too well known to require elaboration. However, whether one likes it or not, the method is here to stay, and every serious student of the Bible will have to come to terms with it in some way. Even ultra-conservatives will, on reflection, find that they have been more affected by the method than they realise. It should not be supposed, though, that all is necessarily well in the historical critical garden, and it says much for the sincerity of its practitioners that a certain amount of re-thinking is currently taking place, as never before. Again, the pressures are well known and easy to identify. They have arisen from the insistence of Karl Barth over fifty years ago that we should read the Epistle to the Romans not merely in order to discover the intention of St. Paul but to hear the word of the living God. They have come from the rather meagre diet that the teaching of biblical studies in colleges and universities has provided for incipient preachers, clergy and teachers. Of particular interest is the fact that the readiness of some biblical scholars to look closely at other disciplines which impinge on the business of biblical studies, has led to criticisms of positions often merely taken for granted by biblical specialists. Under this heading one could mention linguistics and anthropology.[4]

Immediately after the Second World War, there was a strong move-

ment in what was called biblical theology. The movement emphasised the importance of the Bible for theology as a whole, and working within the historical critical method, sought to establish the unity of the Bible, to affirm the uniqueness of biblical (especially Hebrew) categories, and to present some sort of thematic or systematic treatment of biblical doctrines. In the past ten years, however, the movement has faltered and petered out, as much through criticism from within the historical critical method as anything else. We are thus faced with a situation in which not only certain general aspects of biblical studies are being questioned by biblical scholars, but one in which a notable recent attempt to make the critical study of the Bible theologically productive has signally failed.

The attempts of scholars to find a way out of the impasse have varied so far. American contributions such as J. Bright's *The Authority of the Old Testament* (London 1957), B. S. Childs's *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia 1970) and J. D. Smart's *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* (London 1970) have uniformly been more successful in analysing the problems than in suggesting the answers. Childs, however, has been brave enough to argue that modern Christian scholarship should not ignore the two thousand years of Christian exegesis that lie between the Bible and ourselves. In France, an attempt is being made to find an alternative to the intentional and the historical approach which dominates the critical method, by recourse to literary structuralism. Two symposia have so far appeared: *Exégèse et herméneutique* (ed. X. Léon-Dufour; Paris 1971) and *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique* (ed. F. Bovon, Neuchâtel 1971). They are notable in that they are the fruit of cooperation between biblical specialists and structuralists; their results are suggestive, although their theological implications are not yet clear. It is encouraging, however, that French biblical scholars are engaging in cross-disciplinary discussions.

What of the British contribution to the problem? With this question we are brought to the main purpose of the article, a review of James Barr's latest book*. Probably no one has done more than Barr in recent years to stir up the world of professional biblical specialists, especially on the Old Testament front; and here, with the mention of the Old Testament a brief but necessary diversion is required. It was principally Old Testament scholars who were responsible for the emergence of the historical critical method, one of the reasons for this being that a radical questioning of the Old Testament impinged less directly on personal faith than would have been the case with the New Testament. The recent attempts by biblical scholars to say something more positive about the Bible have also been spearheaded mainly by Old Testament scholars, for a reason not unrelated to that just stated as partly responsible for the emergence of the historical

* *The Bible in the Modern World*, SCM Press, 1973, xii + 193 pp., £2.50.

critical method. If the Old Testament is felt to impinge less than the New Testament on the personal faith of church-goers, this means also that the Old Testament scholar who has a Christian theological concern is often on the defensive. He finds his field of professional study either poorly regarded by clergy and laity as a document relevant to Christianity, or he sees it studied and taught in ways often inimical to theology, e.g. as the major source-book for the study of ancient Hebrew, or the history of Israelite religion.

It must be acknowledged, I think, that such pressures on Old Testament writers may lead them to put forward solutions to the problems of biblical interpretation which are relevant to the Old Testament, but less helpful to the New Testament. If it is regrettable to have to say that the world of biblical scholarship is so fragmented that Old Testament and New Testament specialists can often live in mutually isolated worlds, it is nonetheless necessary to state the fact in order to try to place Professor Barr's book in perspective. He is primarily an Old Testament specialist; it would be most significant if his book were to be helpful to New Testament specialists also, but we must allow that it might not be helpful. Certainly, the present writer is in no position to judge, since he is in the same camp as Barr.

The Bible in the Modern World is the published version of the Croall Lectures, delivered in the University of Edinburgh in November 1970. The chapters, each presumably corresponding to a lecture, are more analytic than synthetic. Very occasionally, it is not easy to distinguish between views that the author is expounding, and opinions that he himself accepts. These factors will undoubtedly enable Professor Barr's critics to renew their charge that his work is mainly destructive. However, the book is far from being purely negative. With great clarity, the author analyses many ideas and concepts commonly employed in speaking about the Bible, and if he shows them to be less adequate or more complicated than is commonly supposed, the resulting clarity is surely a gain. The book does not lack positive suggestions, either, but they are not presented to the reader in a pre-digested form. They have to be dug out of the various discussions, and have to be co-ordinated by the reader. For this reason, the book will require more than superficial browsing.

After an opening chapter which briefly describes the present crisis in biblical theology, Professor Barr examines some leading concepts, and in particular the notions of inspiration, Word of God, and authority. In each case, the notions have difficulties. Inspiration implies views about the origins of the Bible, but while it says nothing about the mode of the God-givenness of the Bible, it again often implies the infallibility of the Bible, thereby begging the question about the modes of the origins. Word of God is a notion imported from the world of systematic theology, and while perhaps useful there, is in fact of little help to the biblical scholar. The notion of authority does at least remove

the emphasis from the question of biblical origins, but falls foul of the general crisis of authority in the church. Even the distinction between authoritative and authoritarian has the danger of introducing a personal subjectivism into the matter.

This does not mean that Professor Barr has no further use, at least for the terms inspiration and authority. With regard to the latter, however, he prefers to let the authority of any approach to the Bible to be judged at the end, rather than the beginning of the process; although this does not imply that anything will do, so long as it 'moves' the individual person. First, Professor Barr is clear that one must work within the canon of scripture, while acknowledging that theologies of all positions are selective within the canon. Second, any theological approach to the Bible, if it is to be Christian, must '(a) . . . give some central place to Jesus of Nazareth' and '(b) its God must be the God who was already known in Israel' (p. 114). It is also acknowledged that a theological approach to the Bible 'is very likely to give profound attention to certain supplementary models furnished by classical periods of the early church; traditional christology and traditional trinitarianism are the obvious instances' (p. 135). As for inspiration, Professor Barr would apply it to the process of the emergence of written scripture from living tradition. This is an important part of his general position.

Before written scripture existed, it is maintained, it was a living tradition which expressed Israel's understanding of the living God. Further, this tradition, including elements drawn from historical narratives, folklore, poems, songs and so forth, was subject to reinterpretation and new understanding. The notion of inspiration can be applied as much to this process as the 'decision' (if that is the right word) to make the tradition a written one. When this happened, the whole character of the tradition changed, but the final result was the provision of 'the classic model' (not 'the perfect model') for the understanding of God. By seeing inspiration in this way, Professor Barr is trying to say something about the uniqueness of the written scriptures (they provide the 'classic model'), without implying infallibility (the 'classic model' is not necessarily the 'perfect model'), and without narrowing the idea of inspiration so as to exclude either the period of oral tradition before the emergence of a written scripture (it is *not* implied that nothing was written down during this 'oral' period) or the process of the interpretation and exposition of the written scripture within the church. It is in the light of this account of the emergence of 'the classic model', and the reciprocal relation between church and community which it implies, that one must understand Professor Barr's assertion (p. 115) that the status of the Bible is implied in Christian faith. At the end of the book, the author expresses his conviction of faith and hope that the profoundest unity of the Bible is 'the unity of the one God, which is also a unity within a variety, and—dare we say?—

a unity within a history' (p. 181). Such are the bare bones of Professor Barr's position, extracted from discussions of points too numerous to detail here.

The present reviewer would not disagree with this position. He wonders, however, if it goes far enough, and is of the opinion that Professor Barr gives clues here and there to suggest further ways forward. Of particular value in this respect are chapters dealing with cultural relativism, and the Bible as literature. Probably the most radical attack on the Bible has come from those who argue that the cultural conditions in which it was produced differ so completely from modern cultural conditions that the Bible can have little relevance to the modern world. In comparison with such people, Bultmann is traditional in that he accepts that the Bible (New Testament) has some sort of authority for today in spite of its specific cultural origins; his task is one of cross-cultural appropriation. In reply to more radical cultural relativist critics, Professor Barr makes two points. The first is that they have not sufficiently understood the relation between the different cultures supposedly represented by the world of the Bible and the modern world. The relationship is not similar to that between two contemporary and quite alien cultures. Rather

> 'Where a culture has a memory of its past, then that remembered past would appear to be part of that culture; and the power of that past is the greater where it is made available through literary preservation and through the attribution of high value, whether literary or religious, to this heritage. . . . This cultural transmission is a one-way process: we concern ourselves with the understanding of our cultural past, but the converse is not true, that the men of the Bible could have assimilated our more modern reflection and developments. It is because it is a past—future relation of this kind that communicability between biblical and modern times is not only possible but natural' (p. 46).

The second point is that the effect of their cultural origins upon them does not make the great literary works of the world impossible of appreciation by readers of quite different times and cultures; and whatever else is true about the Bible, it is literature, and its impact on many people is at the literary level. Ordinary worshippers are not aware of the various literary strands said by scholars to make up complete narratives. They hear or read a narrative as a whole, and it is in this form that it makes its impact.

This brings us to Professor Barr's discussion of the Bible as literature, a discussion which is both suggestive and disappointing. The author rightly stresses that parts of the Bible, for example the book of Job and the parables of Jesus depend upon their literary form for the communication of their message. It does not affect the message whether we think that Job and his friends, or the good Samaritan, were historical figures or not. Even in the case of traditions about the saving acts of God as they impinge upon history, the message is contained as much in

the final and literary form of the narratives, as in the fact that the traditions give information about events which were seen by the eyes of faith to be acts of God. This being so, can we gain insights from literary criticism (not in the biblical studies sense!) in our approach to the Bible?

Here, it is to be regretted that the symposia of the French biblical scholars and literary structuralists referred to above appeared too late to be considered in detail by Professor Barr. His main discussion thus deals with D. E. Nineham's paper 'The Use of the Bible in Modern Theology'.[5] Three firm points seem to emerge from the discussion. First, from the literary angle as opposed to that aspect of the text designed to convey information, a text is to be understood in its own terms. Scholarship can elucidate a work, but cannot become a substitute for it. 'The results of all the accumulated scholarship expended on St. Mark will then be that the reader, his mind illuminated by all this, will see the end-product, the meaning of the gospel, by reading: St. Mark' (p. 70). Second, there will not be one solely valid meaning or interpretation of a literary text; but third, this is not to say that negative criteria do not exist to exclude illegitimate interpretations. It is not simply a matter of everybody's interpretation being as good as everybody else's.

So far so good, but Professor Barr seems inclined to go no further. He is right, of course, to warn us that a literary approach to the Bible could be counter-productive theologically, by persuading people that the discipline of philological and exegetical study is irrelevant if one has grasped several literary principles of interpretation. However he seems to have missed the opportunity of adding a new dimension to our understanding of the nature and possibilities of the historical critical method. Two points seem to be indisputable; first, that the Bible is literature, and second, that although biblical scholars practise what is called literary criticism, literary training that would be recognised as such by specialists in literatures is usually not part of the biblical scholar's equipment.[6] Professor Barr perhaps makes this point obliquely when he shows (p. 170) that much of the source criticism familiar in biblical studies is in fact based on a very *literal* reading of the text, a literal reading designed to expose alleged duplications and contradictions. To Professor Barr's point one ought to add that such an approach really begs all sorts of questions about style; and further, the sort of contradictions that are grist to the mill of biblical literary analysts are fastened on by the French literary structuralists, who see them as vital for a proper understanding of the tensions and means of communication of the texts in their extant form.[7] The present reviewer is of the opinion that new literary approaches can only enrich and improve the historical critical method, and that similarly, the philological, exegetical and historical contributions of the latter will provide the negative criteria necessary to prevent illegitimate literary inter-

pretations of biblical texts.

At the end of it all, one wonders whether Professor Barr's difficulty is that he is prepared to accept that the main task of biblical scholarship is intentionalism, i.e. the discovery of the original intentions of the biblical authors (p. 173). This is something that the reviewer is increasingly coming to doubt. First of all, the attempt to get inside the mind of the biblical writers involves the use of anthropological, linguistic and psycho-linguistic procedures often outside the competence of biblical scholars. Further, if one accepts on the grounds of faith and philosophical theology that the supernatural world affirmed by the biblical writers is more than a figment of their imagination, the question must be asked how far it is possible even in an academic discipline to understand the full intention of the biblical writers if the modern biblical specialist is indifferent or hostile to metaphysics. The opening of this review article tried to show how from the outset, the historical critical method was often subject to philosophical influences not helpful for intentionalism. However, supposing that we *can* with a considerable degree of confidence, discover the original intentions of the biblical writers, have we exhausted the task of critical biblical exegesis? By no means. In terms of intentionalism, what are we to make of texts such as the Psalms, which took on new meanings in the changed circumstances of the lack of a Davidic monarch in Judah after the return from exile? How are we to understand the contribution of disciples, of prophets, compilers, editors and glossators to the extant form of prophetical books?

Of all these problems, Professor Barr is not unaware. He has done more than any British scholar to warn us against the use of inadequate linguistic models in trying to discover the categories and intentions of the biblical writers; in the book under review he accepts that there are various levels at which the Bible must be understood apart from the intentional level (pp. 37, 163). He points out that the historical critical method itself cannot be isolated from theological trends (p. 93) and as already mentioned, is prepared to allow the use of supplementary models such as classical trinitarianism in biblical interpretation. Above all, he is aware of some of the dangers of intentionalism, especially by drawing attention to W. K. Wimsatt's article 'The Intentional Fallacy' (p. 64).[8]

It is to be hoped that Professor Barr will return more fully and positively to these matters. The task ahead, as the reviewer sees it, is nothing less than a new understanding of the historical critical method. Its presuppositions must be exposed and improved; it must be open to new insights such as those from literary specialists. It must concern itself not only with original intentions, but also with the other levels of interpretation relevant to the meanings of the biblical text. It must be more prepared to do its work conscious of the great exegetical achievements of previous, often so-called pre-critical scholars. Simi-

larly, concepts such as authority and inspiration should not be so narrowly defined as to cause the ignoring of the continual dialogue between the church and the Bible. If all this can be achieved, biblical specialists should be well on their way to making a vital contribution to the place of the Bible in the modern world.

[1] See the accounts given by H.-J. Kraus *Die Biblische Theologie*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1970; G. Ebeling 'The significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism' in *Word and Faith*, London 1963, pp. 17-61. The original article, in German, was published in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 47 (1950), pp. 1-46. For an informative account *inter alia* of the emergence of the historical critical method within one theological faculty see Klaus Leder *Universität Altdorf. Zur Theologie der Aufklärung in Franken —die theologische Fakultät in Altdorf 1750-1809*, Nuremberg 1965.

[2] See Leder, *op. cit.* pp. 157ff.

[3] See, for example, G. L. Bauer *Hebräische Mythologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, Leipzig 1802.

[4] See, for example, J. Barr *The Semantics of Biblical Language* Oxford, 1961; and the present writer's articles in *Journal of Theological Studies* XXI (1970) and *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Oxford* IV (1973).

[5] In *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 52 (1969), pp. 178-199.

[6] See the recent attempt to define the literary procedures used in biblical studies, by W. Richter *Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft*, Göttingen 1971.

[7] See especially the article by Roland Barthes in *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique*.

[8] In *The Verbal Icon*, London 1970, pp. 3-18.