

Inspiration, Infallibility and Criticism

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I WANT IN THIS PAPER to examine the relationship between two aspects of the Conservative Evangelical approach to the Bible. The first is the presupposition that the Bible is uniquely authoritative, inspired and infallible. The second is that many of the approaches to such questions as the date and authorship of books of the Bible which have come to be widely accepted in the scholarly world over the past century or so are mistaken, and that other more traditional views are preferable: for instance, that the whole of the book of Isaiah comes from the eighth century (rather than substantial parts of it belonging to the exile) and that Daniel comes from the exile (rather than the second century). These two beliefs, in the Bible's inspiration and in the correctness of older views about critical questions, have seemed to belong closely together. The first implies the second. If the second is mistaken, this threatens the truth of the first.

This approach represents the mainstream way of dealing with a problem that has faced Christians who have a high doctrine of scripture for a century. Until a hundred years or so ago, the divineness of scripture was generally emphasised, indeed sometimes to such an extent as to obscure its humanness. The view that the Bible dropped from heaven—'some copies with the apocrypha, some without', as Dr. Ramsey is said to have pictured it—would have been assumed. It was 'the word of God'.

The enlightenment led to the studying of scripture like any other book, a study that flourished as never before in the nineteenth century. It examined the Bible as 'the word of man' and reckoned itself able to trace fairly clearly the processes by which the scriptures came into existence. The results of approaching scripture as the word of man often seemed to be in conflict with the idea that it was the word of God. For instance, Leviticus and Deuteronomy were not, as they seemed to claim, collections of the utterances of Moses. They were frauds, only accepted by Israel because of false claims they made about their origin. Faith

(in the scriptures as God's word) and criticism (which approached them as documents of human origin) seemed to be in tension.

There have been two common ways of dealing with the tension. The 'liberal' reaction—I may be forgiven the adjective, which is not meant to be pejorative, but provides a convenient piece of shorthand—was to abandon the idea that the Bible is God's word; on the contrary, it is just man's reaching after the truth, or his inevitably fallible attempt to express what God was trying to reveal to him. The story of Wellhausen at his last lecture flourishing the empty binding case of a Bible—'This is what I bequeath to my successor'—well expresses the significance of biblical criticism as more 'orthodox' Christians saw it. And thus the 'conservative' reaction was to dispute the major results of the critics' work, although generally they did not overtly dispute the validity of criticism in principle.

There were at the time of the great battles over criticism those who strove to combine faith and criticism. In Britain, W. Robertson Smith¹ was the man through whom many came to know of critical views—he believed that Deuteronomy was written in the time of Manasseh and that the Levitical law was post-exilic. But he also claimed to hold the Protestant doctrine of inspiration:

because the Bible is the only record of the redeeming love of God; because in the Bible alone I find God drawing nigh to man in Jesus Christ and declaring His will for our salvation. And the record I know to be true by the witness of His Spirit in my heart, whereof I am assured that none other than himself is able to speak such words to my soul.

Nevertheless he was accused in ecclesiastical court of denying inspiration, found guilty, and deprived of his professorial chair. C. H. Toy and C. A. Briggs had similar experiences in America. Despite this, by the 1890's critical views had triumphed throughout the universities of America and Europe, and one of the results of the battles fought at this time was to cement the alignment of Evangelical theology (including a high doctrine of scripture) with a biblical criticism that was conservative or non-existent.

It is my impression that the rejection of mainstream critical views, assumed in the approach that has been sketched above to be an inevitable corollary of being an Evangelical at all, is no longer as widespread among Evangelical scholars as it once was. They are more open than they once were to critical theories that have long been regarded as incompatible with the idea that scripture is God's word. One may guess at several reasons for this. One is the fact that postwar Evangelicalism has produced quite a batch of men of considerable scholarly ability (particularly in the New Testament field) who have completed high-grade research, taken up teaching posts in university departments and faculties, and had works published by non-Evangelical presses. They have thus been closely involved on the inside of mainstream scholarly work in a way that few Evangelical scholars have been for

nearly a century. It may be that because of this they have had to wrestle more seriously with phenomena in the Bible that previous generations had not really faced up to. For the critics did not invent their data; they sought to account for phenomena that presented themselves in the text and demanded explanation. The realisation that these phenomena really were there may have been a second factor that has made some Evangelical scholars more open to critical theories. It became difficult to believe that so many intelligent and honourable men could be so totally wrong. And this leads to a third factor which has made for openness to the work of mainstream scholars. This is that the latter has lost some of the dryness (at best) and destructiveness (at worst) which once characterised it. Von Rad, and even Bultmann, can be illuminating and exciting for those who are concerned to understand the Bible's message, in a way that Wellhausen and Streeter were not. Indeed, understanding the Bible's message so that it can be preached in the church has become again a concern of the scholars themselves. Thus, as some 'liberal' scholars have wanted to add to critical views an understanding of the Bible as God's word, so some Evangelicals have been seeking the same combination from the opposite starting-point.

But the theological issues involved in the relationship between a high doctrine of scripture and an openness to critical views need some examination. In the United States there has been in the past year or two a 're-run' of the modernist-fundamentalist battles and the trial of Robertson Smith, in the controversy over biblical inspiration and criticism which has troubled the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, and led to the departure of most of the staff and students from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.² In America establishment Evangelicalism seems to be more conservative than it is here; but in Britain too there are those who are troubled by the Evangelical openness to critical views which has been referred to above. The potential divisiveness of the issue provides a further reason for seeking to reach some mutual understanding in regard to it.

The Words of God in the Words of Men

JESUS speaks with a sovereign freedom, with an authority that the scribes did not pretend to. He does not function as an expositor of scripture, any more than Old Testament prophets do; like them, he has independent access to God's word.

At the same time, however, he regards the Bible as it existed in his day as having its own authority and does not question its divine origin. He looks upon the torah as 'God's great gift to Israel, transcending everything else'.³ The description of the scriptures as *theopneustos*, formed by God's creative breath, comes later in the New Testament

(2 Tim. 3:16), but it does not go beyond Jesus' own attitude as the gospels describe it. 'What Scripture says, God says.'⁴ In an article written in the context of intra-Evangelical discussion, I need not elaborate on this. Suffice to say that it rules out the 'liberal' response to the nineteenth century crisis over the Bible (that is, abandoning belief in the Bible as God's word).

As well, however, as assuming that the scriptures are God's word, Jesus refers to their human authorship and historical origin. He does so in connection with Psalm 110, for instance, proving that the messiah is no mere physical descendant of David by referring to the fact that David himself here addresses the messiah as lord (Mark 12:35-37 and parallels), and again in connection with the law on divorce, which was Moses' response to the Jews' obstinacy (Mark 10:2-9 and parallels). 'David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared . . .' (Mark 12:36): Jesus treats scripture as both God's word and man's. Hebrews speaks similarly of the dual authorship of Psalm 95 (Heb. 3:7; 4:7).

And when we examine the biblical writings themselves, we find that they indeed claim a dual authorship—to be both God's word and man's. But this co-authorship has two main modes, according as the divine or the human initiative is primary. The first, which we might call the prophetic mode, is described by Jeremiah as being taken into Yahweh's council (Jer. 23:18), by Amos as having Yahweh's secret revealed to one (Amos 3:7) (the Hebrew word *sôd*, translated as council in Jeremiah, is used here too).⁵ It is described by John in terms of a 'revelation' which he 'heard' and 'saw' when he was 'in the Spirit' (Rev. 1:1, 10, 12). The divine initiative is primary.⁶ Not that the human agent is a mouth-piece who contributes nothing to the message. The prophets are individuals through whose distinctive personalities God's message is given. Amos and Jeremiah and Ezekiel are different men with different emphases and accents and ways of speaking. And God's word through them is not a-historical or timeless. It speaks to specific human situations.

The other mode one might call scribal. It is clearly described by Luke:

Many writers have undertaken to draw up an account of the events that have happened among us, following the traditions handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the Gospel. And so I in my turn, your Excellency, as one who has gone over the whole course of these events in detail, have decided to write a connected narrative for you, so as to give you authentic knowledge about the matters of which you have been informed. (Luke 1:1-4, *NEB*).

One might be reading Thucydides or Josephus, as has often been noted. Now we may well believe that the Holy Spirit was inspiring Luke in his work. Certainly Luke was seeking to give expression to a divine perspective on the events of which he writes. And he may be compared, I think, in his aim with the Old Testament historians who produced

the books from Genesis to Nehemiah. None of these claims divine inspiration as those belonging to the 'prophetic' mode do (though they do of course *include* some material described as directly given by God—the decalogue, for instance). On Jesus' authority we believe that they were inspired. But their writing was the result of a human initiative—Luke himself makes that quite clear. And it is also clear that they were written in the language and style, and according to the conventions of particular cultures.

We have in these two modes' two ways of combining divine and human authorship—one in which the divine initiative is prominent, the other in which the human will is foremost. *En passant*, it might be noted that the prophet and the scribe suggest two possible models for the preacher today. In practice, preachers have perhaps tended to claim the first when the second is really the one that belonged to them; 'prophetic' is a compliment, 'scribal' is not—though Matthew at least assumes that there are Christian scribes (cf. Matt. 13:52) and perhaps sees himself as one.⁸ The expositor is a kind of scribe (as is the theologian!⁹). We need prophets (in whom the divine inspiration and initiative are primary) and we need preachers, but the two roles are different.

Whether it is the ancient or modern prophet or scribe, however, in both modes the divine word is communicated through human means, according to the human conventions of particular historical periods. Thus the books of the Bible comprise a series of divine-human responses to specific historical situations. This does not mean scripture is inevitably fallible; it does mean it is inevitably historical. The dual nature of scripture has sometimes been compared with the dual nature of Christ, and the analogy may be useful here. 'God was in Christ' (2 Cor. 5:19); but the 'Christ' was himself a historical figure who outwardly belonged distinctly to one particular cultural situation. His clothes, his habits, his table manners would have been those of his culture. They might well be unacceptable in an English theological college.

So with scripture. It takes its human characteristics from the day in which it was produced. It is written in particular human languages, in styles that vary with the author or the period. It manifests particular literary forms, which again belong to particular authors or periods (e.g. the gospel or the proverb).

Thus, while on the one hand scripture must be the object of faith, because it is divine, on the other hand it must be the object of criticism, because it is human. We can no more abandon treating it as the word of man than we can give up regarding it as the word of God. The double approach is necessary, and we must take the risk of finding tensions between the results of the two approaches. How far, then, is the idea that scripture is God's word in tension with critical theories that suggest it is historically fallible, or that conclude that it is not a

theological unity, or that question whether its origins are what they apparently claim to be, or that accept presuppositions such as those of rationalism or romanticism?

The Importance of Historical Accuracy

BIBLICAL faith stands or falls by history. The heartwarming story of Pinocchio, the boy made of wood who is eventually turned into a real human being, suggests an attractive perspective on human existence: the possibility of being turned from woodenness to real existence lies before us all. But it is only a wistful, nice idea: no such transformation has ever actually taken place, so there is no knowing whether it might happen for me. The old religions speak of a dying and rising god; but again, it is only a nice idea: there is no knowing whether a god really has died and risen (or dies and rises) for me.

The perspective on human existence offered by the Old and New Testaments, in contrast with the hopes of archetypal myth and fairy story, demands no blind commitment. It offers to stand or fall by history. Events such as exodus, exile, and restoration show that Yahweh is God; the events of his ministry, of the resurrection and of the history of the early church show that Jesus is lord. Thus the basic historicity of the Old and New Testament stories is demanded by the structure of biblical faith.

One factor behind a concern with infallibility is a desire to safeguard this necessary historical trustworthiness of the Bible story. But infallibility may also be regarded as a logically necessary corollary of the belief that the Bible as a whole is inspired: there is a certain illogic about the alternative suggestion that God inspired something which contains mistakes.

Now to centre a discussion of the Bible's authority and inspiration on the question of infallibility involves misfocussing that discussion. This question is not the central one, nor is it one that the Bible itself shows a concern about.¹⁰ Nevertheless, if the question 'fallible or infallible?' is pressed, the latter term is the less objectionable alternative.¹¹

Writers who accept 'infallibility', however, do not necessarily go on to take every detail of biblical history literally. For instance, R. K. Harrison suggests that some of the statistics in Numbers and Chronicles are meant symbolically,¹² while the *New Bible Dictionary*¹³ allows for the possibility that the world was not created in six days. Further, Calvin notes that the evangelists do not always concern themselves with putting their story in the right chronological order.¹⁴ In what sense are the narratives of Numbers, or the gospels, or Genesis 1 infallible, if they are not historically factual?

The infallibility of scripture implies that whatever the author meant to convey was exactly what God wanted said. The author did not

mistake the truth and thus, when rightly interpreted, his work will not mislead us. 'When rightly interpreted'—here is the catch. For apparently the texts cannot be understood in a straightforward fashion; their meaning is not what it appears to be. When Chronicles says a million fought against Asa, what it means is that the odds against him were huge (and thus the victory given him by God was the more glorious), or more specifically that the army was of such a size that it would be the equivalent of a million in the military conditions of the writer's day (the Persian period, in which he wrote, was an age of great armies). To speak of thousands (the likely actual number) would make it seem a rather small-scale occasion. The Chronicler's infallibility consists in his giving the right impression of the magnitude of the occasion, for the people of his age.

Again, the gospels do not give us a blow-by-blow chronological account of Jesus' ministry. They reorder and schematise. The ministry of Jesus, Luke suggests, is seen in a true light if you read the story of the rejection at Nazareth at the head of it, even though it did not happen then. The gospel's infallibility consists in Luke's being right that we will have a correct perspective on the story if we read it this way.

Our more formal writing of history today would not allow such a practice—though dramatic works such as 'The Crucible' or 'A Man for All Seasons' or 'Oh What a Lovely War' may provide closer parallels.¹⁵ At this point we need to recall that God's written word was given to men through human means, according to the human conventions of particular historical situations. We may not write this way, but we must not treat our literary conventions as if they were absolutes. They are just a different set of conventions. These conventions must be understood and allowed for if we are to identify the assertions being made through them, which have the reliability that comes from divine inspiration.

The question which the interpreter must constantly ask is: what is being *asserted* in this passage? . . . The infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture are relative to the intended scope of the Word of God. Scripture provides instruction that is true and trustworthy, not on every conceivable subject, but simply on those subjects with which it claims to deal. . . . The concepts of inerrancy and infallibility . . . are not hermeneutical concepts, and carry no implication as to the character or range of biblical teaching.¹⁶

I take it that some principles such as these are implicit in the exegetical approaches which have been referred to above. But it is instructive to consider the points at which a thoroughly literalist approach to the Bible has been qualified. In each of the examples that have been referred to, this qualification has come to be made only under virtual compulsion. What we know from other sources about the historical context of the exodus indicates that there could not have been two million people involved; therefore the narrative must be interpreted symbolically.

The differences between the gospels demonstrate that they cannot all follow chronological order—although individual gospels offer few hints that they are not doing so. The principle of conservative scholarship seems to be ‘take it as a description of literal history except where you are compelled to do otherwise, where you have no alternative but to grant that the traditional view is impossible.’¹⁷ But this will not do. If we are to read scripture as God intended it (which means as the human author intended it) then we must not prejudge the human author’s intention. His purpose (historical or otherwise) is one of the things we are seeking to learn; it is not an inevitability that we can presuppose.

For instance, many Old Testament scholars find present in books such as Genesis and Kings what they call ‘saga’—stories that reflect a real historical event but which are now told in such an expanded and applied way that it is difficult if not impossible to trace this original event. The doctrine of Scripture’s inspiration and infallibility does not rule out such a possibility. If there are such narratives, then they are exactly the saga that God wanted in his book. They do not tell you much about literal history. But the antithesis to this is not that they are historically false, fallible. It is that they are applied stories.¹⁸

Again, many New Testament scholars do not regard St. John’s gospel as attempting to record *ipsissima verba*, or *ipsissima acta*, of Jesus. Actual words and deeds have been preached, meditated on, translated, applied, and are perhaps no longer to be traced beneath the eventual text. They are ultimately there (and this matters, because of the necessity that the message of Christ should have a historical base), but they are not traceable. Now this view of John’s non-historicity may in fact be wrong. My point is only that it is not incompatible with a doctrine of scripture’s inspiration and infallibility. That doctrine asserts that John’s gospel is exactly what God wanted it to be, that it was reliable in its picture of Jesus. But what it was that God wanted it to be cannot be prejudged, and to be a reliable picture of Jesus for its readers may not have entailed its needing to correspond to what one would have actually seen and heard in Galilee or Jerusalem in AD 30. And if John—and of course the other gospels, we are now more aware—is a preached version of the gospel story, that is actually likely to increase its impact on us rather than to diminish it; and this is in fact the result of reading the gospels in the light of redaction-criticism.

It is, then, necessary for scripture infallibly to achieve that at which it aims. It needs to realise whatever measure of historical veracity it seeks. And thus where it seems to be aiming at historical presentation but raises historical problems, we have to work at resolving these. But we can accept that its narrative (still less its poetry) is not historiography according to our conventions; as literature it follows the conventions of its own day. This is one of the consequences of its being human and itself historical.

Theological Unity and Diversity

WE have been considering the question whether scripture is infallible in its presentation of history. More important, arguably, is the question whether it is infallible in its theological message. The theological unreliability of scripture would now, I think, most often be asserted in connection with noting the diversity of the theological perspectives that may be identified within it.

For as theology swings pendulum-like, the question 'one message or many' has itself been answered in diverse ways. Pre-critical biblical study tended to read the scriptures in the flat: the same truths were taught throughout the two testaments and could be read out of them in ways that may now seem far-fetched. The nineteenth century set its mind to tracing the history of biblical religion and perceived vast differences between earlier and later forms of Israelite faith and between Jesus and Paul, let alone between Old and New Testaments. Neo-orthodoxy and the biblical theology movement sought to re-emphasise the content, truth, and relevance of the one biblical faith, not ignoring criticism but building on it. But then the last decade or so has seen a further swing back, through the efforts of such scholars as Ernst Käsemann (who speaks of 'irreconcilable theological contradictions' in the New Testament¹⁹) and James Barr (who emphasises 'the multiplex nature of the Old Testament tradition'²⁰).

Diversity within the teaching of the Bible is surely clear enough. James says that Abraham was justified by works, Paul denies it. Isaiah says Yahweh is committed to Jerusalem and will save it, Jeremiah denies it. The torah allows divorce, Jesus prohibits it (Mark) or forbids it *mē epi porneia*²¹ (Matthew). Can all these attitudes be infallible?

In approaching this question, we need to begin from the description of the books of the Bible given above: they comprise a series of divine-human responses to specific historical situations. Now the situations vary wildly: from the triumph and glory of the united monarchy to the moral, social, and religious decline of the eighth century, from the facile optimism of the seventh century to the disillusion of the exile, from the disappointment of the restoration to the danger of the Maccabean crisis—and so on. Now the preacher must bring a different message to each distinctive situation. The Bible is a collection of such specific messages, and the diversity within it reflects this. Thus our reaction to the difference between James and Paul should include 'What differing misunderstandings of the gospel is each of these writers seeking to correct?' And as we answer this question, we find pointers as to how we should preach both messages.

The question which more often preoccupies us, 'How can we reconcile James and Paul?', is of course a valid enough one, though not one scripture concerns itself much with. The Bible is not a corpus of theological generalisations. But situational though it is, there are

basic attitudes that underlie it, and if the varying messages did reflect 'irreconcilable theological contradictions' then it is difficult to see how the whole could be inspired and infallible. But Käsemann overstates his case; what his examples (such as James and Paul) show is how the message is ever matched to the situation.

This does not, however, imply that every message is equally near to expressing the heart of divine truth. 'The situation' includes the limited capacity of those to whom the message is addressed. The divorce issue illustrates this well. Jesus regards Moses' regulation as a condescension to human sinfulness (Mark 10:5). He still regards the torah as God's gift to Israel. May we not also see this divine condescension in Matthew's *mē epi porneia*? If so, it is applicable more broadly to the whole phenomenon of *Frühkatholizismus*: for Käsemann sees the later parts of the New Testament as expressing a different kind of faith, the institutionalised early Catholicism, from the dynamic of the Spirit whose presence he recognises in Jesus and the earliest church. If this is correct, then the presence of *Frühkatholizismus* within the canon indicates that God accepts it, perhaps as an inevitable though regrettable development, as he accepts the expressions of Old Testament faith that seem further from the heart of its message (Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, Daniel). Rather than the fact of *Frühkatholizismus* threatening the idea of canon, as Käsemann suggests,²² the fact of canon (that is, of the inspiration of scripture) signifies the baptism of *Frühkatholizismus*. Not that the latter dominates the canon—there is enough of the dynamic of the Spirit in the New Testament to keep the catholic church (which in Käsemann's sense will include Protestantism) uncomfortable. But there is also enough *Frühkatholizismus* there to keep it from despair.

The same factor casts doubt on Käsemann's quest for a 'canon within the canon' which will enable one to distinguish, within the wider canon, what parts are really authoritative. On the other hand, sometimes we will be able to establish some hierarchy amongst the varied expressions of the will of God. In the case of the divorce question, for instance, the attitudes of Genesis and Jesus in Mark indicate an ideal standard, while Matthew is probably nearer to these than Deuteronomy is. The church has to work out in each period how far it can face God's ideal in its own life, and what standard it can feasibly summon the world to.

We may, then, rejoice that scripture is not a theological unity in the sense that God in his revelatory concern and his condescending grace has ever matched the message he brought through his servants to the particularities of the human situation—although we may believe that underneath the diversity there is fundamental agreement on the nature of God and his ways with men.

The Significance of Statements about Authorship

AMONG the literary conventions of the biblical period was the custom of attributing the authorship of one's work to some earlier revered figure. The Letter of Jude refers to the Book of Enoch, an apocalypse that sets itself forward as the work of Enoch 'the seventh from Adam' (Jude 14). It unquestionably belongs, however, to the intertestamental period, and doubtless, in aspiring to ante-diluvian authorship, never aimed to mislead anyone. The same would be true of the many other works of this period that connect themselves with such figures as Adam or Isaiah or Ezra.

Within the Old Testament there are one or two examples of such a phenomenon about which there is little dispute. The Solomonic authorship of the works attributed to him (except for sections of Proverbs) is queried by the *New Bible Commentary Revised*²³ and by the *New Bible Dictionary*.²⁴ The latter also allows for the possibility that Isaiah 40-66 was not written by Isaiah but by a prophet of the exile,²⁵ while Harrison (though attributing the bulk of the chapters to Isaiah) sees the crucial references to Cyrus as glosses.²⁶ In less conservative circles it is customary to regard much of the pentateuch as post-Mosaic, and many of 'Paul's' letters as post-Pauline.

Now often such theories as the latter have seemed to imply that there was something disreputable about these documents; pious frauds they may have been, but frauds nevertheless, commending themselves to us under false pretences. But actually attributing one's work to someone else need not imply intent to deceive, as we have noted above; and the fact that a critical theory involves declaring a work (or part of a work) to be by someone other than the figure whose name appears at the beginning, ought not in itself to imperil the theory, or the authenticity of the work in question.²⁷

As far as the Old Testament is concerned, such theories might be regarded as unexceptionable but for the fact that Jesus clearly refers to Leviticus and Deuteronomy as from Moses (Mark 1:44, 10:3-5), while the New Testament writers also refer indiscriminately to different parts of Isaiah as from Isaiah (e.g. Matt. 12:17-21). Do they not thereby settle the question of authorship (or imperil their own authority)?

The problem here is that we are treating Jesus or the New Testament writers as if in such references they were meaning to convey something about authorship when they were not. We make distinctions (between the book of Isaiah and the work of Isaiah himself, for instance) which they did not make. We try to treat them as sources for information on subjects that they were not dealing with. We make them answer questions that they were not asking. This is often a misleading exercise. For instance, to try to force Genesis 1 to tell us whether it believes in creation *ex nihilo* or not is a mistake in method; the passage is not thinking in such terms. To ask of different periods of Israel's

faith, is it monotheistic or not, is to set up a discussion that will obscure rather than illuminate the nature of Israelite theism; these are not terms in which it thinks. So with our kind of questions about the origin of Old Testament books. References to Isaiah or David or Moses were not so much concerned with the authorship as with the authority and location of the passage in question. To put it another way, if there was an antithesis in Jesus' or the New Testament writers' mind, it was not 'Moses as opposed to P', 'Isaiah as opposed to Deutero-Isaiah'; but 'The torah as opposed to post-canonical tradition', 'Isaiah as opposed to Jeremiah'—though sometimes the New Testament raises problems with respect to the latter too (cf. Mark 1:2)!

The New Testament's references to the Old might in fact be described as phenomenological, like many of the Bible's references to nature. When Jesus says that the sun rises (Matt. 5:45) or that the seed in the ground dies (Jn. 12:24) he makes points that a prosaic scientist would dispute; but one recognises that he is simply talking the way that men talk about the world as it appears to us. So with his references to books of the Old Testament.

Jesus' approach to Psalm 110 (Mark 12:35-27), which might seem particularly embarrassing,²² is also covered by this principle. Jesus' exegesis is phenomenological and conventional. On the basis of the generally accepted understanding of its origin and meaning, he proves from it that the messiah is not (merely) a son of David—because the author (presumed to be David) addresses the recipient of Yahweh's word (presumed to be the messiah) as 'lord'.²³ Now the generally accepted modern approach to the psalm's origin and meaning²⁴ is that the speaker is not David but a priest or prophet, while it is David²⁵ or whoever is the current Davidic king²⁶ who is the 'lord' referred to at the end of the opening line. What is said about this 'lord', however, is larger than life, as is the case in other psalms about the king. It expresses an ideal that never found realisation in the monarchy; it was in a sense always implicitly eschatological, and eventually (presumably in the post-exilic period, when the monarchy had finally disappeared—though we do not exactly know) became explicitly so. Thus the psalm even when taken in accordance with its origin and meaning as we now understand them still proves Jesus' point. What is said of the 'lord' spoken of would not be fulfilled in one who was (merely) a son of David. The passage in fact tests but in the end exemplifies how we should seek to relate the testaments: we accept the New Testament's theological approach to the Old, but work it *via* our own exegetical method.

And this principle in turn exemplifies the broader one that there is a difference in status between Jesus' theological or ethical teaching (on matters such as the inspiration of the Old Testament or the reality of hell or the use of violence) and his way of speaking of geographical or historical or scientific matters (such as critical or cosmological questions). As with Scripture, in fact, there is a difference between what is

taught and what is only referred to. The former is binding, the latter is not.

Presuppositions and Critical Views

AS well as a concern for historicity and consistency, and a reverence for the attitudes of Christ, a further factor that has led Evangelicals to question critical theories is the fact that the latter have often reflected philosophical or ideological presuppositions on the part of the critics, with which Evangelicals disagree. For instance, it is widely recognised (indeed hardly surprising) that Wellhausen was influenced by the attitudes of his day, even though he may not have deserved to be tarred with as many brushes as have actually been applied to him: R. J. Thompson²⁸ doubts whether he was crucially influenced so much by evolutionism, Hegelianism, or rationalism, as by romanticism—the primitive is idealised (so J is early and good), the cultic disliked (so P is late and nasty). Again, Bultmann is fairly open about the fact that his criticism is a function of his theology: the act of existential commitment needs no historical justification, and seeking such is to seek justification by works; better to remove the possibility by removing the possibility of historical certainty about Christ.²⁴ Further, underlying the belief that Isaiah 40-66 was not written in the eighth century and that Daniel does not come from the exile has often been an inability to believe that such prophecy is possible.

Gabriel Hebert has remarked that, while there is no real tension between faith and criticism, since both are needed if we are to make a full response to what is both God's word and man's word (as we have noted above), there is a real tension between two views of the world and man—one which includes God, one which excludes him: 'behind the issue of Faith and Criticism there lay concealed the deeper issue of Faith and Secularism'.²⁵

We need to beware of the *a priors* that hide behind theories put forward on 'scientific' or 'critical' grounds.

Sometimes, however, conservative scholars have welcomed theories that were in fact produced partly under the influence of questionable *a priors*. In the 1950's John Robinson championed the 'new look on the fourth gospel' which he detected arising in Johannine studies,²⁶ and his work was welcomed enthusiastically by conservatives. Now Robinson had an interest in maintaining that John's alleged realised eschatology was nearer the historical Jesus than was the eschatology of the synoptists; it fitted his own theology.²⁷ The conservative theologians were presumably not so enamoured with the latter.

That scholars with radically different presuppositions were able to agree on the drift of Johannine studies reflects the fact that in this example, as indeed is usually the case with scholarly theories, a critical

approach was formulated as a result of the combining of *a priori*s with objective data.³⁸ Presuppositions alone could hardly have produced a plausible case for an earlier dating of John—there were real data for scholars to point to. The case is similar with Wellhausen's late dating of P; to prove that he had *a priori*s does not deal with the fact that there were phenomena in the pentateuch which his theory sought to explain, and which do require some explanation.³⁹ This being the case, it is an inadequate response to any critical position, whether radical or conservative, to explain it away as the result of some *a priori*, except when one finds oneself in that puzzling situation where the data seem so inadequate to support the theory that one is compelled to look elsewhere for an explanation as to why the theory is maintained.

And, as we have suggested, both radical and conservative scholars can be found holding theories for *a priori* reasons; Evangelicals too have their presuppositions. I do not refer here to the question whether one accepts the inspiration of scripture—let that be taken for granted—but to more subtle factors that influence conservative theories. I refer to their general inclination towards traditional views rather than newer ones; towards dating biblical documents early rather than late; and towards connecting these documents with significant figures rather than letting them be anonymous. Such preferences seem to characterise Evangelical critical work, as may be seen from a comparison of the *Introduction* of Harrison and of Guthrie on the one hand with those of Eissfeldt and Kümmel on the other.⁴⁰ Of course it may be that the data support the conservative works, and that it is the other scholars who have *a priori* inclination towards newer views that deny traditional ascriptions of authorship to famous personalities. Both groups need to beware of holding views 'just for the sake of it'.

Evangelical, Liberal, Conservative and Radical

WE have seen that the gulf between 'liberal' and 'Evangelical' on critical matters is not, or need not be, as wide as is often reckoned. Evangelical scholars accept that the Bible is sometimes not historical, and they need not hesitate in doing so, for inspiration and infallibility apply to the intended scope of scriptural statements: if they are not seeking to be historical, they are not in error if they fail to be so. They can accept the diversity of the biblical message as expressive of the one God's speaking through and to many different men in many different situations, and condescending to them in their weakness when they cannot cope with his highest demands. They can accept that the descriptions of authorship contained in the biblical books need not always be taken as guides to the books' actual origin, as would normally be the case according to the literary conventions that we are more used to; and that Jesus' and the New Testament's references to authorship

should not be taken as *ex cathedra* answers to questions that they were not asking. And further, while 'liberal' scholars may be influenced in their critical work by *a priori*s, so may Evangelicals; but both reckon to accept the priority of facts, and both need to be aware of their presuppositions and to be honest with data.

I suggest that it is in fact possible to combine an acceptance of the Bible's authority, inspiration and infallibility; a conviction that the Bible is God's book, that his Spirit inspired it, that it is exactly what he wanted it to be, that it is the only sure source of the Gospel; an excitement with studying it and preaching it; with a refusal to accept that a corollary to this commitment is a commitment to traditional approaches to critical questions.

Indeed, once we grant that Numbers is not literally historical and Ecclesiastes is not Solomonic, I wonder whether there is any point to draw a line, and whether there is a necessary connection at all between Evangelical theology and conservative criticism. What I mean by an Evangelical theology should perhaps be defined. I might do this by indicating how it differs from other widely held views. It denotes a belief in the transcendent God who is there even when we are not (he is not *just* the ground of our being) and who raised Jesus from the dead (resurrection was not just something that happened inside the disciples); an acknowledgment of the lostness of man, who can only come to God with empty hands to be accepted despite his unworthiness on the basis of Christ's death (he cannot achieve anything before or for God independently of the work of grace that has its effect through the cross); and an acceptance of the Bible, which confronts me with paradigms of God's words to man and the responses God accepts in different situations, which demand my acceptance, and which provide the sole check on what is to be taken as emanating from God. A 'liberal' theology is one which is 'softer', more relativist, on questions such as God, transcendence, grace, the atonement, the historicity of the resurrection, and revelation.

Now the validity of an Evangelical theology is dependent upon the basic historicity of the Bible story, as I have noted above. If the New Testament were so legendary as to provide inadequate grounds for committing oneself to Jesus, the historical figure, as risen and living Lord, then one could not get started as a Christian at all. There is, in fact, a point at which a line has to be drawn. But as long as the story possesses this measure of basic historical value—then that is enough. And it would not matter if Luke were a second century rewriting of the Christian faith or if Ephesians were not written by Paul. If they were, then 'Luke' is an inspired reinterpreter of Christianity, and deuterio-Paul as inspired a theologian as the apostle himself. Conservative criticism is not a necessary condition or consequence of evangelical theology.

The point might be put diagrammatically. It has been assumed, I think, that the following are the only natural alliances:

Evangelical theology ———→ liberal theology
 conservative criticism ←—— radical criticism

I have already noted, however, that:

conservative criticism ←————→ liberal theology

is the somewhat unholy alliance exemplified by John Robinson; it appears sometimes in the work of William Barclay, whose approaches to the gospels (though so attractive) can look suspiciously rationalist: the five thousand may have been fed through their sharing their sandwiches; Jesus may have walked through the surf, not on the water.⁴¹

On the other hand,

Evangelical theology — radical criticism

may not be such a strange combination as has been assumed. I suggest it denotes a firmness about the theological issues that count, but an openness on critical issues which refuses to predetermine what means God may have used to convey his inspired word. 'We can hardly ever, in fact, decide *a priori* what is becoming or unbecoming to God, for divine condescension goes deeper than we know. When we study the written word of God it is well to have in mind the stark reality of the Incarnation and the scandal of the cross.'⁴²

On the one side, anyone who wishes to be regarded as heir to the tradition, as the spiritual son, of Calvin, Warfield, *et al.* must be prepared to answer the question 'fallible or infallible' by accepting the latter, while recognising the need to rethink its implications. On the other side, it does not seem to be uncharacteristic of true theology to live dangerously. Theology is a subtle art; the most closely defined and unambiguous positions may be the most wrong. The attractiveness of many (mutually conflicting!) positions on eschatology lies partly in their simplicity and precision; and Athanasius was more subtle than Arius. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has commented that it is the true preaching of the gospel of grace that gets accused of antinomianism.⁴³ The preacher's temptation is to want, for his congregation's sake, to make black and white distinctions, but somehow such definitions easily miss the truth.

There are enough real *skandala* about the biblical message for it to be most regrettable to accumulate unnecessary ones. Apart from the basic stumbling-block of the cross there is the demand which the Bible's authority really does face us with of bowing down to its message, submitting to its demands upon us, and yielding the right to decide for ourselves between good and evil, truth and untruth, accepting what Scripture teaches even when we do not like it and even when it conflicts with what we have long believed. There is a stumbling block here, and it is a genuine *skandalon*. We should not obscure it by giving the impression that bowing down to scripture's authority, to the content

of God's revelation, involves prejudging the answers to the origin and form of the biblical books, the means of God's revelation. The same rock, however, that can be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence, can (when you are prepared to make it the foundation stone of your theology) help you to keep your foothold on the slippery slope!

¹ On what follows in this paragraph, see R. J. Thompson *Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism since Graf* (Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 19, Brill, Leiden, 1970), pp. 65-6, 68-9. *The Life of William Robertson Smith* by John S. Black and George Chrystal (A. and C. Black, London, 1912) provides a detailed, though partisan, account of Smith's trial.

² For accounts of this controversy from various perspectives, see the reports in *Christianity Today* 18 (1973-4), pp. 581, 839-42, 956-7, and the journal's interview with the president of the Synod, J. A. O. Preus, in Volume 19 (1974-5), pp. 71-5; also Richard J. Coleman's article 'Biblical Inerrancy: Are We Going Anywhere?' in *Theology Today* 31:4 (January 1975). For further background to the variety of views within American Evangelicalism see also the review essay by Carl F. H. Henry and the response by Jim Wallis in connection with Richard A. Quebedeaux's *The Young Evangelicals* (Harper and Row, New York, 1974) in *Christianity Today* 18 (1973-4), pp. 862-6, 1102-3.

³ Eduard Schweizer *Jesus* (New Testament Library, SCM Press, London, 1971), p. 30; cf. Rudolf Bultmann in *Jesus and the Word* (Collins Fontana, London, 1958), p. 51: 'Jesus agreed always with the scribes of his time in accepting without question the authority of the (Old Testament) law'.

⁴ Cf. James I. Packer, 'Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority' in *The Churchman* 81:1 (1967), p. 8. On Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament see also Packer's 'Fundamentalism' and *the Word of God* (IVF, London, 1958), pp. 54-62.

⁵ Leon Morris collects many of the Old Testament examples of what purport to be directly divine words in 'Biblical Authority and the Concept of Inerrancy', *The Churchman* 81:1 (1967), pp. 23-7.

⁶ Cf. the statements about the prophets in Heb. 1:1 and 2 Pet. 1:21.

⁷ The 'two modes' are, I think, in part parallel with Dewey M. Beegle's concept of 'primary and secondary revelation', described in *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1973; a revised edition of *The Inspiration of Scripture*, 1963), pp. 70-2. But the former description is, I think, closer to the way the biblical material itself presents the matter.

⁸ So Michael D. Goulder *Midrash and Lecture in Matthew* (SPCK, London, 1974), pp. 13-15 and *passim*; cf. Joachim Jeremias, 'grammateus' in *TDNT* 1, p. 742.

⁹ So Jeremias in his *New Testament Theology I* (New Testament Library, SCM Press, London, 1971), pp. 143, 145-6.

¹⁰ Cf. Morris p. 27.

¹¹ Against, e.g., Beegle, chapters 8-9; also Robertson Smith, in as far as (like many non-Evangelical scholars since) he views scripture as only the fallible record of revelation in history and means of revelation now: see H. D. McDonald *Theories of Revelation* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1963), pp. 31-3 and *passim*.

¹² *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Tyndale Press, London, 1970), pp. 633, 1165.

¹³ (IVF, London, 1962), p. 271 (J. A. Thompson).

¹⁴ E.g. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, 1845), on Matt. 4:5 and 4:18.

¹⁵ See my article 'That You May Know that Yahweh Is God: A Study in the Relationship between Theology and Historical Truth in the Old Testament' in *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972), pp. 82-3. The article is of general relevance to this section of the present paper, as is the section on the Chronicler's understanding of history in my paper on 'The Chronicler as a Theologian', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 5:2 (1975), pp. 108-12.

¹⁶ Packer, 'Fundamentalism', pp. 97-8.

¹⁷ Cf. James Barr's comments on conservative exegesis in *The Bible in the Modern World* (SCM Press, London, 1973), p. 168ff.

¹⁸ On saga and its presence in the Bible see Klaus Koch *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition* (A. and C. Black, London, 1969), pp. 155-8.

- ¹⁹ 'The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church' in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Studies in Biblical Theology 41, SCM Press, London, 1964), p. 100, and see the essay as a whole; also the papers in *New Testament Questions of Today* (New Testament Library, SCM Press, London, 1969). Not all the post-Bultmannians speak in such terms; James M. Robinson seems explicitly to contest Käsemann's point about diversity in canon and church in 'Kerygma and History in the New Testament' (in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* ed. James P. Hyatt [Carey Kingsgate Press, London, 1966], pp. 148-9—*Trajectories through Early Christianity* by Robinson and Helmut Koester [Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1971], p. 69).
- ²⁰ The title of the first chapter of his *Old and New in Interpretation* (SCM Press, London, 1966).
- ²¹ 'except for unchastity' (RSV).
- ²² art. cit., pp. 102-7. Not that he wishes formally to abbreviate the canon—though logically perhaps he should!—cf. Bruce Vawter reviewing *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (ed. Käsemann), in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33:3 (1971), p. 432. Barr also wishes to sit looser to the canon, though in the interest of taking account of a wider, not a narrower, range of writings; see 'Trends and Prospects in Biblical Theology' in *JTS* 25:2 (1974), pp. 273-7.
- ²³ Ed. Donald Guthrie et al. (IVP, London, 1970), pp. 548 (A. F. Walls), 571 (G. S. Hendry), 579 (J. A. Balchin).
- ²⁴ pp. 331-2 (J. S. Wright), 1050, 1204 (both D. A. Hubbard).
- ²⁵ p. 573 (N. H. Ridderbos).
- ²⁶ p. 794.
- ²⁷ There is a useful and judicious article on 'Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha' by Bruce M. Metzger in *JBL* 91:1 (1972).
- ²⁸ So, apparently, R. T. France *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Tyndale Press, London, 1971), pp. 163-9.
- ²⁹ There is no question that in verse 36 (verse 1 of the psalm) the first 'lord' refers to God (it is Yahweh in the Hebrew); it is the second 'lord' which is problematic.
- ³⁰ See, for instance, A. A. Anderson *The Book of Psalms* (New Century Bible, Oliphants, London, 1972), *in loc.*
- ³¹ So H. H. Rowley, 'Melchizedek and Zadok', in *Festschrift für Alfred Bertholet* (1950); see Anderson, p. 767.
- ³² So most commentators.
- ³³ chapter 4.
- ³⁴ See, for instance, 'The Significance of the Historical Jesus for the Theology of Paul' in *Faith and Understanding* (Library of Philosophy and Theology, SCM Press, London, 1969); cf. Stephen Neill *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961* (OUP, London, 1964 [1966]), p. 232.
- ³⁵ *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Faber, London, 1947 [1950]), p. 117.
- ³⁶ See his 1957 paper of this title, reprinted in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (Studies in Biblical Theology 34, SCM Press, London, 1962).
- ³⁷ See p. 103. Apparently Robinson now maintains that all the New Testament documents were written by 70 A.D., however! (so John Bowden in *What About the New Testament?* Essays in Honour of Christopher Evans, ed. Morna Hooker and Colin Hickling, SCM Press, London, 1975, p. 4 and n. 5).
- ³⁸ Thus Robinson (p. 94, n. 2) could point to other scholars who were taking a similar line, and at the same time C. H. Dodd was also reasserting the presence of historical material in John (cf. *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge University Press, 1963).
- ³⁹ cf. Thompson, p. 49.
- ⁴⁰ Harrison, *op. cit.*; Donald Guthrie *New Testament Introduction* (Tyndale Press, London, 1970); Otto Eissfeldt *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1965); W. G. Kümmel *Introduction to the New Testament* (New Testament Library, SCM Press, London, 1966).
- ⁴¹ See *The Gospel of Matthew* Volume 2 (Daily Study Bible, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1958), pp. 114-5, 116-7.
- ⁴² Wilfred Harrington in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 29 (1962), as quoted in Metzger, p. 22, n. 67.
- ⁴³ *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 6: The New Man* (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1972), pp. 8-10.