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BIBLICAL CRITICISM, HISTORY OF ISRAEL, AND OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

THERE is, I will not say a profound difference, but nevertheless a difference between the problems of historical criticism and Christian Faith, when the former is applied to the writing of Israel's political history, and when it is used to describe the religion of Israel and the religion of the Old Testament.

When working out the history of Israel, the question of *credibility* must be raised every now and then. When the same events are described differently by, e.g., the Chronicler and the Books of Kings or by the different traditions in the Pentateuch, the stories in the Book of Judges or Samuel; or when prophetic texts give representations of historical events or persons, the historical critic must choose between the views presented by the sources, and his only means are those furnished by the methods of historical criticism. If this investigation leads to a probable result (complete assurance cannot be reached, as everybody knows), he is obliged to reject one or more reports as probably incredible. The same is the case when the matter of investigation is a question of *authenticity* of authorship, where historical examination leads him to doubt or reject a traditional view, e.g. a superscription in the Book of Psalms, or when the traditional dating of some event is challenged on historical grounds.

The question of credibility in this field, the history of Israel, becomes most acute in the case of reports on *miraculous events*. Again, everybody knows that science has no legitimate claim to deny the *possibility* of miracle, nor the existence of God. But it cannot affirm miracle. Miracle lies outside its field of experience, which is determined by nature as known to all of us, and its aim, when applied in historical research, is to show how everything happened quite naturally. Therefore historical research must dismiss miraculous stories as of no use to describe events of history. It cannot deny that they may be true. But it cannot use them. It may assume, in many cases, an "historical nucleus" behind the miraculous "embellishment" worked into the story by tradition and poetry. But it cannot accept the whole story as it stands as credible. It must leave it unused.

But when we come to History of Culture and of Religion the picture is changed.

Historical criticism has still its task to fulfil. There may be questions of *dates* and of *authors*, which must be answered by historical criticism here as when the object of research is political history. It is also of importance in cultural and religious history to be able to date an idea or the influence of one of the great personalities of religious history. But here the clash between criticism and faith is not so much a clash between criticism and faith as between ancient and recent views. That is the case everywhere, both in the examination of political history and when we seek understanding of religious and ethical ideas.

But the difference between the areas of research lies in the *question of credibility*. History of Religions and Theology of the Old Testament have no need of raising the question of credibility. Their task is to describe Israel's faith, the complex of ideas set forth in the Old Testament concerning God and Man, of Faith and Hope, and of Righteous Living. To this complex belongs everything in the Old Testament. The *tendency* which colours the historical reports and makes historical criticism suspect them, when used in political and religious political history, is now a thing to be understood as a colour in the picture of ideas, formed by the faith or, let us say, the religious opinion of a certain author or school of thinkers or teachers. The stories of *miraculous* events are not to be dismissed as of no use for research, for they are expressions of the religious life, living confessions of the people or certain circles within Israel. The story of the bears who killed the naughty boys at the command of the prophet Elisha is as significant as are the different stories of Creation, or of the Flood, or the Crossing of the Red Sea. Credible or not, they are extremely useful to understand the religion of Israel, and as such they have their place in the picture of the History of Revelation.¹

The *question of credibility* does not concern us as long as we only seek to give a description of Israel's faith, as true to fact as possible. It is not raised by scientific research in this field. It comes to the foreground only when the description enters the field of personal acceptance or rejection by the scientist. When the claim of the Bible, to be a vehicle of God's revelation to all men, becomes personal to the investigator, or to the common

¹ On the necessity of distinguishing between miracle-stories of different, higher or lower quality, see the fine exposition by Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, II (1935), pp. 86 f., esp. note 5.

reader of the Bible—that is, when a story, which according to common experience seems incredible, or an idea, which to common human experience seems to be incredible (it may be the Resurrection of Christ or the announcement of the Remission of Sin, in its absolute Christian form)—then the question of credibility is raised, no longer on the level of historical research, but on the level of religious faith.

And here again the question raised may lead to rejection. But now no more on historical grounds. The rejection may be caused by unbelief, by despair in view of one's own sins. And it may be caused by wrong notions concerning faith.

This last item is of importance. Here the problem of credibility stands out in the religious sphere. We encounter the question, What is necessary and what not? Must we believe in everything, in the *different* stories of Creation, and of the Flood, and in the story of the bears of Elisha? Must we accept the *contradictions* of Kings and Chronicles without questions, and the stories which are morally repellent?

This question is not only a question concerning the Old Testament. In other ways it reappears in the case of the whole Bible, and it shall not be treated at length here. I only point to an important fact, which I should name the *self-criticism of the Bible*.

This self-criticism is carried out in and by the New Testament, e.g. in the "But I say unto you . . ." of the Sermon on the Mount, in the selection of ideas made by Jesus when working out His idea of the Messiah, in Paul's rejection of the Law as a means to salvation. But this self-criticism is also to be met with in the Old Testament. When, e.g., we compare the Song of Deborah and the Song of the Servant of the Lord in Isa. liii, we find first a contrast, rejecting the spirit of the former of the two passages, the spirit of revenge, scorn and scoffing at conquered enemies. But deeper, behind the words apparently so different and contradicting, there is a profound unity. Both poems are—in different ways, and it is true, the first of them in a way rejected by the other—expressions of the will to be completely and absolutely on the side of God, in the service of God.

The same self-criticism we meet in Hosea's and Jeremiah's condemnation of the craft of Jacob, and in Hosea's curse on the "blood-guilt of Jezreel", approved a hundred years earlier by the disciples of Elijah and Elisha. In this self-criticism of the

Bible the Revelation of God gives us means in hand to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary elements. This is not historical criticism. It is that self-criticism which leads to deeper knowledge of God. But it is a parallel to that self-correction, which is perhaps the most important element in the history of scientific work.

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