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A Word in Time*

Understanding the Bible Today

JAMES D.G. DUNN

1. Introduction

ARTHUR Samuel Peake is a name rightly revered in Methodist circles and beyond, above all as a biblical scholar of the highest calibre. He was the first holder of the prestigious Rylands Chair of Biblical Exegesis at the University of Manchester (1904-29). His writings illustrate the best of both technical and popular scholarship of the period.¹ His name has adorned for more than fifty years the most highly regarded single volume commentary on the Bible;² a new edition of which, I am glad to say, is even now being planned.

Not least of his contributions was to bring home to the Primitive Methodist people, and to many others, the importance and necessity of biblical criticism, of the historical critical study of the biblical texts. At the turn of the last century there were many good Christians and churchpeople who were fearful of the effects of such criticism on faith. It seemed to imply a sceptical attitude to the Bible and to undermine its authority. In evangelical circles on both sides of the Atlantic the infallibility of the Bible was providing a rallying cry for many, and what came to be known as the Fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s was already rumbling. Of Peake's predecessor in his teaching at the Lancashire Independent College in the 1890s it was said, 'His mind was hermetically sealed against modern scientific views in criticism. One quaint manifestation of love for his students was his borrowing the translation of Wellhausen's *History of Israel* from the college library and then steadily declining to return it — it was safer with him; to him it could do no harm!'³

Peake himself had no doubts on the matter. Historical criticism of the Bible was both inevitable and desirable, both necessary and valuable. Others might be willing to translate Christianity into a series of high principles or ideals — to soar aloft, away from the earthboundness of historical facts, to a cloudland where history had no wings to follow. Not

* The Peake Memorial Lecture (June 1991)

Peake! Others again might wish to stake everything on the testimony of religious experience or religious consciousness, preferring to talk of the Christ of faith and to ignore the Jesus of history. Not Peake! For Peake such a flight from history was impossible. For Peake Christianity stood or fell with what had happened in history, above all in the life and ministry of Jesus. As such it was open to historical scrutiny and critical inquiry. That was why historical criticism was both inevitable and necessary. Moreover it was precisely such historical scrutiny which kept Christianity rooted in history and in fact prevented Christians from fashioning a Christ after their own fancy and thereby impoverishing the whole. That was why historical criticism was both desirable and valuable.¹ It was Peake writing in this vein who probably did more than any other in Britain to save the Free Churches from the Fundamentalist controversy which so racked the churches in America.

But now the fight which Peake fought so successfully earlier in this century needs to be fought again. For in the past few decades the importance of historical criticism has once again been put into sharp question, and by no means only from the fundamentalist side. It is the purpose of this lecture to honour the name and memory of A. S. Peake by attempting a modest restatement of the importance of the scholarly endeavour to which he dedicated most of his life, to remind Peake's own people of what is at stake in the historical criticism of the Bible.

2. What is historical criticism?

Historical criticism as we know it goes back to the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and behind that to the Renaissance — which means also to the Reformation. Historical criticism is simply the attempt to gain as accurate a picture as possible of the past, particularly of the personalities, events and epochs whose influence has shaped our own traditions and present. We use the word 'critical' simply to indicate the endeavour to use *all* the available tools to uncover the reality of that past, to scrutinize as dispassionately as possible the basis in history of claims for that past. 'Critical', of course, must include 'self-critical', including openness to having one's own viewpoint put in question by the evidence itself or by other researchers; otherwise the word easily becomes a cover for self-deception and manipulation of the historical data.

The historical critical method gathered to itself a good deal of extra philosophical and other baggage and I do not have time to examine critically its own history. All I want to do here is to emphasize one point which lies at the heart of historical criticism, one point which, for me, constitutes its most important contribution to the human acquisition of knowledge. I am referring to *the appreciation of historical perspective, the recognition of historical distance and historical difference*. Characteristic of the medieval world was the blurring of past and present; the world-view of the past was no different from that of today; the events of the NT could have happened yesterday and been described in just the same words. But with the Enlightenment in particular came the widespread recognition, in

L. P. Hartley's words, that 'the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'.⁵ The point is obvious: that unless we recognize the *otherness* of the past we will simply assimilate it to our own present. Unless we recognize the otherness of the past we undercut its power to challenge us.

Albert Schweitzer gave the point classic expression when he showed how, all through the nineteenth century, 'Lives' of Jesus had been written which simply recast the portrayal of Jesus in nineteenth-century moulds — Jesus the moralist, Jesus the socialist revolutionary, Jesus the rationalist, and so on. The Jesus whom Schweitzer put forward was Jesus the stranger and enigma⁶ — one who is bound to appear strange and enigmatic to us moderns because he belongs to a time and culture far removed from ours. The point is that only respect for the historical otherness of Jesus will prevent us from domesticating Jesus, rendering him tame and amenable to our own prejudices and priorities. Only a Jesus who is historically distant and historically different can criticize us, can serve as a yardstick by which to measure our own faith and practice. Only the Jesus who is a stranger and enigma has the power to challenge our comfortable compromises and half-hearted discipleship. Or, in broader terms, only the Bible seen in its historical otherness can function as a canon, the norm by which we judge ourselves and our churches.

It is this appreciation of historical perspective which we owe to historical criticism and which we should not lose sight of, whatever other criticisms we may wish to make of our Enlightenment heritage in general, or of the historical critical method in particular. There are, however, two lines of attack on the methods and objectives of historical criticism which are too serious to ignore, and to these we now turn. The first entails, or so it seems to me, the loss of historical nerve.

3. The loss of historical nerve

The first accusation laid against historical criticism is that it does not and cannot deliver. It promises historical facts only to deceive. In the past it sought to replace the dogmatic Christ with the historical Jesus. But it cannot actually deliver the Jesus of history. Historical research into Christian beginnings is like trying to dig up an endless stretch of quicksand which sucks you in and never gives you a secure foothold from which to recover yourself.

The limitations of the historical method were recognized early on in the Enlightenment. The findings of historical research could never be certainties. They were always interpretations of, deductions from, partial and incomplete data. At best they indicated probabilities. Often, such was the paucity of much historical data, the historian's findings could rank only as possibilities. And as such, possibilities or probabilities, they could never provide the basis of religious truth.⁷

Even sharper was the critique of Ernst Troeltsch early in the twentieth century. He saw that the historical method relativizes everything. No historical fact can escape the flux of history, can rise above historical

contingencies. Since all historical facts are relative to each other, it is impossible for any individual fact to provide a sufficiently substantial basis on which to construct a system which makes ultimate claims on people. The gap between historical study and religious truth claims is unbridgeable.⁸

Rudolf Bultmann positively relished this inadequacy of the historical method. He did not want faith to be dependent on historical study or so-called facts. He could happily throw all 'Lives' of Jesus on the bonfire of historical scepticism; it was the Christ of the gospel preached now with whom alone his faith had to do.⁹ Those who followed him found it impossible to dispense so completely with the historical Jesus, but still found the problem of relating history and faith intractable.¹⁰

In our own day Dennis Nineham has repeatedly drawn attention to the impossibility of tying the Gospel picture of Jesus down to precise historical facts. He presses home the conclusions of the early form-critics: that the Gospels provide us first and foremost with the beliefs of the Evangelists and their churches, not with direct evidence as such for what Jesus did and said. Whether or not the Gospels contain first-hand, eye-witness accounts of Jesus' ministry is not the point. The point is that even if they do, we have no means of recognizing it; we have no absolutely watertight criteria for establishing where the Gospel tradition is in immediate touch with the historical Jesus.¹¹

More recently Walter Wink has declared historical biblical criticism bankrupt. It is bankrupt because 'it is incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation'.¹² It is bankrupt, claims Wink, summarizing the earlier criticisms of the historical critical method, because 'it was based on an inadequate method, married to a false objectivism, subjected to uncontrolled technologism, separated from a vital community, and has outlived its usefulness as presently practised'.¹³

I have to say at once that I do not share this pessimism. I believe it is possible to ascertain the historical meaning of our texts. I believe it is possible to hear again something at least of what it was that the first readers heard, a text speaking to them with such power and authority that they retained that text, treasured it and passed it on, to become, in due course, part of our canon of holy scripture. I believe that historical study of the text can facilitate the past to illumine our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation. Here I will speak only with reference to the New Testament — partly because that is my own speciality, partly because the NT and its witness to Jesus is central and fundamental to Christianity, and partly because the tradition in the OT is more complex and requires a much fuller discussion than I can give it here. But let me attempt to explain my position with regard to the NT at least, even if I can do so only in broad terms in the time available.

It does seem to me that historical scepticism is in danger of blinding us to the amazing quantity and quality of our sources regarding Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity. So far as our knowledge of Jesus is concerned

we should consider some basic facts.

(1) First, we know that the first Christians were concerned to remember stories about and teaching of Jesus. This is implicit in the fact that teachers had a privileged position in the earliest churches (Gal. 6:6, etc.). Teachers by definition are concerned to preserve and teach the shared traditions of their communities. These traditions must have included traditions about Jesus. Moreover, the simple fact is that we actually have many of these very traditions — in the Synoptic Gospels in particular. These traditions tell us that the first Christians wanted to remember Jesus and did so by means of these traditions.

(2) Secondly, these traditions also show us *how* they remembered Jesus. Not with fixed formulations repeated word for word — we have *four* Gospels, not one. Each telling and retelling had its own emphasis and context. Each Evangelist combined and edited the traditions in his own way, but in the Synoptic Gospels the breadth of variation is, when everything is considered, remarkably small. We can gain a very clear picture of how Jesus operated, of typical episodes from his ministry, of the characteristic emphases of his teaching, of typical utterances. All the while we are sharing the memories of these first Christians, and in sharing their memories can experience something of their fascination with and faith in Jesus which thus found such expression. Do we know *precisely* what Jesus said or did? Often not; apart from anything else, he presumably spoke in Aramaic, and our traditions are in Greek. Do we know where and when precisely he did it or said it? Usually not. But that matters little when the overall picture is so clear and so compelling.¹⁴

(3) Thirdly, what of the danger of reading our own meaning into the words which convey these memories of the first Christians? Here too we need not despair. For we have a remarkable range of other texts, not to mention archaeological material, from this period. Such evidence usually enables us to get a sequence of cross-checks and 'fixes' on words, concepts and themes which enables us to hear them within the living matrix of their language contexts of the time. Given the idiosyncracies of individual authors it is not, of course, an exact science. But human discourse generally can make allowances for such idiosyncracies and still communicate with a fair degree of intelligibility. And the same is true of a NT text's communication to us today. Many of the disputes about meaning which have driven such as Wink to despair are disputes about what, in communication terms, is the fine print. The larger meaning is not in much dispute, even if not all agree on the fine detail.

In short, I do not think we need to despair either of historical study or of the gulf between history and faith. The historical impact of Jesus and of his Spirit has given birth to and shaped our canonical documents. That historical impact is embodied still in these texts. By hearing them again in their own historical terms we too can experience something of that power and open ourselves to that same Spirit still speaking through the same texts. It is not a matter of making our faith dependent on the findings of historians, as Bultmann feared. It is rather a matter of opening ourselves to

the faith-creating, faith-instructing, faith-sustaining power which, as a historical fact, these texts exercised in the beginning and which lifted them above the mass of other historical texts of the period to be recognized, in due course, as Christian scripture.

4. The flight from history

If the first attack on historical criticism has attested the loss of historical nerve, the second attack has seen something of a flight from history. The other side of the disillusionment with the results of historical criticism has been the increased interest in the Bible as literature, which has been such a feature of the scholarly scene over the past twenty years.¹⁵

The reaction is understandable and overdue. Why should the biblical texts be regarded merely as witnesses to long past historical events? Why should they be treated simply as windows through which we can look to learn historical facts? Are they not works of literature, works of art in their own right? Historical criticism has tended to see the biblical writings simply as sources of historical information. The effect has been to treat them as though they were a series of dead corpses, to be dismembered and dissected into older traditions and earlier forms, with interesting facts extracted like so many individual organs and surprising growths to be popped into some jar of preserving fluid. Or like a painting which can be disregarded and removed to uncover some earlier work of art on the assumption that earlier is more important. Should we not, however, value the text as it is, the living text as it has functioned in the worshipping community and beyond? Should we not be standing back to appreciate the masterpieces which we have in these texts in their full and detailed sweep?

Even more far reaching has been the question of whether we can speak of a single historical meaning of a text. For meaning, it is now frequently asserted, is the product of the encounter of the individual reader with the individual text. There is no such thing as a single meaning of a text, literal or historical or whatever. In the fundamental sciences it is now recognized that pure objectivity is impossible; the observer influences the data observed by the very act of observation. So in reading a text the response of the reader determines its meaning as much as anything else. In other words, meaning is multiform. A text is fundamentally unstable, capable of yielding as many different meanings, as many different readings as there are readers.¹⁶ The quest for a single authoritative meaning is therefore flawed from the outset.

This reaction to the clinical aridness of much historical criticism has many welcome features. In particular it is important that we appreciate the dramatic *narrative power of our literature*, the Gospels in particular. We need to appreciate, for example, the dramatic force of Mark's sustained representation of the disciples as dull of hearing and hard of heart; the power of the dramatic climax of a Roman centurion being the one to make the supreme Christian confession of Jesus as the Son of God, and that just after he had expired on the cross (Mark 15:39); the open-endedness of a Gospel which ends with the women fleeing from the empty tomb, troubled,

silent and afraid (Mark 16:8). Or again, in the Fourth Gospel, for example, we need to appreciate the studied literary effect of a sequence of 'signs' each explicated by discourse, the series of 'misunderstandings' by which these discourses open up richer and richer dimensions of meaning, the dramatic power of the way in which John presents Jesus as the light shining and caused *krisis*, separation and judgement, between the few who side with him and the many who decide against him, the dramatic irony of the world judging itself by its reaction to Christ when it seemed as though it was Jesus who was on trial.

It is also important that we take seriously the biblical text as *an act of communication* — written to be heard or read — meaning as what the words communicated to those who received them. The danger of focusing the discussion on authorial intention, on what the author intended to say, is that we confine meaning only to one part of the act of communication — as though the biblical author launched his words like some great fleet on the ocean, in a particular direction, of course, but without it mattering whether they arrived or not — so that they are still there, out on the ocean, ready to 'arrive' at anyone who discovers them today. But these words did arrive. They come down to us because they were received, because they were perceived to have meaning which ran beyond the particularities of their immediate context. As those who wrestled with the old problem of false prophecy had long recognized, prophecy to be prophecy must be received and evaluated as well as uttered. In the making of scripture the hearing of the recipients and the evaluation of the believing community is as much a part of the process as the inspiration of prophet or apostle.

So there are points of considerable importance in the reappraisal of the Bible as literature and of the significance of the response of the reader. Yet there are dangers too. One is the danger of generalizing too much from the presence of various literary forms in the Bible, or, conversely, the danger of ignoring the historical particularity of other forms. Again I confine myself to the NT. It should occasion no surprise, for example, that some of the most fruitful literary insights have come in the study of the metaphors and parables used by Jesus. For a metaphor, or aphorism, or proverb, is often a statement of a general or universal truth which is quite independent of any particular context. 'By their fruit shall you know them' is an epigram which is true whoever said it and wherever it was first said. So we add nothing to its meaning by inquiring whether Jesus said it or not. But the majority of the documents in the NT are letters, most of them occasional letters, letters written by a known author to specific churches and situations. Here we can speak of authorial intent. Here we can ask sensibly what he intended his addressees to hear. Here we can set a text in historical context, including language usage and literary form. By setting ourselves as fully and as sympathetically as possible in that historical context we can hear again the specific force of its message, the meaning which spoke to the first hearers with word of God power in its historical particularity, even if various nuances and overtones are lost to us as a result of the imperfection of our historical knowledge.

Certainly there is a danger of imprisoning a NT text within its historical context so that it loses its power to speak to us across the centuries. But there is also a danger of thinking of the historical context as a prison from which the text has to be liberated, of thinking that we can free a text from its historical context and still retain its integrity. Rather a text such as Paul's letters is like a plant deeply rooted in its historical context, firmly attached to that context by many tendrils and roots, so that to remove it from that context is to free it, yes, but also to kill it, so that it becomes the very thing that we sought to avoid — an interesting historical specimen, strange both to our own time and to the past. Alternatively, a historical text is like one section of a pattern in a large tapestry. It is attached by many threads of language usage, idiom, convention, world view to that context. We may tear the pattern from the tapestry and attempt to attach it elsewhere, but there will be a real danger of the threads running and of the pattern itself beginning to disintegrate.

The fact is that no text can exist without a context, except perhaps the most generalized of proverbs. If we 'liberate' a text from its historical context we simply subordinate it to a different context — the context of church tradition, the context of our own agenda, our own reading. It is simple self-deception to speak of the autonomy of a text. Those who claim to be freeing a text like one of Paul's letters from its historical context run the greatest danger of infringing its integrity; rather like a hostile takeover bid in the city, which takes over another business in order to 'liberate' its assets. In contrast, it is surely an inescapable fact that the very identity of a Pauline letter is bound up with its historical context. Text-in-historical-context is part of its givenness.

For a start, our texts were not written in English, but in ancient languages. For the English reader to have access to them requires that they be translated; and a translation which does not respect the language usage of the time of writing is a poor translation. In other words, the very fact of translation already ties these texts inextricably to the language and thought context of the time of writing. All would doubtless agree that any attempt to 'read' a text in an unknown foreign language is bound to fail. It should be obvious, then, that any attempt to read a text-in-translation, which totally ignores the fact that it is a translation and fails to inquire after the meaning of its words, idioms and themes in the original language, is equally misguided. What would we think of a translation of Shakespeare which paid no attention whatsoever to the English usage of the Elizabethan period?

We should also recall that historical criticism emerged itself, in part at least, precisely as a protest against an ecclesiastical tradition which had read more into the text of scripture than it read out, precisely in protest against an allegorizing of Jesus' parables which allowed details of the parables to be read in accordance with ecclesiastical fancy.¹⁷ Of course, many of Jesus' parables belong to the great stories of the world. But how much in them we will miss if we fail to recall their relatedness to historical context: that the vineyard was a familiar picture of Israel (Mark 12:1-9); that

Samaritans were despised by Judeans as religious and racial half-breeds, and that a bloodied or dead body was a prime source of ritual impurity for anyone with business in the Jerusalem temple (Luke 10:30-37); that for a father to run and greet his wayward son as the father of the prodigal son is represented as doing was unheard of in the social conventions of the day (Luke 15).¹⁸ None of these features is self-evident in the explicit details of the parable itself. They do not arise to us simply from our reading of the text. They become evident only when the text is set in its historical and cultural context. We take them for granted and may even read them into our own hearing of the text, simply because we assume, without realising it, the first-century context. But to neglect that context is to lose integral elements and emphases of the parable.

I do not want to imply that the historical meaning of a text is the only meaning that may be heard from it. But I do want to say that a historical text belongs primarily, though not exclusively, to the historical context which gave it birth. A NT text will have other contexts of meaning in history, for example, the Latin Vulgate and the classical period English of the Authorized Version. But its *primary* meaning is the meaning bound up with the language and idiom of the time of writing, the meaning intended by the one who gave the text its definitive shape and heard by its first recipients. A letter of Paul remains first and foremost a letter of Paul, however influential it may have become in subsequent contexts. To respect the integrity of a NT text is to respect it as first and foremost the product of a particular historical period, to respect it in its historical otherness. Only as we allow the NT text to be itself, to breathe its native air, can we properly acknowledge its integrity. Only so can we be prevented from treating it as a wax nose, to be shaped in accordance with our own fancies or the prejudices of the age. The historical context of a NT text is the normative context and provides the check and yardstick we need by which to measure all other claims to authoritative meaning from the text.¹⁹

In short I would wish to defend the following proposition: *that the more the identity of a text is bound up with the historical context from which it originally emerged, the more we have to accord normative status to the meaning which that text has as read within its historical context.*

5. The integration of historical text and historical context

To recap, then. The need for and point of historical criticism is being questioned from two sides. On the one hand, by those who think that the historical past is impenetrable and irrelevant to faith — the loss of historical nerve. On the other hand, by those who think that reading the biblical text as literature allows a plurality of meanings, among which historical meaning can claim no privileged status — the flight from history. In response I have offered four considerations.

(1) Historical criticism means recognizing and respecting the historical *distance* from us and the historical *difference* from our time and context of our canonical NT texts. In other words, we must begin our use of these texts by acknowledging that the process has to be a two-way process, a dialogue

between independent partners, not one where we dictate to the text or make it say what we or our ecclesiastical traditions wish it to say.

(2) We must acknowledge that many of these texts belong so integrally to the historical context which gave them birth that they cannot be adequately understood independently of these contexts, so that to respect their integrity is to set them within their historical contexts. In such cases, *the measure of an appropriate reading of these texts is the degree to which it re-expresses the original force of these texts as read within their native contexts.*

(3) Against those who despair of recovering historical meaning we simply have to affirm that in many cases in the NT we do have sufficient data on social context, language usage, theological claims, etc., to achieve a high degree of 'fix' on the historical meaning, at least in broad terms and on key issues. More so indeed than for other periods in which other meanings have been read from these texts. Indeed, *the further we remove many of these texts from their historical context the more arbitrary is likely to become the meanings read from them*, as the texts in question are set within different and sometimes alien contexts.

(4) None of this is to deny the possibility, inevitability, even desirability of other readings of the NT texts. None of this is to deny that meaning is in an important measure the outcome of the dialogue between text and reader. It is, however, to insist that the text provides important checks and controls on the legitimacy of the meanings which may be read from it. And by that I do not mean the text as a free-floating entity, independent of any context, but the text precisely in its historical context. *It is the NT text within its historical context which provides us with the norm by which we measure the legitimacy of other readings.*

In all this a basic theological principle has to be reaffirmed with some force — the very point, indeed, which Peake saw so clearly: that Christianity is an irreducibly historical faith. The claims that it makes for a specific segment of time and space in history are integral to it. Historical facts, however you define 'facts' precisely, are central to Christianity's identity. If Christianity is not about what happened in Palestine in the early decades of the first century of the common era, it is no longer Christianity; the word itself has become something fundamentally different. Christianity is committed to history, to asserting the essential truth, including the historical truth of the gospel so clearly expounded in its scriptures.

Christianity is therefore bound to historical meaning. It cannot but be passionately interested in this Jesus on whom its whole distinctive character is built. It cannot but be deeply concerned to know what it was he said and did in history, to understand, as much as possible from within, the nature of the impact he made on those who first followed him, as attested in our scriptures. For those who take the doctrine of the incarnation seriously it cannot be otherwise. For if this Jesus is indeed the clearest manifestation of God and of the divine purpose which has ever come to concrete reality within history, then this Jesus and the historical testimony to him in the NT scriptures is the norm by which we measure all claims to divine revelation. We cannot therefore, we dare not, cut ourselves off from that history,

declare it unreachable, diminish its significance to one reading of no greater intrinsic value than any other. Nothing less than the credibility and integrity of our whole faith is at stake.³⁰

That is not to say that we can or need to gain exact historical knowledge of Jesus or of the beginnings of Christianity. History is not an exact science; but neither is any science of the real world of things and people. We know enough to recognize the character of Jesus' ministry; the impact is clear for all to see. Nor do I wish once again to make theology subservient to history, as thought the two were neatly separable and easily orderable into sequence. Rather, it seems to me, the incarnation binds the two together; at the point of Christianity's beginnings history and theology are integrally intertwined.³¹ The theological impact and authority of the NT texts themselves is itself part of history. To enter empathetically into the historical context of these texts is to open oneself to the possibility of re-experiencing the theological power which caused their first recipients to treasure and preserve them.

6. Two illustrations

Let me illustrate the sort of re-appreciation of the scriptural testimony which can come from setting it within its historical context, and the corrective which so doing can provide to later interpretations. I have time to take only two example, one from the testimony to Jesus himself, and one from Paul.

a) The fact that Jesus had a ministry among 'sinners' is a well-known fact of the Gospel traditions and Life of Jesus reconstruction. He was known disparagingly as 'a friend of tax-collectors and sinners' (Matt. 11:19). He is remembered as saying that he came to call not the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:17). But who are or were the 'sinners'? An evangelistically oriented reading of the text might well take such passages as immediate authority for preaching the gospel to non-Christians — 'sinners' understood as non-Christians. Joachim Jeremias understood the passages to be talking of the common people, the people of the land, the irreligious and those engaged in despised trades.³² In turn, E.P. Sanders criticized Jeremias for an unhistorical reading of the social context, and concluded that the 'sinners' were the truly wicked,³³ real 'bad hats'.

But Sanders himself is open to historical criticism because he has failed to give weight to the sequence of evidence from documents of the period that 'sinners' was a sectarian term: 'sinners' were Jews judged by other Jews to be falling short in their practice of Judaism; the word gives us an insight into the factional disputes which were rending Judaism in the time of Jesus. This is just the tone we hear in the texts quoted: the voice of those who thought they were 'righteous', acceptable to God, and that others were 'sinners', unacceptable to God, even though as Jews they called on the same God and walked in accordance with the Torah as they understood it.³⁴

In other words, by locating these texts within the historical context of Jesus' ministry we can recognize that what Jesus was protesting against in his ministry to 'sinners' was precisely religious sectarianism — the

sectarianism of the Judaism of his day which disputed the acceptability to God of other Jews. The text set in historical context gives us a check on the interpretations which have been put upon the text. The text thus set in historical context can suddenly speak again with something of its original power to the sectarian tendencies and judgmental attitudes by which we today try to pre-empt the grace of God and deny it to others.

b) The second example is the role of women within Paul's ministry. I need hardly remind you that Paul's teaching on women's ministry is one of the most hotly contested areas of biblical interpretation today — with texts like 1 Cor. 11:2-16, 14:34-36 and Gal. 3:28 at the centre of the debate. What has been too little considered, however, is the historical fact that women filled prominent leadership roles within the Pauline and Gentile churches, and that these historical facts must inevitably reflect upon his teaching on the theme and give us pointers on how his teaching would have been understood then and may be understood today.

I think particularly of Rom. 16 — a much too neglected passage on this topic.²⁵ In that passage Paul begins by commending Phoebe to his readers. Phoebe is described as a 'deacon', not deaconess. Phoebe, indeed, is the first person to be named deacon in the records of Christianity. Moreover she is also called a 'patron'. That is what the word (*prostatis*) means. But for many decades European commentators could not bring themselves to allow that a woman had been a patron; the word must mean something weaker — for example, RSV offers 'helper'! But we know from the usage of the day that the word usually meant 'patron', and also that there were many socially powerful women who acted as patrons to societies and clubs. Phoebe was obviously one such — probably the most, or one of the most, important members and leaders of the church at Cenchræa.

Next we meet Prisca and Aquila. From the various references to this couple in Acts and Paul it would appear that Prisca was the dominant partner. She would certainly have functioned as a leader and probably the moving spirit in the churches which met in their various houses as they moved from place to place, probably on business.

Then there are Andronicus and Junia. The second name is certainly feminine — as certain as anything can be in history. We know of many Junia's in inscriptions and records from the period, but not of any Junias's. And yet generations of commentators and translators could not bring themselves to believe that it could be Junia, since Paul goes on immediately to describe the two as 'eminent among the apostles'; it could not be that a woman was among that larger band of apostles of whom Paul speaks in 1 Cor. 15:7, could it?! But Junia it certainly is, a woman, and probably wife of Andronicus. And she is certainly described as a prominent apostle. The historical facts are clear.

Finally, we may note that four members of Paul's list are described as 'hard-workers'. Where this description occurs elsewhere (1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12) it is regularly inferred that those so described were church leaders. But surprisingly, or not surprisingly, not so in Rom. 16. Why so? Because all four are women — Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis.

And only women are so described. Evidently, on the normal deductions drawn from such language, women were prominent in the leadership in the earliest churches in Rome.

Here, then, once again, careful historical inquiry enables us to correct a biased and misleading picture perpetuated up to the present by commentator and translation. It enables us to gain a fresh insight into the historical reality of Christian beginnings and fills out the historical context within which we must read Paul's teaching on women's ministry. It therefore feeds directly into any theological reassessment of ministry which wrestles with these texts.

These are just two examples, but I hope they indicate with sufficient clarity the importance and potential of the historical criticism upon which Peake placed such store.

7. A word in time

One word more is perhaps necessary. I have entitled this lecture, 'A Word in Time'. I did so for two reasons. The first is the main burden of this lecture. I hope by means of this title to underline the extent to which our canonical documents consist of words spoken and written at particular times in the past; the extent to which their meaning and authority as our canonical documents is conditioned by their historical and historically contingent character; the extent to which our appropriation of them depends on our recognizing and respecting that 'in time' character of our texts.

This is of vital importance for us all. For it not only calls in question radical re-use of these documents which does not respect their historical integrity, a hearing of meaning which is determined more by the reader than by the text itself. But it also calls in question any simple transfer of meaning from the past to the present. We cannot simply read the Bible as though it was written yesterday and ignore the questions of historical difference and historical distance — the different contexts of meaning which give the texts their primary meaning. We cannot simply read an OT commandment and claim 'God says', or 'This is still the word of God', as though any such commandment still had prescriptive authority for us, simply because it appears in the Bible. Taking the historical context of these documents seriously means taking seriously the degree to which the words written were addressed to particular historical situations which no longer pertain. To hear the word of God as it was heard by the OT prophet or the NT apostle may well mean hearing it in its distance from the changed circumstances of today. This is not to deny that the message of salvation is clear to any who read with open ear and eye. It *is* to deny that any attempt to define doctrine by straightforward 'proof-texting', as in the Westminster Confession, is a failure to respect the Bible as 'a word in time'.

Nor can we think to slip round the problem by means of abstracting unchanging principles from the changing historical circumstances — as though historical context was a kind of skin or shell which could be stripped off leaving an unchanging, non-historical core. Of course there are great

revelatory insights and profound principles for faith and conduct which do emerge clearly from our texts — God as one and beyond the comprehension of humankind, human creatureliness and dependence on the Creator for life and meaning, Jesus as the climax and clearest expression of God's character and purpose within history, and so on. But what we actually have is the core insight expressed only in particular historical circumstances; even the basic principle itself is conditioned by the historical particularity of the words and context in which it was uttered. We can speak of God's bias for the poor as a general principle; but what that meant in practice, how it actually worked out within the Bible, with regard, say, to the welfare system or the ownership of property, is tied all the time to particular historical contexts. We can speak of Jesus as the incarnation of God's Wisdom, but incarnation is by its very nature historically specific. To ignore historical particularity is to ask for a docetic Christ, not for the Christ incarnate in history.

How then does a word spoken in time speak to those of another time? God may speak through it in many ways, of course. But if we are concerned to hear the primary meaning of most key NT texts, we have no alternative but to set that text as fully as possible within its historical context of language, idiom and world-view and to hear it as fully as possible within that context. Of course, the word of salvation will speak loud and clear to any with an open ear, without their needing to worry about historical context. But if we are talking about the normative word by which we check our faith and life, the church as a whole simply cannot ignore the fact that that word and the insight or principle it embodied was historically contingent through and through.

What is needed, then, is to listen to the word of God in time, in its historical contingency, in its relation to specific historical situations. To listen and hear how the text functioned as word of God in these historical situations, how it provided illumination, stimulus, or corrective to these situations in different ways. These texts are models and paradigms of divine disclosure in historical contexts of the past. They demonstrate how the word of God has always functioned within the historical particularities of specific situations in time. They reassure us that God's word is always in time, always respects the circumstances of those to whom it is addressed; that the God who speaks in time still speaks to us in the particularity of our time, in the diversity of our contexts.

I said a moment ago that I chose the title 'A Word in Time' for two reasons. I have begun to touch on the second one and with that I close. The Bible is a word in time not only as a word spoken in history, but as a word spoken 'just in time' — 'just in time' to us caught within time to remind us that life and meaning is not reducible to what happens 'in time', 'just in time' to us who are slaves to the clock and the seasons to lift our eyes beyond time and season, 'just in time' to us who 'in time' can look forward only to death to tell us of the one who from beyond time gives life to the dead, 'just in time' to save us from ourselves and our petty ambitions. And that too was the message of Arthur Samuel Peake.

Notes

- 1 Bibliography in J. T. Wilkinson, *Arthur Samuel Peake: A Biography* (London: Epworth 1971).
- 2 Peake's *Commentary on the Bible* (1919; with supplement, 1937; revised and ed. M. Black; London: Nelson 1962).
- 3 L. S. Peake, *Arthur Samuel Peake: A Memoir* (London: Hodder 1930) pp. 131-2.
- 4 A. S. Peake, *Christianity, its Nature and its Truth* (London: Duckworth 1908) ch. 8.
- 5 L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, Prologue.
- 6 A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: Black 1910) p.397.
- 7 I echo, of course, the famous words of Lessing: 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.' *Lessing's Theological Writings*, selected and translated by H. Chadwick (1956) p.53.
- 8 See e.g. the treatment of Troeltsch in J. Bowden, *Jesus: the Unanswered Questions* (London: SCM 1988) ch. 10.
- 9 R. Bultmann, 'On the Question of Christology', *Faith and Understanding* (London: SCM 1969) p.132.
- 10 See now particularly R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford University 1988).
- 11 D. E. Nineham, *Explorations in Theology 1* (London: SCM 1977) pp.50-1.
- 12 W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1973) p.2.
- 13 Wink, p.15.
- 14 At the question time following the lecture, John Harrod asked quite justifiably whether one could have such confidence on such crucial matters as Jesus' own self-understanding, or understanding of his death. It is true, of course, that, strictly speaking, one can get back with certainty only to the very early (earliest?) memories of Jesus, to the way Jesus was remembered by his first followers. But all would also agree that the 'Christ event' must have been of sufficient impact to explain such memories. The basis for a strong historical conclusion is thus given. In addition, there is a surprising degree of agreement that Jesus thought of himself as God's son or agent or representative in a distinctive degree. There is also a strong majority view among NT scholars that Jesus spoke of himself as 'the son of man' and that his main theme was the coming/presence of the eschatological kingdom of God. Beyond that disagreement abounds. But I would still want to say that that provides a strong historical base in Jesus' own ministry for subsequent christological claims about Jesus.
- 15 e.g. N. R. Petersen speaks of 'the revolt against historical criticism', although he makes it clear that the target in view is really 'historicism' — *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1978) pp.25-33. Currently the major review studies are S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels. The Theoretical Challenge* (Yale University 1989) and A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: Harper Collins 1992).
- 16 See e.g. E. V. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1985), here p.9.
- 17 I refer particularly to the famous work of A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 Bdc., Freiburg 1899).
- 18 'An Oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere' (K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant; A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1976) p.181.
- 19 Cf. Morgan, 181-2. See further my 'Levels of Canonical Authority', *Horizons in Biblical Theology 4* (1982) pp.13-60, reprinted in *The Living Word* (London: SCM 1987) pp.141-74.
- 20 Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (London: SCM 1967) cites D. M. Baillie appositely: 'there is no stability in a position which accepts to the full the humanity of Christ but has no interest in its actual concrete manifestation and doubts whether it can be recaptured at all; which insists on the "once-for-allness" of this divine incursion

- into history, but renounces all desire or claim to know what it was really like' — *God Was in Christ* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1948) p.28.
- 21 I thus echo and affirm the basic thesis of M. Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (1892; ed. C. E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress 1964). See also my 'The Task of New Testament Theology', in J. D. G. Dunn & J. P. Mackey, *New Testament Theology in Dialogue* (London: SPCK 1987) pp.1-26.
- 22 J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: Vol. 1: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM 1971) pp.109-13.
- 23 E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM 1985) chap. 6.
- 24 J. D. G. Dunn, 'Pharisees, Sinners and Jesus', *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (London: SPCK 1990) chap. 3.
- 25 For fuller details of what follows see my *Romans* (Word Biblical Commentary 38; Dallas: Word 1988) ad loc.