

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Grace Journal* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-journal.php

THE MEANING OF BIBLICAL HISTORY

WILLIAM R. FOSTER

Dean of Faculty
London College of Bible and Missions

The study of history as an intellectual discipline requires far more than a mere assembling of facts. The interpretation of history must be recognized as a legitimate and necessary aspect of the historian's task since facts in themselves have no abiding value apart from the consideration of their causes and consequences. Nor would it be possible for a historian to collect all the facts of history—a circumstance which demands a guide to the selection of the facts deemed significant. "A failure or refusal to acknowledge and deal explicitly with its philosophical implications really means that a philosophy functions surreptitiously, and that it is likely to be only by a happy accident adequate and relevant to the facts of history."¹ In the consideration of the Biblical record as history two distinct areas must be investigated. In the first place, the question of the relation of the recorded events to the actual facts of history must be considered. Are we dealing in the Scriptures with legendary story (saga), or do the recorded events actually take place in history? In the second place, the pattern of these Biblical events must be discovered since it is clearly evident that the authors of the Bible did not include all the historical details which were available (John 21:25). In the past centuries especially since the Reformation the Scriptures have been subjected to critical attack centering upon the question of their historicity.

The Older Form of Literary Criticism

The course of criticism has not always run in the same channels, and, therefore, cannot be explained by general covering statements. The past thirty years have witnessed a most striking reversal of critical opinion from that which reached its climax toward the close of the last century. The roots of this older form of criticism may be traced backward to the rationalism of the 18th century. Voltaire and Condorcet argued that "history was the story of man's progress from ignorance and superstition to the clear day of rationality through which he would eventually reach perfection."² The development of scientific historiography in the following century produced a confidence "in the efficacy of the new historical method to discover the truth of history, and so the meaning of history itself."³ The development of the evolutionary concept in the same century was regarded as providing the capstone of fully scientific naturalistic humanism. "Divine intervention...was declared to be impossible, because of history's very nature. The divine would only enter in at the end, and would then turn out to be man himself."⁴

Naturalistic humanism exercised a large measure of control over the spirit, method, and conclusions of religious scholars who delighted to be known for their "open-minded investigation of the facts, without any prior assumptions or commitments."⁵ Theological liberalism could not be completely naturalistic or fully humanistic, and maintain its connection with theology. This tension was overcome by the religious philosophy of Schleiermacher who propounded the doctrine of divine immanence which made man akin to the infinite and impersonal World-Spirit. In its fullest development of the humanistic doctrine of man theological liberalism "advocated a romantically light view of his sinfulness...represented him as the highest evolutionary achievement of an immanent divine principle...enthusiastically pictured him as on the verge of realizing, by his own

efforts, an idealistic program of social amelioration, which was identified with the kingdom of God...insisted that he had only recently evolved by natural processes from a purely animal stage."⁶ This composite of ideas established the atmosphere of rosy optimism which provided the theological climate of the beginning of the twentieth century.

The critical study of the 19th century subjected the Scriptures to the same foundational principles which had given rise to theological liberalism. Rationalism could not remain satisfied until the supernatural elements in the history and religion had been reduced to the level of the natural world. Ingenious explanations of the Biblical miracles were attempted, or reduced as did Harnack "to the misconceived and unexplained." Historians adopted the scientific method in order to re-fashion history as a science, and began the labor of sifting the facts of the past in order to find out, as Leopold von Ranke stated, "how it actually happened." The result in the realm of Biblical studies was the fostering of a skeptical attitude toward the historicity of Biblical events. Their error was not so much in their method as in the hasty and unjustified conclusions which were drawn from their investigations. The evolutionary hypothesis became the foundational philosophical principle to establish the meaning of history. This resulted in a drastic rearrangement of the structure of Scripture to support the developmental hypothesis. "The course of man's development in the realm of religion...began with the tribal god and primitive faith of early Israel, its culmination in the teachings of Jesus."⁷ The rejection of doctrine as relevant to the religious life was inherited from Schleiermacher, and was directed toward the undermining of the orthodox Biblical teachings. Doctrinal foundations disappeared because they were regarded as divisive and antagonistic to the well-integrated religious life.

This form of criticism did not adequately deal with the problem of history, and began to break down as a system shortly after the beginning of the 20th century. Its skepticism concerning the historicity of Biblical events involved a basic disagreement with the Christian Lord and Master (Matt. 12:39-42), with the historian Luke (Luke 1:1-4), with the apologist Stephen (Acts 7:2-50), and with the missionary Paul (Acts 13:16-39). This disagreement became more uncomfortable when the developing science of archaeology began to show that Biblical history is far more reliable than any of the critics had ever expected. Archaeology has "in general supported the position of those who regard the Bible as trustworthy."⁸ Criticism's most disastrous error was uncovered in its attempt to make the interpretive principle regulate the historical facts of the Biblical record rather than to allow the pattern of interpretation to be derived from the facts contained in the Scriptures. "Straight-line evolution was a framework imposed on the Bible from without, and it has proved far too rigid to accommodate the data."⁹ The idea of automatic progress has become doubtful due to the shattering of liberal optimism by two world wars in one generation. One contemporary exponent of liberalism now admits that "a thousand years from now our descendants will be facing difficult times, some of their problems being new and others being the same old problems that plague us today, because they will share inevitably in the perennial human predicament."¹⁰ The very nature of history is now being called into question in order to discover some philosophy of history which will more adequately explain the course of events. History is a mystery, and "the cosmos is more mysterious today than ever it was."¹¹ The older form of criticism has no solution to this mystery, and its once confident interpretation of history is being more and more recognized as totally inadequate. In a system where chance is the only ultimate principle of evolution, history can hardly be expected to have any pattern of purpose.

The Newer Form of Higher Criticism

The attitude of criticism has greatly changed in the past three decades as the older critical views toppled more and more into discard. The doctrine of human perfectibility is no longer so confidently held. The stress upon man's ability must be replaced by an emphasis upon the grace of God. One historian decries the naïvete of those who conceive of man as an evolving and perfectible creature by asserting that "it is essential not to have faith in human nature. Such faith is a recent heresy and a very disastrous one."¹² The evil potential in man is now more candidly recognized, and so an emphasis upon the sinfulness of man is replacing the rosy optimism of yesteryear. There is a growing sense of the inadequacy "of any explanation which attempts to interpret history, simply from history. History may be known only by One who is beyond its movement."¹³ Therefore, God is being understood more in the sense of His transcendence than His immanence. Revelation is replacing reason as the means by which man understands the significance of history and existence. Older liberalism had its hope in a Utopia which involved a perfect social order which man would build upon the earth. Now contemporary representatives of liberalism believe that "every hope for the establishment of God's kingdom within history is incomplete and imperfect."¹⁴ The kingdom of God is presented as an eschatological concept, not as that which will take place at the end of history, but as that which lies beyond history. "The meaning in history lies always in the present, and when...conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning in history is realized."¹⁵ The meaning of history comes from beyond history through the revelational encounter with God in which the events of the contemporary world take on new meaning and significance. Since the Scriptures "mirror the experienced history of Israel"¹⁶, the narratives contained therein portray "the deepest dimensions of Israel's history--her encounter with Yahweh in the political and cultural crisis of the time."¹⁷ The new emphasis in Biblical studies is now directed toward the discovery of the underlying themes and concepts which constituted Israel's religious heritage, rather than toward the atomizing of Israel's religious documents into fragmentary sources, and the piecing of the sources into a presupposed evolutionary pattern.

Contemporary criticism has designated the two components of historical study by two German words which are in non-technical usage normally synonymous. The assured or established facts of history fall within the realm of historie which technically refers to a historical event occurring at a certain place, and on a certain day which can be historically verified by competent investigators. Geschichte refers to the supra-temporal or supra-historical realm, "the realm of faith or ...the realm of redemption."¹⁸ Critics usually avoid a flat negative answer to historical questions concerning the mighty acts of God, but in reality assume that the Biblical records do not fall in the area of historie but of geschichte. Geschichte involves the realm of meaning since in the common experiences of the Israelites they saw the hand of God in the events of their history. The Exodus was only a political event, the liberation of a band of slaves from Pharaoh's yoke. Externally this event had no uniqueness since it may be compared with similar events in the lives of other people. However, with the eyes of faith these Israelite slaves saw in this event the presence of God in redemption. In the Exodus, historie would relate only to the liberation of slaves from the Pharaoh's yoke, whereas geschichte would refer to the perception in these historical experiences of "a divine dimension of meaning of which the general public was unaware."¹⁹ The same author asserts that "no external historical study can demonstrate that the Exodus was an act of God."²⁰ The Exodus account does not purport to be "objective history," but is rather to be under-

stood as "an interpretive account of events...an interpretation of faith...a meaningful happening in the life of a people."²¹ The heart of the whole matter has been given by Wright in his definition of Biblical Theology as "a theology of recital or proclamation of the acts of God, together with the inferences drawn therefrom."²² These new views have fundamentally altered the course of critical opinions, but this mid-twentieth century interpretation of history does not constitute an orthodox or even valid understanding of the meaning of history.

The new criticism is open to two basic disagreements as it pertains to the orthodox understanding of history. In the first place, the actual facts of history seem to have no valid connection with the interpretation of history. Although the critics protest that Israel's faith is radically historical, this does not necessitate a close integration of fact and interpretation. The actual historical event is of no real importance, and is not under any circumstance to be regarded as unique or as accomplished by supernatural power. The revelation of divine activity is not to be found in the event on the plane of historie, but in the revelational encounter in the realm of geschichte. The cause and the consequence of the Exodus are in historie, the whim of Pharaoh and the liberty of the slaves; in geschichte, the power of God and the redemption of His people. This is a historical dualism which is contrary to the orthodox understanding of history. "If it is not too important whether or not the particular events happened as recorded, then the uniqueness predicated of them can hardly be what our fathers in the faith have meant by the uniqueness of redemptive history."²³

In the second place, the interpretation of these events depends upon "the inferences drawn therefrom"²⁴, and the ability of persons "who perceived in the events a divine dimension of meaning."²⁵ In the events of the Exodus the Israelites presumed to see the hand of God, and in their explanation of the meaning of the events to themselves they inferred that God had been present with them, and had brought them out of Egyptian bondage. As Edward J. Young argues so conclusively, "the all-important question is this, Was Israel's inference true to fact or was it not."²⁶ Does this imply that human inference is a valid means for the discovery of truth, or may human inference sometimes be a mistaken inference? The critic would answer that "God gives evidence of his presence and redemptive purpose, but in an ambiguous way that demands faith and trust."²⁷ However, this answer only intensifies the problem, since the possibility of a mistaken inference is now joined to an ambiguous revelational encounter, and the possibilities inherent in this combination leave the critic exactly where his older predecessor arrived--with no certain interpretation of history. Perhaps this is the reason why some moderns are willing to make the basic assumption that "we cannot know if there is a plan for history, nor even if there is, whether it can ever be realized."²⁸ Thus, modern criticism has no solution to the historical problem of the Bible since it cannot discover the facts underlying the record nor establish an interpretation which is certain.

The Orthodox Alternative to Critical Theories

To the orthodox Christian the Biblical record is founded squarely upon certain things that God did in history through the entrance of the supernatural into the affairs of men. The historicity of the Biblical record is the only position which is in harmony with the understanding of the apostolic church and the testimony of Jesus Christ Himself who unequivocally spoke of the great events of the Old Testament history as actual happenings (Matt. 11:21-24, 12:1-5, 12:39-42, 23:35). This position has been followed by orthodox theologians through the succeeding centuries so that an orthodox scholar of a preceding generation could state that "the centre and core of all the Bible

is history."²⁹ The general providential working of God in all the events of history is indeed a blessed reality (Eph. 1:11), but this is not precisely the sense in which the orthodox theologians assert that God was active in history. The Bible records the special and supernatural interventions of God into the course of human history. The Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt was not a providential working of God, but an event which was supernaturally accomplished, and in which God was specially manifested. This activity of God was not common to all peoples, but special to the one nation which He had chosen (Psa. 147:20). Through supernatural exhibitions of His power in redemption and judgment God constituted the history of Israel to be unique as compared to the history of all other nations. These supernatural manifestations were climaxed in the assuming of an incarnate form in Jesus Christ, who being true God and true man, was crucified in history, was resurrected after three days in the tomb, is ascended into heaven from which place He shall physically return into the realm of human history.

Nor does the interpretation of these facts of history rest upon the human religious consciousness, for the mighty acts of God in history are interpreted by certain divinely-prepared witnesses who speak as directed by God and write as moved by God (2 Peter 1:21 ASV). The Exodus is not an experience common to all enslaved people, but a unique divine deliverance of a specially chosen people at a particular time from a specific place. The Biblical record of the Exodus is a divinely-inspired interpretation of the significance of the event given through the prophetic ministry of Moses. The historical events of the Exodus were revelatory of God's power, but such revelations cannot be properly understood unless it also be accompanied by a revelation in words. The Israelite did indeed see the manifestations of God's glory and power, but they were not left to draw their own inferences from these events. This interpretation of events does not come as "an ambiguous revelational encounter," but as a clear unveiling to the chosen prophet of the precise significance of the event. Supernatural ability is granted to the prophet to communicate accurately the truth to his people, or to record the interpretation in a permanent form for future generations. The orthodox concept of revelation is the key to a satisfactory solution to the problem of history. If God led the children of Israel out of Egypt, "we today can know that fact only if He Himself has told us."³⁰ Our understanding of the significance of redemptive history is not based upon inference from events, but rests upon the certain truth revealed by One who is beyond history, who acts in history, and who sees the end of history from its beginning.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Andrew K. Rule, "Interpretation of History," 20th Century Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge, I, 515.
2. W. Stanford Reid, "Review of Current Religious Thought," Christianity Today, Feb. 3, 1958, p. 40.
3. Loc. cit.
4. Loc. cit.
5. Andrew K. Rule, "Liberalism," 20th Century Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge, II, 660.
6. Ibid., p. 661.
7. John Bright, The Kingdom of God, p. 9.
8. Edward J. Young, Old Testament Theology Today, p. 11.
9. John Bright, op. cit., p. 10.
10. Elton Trueblood, Predicament of Modern Man, p. 7.

11. Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History, p. 118.
12. Ibid., p. 47.
13. W. Stanford Reid, op. cit., p. 40.
14. Robert Paul Lightner, Neo-liberalism, pp. 85-86.
15. R. G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 155.
16. Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, p. 205.
17. Loc. cit.
18. Edward J. Young, op. cit., p. 19.
19. Bernhard W. Anderson, op. cit., p. 15.
20. Loc. cit.
21. Ibid., p. 14.
22. G. Ernest Wright, God Who Acts, p. 11.
23. Meredith G. Kline, Review of Bernhard W. Anderson, "Understanding the Old Testament," Westminster Theological Journal, May, 1959, p. 253.
24. G. Ernest Wright, op. cit., p. 11.
25. Bernhard Anderson, op. cit., p. 13.
26. Edward J. Young, op. cit., p. 23.
27. Bernhard Anderson, op. cit., p. 44.
28. W. Stanford Reid, op. cit., p. 40.
29. J. Gresham Machen, "History and Faith," The Princeton Theological Review, Vol. XIII, July, 1915.
30. Edward J. Young, op. cit., p. 25.