

Chapter VII

Historical Criticism

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I. Aims and Method

By "historical criticism" is meant the study of any narrative which purports to convey historical information in order to determine what actually happened and is described or alluded to in the passage in question. The phrase "what actually happened" is by no means free from difficulties of interpretation, but a common-sense view of it will suffice us in the present discussion.

Historical study may be undertaken in order to throw light on an obscure narrative by determining more precisely the nature of the events to which it bears witness. In his useful study of the matter G. E. Ladd illustrates how the meaning of various statements in the New Testament becomes apparent to the modern reader only when they are placed within their historical context.¹ In John 4:6 Jesus is said to have sat at the well near Sychar at "the sixth hour". If this detail is "historical" (i.e. refers to what actually happened), it must have been remembered and recorded because it conveyed some significant information to the original readers, but for the modern reader it is a mere, empty time note without some elucidation. A knowledge of Jewish chronology enables us to state that the equivalent time in modern terms was probably noon.² If so, the detail indicates that this was the hottest time of day, and helps us to understand why Jesus felt tired from his journey and thirsty.³ Here we see how a mixture of historical skills—a knowledge of ancient chronology and insight into normal human feelings—may be used to illuminate the verse in question so that the modern reader may gain from it the full meaning which the author intended to be grasped by his original readers.

Alongside this task of *elucidation* a second aim of historical criticism is to *test the historical accuracy* of what purports to be historical narrative. In the Acts of the Apostles several pieces of local colour, e.g. the various titles given to magistrates, have been shown to be accurate by the production of confirmatory evidence from inscriptions and other ancient documents. It is well known that Sir W. M. Ramsay began his archaeological researches in Asia Minor with the belief that Acts was a tendentious second-century

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¹ G. E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (London 1970), pp. 171-194.

² Most commentators agree that John reckoned the hours of the day from 6.00 am.

³ It has been argued that John used a different system of chronology (see N. Walker, "The Reckoning of Hours in the Fourth Gospel", Nov. T 4 (1960), pp. 69-73; also however, J. E. Bruns, "The Use of Time in the Fourth Gospel", NTS 13 (1966-67), pp. 285-290).

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document. The evidence which he discovered led him to the verdict that Luke was a first-class historian, and he devoted the rest of his life to further researches designed to find confirmatory evidence for the historical truth of the NT.⁴

The problems that arise in pursuing these two aims are obviously those of applying historical science to the NT. This method consists in the careful scrutiny of any given narrative by itself and in comparison with whatever other sources of information are able to shed any light on it and the incidents which it records. The marks of the good historian are consequently that he possesses a good knowledge of all the sources which may be relevant, that he is adept at probing into their reliability and establishing what is historically probable, and that he is capable of framing a historical hypothesis which will successfully account for what the sources say. He interrogates the texts in order to construct a picture of the event which they reflect, a picture which will be in itself historically coherent and which will also serve to explain the wording of the sources. His tools include the various types of criticism discussed elsewhere in this volume, and he uses them to work back from the historical narrative to its possible sources and so to the incident which gave rise to them. We say "incident", but it should be remembered that various historical situations may have influenced the narration of the story at different stages in its transmission, and these need to be taken into account by the historian.⁵

It will be clear that many factors enter into the historian's reconstruction of the past, and that he cannot always arrive at certainty. Too often the sources are fragmentary and opaque, too often the original events are too complex for any source to reproduce them fully, too often several reconstructions of what happened are possible. The historian is frequently reduced to reasoned conjectures and assessments of comparative probabilities.

II. Historical Problems in the New Testament

The process of historical study often suggests that events did not happen exactly as they are reported in a particular source. So far as the New Testament is concerned such conclusions can arise in a number of ways.

1. DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN PARALLEL NARRATIVES

Comparison of different accounts of the same incidents in the NT may lead to the conclusion that two or more of them cannot simultaneously be true. For example, the order of events in Mt. 8 is quite different from the order of the same events in Mk. In Mt. the healing of a leper (Mt. 8:1-4) precedes the healings of Peter's mother-in-law and of the crowds in the evening (Mt. 8:14-17), but in Mk. the order is the reverse (Mk. 1:40-45, 29-34); again the crossing of the lake and stilling of the storm occur in Mt. 8:23-27 long before the teaching in parables in Mt. 13, but in Mk. 4 the teaching in

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⁴ W. W. Gasque, *Sir William Ramsay: Archaeologist and New Testament Scholar* (Grand Rapids 1966).

⁵ V. A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (London 1967).

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parables occurs just before the crossing of the lake. It is clear that one or both narratives cannot be in chronological order.

In the same way parallel accounts of the same incidents may differ from each other. In Mt. 21:40f. Jesus reaches the climax of the parable of the wicked husbandmen by asking what the owner of the vineyard will do to his tenants. The question is answered by the audience, and then Jesus replies by quoting Ps. 118:22f. In Lk. 20:15-17, however, Jesus answers his own question, and the audience replies, "God forbid", before Jesus goes on to cite the Psalm. Both accounts of the conversation cannot simultaneously be literally true.⁶ Or did Jesus allow or forbid the use of a staff to the Twelve when he sent them out on their missionary travels (Mt. 10:10; Mk. 6:8)?

2. COMPARISON WITH NON-BIBLICAL MATERIAL

Exactly the same kind of problems can arise when the NT narratives are compared with evidence from secular history, both in written accounts and in archaeological records. There is still no completely satisfactory solution to the problem arising from Luke's statement that Quirinius was in office as governor of Syria and conducted a census at the time of the birth of Jesus *before* the death of Herod (Lk. 2:1f.; cf. Mt. 2:1) when compared with Josephus' statement that Quirinius was governor and held the census several years *after* Herod's death (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17:135; 18:1f.)⁷

3. HISTORICAL IMPROBABILITIES

Some narratives contain incidents which appear to be inherently improbable. This can happen with ordinary, everyday events. One of the most serious attacks on the historicity of the Gospel of Mark came from W. Wrede who argued that the whole series of commands to keep the deeds and teaching of Jesus secret were incapable of being carried out, and hence un-historical: how, for example, could Jairus and his wife have kept the cure of their daughter secret (Mk. 5:43) after her death had already been publicly announced?⁸

4. SUPERNATURAL OCCURRENCES

The suggestion of improbability is all the stronger when the stories contain miracles, visions of heavenly beings and prophetic knowledge of the future. The problem here has two sides.

On the one hand, there is scepticism regarding the possibility of such events. Some scholars reject the supernatural out of hand. Others, while theoretically preserving an open mind, act in accordance with Hume's principle: while miracles are rare occurrences, it is not rare for

⁶ In the account in Mk. 12:9f. the crowds do not intervene at this point.

⁷ The case against Luke's reliability is presented most fully and strongly by E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.—A.D. 135)*, revised edition by G. Vermes and F. Millar, (Edinburgh 1973), Vol. I, pp. 399-427. In defence of Luke see E. Stauffer, *Jesus and his Story* (London 1960).

⁸ W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge 1971). See, however, J. D. G. Dunn, "The Messianic Secret in Mark", Tyn. B. 21 (1970), pp. 92-117.

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witnesses to be mistaken, especially in an era when superstition abounded and modern scientific knowledge was lacking. Every apparent example of the supernatural must therefore be scrutinised with care for the possibility of a

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natural explanation. Behind this attitude lies the belief that ancient history should be regarded as continuous in character with modern history, so that the one can be interpreted on the analogy of the other. Since (it is said) the supernatural is unknown today, it cannot be admitted into explanations of the past.⁹

On the other hand, it is argued that even if a person believes in the supernatural as a private individual, he cannot as a historian allow supernatural explanations of events. To do so would be to abandon the ordinary principle of natural cause and effect in history and to allow a place to the irrational. This procedure would put an end to historical method, since historical method, like scientific method, must proceed on the basis of natural causation. To accept the supernatural would mean giving up the usual methods of establishing historical probability and leave no firm basis for historical investigation, since no grounds would exist for preferring one account of an event to another.

The result of these considerations is that many scholars feel bound to explain the events behind the NT in natural terms and to refuse to allow any place to the supernatural as a possible category of interpretation.

5. CREATION AND MODIFICATION OF MATERIAL IN THE EARLY CHURCH

What appears to be a historical narrative can sometimes be explained as the product of the inventive faculty of a community or individual. Scholars applying the method of tradition criticism often assert that in the case of the so-called pronouncement stories the original element is simply the saying ascribed (correctly or incorrectly) to Jesus: these sayings were remembered because they were important for the early church, and it was the early church which invented the settings for such isolated and context-less sayings. Much attention has been devoted to tracing the development of traditions, and whenever an element in a story or saying appears to reflect a particular interest of the church or the predilection of an Evangelist the temptation is to argue that the church or Evangelist *created* the element (rather than that they *preserved* it because of its inherent value to them). What appears to be historical can thus often be explained as historical fiction, and the genesis of a narrative may be explained more plausibly in terms of the motives which animated the mind of its creator than in terms of a purported historical event reported in it.

6. LITERARY GENRE

The historian needs to ask whether any narrative which is a *prima facie* historical account has been assigned to its correct literary genre. A historical narrative may turn out to be a historical novel. Did the writers of the Gospels intend them to be taken as historical documents in the

⁹ R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (London 1961).

I.H. Marshall, "Historical Criticism," I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, 1977. Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, revised 1979. Pbk. ISBN: 0853644241. pp.126-138.

sense that they are in their entirety reliable accounts of events as they actually happened? It could be that the significance of Jesus was too great to be ex-

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pressed within the limits of a historical narrative: do we therefore fall into the error of reading as history what was never intended to be so understood? What, for example, is the historical status of the temptations in the wilderness? Have the NT writers woven event and interpretation together in such a way that interpretation may appear in the guise of historical event? Was the story of the tearing of the temple veil (Mk. 15:38) intended to be a historical account or a piece of symbolism (to signify the opening up of the presence of God to all believers)?

7. INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE

A final question concerns the amount of evidence needed to demonstrate that an event took place. Suppose that we have a single narrative of some event, with no confirmatory evidence from other sources: is that report adequate as a basis for belief, especially if the event is unusual or supernatural? Only Jn. 11 tells us of the raising of Lazarus: is that sufficient evidence to justify us in believing that such a stupendous event occurred despite its miraculous nature and despite the silence of the other Gospels? What is adequate evidence? Is it possible to prove historically that salient events in the life of Jesus occurred? There is surely a distinction between being able to say that a certain event (e.g. that there was a person called Jesus of Nazareth) took place with a probability approaching certainty and merely being able to say that there is no evidence that an event did not take place. If the events in question are said to be the basis for religious faith, then the question is manifestly of crucial importance.

III. *The Legitimacy of Historical Study*

It is not surprising that many people feel worried if the application of the historical method leads to the conclusion that certain events described in the NT either did not take place as they are recorded or cannot be established above a low degree of probability. The discovery of errors is not a problem in the same kind of way in the study of some secular history. Nobody is particularly disturbed by finding errors in Josephus and having to make allowance for them, however inconvenient this may be to the student of Jewish history. No problem of religious faith arises. The matter is more worrying for the Christian believer whose faith includes the belief that the Bible is in some sense true and reliable. He has come to the study of the NT with this working presupposition. It may not be superfluous to observe that at least he is (or should be) aware of the existence of this presupposition, and also that, if he is intellectually honest, he must be prepared to test its validity. It may also be worth observing that the contrary belief (namely, that the Bible is not reliable) is every bit as much a presupposition, and indeed from one important point of view a much less likely one, since there is a good case that the Bible does claim to be a reliable revelation of God and that this claim is a justifiable one.¹⁰

¹⁰ J. I. Packer, "*Fundamentalism*" and the Word of God (London 1958); J. W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London 1972).

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What, then, is to be the Christian believer's attitude to historical study? Many students have been tempted to conclude that there must be something wrong with a method which leads to such alarming conclusions, and therefore to pronounce the method illegitimate. But in reality the Christian cannot deny the *legitimacy of historical criticism*. If he is correct in his presuppositions, then the effects of such criticism should be ultimately to confirm the historicity of the NT.

In fact anybody who tries to understand the NT or to defend its historicity against sceptics by any kind of reasonable argument is already practising the historical method. He may try to argue that he personally does not need any historical proof of the truth of the NT because this is a matter of faith and not of proof, but this is not so. Not only does he need to practise it in order to overcome the arguments of sceptics and give an apologetic for Christianity (insofar as this can be done by historical argument); he also needs it in order to elucidate the historical statements made in the NT. There are problems of interpretation in the NT that cannot be solved apart from historical study, and it does no good to ignore them and try to move on straight to a spiritual or devotional exposition of a passage.¹¹ There are, for example, two *prima facie* different datings of the crucifixion in the Synoptic Gospels and John: it is impossible to study the Gospels seriously and avoid trying to discover *when* Jesus was crucified and why the Gospel records differ on so important a date. Historical criticism is both legitimate and necessary.

There is a deeper sense in which it is necessary. It must be practised in order to throw light on the *nature of the truth which is to be ascribed to the NT*. The answer to this question can be determined only by applying historical criticism to the actual phenomena. Two examples will illustrate the point.

First, as was indicated above, the *form* of a narrative must be taken into account in order to determine whether or not it was meant to convey historical truth. The parables of Jesus are related as if they were stories of real events. But nobody would claim that there must have been a historical good Samaritan or prodigal son in order that these two stories may be "true". The parabolic form does not demand the historicity of the story.

Second, the *aims* of the author must be considered. He may not have wished to give more than a summary of an event. Matthew so abbreviates the story of Jairus' daughter that one gains the impression that she had already died before Jairus first approached Jesus (Mt. 9:18), but according to Mark at this point she was only *in extremis*, and not until later did Jairus learn that she had died (Mk. 5:23, 35; cf. Lk. 8:42, 49). What Matthew reports is, therefore, not what actually happened, and it stands in contradiction to the report of Mark. But when Matthew's method of abbreviation (possibly in order to make room for additional material elsewhere in his Gospel) is taken into account, it is seen that he was not concerned with detailed accuracy, and he should not be faulted for what he was not trying to do. In the same way a first-century audience would not have expected the

¹¹ It is unfortunately the case that all too frequently evangelical scholars ignore these questions and give the impression that they do not exist.

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brief accounts of the various sermons in Acts to be verbatim accounts of what was actually said, any more than we would expect the same of brief newspaper reports of parliamentary speeches (as opposed to detailed reports in *Hansard*).

These examples indicate that the *prima facie* impression which may be gained by an untutored or naive modern reader of the NT can be wrong, and that historical criticism is needed in order to clarify what the NT intends to teach. Belief in the "truth" of the Bible cannot be a substitute for historical study. We may wish that this was the case, that God had given us a Bible that would be instantly and correctly understandable by any modern man. But he has not done so, just as he has not given us a Bible with a guaranteed text (instead of one that has to be determined by the techniques of textual criticism) or in a modern *lingua franca* (instead of having to be laboriously translated into many different human tongues). The Bible needs interpretation, and historical criticism is part of that process. This is not, of course, to say that the Bible is hopelessly obscure until the scholars have done their work on it; its broad meaning is clear enough, but the details of interpretation need scholarly skill.

IV. *The Implications of Inspiration*

The previous section attempted to show that our understanding of the historical truth of the NT must be formulated in the light of historical criticism—and that in this light some of the apparent difficulties in regarding the NT as historically reliable disappear. We must now stress the converse point, that the process of historical criticism must take place in the light of the doctrine of biblical inspiration. For example, John Calvin was not insensitive to the existence of historical problems in the NT, and did not brush them aside. He observed the problem caused by the different datings of the crucifixion in the Synoptic Gospels and John. Let it be noted that there is nothing wrong in establishing such a discrepancy. (If conservative scholars have been slow to look for such things, it has usually been because they have been too busy looking for answers to problems turned up by their more sceptical colleagues.) What is wrong is to stop at this point. So Calvin goes on to seek a solution to the discrepancy in terms of the Jewish calendar. He looks for a solution to the problem which will not sacrifice the historical accuracy of the NT authors. He attempts a *harmonization* in the light of historical knowledge.¹²

This sort of procedure is surely legitimate. If any particular event has been described by several witnesses, it is fair to expect that they will be in agreement, although allowance must be made for errors of observation and memory. A full picture can be gained only by piecing together several testimonies from different points of view. We would have a one-sided and wrong view of the chronology of the passion if we had only one of the sources in question.

Nevertheless, harmonization of the Gospels has aroused much adverse

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¹² J. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Edinburgh 1972), Vol. III, pp. 126f. Calvin's solution may not be acceptable; our point is simply that he did look for a solution which would do justice to all the evidence. The modern scholar is required to find a better solution in the same kind of way.

comment. There may be only one original written source (as in passages where two Synoptic writers are dependent on the third), so that differences between parallel accounts may be due to the growth of tradition or to independent editorial revision. This objection has some force, but is not decisive. For, first, it ignores the evidence of continuing oral traditions which may have preserved features omitted from the written sources used by the Evangelists.¹³ Second, the work of the later Evangelist may be an "exegesis" of his source through which features which were played down or obscured in the source but were nevertheless latent in it may be brought out more clearly: *Tendenz* is not necessarily the fruit of creative imagination. It is true that much misapplication of harmonization has brought the process into disrepute. The theory which harmonizes the two accounts of the healing of the centurion's servant by arguing that the centurion came to Jesus himself (Mt. 8:5-13) and sent two deputations of friends to him, the latter of whom repeated the centurion's own message *verbatim* (Lk. 7:1-10)¹⁴ is rightly to be rejected as too great a strain on credulity. Harmonization is legitimate, but only when the hypotheses necessary to establish harmony are not more unlikely than the hypothesis of non-historical reporting in one or more of the sources.

A conservative outlook may thus lead the critic to a more earnest reckoning with the possible historicity of his sources and hence to the discovery of historical material which may otherwise have gone undetected. Simple loyalty to the truth is all that should be required to lead to such effort—the willingness to check each and every theory, and to take nothing for granted. But the history of NT interpretation shows that where the conservative has not played his part the sceptic has often been content with inadequate solutions to problems, and has not tested them carefully in the light of the possibility that "*Die Bibel hat doch Recht*".¹⁵ Historical criticism must press on beyond what may be a superficial solution of a given solution in terms of the error of the source to a deeper solution which may be able to resolve the apparent error in the light of a more exact knowledge of the historical situation.

V. Conservatism and Scepticism

Such an attitude may well seem to have certain weaknesses. First, *conservative scholars may often seem unduly reactionary in their refusal to accept hypotheses which depend on the presence of errors and contradictions in the NT*. Thereby they appear to have precluded the possibility of fruitful research. For example, conservative scholars have never been very happy about the dismemberment of the Epistles to the Corinthians, especially the view of Haurath that 2 Cor. 10-13 forms part of an earlier Epistle than 2 Cor. 1-9, since this means that the various fragments have been erroneously joined together in the wrong order. It could be argued that by this obstinate refusal to accept an "assured result" of criticism they have prevented themselves from entering into a fruitful discussion of the historical develop-

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¹³ Some such theory appears to be necessary in order to explain (for example) the agreements of Matthew and Luke with each other against Mark in the so-called "triple tradition"; cf. T. Schramm, *Der Markus-Stoff bei Lukas* (Cambridge 1971).

¹⁴ N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (London 1950), pp. 220f.

¹⁵ The title of a well-known popular book by W. Keller, translated as *The Bible as History* (London 1956).

ment of the Corinthian church or of Paul's own thought. But two comments are in order. First, recent study suggests that earlier conservatives may well have been right in their hesitation (whatever their grounds for it); one solution to the enigma of 2 Corinthians that finds increasing favour at present regards 2 Cor. 10-13 as posterior to 2 Cor. 1-9 and forming part of a later Epistle.¹⁶ Second, if the historical evidence demands the dismemberment of the Epistle, and if there is no doctrinal reason why this should be regarded as illegitimate, then modern scholars should not be bound by the attitudes of an earlier generation.

What this illustration demonstrates is not that the historical method is wrong—for it is only by the application of it that a better solution to the problem can be found—but rather that the conservative is right to insist on the element of conjecture in many proposed solutions and therefore to be sceptical towards them.

This raises the possibility of another weakness in our approach. How far should scepticism be carried? After all, the basis for the newer view of 2 Corinthians may be no better founded than the old, even if it is a more congenial solution. Is the conservative sufficiently sceptical with regard to conservative solutions to problems? Indeed—and this is the crucial point—*ought he not to adopt an approach of methodological scepticism towards the NT text itself*. The conservative, it may be argued, is prepared to adopt the principle of historical criticism only up to a point; he refuses to apply to the text that wholesale scepticism and questioning attitude which is the mark of the historian.¹⁷

This description of the conservative attitude is correct; what is debatable is whether it represents an illegitimate, unhistorical approach to the text. It is surely one thing to interrogate a text minutely in order to discover all that it really says or implies; it is quite another to disbelieve every statement that it makes until it can be proved to be true. It is at this point that a clear distinction emerges between the so-called conservative and radical viewpoints. The position adopted by the sceptical historian is thoroughly unrealistic—as he would soon realise if he attempted to apply it to all the ordinary statements made to him by other people in the course of everyday life.¹⁸ If we have a narrative that purports to be historical from a writer whose general content is known to be reliable, it is more reasonable to accept it as reliable until satisfactory evidence is produced against it. *In the absence of contrary evidence belief is reasonable.*¹⁹ When a scholar finds that his general belief in the reliability of the NT is confirmed by the available historical evidence, he has every right to protest that methodological scepticism is unjustified.²⁰

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (London 1971); C. K. Barrett, *2 Corinthians* (London 1974). To be sure, this theory still requires that 2 Corinthians be regarded as a compilation.

¹⁷ See especially V. A. Harvey, op. cit.

¹⁸ Such ordinary statements form historical data. If the historian, bidding farewell to a departing friend, were to stop to question such a statement as "Hurry up and get off the train: the signal is at green", he would be taken where he did not wish to go.

¹⁹ This principle obviously does not commit us to believing any cock-and-bull story simply because it sounds plausible. It operates in the area where a writer may reasonably be regarded as attempting to convey historical fact.

²⁰ We would thus align ourselves with those scholars who insist that it is not the authenticity of sayings attributed to Jesus that needs to be demonstrated (so N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London 1967), p. 39), but rather it is the inauthenticity that needs to be demonstrated: a saying attributed to Jesus can be accepted as authentic until it is shown not to be authentic (C. Colpe, TDNT VIII, pp. 432, 434f.; W. G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (London 1974), pp. 25-27; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London 1971), Vol. I, p. 37).

One important special factor in this connection is the *question of the supernatural*. The conservative scholar accepts the possibility, and indeed the probability, of the supernatural. "If the universe is dominated by a Spirit, miracles are possible; if by a Spirit that is Love, probable; and if that Spirit has become incarnate, this miracle would make further ones very probable indeed."²¹ As a Christian historian he cannot rule the supernatural out of court in his attempt to furnish a historical account of the phenomena behind

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the NT. To do so would be to provide a naturalistic explanation of what, as a Christian, he believes to be supernatural; it would indeed be to explain away that on which his belief in the supernatural rests. The historian who believes in the possibility of the supernatural cannot divorce his faith from his historical judgment.

But this attitude does not condemn him to a non-historical approach. Historical judgment has to be exercised on the quality of the evidence and the nature of the event to which it bears witness. What appeared miraculous to the contemporaries of Jesus may in some cases be better explained in terms of insights derived from psychosomatic medicine. The nature of the evidence may be such that an account of the miraculous is not to be taken at its face value.²² Nevertheless, if the historical critic is convinced of the reality of the incarnation, he will be prepared to account for certain events as miraculous without any sense of incongruity or lack of historical sense. It has been sufficiently demonstrated by W. Pannenberg that there can be cases where the historian can admit the supernatural without in any way abandoning the principles of historical method.²³

VI. Conclusion

The argument so far has attempted to show that the application of the historical method leads to the elucidation of the NT and the resolution of the historical problems which it contains. A scepticism towards solutions to historical problems which postulate the unreliability of the NT documents is justified by its results. It is sensible to adopt an attitude of scholarly caution towards historical conjectures, whether they tend towards disproving or confirming the historicity of the NT narratives.

These points, however, do not remove the possibility of discovering intractable historical difficulties in the NT. There may be a stage at which the difficulties involved in explaining away an apparent historical error are greater than those caused by accepting the existence of the error. Theories which attempt to harmonise the narratives of Easter morning by postulating several different visits by the women to the tomb seem much more improbable

²¹ T. E. Jessop, cited by A. M. Hunter, *The Work and Words of Jesus* (London 1950), p. 59.

²² For example, in view of the evidence given by Mk. 5:1-20, it is highly unlikely that Matthew's description of the healing of two Gadarene demoniacs (Mt. 8:28-34) is to be regarded as historical; even N. Geldenhuys, hardly a radical critic, suggests the possibility that "Matthew, after his fashion, conflates two incidents here" (Op. cit., p. 258).

²³ W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (London 1968), p. 109; cf. D. P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (Grand Rapids 1964), p. 251; R. J. Sider, "The Historian, the Miraculous and Post-Newtonian Man", SJT 25 (1972), pp. 309-319.

than those which allow for a certain amount of confusion in the narratives,²⁴ just as there came a point when the pre-Copernican solution to the movements of the planets, though mathematically possible, broke down under the weight of the number of epicycles which more accurate observation of the heavens made it necessary to postulate, and the simpler Copernican system became much more probable. More generally, one may ask whether there is a stage when the number of alleged historical difficulties for which there is as yet no solution must lead the conservative scholar to conclude that the absolute historical reliability of the NT is a mirage: is there a point at which faith becomes sheer credulity? On more than one occasion Calvin himself notes the indifference of the Evangelists to details of times and sequences.²⁵ Was the Spirit less concerned about such matters than we are?

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It is certainly impossible to practise the historical method without concluding that on occasion the correct solution to a difficulty lies in the unhistorical character of a particular narrative. Several cases of this kind have been cited above, but in many of them we have claimed that to establish that a particular statement is unhistorical is not to establish the presence of an error which would call in question the reliability of the NT writer. Very often the reader may be demanding a kind of historical truth from the narrative which it was never intended to provide.

We must of course sympathise with the ordinary reader of the Bible at this point. He may well argue that if what the text says did not happen, then it is in error, and that to explain the text in terms of an abbreviated narrative or an interpreted narrative or even as a piece of symbolism is illegitimate. But sympathy is not an argument for dispensing with reason. The ordinary reader may not be able to recognise when unusual literary categories are being intentionally and properly used by the NT writers any more than the average reader of the Greek NT is likely to detect the presence of the odd examples of prose and verse rhythms that can be found in it by a person trained to do so.²⁶

When all this is said, however, there will still remain cases of apparent historical error which cannot be explained away with the knowledge at present at our disposal. There is a difference of opinion among scholars of a conservative inclination regarding these. Some scholars are prepared to allow that a Bible which is infallible in its doctrinal statements may nevertheless contain inaccurate historical statements in matters that do not affect its doctrinal affirmations: the truth of the incarnation is not affected if one or both of the genealogies assigned to Jesus are not accurate in every detail. Others would disagree, and claim that, even if no solution is known at present, nevertheless a solution *exists* and will one day become known. So far as doctrine is concerned, these two views obviously differ, although not perhaps as much as their proponents may think. In practice, however, they are not so very different, for where the former group of scholars admit real error, the latter group must admit apparent error. What is important is that scholars of both persuasions are equally committed to the search for truth—God's truth—and both are required to be humble and cautious in their statements

²⁴ This is not to say that the narratives are necessarily irreconcilable, but that so far nobody has produced a convincing hypothesis.

²⁵ J. Calvin, op. cit., 1, p. 168.

²⁶ F. Blass, A. Debrunner and R. Funk. *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Chicago 1961), paras. 487, 488.

I.H. Marshall, "Historical Criticism," I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, 1977. Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, revised 1979. Pbk. ISBN: 0853644241. pp.126-138.

regarding the phenomena in the NT. Both groups can and must work together in a spirit of mutual understanding instead of yielding to their respective tendencies to regard the others as beyond the pale or as dangerous heretics. Only through mutual cooperation and discussion are we likely to come to a resolution of these as yet unsolved problems.

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