

TRENDS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

IT would be hard to exaggerate the contrast between the attitude to the Bible in the Middle Ages and what one might call the modern critical approach. The former was at once more literal and more figurative. It was more literal in the sense that the Bible was understood to mean what it appeared to mean on the surface. If Genesis Chapter i described the creation of the world as having taken place in six days, no one questioned the statement; if a rapid addition of figures in the Bible gave the conclusion that the world was created in 4004 B.C. or thereabouts, the date was accepted: if the first five books of the Bible were described as of Moses or the Psalter was named the Psalter of David the attribution was received without question. There was indeed some textual criticism, i.e. some attempt to establish an accurate text, but once that was done little further investigation was made. The statement of the Bible was accepted at its face value. In all matters of doctrine of course it was interpreted in the light of Church tradition; which brings us to the second point. The Scriptures were not regarded as ancient documents written long ago, but as the living word of God, speaking to men here and now. They were thought of as timeless, as God himself is timeless, living in an eternal Now.

This teaching was largely through figure and symbol. As St Thomas says 'It is also befitting Holy Writ which is proposed to all without distinction of persons . . . that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from material things in order that thereby even the simple who are unable to grasp intellectual things of themselves maybe able to understand them' (*Sum. Theol.*, i, 1, 9). The method of Scripture itself was used by the Church. The walls of churches were covered in frescoes depicting scenes and figures from Old and New Testaments. The windows were filled with stained glass showing similar stories. Parts of the liturgy dramatized the various texts of Holy Writ, e.g. the chanting of the Passion. From the liturgy too came those mystery plays which were so prominent a feature of medieval life, and which eventually covered the whole Bible story from the Creation to the Last Judgement. In all this there was much allegorizing, i.e. representing spiritual truths under material figures—and the portrayal of New Testament events under Old Testament types. The figures of the O.T. on the walls of the church were never regarded merely for their own literal meaning—they stood for other facts of history or of the personal lives of the people. Indeed the whole Old Testament was made to foreshadow something of the New. The same trend was to be seen in the preaching. If a parable was the subject of the sermon, the smallest detail was allegorized—that is, was taken as symbolical of some spiritual teaching. These allegories become traditional and often remained unchanged for centuries. Of

course it was not always based on the literal sense. They used the Bible to expound the teaching of the Church—the living Church.

The sixteenth century saw the beginning of a profound change. With the rejection of Church authority and of the Roman liturgy, and the installation of the English Bible in its place, there came also the substitution of a literalist interpretation in place of the symbolism of an earlier age, and an unshakable belief in the capacity of man to derive the truth from the text by his own unaided efforts. Yet this same century witnessed also the beginnings of another development which was eventually to undermine if not actually destroy this belief. Following hard upon epoch-making geographical discoveries there came a great development of the natural sciences which soon revolutionized the old conception of the Universe. The Copernican theory replaced the Ptolemaic geocentric view. As time passed the age of the earth came to be estimated at millions of years; and even man was thought to have been tens of thousands of years on earth. The Books of the Bible were now examined as other ancient documents were examined. They were thought to be in many cases later compilations, with consequent uncertainty as to their historical value. A long time was needed for the assimilation of all the new knowledge, and many critics of course did not wait before drawing extreme conclusions with regard to the Bible. Its authority was seriously shaken.

It was inevitable of course that historical criticism, literary analysis and the conclusions of modern science should be applied to the Bible. It is not suggested that all the findings were wrong, but it is generally recognized, not only by Catholics but also by non-Catholics, that they went too far. 'It has led', says Dr Lightfoot, 'to an over-emphasis on the part played by human agency in the production of Holy Scripture and has made too little of God's Word to man therein. The charge must to a large extent be admitted' (*The Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 88). This over-concentration in fact led to two defects, (1) too close assimilation of the Bible to secular literature, i.e. an obscuring of its divine character; and (2) too little time given to its theological interpretation. The critic was rightly reluctant to admit a supernatural explanation which was not demanded by the context, but he soon came to hold the view that every supernatural explanation must be excluded in advance; and the general atmosphere was unfavourable to theology, so that this was reduced to the minimum. Again, the very fascination which Biblical criticism inevitably exercised over its devotees meant a corresponding decline in their attention to theology. No doubt they would have claimed to be preparing the way for the theological interpretation which should follow. But it rarely if ever did follow. Thus it was that the students of such teachers either became critics themselves, or bore the study with stoical indifference as a necessary evil, or reacted

violently against it. Such in brief outline was the course of events outside the Church, cf. Lightfoot, loc. cit.

Catholics of course never entirely lost the typological interpretation of the Scriptures, though it no longer occupied the prominent place it enjoyed before the Reformation. Referring to the medieval methods of exegesis Père de Vaux speaks of 'cette floraison d'allégories, qui sont touchantes, jolies ou simplement bizarres; qui peuvent plaire à l'esprit, émouvoir le coeur et aider la piété personnelle, mais qui sont artificielles et ne nous font pas pénétrer dans l'intelligence vraie de la Parole de Dieu' *Revue Biblique*, Jan. 1950, p. 141. Not everyone perhaps would entirely subscribe to this view-point, but it is undeniable that there was much exaggeration in those centuries we call the Middle Ages and earlier. Again, just as Catholics had never adopted the exaggerated views current at the Reformation, but had always insisted on the authority of the Church to interpret, so when the advance of modern science seemed to have destroyed the authority of the Bible, the Church maintained an attitude of reserve, waiting for time to bring a sense of proportion into the relationship between the two. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Catholics were in many respects greatly affected by the tendencies outside the Church. Being on the defensive they came to make their Bible-study more and more a matter of apologetics. They tended to spend their time defending it without actually assimilating its teaching. Or else the Bible became a sort of quarry from which one excavated proof-texts for use in theology: little attention being paid to the context from which they were taken and none at all to the broad lines of theological development in the Bible.

In so brief a summary there is bound to be some over-simplification but in its broad outline the above account is, I think, a fair representation of events.

The first World War severely shook the complacency and assurance of the non-Catholic Biblical world. The bland assumption that men and events were marching steadily forward to a golden future was rudely shattered. Men now began to see what is today realized by even the dullest witted, namely that man's moral calibre is not equal to this sudden accession of knowledge. Man is not sufficient to himself. Sin and judgement and God's salvation are the real things, cf. Lowe, in *The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Dugmore, p. 118. Writers set themselves to study the Bible anew for its spiritual teaching and expound it to others, while making at the same time a serious attempt to sift out from Biblical criticism what was of permanent value and harmonize it with the theological doctrine. This is for example the theme of the Editors' Advice to the Reader in Gore's *New Commentary on Holy Scripture* (1928). There, one is advised to accept the conclusions of historical criticism

as final, though shorn of its exaggerations and then to re-evaluate for oneself the theological doctrine of the O.T., in the light of the new knowledge. The reader is assured that the theological value of the O.T. stands out more clearly when thus dealt with and 'of this pearl of great price there is no danger that historical criticism will deprive you'. Certainly the editors do well to stress the importance of tracing through the O.T. the establishment of the Kingdom of God which reaches its goal in Christ. But they offer no guide at all as to the adjustment of the relationship between criticism and theology, nor do they hint at the nature of the exaggeration to which criticism itself is liable.

Nevertheless it is beyond question that in the years that followed there was a steady output of theological works on the Bible, especially the O.T., e.g. by such writers as Professors Snaith, Phythian Adams, Rowley and North, to mention only some of the more recent ones.

A representative example may be cited. Dr Rowley, after condemning the method of reading back the New Testament into the Old, goes on to elaborate the theological doctrine of the O.T. employing on the one hand a rigorous method of historical criticism, and on the other fully admitting the guiding hand of God's Providence and the possibility of his intervention by supernatural means. Thus while recognizing the errors and exaggerations of historical criticism, Professor Rowley insists on our admitting its solid achievements. Needless to say he devotes some space to discussing the fulfilment of the O.T. in the New and to assessing Messianic prophecy; but he assigns less importance to this aspect of interpretation than one might perhaps have expected. The author rightly stresses the fact that many O.T. passages once thought to be Messianic are now known not to be so, but on the other hand he appears reluctant to admit any sense in Scripture beyond the literal. A development in the theological interpretation of the O.T. evidently does not lie for Dr Rowley in any revival of mystical interpretation, especially in the form current in the Middle Ages.

Yet there were certain non-Catholics who were becoming convinced that such a revival was not only useful but indispensable. Dr Darwell Stone, for example, gives a very lucid account of *The Mystical Interpretation of the Old Testament* (*New Commentary*, p. 688), and adds copious examples to show that the method dates back to St Paul himself, who in his turn was but employing means familiar to the Rabbis. Thus the Christian Fathers had good authority behind them. 'If', he says 'the O.T. is to fulfil its purpose as written for our admonition something much more than its merely literal and historical meaning is needed', p. 695, col. 1. 'If the O.T. histories' he goes on 'are regarded as histories only, they lose their interest for those who worship and in some cases may even be repellent . . . But if in such incidents we may see with St Augustine the Church conquering the devil by the Cross of Christ . . . they have not only interest but also spiritual value', *ibid.*

A. G. Hebert, an Anglo-Catholic, writing in 1941 speaks even more strongly. If the O.T. is merely the record of the gradual progress of a people from nature-worship and polytheism to the lofty monotheism of the prophets it is not easy to see why it is to be regarded as inspired or why it should be studied by anyone except scholars. For it means 'that Divine Revelation is to be looked for in the great prophets while the earlier parts of the O.T. are to be classed with the pagan religions', *The Throne of David*, p. 24. Hebert insists that (1) the only way to regard the O.T. is as finding its fulfilment in the New: that in fact there is a thread of continuity through O.T. and N.T. which must be grasped if the O.T. is to be understood; (2) the Israel of the O.T. and the Christian Church are one community—the Ecclesia of God, and it is from within this community and in the light of its faith that the Books are to be read; 'it has constantly been assumed' he says 'that the emergence of monotheism out of monolatry was the decisive event in the story of Israel and since this first happens quite unambiguously in the work of the Writing Prophets of the eighth century, much prominence comes to be given to the prophet Amos as the first of these writing prophets. His predecessors, even prophets of the first rank such as Samuel and Elijah tend to drop into the background as belonging to the pre-monotheistic period; and what is more serious, the interpretation of the history of Israel given by the Israelites themselves is quite set on one side. For *them*, the fundamental fact about Israel is that Yahweh in the days of Moses brought Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and made a Covenant with her.' Israel thought of her story as a Call, and in the record of that call the account of the Exodus is absolutely central. . . While it is possible that certain details of the narrative are a projection into the past of a later state of affairs, it remains true that the substantial historical reality of the events of the Exodus are of the very essence of the O.T. In short A. G. Hebert sees the significance of the O.T. not as the story of a people's religious evolution but as the story of a Call, given in Genesis and attaining its fulfilment and goal in the N.T.

Intimately bound up with this is the mystical interpretation of the O.T. in the light of the New and the reading of N.T. events in terms of the Old. The abandonment of this method at the Reformation was a grave error, in the view of A. G. Hebert. 'It must', he says 'be regarded as a disaster that the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac which we read as the morning lesson for Good Friday is expounded in the *New Commentary* as a prophetic midrash of the eighth century designed to show that Israel's God does not require human sacrifice', *Throne of David*, p. 34. Historical criticism must of course be given its proper place, as A. G. Hebert explains in a later work, *The Authority of the Old Testament*, and he quotes C. H. Dodd as saying 'it (historical criticism) provides

the only really valid framework or scheme within which the interpretation (of God's Word) must be assayed. The striking thing is that this scheme is now seen to be substantially that which is implied in the liturgy and presupposed in patristic and medieval interpretation at its best,' op. cit. p. 265. And Hebert himself says 'In the Roman Missal and Breviary the classical tradition in this matter has been preserved . . . The way in which the Scriptures are there used shows how well the compilers knew them and how deeply they loved them. In consequence the Christian liturgy is the best of all schools for the study of the theological unity of the Bible,' op. cit. p. 284.

Speaking of the fulfilment of the O.T. in the New, Hebert says that there are passages in the N.T. in which the incomplete accomplishment of the divine purpose for man's salvation in the O.T. is shown to have been brought to completion in the New. Such is for example, St Paul's argument in Gal. where he describes our being freed from sin and the Law, in terms of the Patriarchal Promises, 'So then brethren we are not the children of the bondwoman but of the free' (Gal. iv, 31). Such parallels are not accidental likenesses, he says, and mere devotional applications imposed subsequently, but all form part of God's plan. This is what he calls the theological use of the O.T. Many of such instances are what he would like us to term *Homologies*. Examples of this are: the comparison of Christians to Israelites in the Wilderness in I Cor. x and Heb. iii, 7. Psalm 94 is used to make almost the same point. 'Clearly', says our author 'some such name is needed to describe the parallel which is drawn between the divine operation in the First Redemption (the Exodus) and the Second . . . the thought is clearly worked out (in the New Testament) that the pattern of God's working, under two dispensations, is one and the same. Further it becomes plain at certain crucial points that this conception also controlled the actual working out of events,' op. cit. pp. 218-19. This is the true typological use. The underlining of the unity of the two Testaments may, however, lead us into the error of reading too much of the N.T. back into the Old. We shall have more to say on this point.

While not necessarily agreeing with every aspect of our author's exposition, we may freely record our appreciation of what he says on the theological use of the O.T. It is valuable as stressing that the key to interpretation is the fundamental unity of the Old and New Testaments. A. G. Hebert's constructive contribution to Anglican Biblical theology must be the excuse for devoting so much space to his work; though far more would be necessary to give an adequate appreciation of it.

R. C. FULLER.

To be continued