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BIBLICAL CRITICISM: HISTORICAL AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Devon Wiens*

LITERAL

This approach seeks to take the Bible at face value (some prefer the term "natural"). Luther's dictum that Scripture is its own interpreter is often appealed to. Emphasis on the "plain sense" is indeed commendable, for it has all too often been ignored by spiritualizing tendencies which refuse to take the historical record seriously. "Literalism" is a mentality which abuses this principle by overlooking the presence of poetry, hyperbole, or parable; consequently, biblical language is improperly viewed as exclusively one-dimensional. Exodus 15 helps to illustrate the principle. Verses 1 to 18 (The Song of the Sea) are plainly poetic, for surely the Lord is more than a man (v3), whereas 19ff is plainly intended as historical narrative.

ALLEGORICAL

This method is unconcerned with actual historical circumstance and seeks to draw out the deeper, "spiritual" meaning of the text. The early Christian use of the method derived from Greek attempts to translate Homer to a later age by filtering out unacceptable features (e.g., immoral activities of the gods) and to Jewish attempts to make Moses palatable to cultured Greeks by weeding out anthropomorphisms. It was used to great lengths by the Alexandrian Christian school (e.g., Clement and Origen), though there were canonical precedents, such as Gal. 4:22-26. This approach rightly senses that the prophets and apostles "wrote more than they knew," but there is little control inherent in the approach, so that the results are frequently capricious and bizarre. A blatant example is found in the second century Epistle of Barnabas, where the 318 servants of Abraham are taken to prefigure the cross of Christ since the Greek equivalents to this number represent the shape of a cross and the first two letters of the name "Jesus."

TYOLOGICAL

Unlike allegory, typology is not so much related to the literary level as to historical events. Danielou has called it the "distinctively Christian method of interpretation." The usual procedure involves seeing a relationship between the Old Testament and its New Testament counterparts so that a particular person or event in the Old Testament represents a type (strictly speaking, a prototype) of a person or event in the New Testament era. There is a certain legitimacy to this, inasmuch as Scripture itself suggests such relationships (e.g., Christ as the paschal lamb; Christ as the rock which followed the Israelites in the desert; the recurring Exodus theme in both OT and NT), but a lamentable tendency is to foist such a pattern upon the Bible where there is little intrinsic warrant for it (e.g., the insistence that every peg and hook in the tabernacle is a prototype).

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HISTORICAL-CRITICAL

With the dawn of scientific historiography in modern times, there came also the awareness that historical investigation of the Bible was necessary since the Bible traces the historical origins and development of the community of God and is itself the product of the historical consciousness of that community (though it must be added that there were early precursors of the method, such as the fathers of the Antiochene school of exegesis). This approach attempts to ascertain the specific cultural conditions of the writers, the recipients, and the people described in the various books as this facilitates understanding of the text. For example, knowledge of the pagan religious rites at Corinth enables one to understand better the nature of Paul's polemicizing in Corinthians. Exegetes of various persuasions use the method, whether consciously or unconsciously, since it is essentially a neutral approach. Clashes between its practitioners result from their differing predispositions (e.g., the question whether Scripture is also the Word of God in addition to its being comprised of historical documents).

DISPENSATIONAL

Dispensational thought is basically a particular perspective from which history is viewed. As it relates to Scripture, there is (at least in thoroughgoing dispensationalism) a strict "parceling-out" of the text, according to whether it applies to Jew or Gentile (sometimes based on an inferior rendering of 2 Tim. 2:15, "rightly dividing the word of truth"). Scofield, who discovered no fewer than seven dispensations in the Bible, defined the term as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God." In this extreme form the procedure is highly arbitrary and results in a "flat" view of Scripture and a failure to recognize that there is cumulative revelation in the Bible, that the New Covenant (including the Sermon on the Mount!) applies equally to Jew and Gentile in the present age, and that the old system of sacrifices and offerings is dispensed with forever.

SOURCE-CRITICISM

As the name suggests, this method is principally relevant to a study of the authorship and thus the integrity of a given book. In its heyday (the turn of the 20th century) its exponents confidently and rashly maintained that they had solved the knotty problems of the history of the composition of the text. Three criteria were in purview: Is there consistency within a book in terms of: a) vocabulary usage and stylistic qualities, b) theological views, c) historical perspective? The Epilogue of Amos (9:11-15), for instance, was assigned by most source critics to the post-exilic period because its vocabulary and style differ from the rest of the book, its theological stance is that of salvation rather than doom as is elsewhere the case, and, finally, that "the booth of David that is fallen" (v11) signifies that the passage comes from a time when Solomon's temple lay in ruins. Much of lasting benefit has been gained, including a better perception of the peculiarities of the individual biblical books, but other results have had to be scuttled or at least revised (e.g., the "tidy" division of the Pentateuch into four major literary strands), in part due to the naturalistic and evolutionistic assumptions of some earlier students of the method.

FORM-CRITICISM

This method, which originated in Hermann Gunkel's analysis of the Old Testament literature, assumes an extended period of oral transmission of sacred traditions prior to their incorporation into written modes. In the constant re-telling of these stories, the content exercised a formal influence, so that an analysis of the various forms of written tradition reveals something about their pre-literary history. Of special concern is the attempt to discover the *Sitz im Leben*, the original life-setting (e.g., legal disputes in the city gates, victory songs, dirges, religious festivals and processions) from which the stories emanated and in which setting they were habitually retold. In the refinement of this method, much light has been shed upon the various literary forms, their relevance to everyday life and the crucial importance of the oral transmission of the material. (Understanding of Hosea 4:1-3, for example, is enhanced when it is realized that Yahweh is depicted as the plaintiff who brings various charges against the defendant, Israel, and that he concludes with a statement of the penalty [the sentencing]. Thus, this passage is patterned upon the everyday court-cases of the people.) However, form critics overstep the bounds of objectivity when analysis is exchanged for evaluation of the authenticity of the material (e.g., the distinction between the actual words of Jesus and later churchly accretions). In the case of the Gospel tradition, furthermore, there is limited applicability for the method, because of the brief interval between the life of Jesus and the most primitive written records which recount his life and work.

REDACTION CRITICISM

This is an offshoot of form criticism and thus presupposes the techniques and conclusions of that method. However, rather than focusing upon the individual units of the text and theorizing as to their histories, it seeks to discover the motives behind the present configuration and/or sequence of the units as they have been linked together (e.g., on the basis of recurring "catchwords" in successive units) by a hypothesized redactor. In analyzing the motives and methods of the redactor, one learns something about the theology of this person(s) who was responsible for the final form of the text. The presumption, in the case of the New Testament, is that the redactor remolded and linked the units in accordance with the needs and views of the Christian community of which he was a part. This, then, informs us about the theological contours of such communities as well. It is not to be denied that there are gains accruing from the use of this method, insofar as a more complete picture of the early church emerges. Nonetheless, the method lends itself to a certain arbitrariness. Though the existence of a redactor is not entirely implausible, it is difficult to be sure that the motives ascribed to him were in fact the motives which provided the impetus for his work.

I wish now to turn to some rather personal and candid comments on the issues which have been raised. Hopefully, this will engage the reader in a substantive discussion and will not prove to be a mere personal "tilting at windmills." The format that I have chosen is to identify and

* George Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Eerdmans, 1967), has proven to be of considerable assistance, since the author is an enthusiastic, self-proclaimed evangelical who utilizes historical-critical methodology in his work.

elaborate on some gradual shifts in my own thinking with respect to some of the issues.

The first of these involves a movement from a rather unthinking, popular view of Scripture, to a critical acceptance of critical approaches as these have been worked out since the Enlightenment.* In a sense, this involves merely the application of Paul's principle in 1 Thess. 5:21 ("test everything; hold fast what is good"), though, admittedly, the application is oblique. For a truly critical stance necessitates both the acceptance of what is true, good, or useful and the rejection of negative features. To reject form-criticism wholesale, for example, is to throw out the baby with the bath. It is to overlook the possibility that God will be heard speaking in more precise, cogent, and exciting ways through the vehicle of the written word.

A thorough understanding of Scripture is indeed heavily indebted to the development and refinement of critical method. I am profoundly grateful, for instance, for the two-source theory, a result of source-critical analysis which is generally accepted in the study of the Synoptics which posits the chronological priority of Mark and the use of that Gospel by Matthew and Luke. Not only is it possible to understand more clearly the situation of the early church which prompted Matthew and Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to abbreviate, expand, and modify Mark's account, but the fact that the picture of Christ is undeniably an exalted one already in Mark, the earliest Gospel, becomes particularly impressive.

It is my conviction that an informed awareness of critical method in scriptural investigation leads to a fresh appreciation of the Bible as truly both the Word of God and the word of man. (In implicitly rejecting the human element contemporary evangelicalism is vulnerable to a Docetic view of Scripture, as it fails to take seriously the fact that real people, animated by the Spirit though they were, brought the Bible into being.) I would therefore insist that it is not necessarily a case of traditional, non-critical approaches which champion the Bible as the Word of God standing opposed to a reductionized historical-critical approach which offers only a human word. Rather, the crucial question is, **How did God inspire man to write his Word?** Are the biblical documents *de novo*, spontaneous creations, or are they products of complex forces in a lengthy history of composition? I would opt for the latter alternative, inasmuch as this seems congruent with the way in which God generally effects his will on the human scene (I think, for example, of the tortuous, involved history of the canonization of both Old and New Testaments and also of the scientific evidence for the continuing creation of the material universe).

Accompanying this insight, there has taken place a movement in my thinking toward a hermeneutic which is more harmonious with the nature of the biblical material itself. This has led to a disavowal of dispensationalism, since it appears to represent the arbitrary imposition of an alien philosophical scheme for which there is little encouragement within the text itself.*

An interpretive stance which conforms to the self-testimony of Scripture will eschew a wooden literalism. I have acquired a revulsion against

* Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Eerdmans, 1960) has conclusively demonstrated, to my satisfaction, the alien nature and modernity of such a scheme.

the way in which we often refuse to allow the biblical writers to speak in ways that we ourselves speak (i.e., poetically and metaphorically). This has implications for the ways in which both *Urzeit* and *Endzeit* are portrayed in Scripture. The theological truth of the creation stories is no more dependent upon the existence of a literal tree of the knowledge of good and evil than the truth of ultimate felicity for the Christian is dependent upon the existence of literal streets of gold.

Finally, the attempt to do justice to the way in which the voice of God is heard in Scripture has meant viewing with a jaundiced eye a kind of anti-historical lay existentialism which is prevalent in evangelical circles. This approach lays effortless claim to "a verse for the day," without any recognition of the original historical context and meaning of the verse. This is certainly not to deny that God speaks in this way—indeed, he speaks that way to me—but the continual exploitation of such a spiritualizing tendency heaps scorn (unintentionally, to be sure, in most cases) upon the integrity of the biblical writer as a real man of his own time with a real message for his time. One who pays little heed to the original setting of a passage might as well use the *Quran* or the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius in his life of piety, for, in any case, the only interest manifested is not in the inspired source, but with how that source speaks to me.

The conclusion of the matter is that familiarity with the original circumstance of the writing of the Bible does not breed contempt, but deepened respect. A thorough knowledge of the original languages, the cultural vicissitudes of the time, and the precise situations of writers and recipients both sharpens the primal sense of Scripture and renders it all the more meaningful for the present day. God speaks his word to our time only because he has first spoken his word to the time of the writers. The attempt to short-circuit this truth by flights into mystical fancy leads inevitably, as the history of Christianity amply demonstrates, to a distortion of what the Spirit intended and to doctrinal aberration.*

* According to G. Ernest Wright and R. H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God* (Penguin Books, 1965), p. 10, "to study the Bible in such a way as to make abstractions of its spiritual or moral teachings, divorced from the real context of their setting in time, is to turn the Bible into a book of aphorisms, full of nice sayings which the devil himself could believe and never find himself particularly handicapped either by the knowledge of them or by their repetition."