

# THE BIBLE IN TODAY'S DIALOGUE\*

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Interest in the Bible is universal. No other literary production has merited such constant and continuous consideration by scholars as well as laymen. Each new translation and revision represents the current concern to convey the message of the Bible to the common man.

Although the Bible has always had an important and unique place in Christianity, the role of the Scriptures has varied from time to time. This changing attitude toward the Bible has been reflected in Christian education, preaching, scholarship and the practical use made of the Bible by the laity.

Two basic attitudes toward the Bible have been apparent in the history of Christianity. The principle of *sola Scriptura* has always had its advocates since the Reformation. They hold to the supernatural Biblical revelation as infallible. One phase of Protestantism to the present day is represented by those who accept the Bible as inerrant propositional revelation.

The opposing view has had many and varied representatives in Protestant scholasticism. The extreme rational approach regarded the Bible merely as a book of human production while others recognize selected parts of the Bible as of divine origin.

Today, when religion has a more popular recognition on college and university campuses, when church membership has reached unequaled records, when American politics is marking a new frontier and science is rapidly marking advance in the space age, we do well to take inventory in the realm of Biblical scholarship. Are the two basically opposite views in evidence in today's dialogue regarding the Bible? Have recent decades of study and reappraisal resulted in a synthesis of these diametrically opposite views?

In the wake of the Reformation the Bible was made available to the common people by means of numerous translations in printed form. A church-going and Bible reading populace accepted the Scriptures as reliable history as well as a sufficient guide to life. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century the prevailing view of the Bible held that it contained a timeless, universal and final teaching.

At the turn of the nineteenth century several trends were developing that affected a change in attitude. The German philosopher, Hegel, who has been acknowledged as the intellectual father of the modern point of view, held to the human mind as the final and ultimate authority. In the theology of Schleiermacher, the authority of either reason or revelation was brought into question, making the inner experience of the believer the final authority instead of the Bible. This "theology of religious experience" provided a favorable climate for the development of higher criticism.

In the mean time, literary criticism flourished. Scholars legitimately subjected the Bible to the same principles of research which were applied to any other ancient book. However, from *such* criticism came the assertion that the Bible was no longer to be regarded as sacred history. Instead it was treated as a "human" book composed of numerous literary documents with many religious viewpoints reflecting the conception of a particular age.

At the same time the predominant hypothesis affecting research in the natural sciences was the influence of Darwin through his theory of evolution. In the historical sciences and in religious and philosophical thought, the evolutionary concept made a penetrating impact after Hegel had replaced the idea of "being" with the notion of "becoming." In this atmosphere of enlightened scholarship it was Julius Wellhausen,

who published the classic formulation of the critical theory of the composition of the Pentateuch, in his *Geschichte Israels*, 1878.

This viewpoint is still reflected in today's dialogue among scholars in Biblical research. H. H. Rowley in the Peake Memorial Lecture in 1959 asserted that in common with the majority of scholars he still accepted Wellhausen's view of the origin of the Pentateuch. Although the moorings have been loosed as was indicated by Cyrus Gordon in an article "Higher Critics and Forbidden Fruit" in *Christianity Today*, November 23, 1959 the impact of Wellhausen still remains.

The application of Darwinian evolution and scientific method to Bible study has resulted in a new approach to the Bible. Expressed popularly at its best by Harry Emerson Fosdick in his *Modern Use of the Bible*, 1924, and *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 1938, this viewpoint maintains that a dual movement—a human achievement and a divine self revelation—converged in the process of Biblical development.

As a geologist sees the strata of the earth so can we discern, in the accumulated results that constitute our Scriptures, the time and order of the deposits. The Bible represents the apprehension of truth and also inaugurates a continuing development that extends indefinitely.

The role of the Bible in religious education reflects this appraisal of Scripture. George Albert Coe, a pioneer and leading philosopher in modern religious education, defines Christian education as a growing process in which the Bible is a "transcript of life" or an occasion for experience and growth and not a body of doctrine used for indoctrination. Art and other literature are just as useful as the Bible.

In the stated objectives (1930) of the International Council of Religious Education, a highly representative body of Protestants, the Bible was regarded as a "record of developing religious experience which students should learn to know and appreciate for its meaning to present day living." The Bible then became a source book, a valuable human document, containing principles of living, symbols and codes and a dynamic source for ever-enlarging revelation.

Although the main stream of Protestantism in its official representation regarded the Bible as a source book the traditional view prevailed. Among the groups in this country which held that the Bible was primarily a God-sent message of salvation for mankind was the American Sunday School Union. Adelaide Case in *Liberal Christianity and Religious Education* (Macmillan, 1924) p. 99, noted that this influential interdenominational movement did not accept as an objective the reconstruction of experience through the use of the Bible.

Since the turn of the twentieth century the Bible was largely regarded as the national literature of Israel or as an historical and cultural deposit in the majority of educational centers of America. The viewpoint of inerrancy of the Scriptures largely found expression in a few seminaries and was vigorously asserted by the Bible institute movement.

During the first half of the twentieth century the dialogue between those who regarded the Bible as the inerrant record of God's revelation and those who appraised it as a human book almost diminished to the point of silence. Literature, books and individuals that advocated the traditional views of Scripture were often regarded as non-scholarly. Lacking manuscripts that recognized the Bible as reliable and inerrant some publishers, who were concerned about supplying books maintaining this viewpoint, resorted to reprints.

The post-war era of the 40's and 50's provided an atmosphere in which previous attitudes were re-evaluated. In general education the Harvard publication *General Education in a Free Society* projected a balanced view endeavoring to reconcile the idea of an open mind and change with a proper appreciation for heritage. This

attempt to synthesize was also reflected in the realm of the general attitude toward the Bible.

Christian education may be used as an example to illustrate the new role that the Bible has in current thought. The significant book, *The Church and Christian*, by Paul H. Vieth, (1947) marks the transition to a new mood. Although the human quest for the good life still deserves recognition the new emphasis insists that God has revealed himself within history. The new perspective emphasized that which was divinely given. Revelation took on a new meaning with the recognition of the divine.

The synthesis of the two extremes in Christian education has been set forth by Sara Little in *The Role of the Bible in Contemporary Christian Education* (John Knox Press, 1961). The core of Protestantism stands between the two poles represented by the Bible as a human or divine book.

A key factor in this position is the view of revelation as projected by representative theologians such as William Temple, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner and H. Richard Niebuhr. Sara Little summarizes their consensus on revelation as follows in her list of the key emphasis: (pp. 57-62)

1. Revelation is essentially the self disclosure of God.
2. Revelation takes place through God's "mighty acts," events on the plane of history apprehended by faith as God's action.
3. Revelation, as God's confrontation of man within the covenant community, is determinative of man's existence.
4. Reason, now assigned a new role, is not the basis for revelation, but instead helps make it intelligible.
5. The Bible, as witness to and participant in the event of revelation, is of unique significance in the church and in the life of man.

The historical, archaeological and sociological facts of the Bible are thus subjected to a theological interpretation in this new trend. A dynamic movement is recognized in the Bible. People respond to God's actions. The Bible as a record of God's encounter with man becomes a means of revelation. The meaning of revelation thus provides a new vitality in Christian education with the Bible occupying a central place.

Revelation however is not identical with Scripture. Infallibility does not rest in the *words* of Scripture but in the *message*. With the Bible as a field of revelation God continues to reveal himself through it. The Bible has a message which may become the channel of revelation through which God may encounter and save him. Consequently, the Bible is relevant in Christian education.

In turning to Biblical scholarship we see that the mood has likewise changed as far as the role of the Bible is concerned.

Archaeological excavations at Nuzu, Mari, Ugarit, and numerous other places have yielded knowledge of Biblical times that provide a more reasonable basis to accept the Biblical record as true to life. Whereas the late Dr. Robert H. Pfeiffer of Harvard hardly acknowledged Moses as historical, scholars today acclaim the patriarchal narratives in their basic outlines as normal for the first half of the second millenium before Christ.

Monotheism instead of originating with Amos in the seventh century B.C. has been found to be normal in Mosaic times. Much that once was considered myth is now accorded historical recognition.

Adhering however to the broad outlines of the late literary development of the Pentateuch, current scholars as represented by Albright and his disciples project oral tradition as a very reliable source for the written documents. But, by no means, is this a return to the position that the Scriptures are inerrant.

The current interpretation of the Old Testament reflects a vocabulary that superficially provides a language more nearly like that of the orthodox view of the Scriptures. Current writers speak freely of revelation, of a God who acts, of a divine encounter, and of the living Word. Sacred history is again an acceptable term for the Biblical record. Israel's history is the record of a religious encounter or the account of a revelation and response. Faith represents man's outreach to God. Israel is a covenant community.

The religion of Israel was not an outgrowth, according to current interpretation as represented by John Bright in his recent publication *The History of Israel*. Formerly, Israel's religion was described in terms of evolutionary development, robbed of its content and described conventionally as henotheism—the exclusive worship of a tribal-national deity which did not deny the reality of patron deities of other peoples.

On the basis of our knowledge of the religion of early times Bright questions whether henotheism ever existed. Ancient religions were developed polytheisms whose gods were accorded cosmic domain. Henotheism is insufficient to describe the religion of Israel. This position continues; the faith of Israel, however, made Israel distinctive. Yahweh was their king, Israel was his people, conscious of Yahweh's election and covenant. Israel's monotheism however must be understood in the ancient sense. Israel's national religion was amphictyonic, i.e. an association of communities organized for the protection of a common god, dating to the twelfth century when the various clans united in the land of Palestine. Israel had a unique faith.

Thus, today's vocabulary in Biblical scholarship seems to be more nearly akin to the current orthodox language. Recent trends in many areas have narrowed the cleavage between the two viewpoints of the Bible. Both groups speak of the living Word, revelation, faith, a religious encounter, the unity of the Old and New Testaments, and the relevance of the Biblical message for today. To the layman it may at times appear that the differences regarding the Bible have disappeared.

Careful analysis of the language of current Biblical scholarship, however, reveals that the basic cleavage is still apparent. Regardless of the similarity of the language in today's conversation, the underlying difference is the attitude toward the Bible itself. Inerrancy of the Scriptures rightly understood subjects the mind of the scholar of the Bible to the written word.

Those who reject the inerrancy of the Bible subject the Word of God to man's judgment as to what part of it is reliable. Often theories or basic presuppositions determine the interpretation of a given text of Scripture.

Let me illustrate this with an example from the Pentateuch. The one who begins with the assumption that the Pentateuchal account may be taken as trustworthy will accept without question that God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage, that He led the twelve tribes by way of Mount Sinai to Canaan and gave the law to Moses. Nor does he doubt that God established the priesthood, gave directions for the building of the tabernacle, instituted the sacrificial offerings and that Israel was miraculously sustained through the wilderness.

On the other hand, the scholar who begins with the premise that the Bible is not inerrant or reliable and assumes that the Pentateuch was composed basically of four documents written down between the Solomonic era and the post-exilic period has a significantly different attitude towards God's revelation to Israel.

He regards God's redemptive act in behalf of Israel as reliable on the basis of oral tradition. The rest of the record is held to be a later embellishment or reflection. Relatively few laws are regarded as dating back to the Mosaic times and the tabernacle is thought to be post-exilic. Thus, the priesthood never existed in Mosaic times but began during the Solomonic era. Out of the nation of Israel only the tribes of Joseph lived in Egypt and they were united with the rest of the tribes of Canaan.

Consequently God's revelation to Israel takes on a different meaning. The covenant, election, the laws and experiences portrayed as historical events in the sojourn of Israel under this view do not have the same frame of reference in today's dialogue in Biblical data.

Dr. George A. Buttrick in his book, *Biblical Thought and the Secular University* (Louisiana U. Press, 1960), affirms that university students need the Biblical view of man and need to worship God. As the Bible occupies an important part in today's dialogue in universities and colleges we may well pose the question: How should it be presented? What kind of presentation will make an impact upon today's generation?

We who are committed to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God need to face the issues in a forthright manner. Those who attended the organizational meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1949 in Cincinnati will remember that the issue of inerrancy was considered so important that it became the only statement to distinguish us from others in the field of Biblical scholarship. Consequently this question is never debated in our meetings and all papers and discussions are based on this assumption.

As we listen in on today's conversation there are some areas in which the two opposing views have common points of interest. Each group however approaches these areas from a different vantage point.

Revelation is of basic importance. However, we must be conscious of the fact that many contemporary scholars do not accept all the data that is given us in the written word. Their Biblical basis for understanding revelation is limited to that part of the Bible which is accepted as reliable. Note, by way of example, that they accept the revelation of God to Israel as a redemptive act, but not the instructions which God revealed to Moses for the construction of the tabernacle. For the one who takes the Scriptures as inerrant and reliable the entire account constitutes the data for the study of God's revelation.

The unity of the Bible is likewise a point of common interest. A dichotomy between the Old and New Testament was reflected formerly in the God of justice and the God of love—marking a basic contrast in the relative periods of progress.

In extreme dispensationalism this dichotomy likewise existed in a contrast between law and grace. In some areas the Old Testament was relegated to minor importance, but today the Bible is recognized as a unit. Judgment and mercy, the law and the gospel belong together throughout the Bible. Redemption of Israel stands in juxtaposition to the salvation provided through Christ.

Another common area in today's Biblical language is the emphasis on the relevance of the Bible. Whereas the Bible frequently was represented as man's search after God it is now interpreted as a drama of redemption within which man responds to the Word of God, makes decisions, and appropriates salvation day by day. In God man finds the answer to his lost condition. The Bible confronts man with the Word of God and calls him to participate in the Biblical drama and prepares him for an encounter with God. Consequently the Bible is relevant.

The social gospel approach appropriated the ethical standards and the other extreme emphasized the supernatural in a crisis experience. It is evident today that the Bible is relevant at the point where the gospel touches man at the deepest level of his existence as well as at the level of conduct in every day life. The area of disagreement again is apparent in the extent of the Scripture that is relevant.

The historical and cultural background is another area that is common to the Biblical scholars of today. With the advance of archaeological discoveries the milieu of Biblical records and history is much more fully known. The meaning and signifi-

cance of the message as it was given through the prophets, for instance must first of all be understood as the hearers perceived it at that time.

Formerly a Biblical passage was interpreted in one case as limited in its meaning to the historical setting and on the other hand was taken completely out of context. Today the common emphasis is on the background as well as the application. In many parts of the Bible the historical background represents a point of agreement among Biblical scholars. Take for example Isaiah chapter seven. The time, place and events pose no problem. When the book of Deuteronomy is under consideration we differ radically with those who do not accept the Scriptural assertion that these speeches are by Moses. While we take the time of Moses as the historical background the scholar who accepts the conclusions of higher criticism poses the times of Josiah as the background. Even though by common concurrence the historical background is important the interpretation of Scripture often is radically different because we accept the Scripture as inerrant.

As we consider the role the Bible has in the current dialogue we who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture need to recognize the points we have in common as well as the differences. By taking the Bible in earnest we have every reason to engage in Biblical scholarship. Our responsibility is to activate all our intellectual resources as we intelligently interpret what the Bible says.

Creative as well as critical thinking is the challenging responsibility of Biblical scholarship. These disciplines should prevail in our quest to ascertain what the Bible says and our consistent effort to integrate facts apparent in fields of research with Biblical claims. This demands our best in stewardship of time and effort. It may be costly, as Dr. Frank Gabelein pointed out in an article entitled, "The Christian's Intellectual Life" in *Christianity Today* (May 8, 1961), "The price will not come down. It is nothing less than the discipline of self restraint and plain hard work."

As members of the Evangelical Theological Society, we must renew our efforts to engage in the current dialogue without compromise. Committed to the position that "the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs" we have a stewardship of scholarship with the inspired Word of God as our basis.

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\* Chairman's address to the mid-western Regional meeting of E.T.S., at Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana, May 12, 1961.