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The Bible, the question of God, and Christian faith

There are many ways in which one could approach discussion of the Bible and its interpretation. One could look at classic models of the past. One could study particular twentieth-century scholars, such as Bultmann, von Rad, or Childs, who have made landmark contributions. One could offer a history of the subject with a view to highlighting some aspect. One could try to survey the burgeoning plurality of methods and results in contemporary biblical study. I propose to do none of these, but rather to develop an account of biblical interpretation in relation to the question of God in three stages. First, I will offer a very broad brush sketch of certain aspects of biblical interpretation within which to contextualize my general concerns. Secondly, I will expound and analyse two significant and different contemporary accounts of how biblical interpretation operates (or should operate). Thirdly, I will set out my own specific hermeneutical assumptions which inform the handling of the biblical text in the rest of the book.[1]

Situating the argument

(1) A basic tension

The scholarly study of the Bible is a difficult discipline. Many of the difficulties relate to age-old questions, such as the relationship between faith and reason, or appropriate method in reading ancient texts, questions which are renewed in every generation. However, the particular form in

1. I realize the dangers inherent in the kind of generalizations which will regularly feature in this argument, for it is rarely difficult to think of exceptions and qualifications, and one cannot do justice to the complexities of hermeneutical debate in one chapter. I ask for the reader's patience with the broad brush strokes of this whole chapter.

which the questions are renewed varies, and if one does not attend to the particularities of context no satisfactory account can be given.

My concern in this book is the interpretation of the Bible as the foundation, and primary resource, of Christian faith and theology. To have this concern is common among biblical scholars, and is a primary reason why many people choose to become biblical scholars. Yet the status of the concern is problematic in many ways. Biblical scholars who have agreed that the Bible should be related to Christian faith have constantly disagreed as to how that relating should be carried out. In recent years there has been a strong resurgence of Jewish scholars engaging in biblical study, and the varying possible relationships between Jewish and Christian agendas (in which the Bible itself is differently defined) is a live topic. There are those who wish to study the biblical texts as interesting ancient texts with no commitment to, or interest in, their continuing status as Jewish and Christian scripture. Some see the continuing significance of the Bible as a matter for cultural analysis of one kind or another but with little or no reference to historic discussions of faith and theology. Some question whether the concern to relate the Bible to faith today is not likely to prejudge prematurely or foreclose certain issues and to make analytical scrutiny of the text ultimately subservient to apologetics. All these questions are a matter of lively debate at present.

I take it as axiomatic that a scholarly study of the Bible as a resource for Christian faith must always do at least two things (and similar concerns, *mutatis mutandis*, will characterize also many Jewish scholars). On the one hand, it must learn, and not retreat, from the insights of modern *Wissenschaft* (even though it may wish to reconceive some of them). Most obviously, in terms of biblical study as a scholarly discipline, the impact of critical historical awareness has been immense. When the biblical text is used as a source for the life and thought of certain segments of the ancient world, then in principle it is handled as any other source would be handled, subject to the familiar agenda of such matters as philology, compositional context, genre, historicity, and a historically nuanced evaluation of interesting and often controversial assumptions, prescriptions, and practices within the text.

On the other hand, the Christian faith (in all its apparently endless diversity) offers a particular understanding of God and humanity, and a particular way of living, which centres on the figure of Jesus Christ. This faith is rooted in the Bible as a privileged and unique account of the nature of God and humanity and of the significance of Jesus for both. The

way of living which arises from this, which has endured (in multifarious forms, and with constant abuses) to the present day, is one to which many millions have testified as a way, indeed *the* way, of truth. If this faith and life is to continue as a genuine and significant option – an option which, humanly speaking, can hardly be taken for granted – then it must constantly be nourished from its primary resources, the most foundational of which is the Bible, and so it remains vital for the Christian scholar constructively to integrate the Bible with the life and faith of the Christian Church.

How should these two requirements be held together? First and foremost, it is important to see that most easy polarizations – such as the Bible as a book like any other book versus the Bible as a book unlike any other book, or what the Bible historically meant versus what the Bible homiletically means, or the Bible as ancient religious ideologies versus the Bible as purveyor of timeless truths, or the scholar as the disinterested pursuer of truth versus the scholar as partisan advocate and apologist – are best abandoned. Their occasional heuristic usefulness in highlighting a certain kind of contrast is more regularly outweighed by their imposition of a distorting and deceptive oversimplification of complex and intertwining issues. This may perhaps be seen through brief preliminary reflections on three issues: the contextual nature of reason, the relationship between Bible and Church, and the problem of speaking about God.

(2) Reason and life

Modern biblical criticism arose within a cultural context in which reason was as highly esteemed as it could be. The rational and disinterested pursuit of truth, empirical (as opposed to dogmatic) in method, open (as opposed to hidebound) in attitude, and judicious (as opposed to partisan) in assessment, is something that it seems should hardly need defence against detractors, for once such an outlook has been well acquired there is something self-evidently right about it.

Yet one thing that seems common to many diverse moods and movements of the present time, which is a factor in the designation 'postmodernity' (however one understands the term), is a critique of reason. This is a critique which is not (except in its more bizarre manifestations) advocating unreason, but rather which insists that reason cannot be abstracted from the totality of life. On the one hand, the use of reason is inseparable from the use of language, and languages are social constructs of immense historical and cultural complexity. On the other hand, the

use of reason is not fully separable from personal and cultural context: the questions one asks, and the answers which satisfy, always relate to the various wider contexts of which each person is a part. None of these factors deny the importance of reason within human life. But they do mean that discourses about reason can no longer treat reason as though it were somehow disembodied and not subject to the particularities of life which are part of the human condition. Empirical methods and judicious assessments remain important. But they operate within particular traditions of life and thought, and there are many contexts of life in which other approaches and qualities are also necessary (what may judges and scholars need in order to flourish as businesspeople or lovers?).

Since a sense of an inseparable relationship between reason and life was a fundamental presupposition of classic Christian theology – in shorthand, the complementarity of knowledge and love – the present climate of thought is in many ways suitable for a rediscovery of certain historic Christian insights and for reformulating discussions of 'faith and reason' and of 'Bible and theology'. To be sure, there are important differences between the self-reflexive turn in contemporary epistemology and the linkages of reason and life in the premodern period, and I do not wish to obscure these. Nonetheless, the changing intellectual and social climate creates new similarities, as well as new differences, between Christian and other concerns.

(3) Bible and Church

There is an obvious problem which affects Christian (and *mutatis mutandis* Jewish) study of the Bible. On the one hand, the content and self-definition of all the mainstream branches of the Christian Church is provided, at the very least, by the Bible in conjunction with the theological formulations of the patristic period – the creeds and councils with their trinitarian and incarnational understandings of God, Christ, humanity, and salvation. To accept the validity of these doctrines (however much they may need reformulation and reappropriation) is part of the official definition of what it means to be a Christian – at least for the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, and also for those Protestant churches that are affiliated to the World Council of Churches, that is, for an overwhelming majority. For most Christians there are also various post-patristic formulations and confessions which are also normative. On the other hand, none of these doctrinal confessions were formulated by the biblical writers, nor (in all likelihood) even envisaged by them. Although the biblical

writers provide a content for which the Fathers and others have sought to provide appropriate means of articulation and appropriation, such formulations are always technically anachronistic with regard to any particular biblical text in its likely original context.

It is common knowledge that modern biblical criticism only became a recognizable discipline through the process of explicit severing of the Bible from classic theological formulations. The basis for this was the belief that only so could the Bible be respected and heard in its own right, untrammelled by preconceptions which supposed that the answers were already known even before the questions were asked, or by anachronistic impositions of the conceptualities and assumptions of subsequent ages. The fruitfulness of the severance, in terms of a clearer sense of practical and conceptual differences both within the Bible and between the Bible and post-biblical formulations, is well known. Moreover, the approach has been justified theologically, at least by Protestants, in terms of the need for the authentic voice of scripture to critique the always provisional formulations of post-biblical theology.

This has led to a curious situation. To be a Christian means, at least in part, the acceptance and appropriation of certain theological doctrines and patterns of living. Yet the task of reading the Bible 'critically' has regularly been defined precisely in terms of the exclusion of these doctrines and patterns of living from the interpretative process.

To be sure, it can easily be shown that many biblical scholars have been less than entirely consistent in their actual practice of interpretation. This is clear, for example, if one considers the frequency with which outstanding German scholars have brought an understanding of faith rooted in Luther and Lutheran confessions to bear upon the interpretation of the biblical text; neither Baur and Wellhausen in the nineteenth century, nor Bultmann and von Rad in the twentieth century, can be understood apart from this context (amidst many other influences upon them). Yet too often formal questions about the relationship of faith and interpretation have been neglected, or conducted in the light of a debilitating polarization between faith as practical piety, or existential authenticity, and faith as theological dogma. Defining Christian doctrines, such as Trinity and Incarnation, and their relationship to faith and interpretation, are rarely on the agenda, except to show the tenuousness of their rootage in the biblical text or the distance of their supposedly abstract conceptualities from concrete biblical faith.

From the perspective of a history of religious thought, it may be as

readily conceded that the New Testament writers did not think in terms of the trinitarian categories of the fourth century, as that the writers of Israel's scriptures did not think in terms of Jesus Christ. But the crucial issue in the present argument is not the history of ideas – did the earlier writers think in terms of subsequent perspectives, and how did the subsequent perspectives develop? – but the problem of theological hermeneutics – do certain subsequent perspectives genuinely enable the reader to penetrate more deeply into the meaning and significance of what the earlier writers said? To this hermeneutical question the answer is much less simple or straightforward. If it be acknowledged that appeals to Trinity and Incarnation may in practice sometimes function as anachronistic impositions which distort true historical understanding, it does not follow that this is their sole function. May they not be insights of an ultimate kind into the nature of God and humanity, focussed in Jesus Christ, whose role is to enable understanding of God and humanity in any context, not least within the Bible – insights, however, whose content is not fully given in advance but rather is clarified and deepened only in and through the continuing quest to discern the reality of God within human life? More generally the basic issue is the adequacy of the interpreter's categories of understanding as regards the substantive moral and theological content of the Bible, and hence the inadequacy of the assumption that if only biblical interpreters are well trained in appropriate languages, biblical history, and history of religious thought, they are well placed to understand what the Bible says.

Finally, under this heading, it should be remembered that the hermeneutical dialectic of biblical text and post-biblical faith is not peculiar to Christians and Jews. In general terms, whenever there are structures, communities, and patterns of life whose identity is in some fundamental way defined by a particular textual corpus, there should always be a healthy two-way interaction between text and community. The community seeks to develop its own life and to understand its text better through exploring the text's various possible implications and developments, and there is constant discussion as to whether particular developments are, or are not, good and valid in relation to the original text. This pattern, in one form or another, pertains not only to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in relation to their scriptures – it can be seen in some of its elements in the historic responses to major thinkers from, say, Plato and Aristotle to Marx and Freud. Or it can be seen in more specific form in America's continuing interpretation of its Constitution. When such interaction flags in vitality then it is a sign that the tradition of thought and

life is in perilous condition; if the interaction cannot be revived, the tradition is moribund and its end is at hand, and differently structured patterns of thought and life will be adopted (for better or worse).

In broadest terms, one can suggest that one of the central issues facing contemporary Western culture in general, and Christian and Jewish communities of faith in particular, is whether or not they can continue to engage positively with those texts and traditions which historically have been formative, and whether serious engagement with the changing conditions of the present will energize or marginalize creative appropriation of the wisdom of the past.

(4) Speech about God

One basic issue which is raised by the Bible in conjunction with the faiths rooted in it concerns the nature of God. It is axiomatic (in Jewish and Christian, also Muslim, contexts) that God is not a 'being' or 'person' or 'object' like any other being or person or object in the world with which one might be familiar; in theological parlance the Creator is distinct from the creation. This raises the problem of what it means – if indeed it is meaningful at all – to speak about God or to make claims to knowledge of God. If someone speaks about God, how can we know that they know what they are talking about?

Classic Christian theology developed an extensive set of protocols of an intellectual, moral, and spiritual nature for responsible engagement with this issue. However, in the development of early modern Western culture, in which knowledge and method in relation to the empirical and mathematical natural sciences became the norm of epistemology, fundamental conceptual shifts took place. Since God could not be studied scientifically, as this had come to be understood, the focus of theology became increasingly uncertain, with some tendency to swing between metaphysical abstractions and pietism; and, with the rise of the social sciences, there has been a tendency for theology in one way or another to focus on the human dimension which could be scientifically studied – human language, thoughts, and feelings about God could all be analysed and classified with a sense of scientific rigour. The subject of theology thus shifts from God to the history and conceptuality of belief in God.

Such factors, among many others, have tended to leave biblical interpreters in a difficult position. They have often wanted to talk about God, and make truth claims in relation to God, on the basis of the biblical text. Yet in practice their work has often consisted predominantly in the analysis and classification of human beliefs and practices in relation to belief in

God as attested in the Bible. The status of such human beliefs and practices in relation to contemporary truth claims about God has usually been highly problematic. Some scholars have, of course, tackled the problems. Perhaps most famously in the twentieth century Bultmann combined meticulous philological and historical work with a consistent engagement with fundamental issues of philosophy and theology, precisely so that the truth status of the Pauline and Johannine accounts of God and humanity could be clarified and proclaimed. But the wide scope of Bultmann has been more of an exception than a rule among biblical scholars, and in any case his particular way of construing the issues as a whole has generally ceased to persuade either believers or non-believers. The question of God in relation to the Bible is thus easily either left in abeyance, or it becomes a matter of assumption or affirmation whose intellectual depth and seriousness may be open to doubt.

Into such an ocean one can throw no more than a pebble. Nonetheless the purpose of this book is to suggest ways in which one might make some progress.

These preliminary reflections will, I hope, give the reader some sense of the general drift of the argument I wish to make. We will now turn to more specific discussion. First I will consider one essay from an Old Testament scholar, James Barr, and one from a New Testament scholar, C. K. Barrett. Although the essays were written a few years ago now (Barr, 1977; Barrett, 1981), each essay is a model of lucidity and insight, which distils priorities and concerns evident in the wider work of each scholar. Both scholars have a high international reputation within the world of biblical study, and their work is characteristic of the kinds of approach to the Bible which, until recently, constituted a widespread scholarly consensus. Although this consensus may be diminished now, it is probably still much more widespread than might be realized solely by attending to those who reject it in part or in whole.

James Barr, 'Does Biblical Study Still Belong to Theology?'[2]

(1) Exposition

James Barr's essay was written as his Inaugural Lecture in the Oriel Chair of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in Oxford University. It was delivered on 26 May 1977.

Barr begins by briefly describing the contemporary academic context

2. Barr 1980.

in which, as a matter of fact, study of the Bible is increasingly detached from the study of Christian theology (specifically, the training of ministers for ordination). He notes that theology is 'a constellation of different fields and subjects held together by the fact that they are studied as they relate to God, to the church, its work and its tradition, and to the Bible' (1980: 19). Given that such a constellation is intrinsically difficult to accommodate within a three-year curriculum, it seems inexorably likely that the more theology concentrates on present-day issues the less prominent will the study of the Bible become, since the learning of the biblical languages, 'the foundation of serious study of the church's own scriptures' (p. 20), both takes a lot of time and lacks immediate relevance or applicability. This general dilemma that Barr sketches is painfully familiar to all who work in the field.

Barr's specific interest lies in the inner philosophy of biblical scholarship: 'How far must [the biblical scholar] think and work, and how far does he think and work, in terms that are really theological?' (p. 21). This question requires definition of the term 'theology', and Barr distinguishes two basic senses (p. 22). On the one hand, confessing[3] statements such as '"God is X", or, in other words, "We believe that God is X"', which are 'statement[s] of personal faith, or a statement of the church's faith', and which constitute theology 'in the stricter sense'; on the other hand, descriptive statements, '"This or that biblical writer said, or thought, that God is X."' The essential difference between these kinds of statement is explicated in terms of their relationship to evidence. The former 'is a statement which, however closely related to evidence, is not merely an interpretation of evidence: its logic is not exhaustively explained by stating the evidence to which it may relate itself'. The latter 'is an interpretation of given evidence'. Biblical study, as generally practised, predominantly takes the form of the latter. This enables the question to be reformulated. If a scholar is to make descriptive statements about the content of the Bible 'in an adequate and comprehensive way', does the scholar also 'have to make' confessing statements? To this the answer is negative, as a simple consideration of the realities of contemporary scholarship reveals. Although confessing biblical study is important for some, it is not for others, and the work of differing scholars is not necessarily distinguishable on this basis. 'Theology in the strict sense is optional rather than necessary' (p. 23).

3. Barr does not use the term 'confessing', but I think the term accurately depicts his meaning.

Having thus established the independence of biblical study from theology, Barr goes on to show what this does, and does not, entail. First, he does not wish to deny the propriety of linking theology (in the strict, confessing sense) with biblical study, or to maintain that theology is necessarily distorting on the grounds that it lacks 'objectivity'. On the contrary:

> Though theology can distort and damage objectivity, as theologians themselves continually admit, strong theological conviction can coexist with and rejoice in a very high degree of objectivity. It is true that complete objectivity is not attainable, but a high degree of objectivity is attainable, and a high degree of it is very much better than a low degree. (p. 24)

Those who do not espouse a confessing theological position may themselves hold 'some secular or pseudo-theological ideology which is equally destructive of objectivity' (p. 25). What matters is a quality of openness on the part of both theological and non-theological biblical study.

Barr further recognizes the value of theological approaches to the Bible in its asking of certain questions which otherwise might not be on the agenda:

> Experience suggests that certain levels and dimensions of scripture are not explored except when scholars are prepared, even if only as a hypothesis for the sake of argument, to think theologically, to ask the question, how would it be if this were really true of God? Or, to take a simple illustration from another sphere, from philosophy, how much would the study of an ancient thinker like Plato have been impoverished if throughout the ages scholars had confined themselves to expounding the text and its internal semantic linkages and had rigorously excluded from their minds the question 'Is Plato right?' (p. 25)

Barr then briskly dispatches two arguments that would insist that study of the Bible must be theological. First, the argument about the need for empathy with the matter under study. This applies equally to any subject, and empathy should not be confused with acceptance. In any case, scholars regularly express judgments about religious and philosophical positions which they themselves do not hold. Secondly, discussion about presuppositions has its place, but the validity of scholarly biblical work is determined by how well it accounts for the evidence.

Thus Barr concludes that biblical study and theology should coexist in a relationship of 'lively dialogue'. To exclude theology would leave biblical study the poorer, but theology must recognize its situation as one interpretative option among many.