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C. H. Dodd

Excerpt

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THE
PRESENT TASK
IN NEW TESTAMENT
STUDIES



It is impossible for me to stand before you on this occasion without thinking, as you all think, of the great scholar whose death was so severe a loss to our studies, and whose place I unworthily occupy. Francis Crawford Burkitt stood in the high succession of Cambridge theological scholarship. Of his personal qualities it is not fitting that I, a stranger here, whose opportunities of converse with him upon our common interests were too rare, though greatly valued, should speak to you who knew him. He was not only a master in biblical criticism and interpretation, but he had command of vast and recondite learning in the strange regions that lie between Greek-speaking Christendom and the East; and he had that without which learning goes lame, the wisdom to dis-

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cern significance, which gave authority to his judgment upon tangled problems where so many of the learned fall into extravagance. When some new and startling theory burst upon us, did we not wait and ask, "What will Burkitt say?" His weight of learning was worn lightly, and with an almost boyish freshness of mind, which he kept to the end. He was prodigal in sharing the resources of his knowledge and wisdom with others, and particularly with us younger men, who were stimulated by his unflinching zest for his subject, instructed by his mastery of method, and kept up to scratch by the example of his thoroughness, accuracy and honesty of mind. Much learning has died with him, but his achievement remains both as a sure foundation for further studies, and as an inspiration to those who labour at the same unending task.

It is my intention on this occasion to speak about the nature of that task, in the special field of New Testament studies, as it presents itself to us in this year of grace.

The study of the New Testament falls

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naturally into various departments, which may be ideally arranged as stages in a structure. The foundations are laid in textual criticism, the aim of which, never fully attainable, is to restore the text of the several documents as they left the hands of their authors. The text secure, those questions may be raised which belong to what is called the higher criticism. At this stage we seek to determine the date and authorship of the several documents, the circumstances in which they were produced, their sources, the method of their composition, and, so far as they have an historical character, their trustworthiness. The next stage is detailed and exact exegesis of the text. This demands the support of studies which belong to a wider field: the study of the Greek language in its classical, Hellenistic, Byzantine and modern forms, and of the Semitic languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac. These studies may be pictured as external buttresses to the structure. Upon exact exegesis in turn rests interpretation in the larger sense. At this stage once again the structure needs external buttresses. The thought of the

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New Testament cannot be clearly understood without a study of other forms of religious thought and belief with which it stood in historical relations: the Old Testament, Judaism, Greek philosophy, Hellenistic religion with its admixture of oriental elements, and finally the developing thought of the Christian Church after the New Testament period. It is in the light of such studies that we may hope to approximate by degrees to a clear and conclusive understanding of the essential purport of the New Testament in its various parts and as a whole, which is the goal of interpretation. Interpretation in this sense culminates in biblical theology, which is the ἀκρογωνιαίον of the whole building.

The structural view of New Testament studies which I have thus sketched is an ideal scheme, never fully realized. At each stage we must be content with something less than finality before approaching the next stage. We cannot wait until the archetypal text has been restored before beginning higher criticism or exegesis; and although interpretation must rest

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upon detailed exegesis, yet the precise sense of a particular passage must often remain undetermined until the meaning of the work as a whole is in some measure understood. All the several departments are to a greater or less extent interdependent. In actual practice the study of the New Testament has advanced by correlated efforts to solve the problems from various points of approach, and further advance must certainly be sought by co-operation of specialists in many fields.

Nevertheless it appears that particular generations of students have found a special attraction in problems of a particular order, and have been specially successful in their solution. It would, I suppose, be generally agreed that textual criticism had a great age in the period which may be roughly defined by the years 1840, which Tischendorf mentions as the beginning of his work, and 1881, which saw the publication of Westcott and Hort's text. During that period the gains of much past work were gathered up, fresh material emerged, principles were laid down, and results were secured which re-

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main valid. It may be that textual criticism will prove to have entered upon another great age, when the remarkable discoveries of the last two or three decades have been fully assimilated. But for the present, though we are being given a “new Tischendorf”, it is still based upon the text of Westcott and Hort.

Again, the latter half of the nineteenth century, particularly, perhaps, its last quarter, was a golden age of higher criticism. The Synoptic Problem was, in principle, solved, the Pauline Corpus, within limits, fixed, and the general succession of the New Testament literature determined on lines which all subsequent study assumes as a basis.

The early years of the present century saw a perceptible slowing down of critical advance. This was partly due to the very fact that the major problems had in a measure been solved. In some fields all that remained was to clarify results already attained, to confirm them by more minute tests, and to supplement them by subsidiary hypotheses. Thus, further work on the Synoptic Problem concerned such questions

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as the relation of Mark and “Q”, the unity (or otherwise) of those parts of Matthew and Luke which are not derivable from these primary sources, the process of composition in the First and Third Gospels, and the inner structure of Mark. In Pauline criticism, the non-Pauline character of the Pastoral Epistles (at least in their extant form) has been more definitely established, while the authenticity of Ephesians, and perhaps of II Thessalonians, remains in the balance. For the rest, criticism has tended to concern itself with such subordinate questions as the possibly composite character of certain epistles, and with their precise chronological order. On the Acts of the Apostles we have had during this century work on the grand scale, but in its strictly critical aspect it cannot be said to have advanced greatly beyond what was done thirty years ago, except in the way of confirming and supplementing earlier results. In a word, we have been tidying up the situation left by the great critics of the last century.

There is indeed one major problem which the nineteenth century left unsolved, that of

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the Fourth Gospel. Upon this problem the present century has seen important though as yet inconclusive work, about which I shall have something to say presently. But with this exception it would be true to say that interest has very largely shifted from criticism to other departments. I shall try to show that this shift has led us to a more direct concern with the task of interpretation. No age indeed has been indifferent to this task; but unless I have mistaken the trend of our time, it has become definitely more urgent for us than it was in the recent past. Much of the most interesting contemporary work belongs to this part of the field. It is, I think, in relation to the Pauline Epistles that the work of interpretation is furthest advanced, perhaps because the major critical problems here were comparatively straightforward, and were early solved. But in other fields too the same tendency may be observed.

If we are to select any particular field in which the early years of the present century were specially distinguished, we should, I think, naturally turn to those studies which I de-

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scribed as external buttresses of the New Testament edifice. In the closing years of the nineteenth century the development of the historical and comparative study of religions had its effect upon our studies. Attention began to be directed towards the background and environment of early Christianity. Our science moved from anatomy to oecology, the study of the organism in its habitat.

There have been here two main lines of approach. On the one hand the study of Judaism in and about the New Testament period began to take on a fresh importance, as the somewhat one-sided emphasis on the apocalyptic literature was corrected, and the results of a more scientific examination of the Rabbinic material became available. Thirty years ago we still depended largely upon John Lightfoot's *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*, published in 1674, and upon the now discredited Weber. To-day a whole series of works, from the Jewish as well as from the Christian side, are at our disposal.

On the other hand, the so-called *Religions-*

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geschichtliche Schule set out to exploit for New Testament purposes a mass of material gathered from the wide and varied world of Hellenistic religion, with its extensive background in the older religions not only of Greece but of the whole Near East. It is perhaps in this direction that the most distinctive contribution of the first quarter of the twentieth century will be found to lie. The value of such material depends on the use made of it. Our commentaries have indeed been enriched with an astonishing assortment of “parallels” diligently collected from every part of the Hellenistic underworld. The observation, however, of so many isolated parallels may be confusing rather than enlightening. They are often adduced as evidence for the “derivation” of this or that element in early Christianity from Hellenistic sources of one kind or another. But here we should do well to be cautious. Something more than a simple parallel is needed to prove derivation. It may be suspected that some of those who apply this method of research are still working with categories left over by the higher critics.