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Edited by W. D. Davies and D. Daube

Excerpt

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PART I

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TOWARDS AN
UNDERSTANDING OF THE
BACKGROUND OF THE
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THE TASK OF EXEGESIS

E. C. BLACKMAN

HERMENEUTICS is an ungainly word, and the scholarly practice it stands for is, in the judgment of many, an unlovely thing. Critical study of the Bible has managed very well without it, it may be said, since the last book was written upon this subject (about 1890?); and what has died a natural death need not be exhumed. The process of exhumation—or, to speak without caricature, the revival of the study of hermeneutics—has been taken in hand recently by some conservative scholars,¹ and it may be useful to consider the reasons for this, and indeed its justification. If we speak plainly of the rules of Biblical interpretation our discussion will be less fogged by prejudice, and we shall be dealing with all that matters in the subject.

It is a fair question whether critical methods in Bible study have really enabled people to understand its meaning and message better than was possible a century ago, before the Bible was submitted to that process of historical and literary analysis familiarly known as Higher Criticism. Luther affirmed that Scripture was *allgemeinverständlich*. Tyndale's object in translating the Scriptures was to make them intelligible to 'the boy that drives a plough'; and no less has been the aim of modern criticism. It is proper to inquire how far criticism has succeeded in this. The beginning of modern criticism seemed to many to be sacrilegious, for was not the Bible the Word of God, and was not the attempt to judge it by ordinary literary standards an implicit denial of its uniqueness and authority? There were in those days many who trembled for the ark of God and

¹ A. G. Hebert's *Throne of David* (1941) may be taken as an indication of this revival among English scholars. More recently he has been supported by L. S. Thornton and A. M. Farrer. Among Continental scholars we note the work of J. Bonsirven, J. Daniélou, W. Vischer, G. Ebeling.

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devised arguments in its defence against the incipient science of Biblical criticism, as if the 'impregnable rock of Holy Scripture' were not, in actual fact, impregnable. The like of Strauss and Renan and Ewald and Colenso were daring with impious hands to treat Holy Scripture as mere scripture, implicitly denying its inspiration by their definition of that inspiration in terms applicable to any literary masterpiece of ancient or modern times. The pioneers of the critical approach were, so to speak, taking the Bible out of the glass case which Christian piety from the very beginning had regarded as appropriate for it. The Reformation had attempted to ensure that no other acknowledged authority in the Church was deposited in the same glass case; but now, behold, a more radical criticism was at work which considered glass cases out of fashion! What guarantee was there that the Book's unique position of authority would be reserved?

It is not enough to ridicule the apprehension of those early champions of Biblical inspiration. It is true that the doctrines of *verbal* inspiration which they elaborated in defence of the authority of Scripture were a most unfortunate manoeuvre, for it meant the taking up of a false position which cannot be defended except by those impervious to reason. Nevertheless, their anxiety had some justification, and it is still not superfluous to raise the question whether the critic has any further use for the glass case; or is he satisfied that the proper place for the Bible is by the side of the *Sacred Books of the East*, or on the same shelf as Plutarch's *Lives* or the *Hermetica* or the *Bhagavadgita*? In plainer language, has criticism considered sufficiently the meaning of canonicity, that is, the question of the Bible's essential authority? Has its uniqueness as a religious classic risen clear above the dust of debate? How much more does it appear to be than ancient history and literature? In terms of the traditional phraseology, can the critic still honestly speak of the Bible as the 'Word of God'? These questions must be pressed. The revival of an uncritical attitude is due to the suspicion that criticism is not sure enough about the answers to them, as if there turns out after all to be no Promised Land for the ordinary believer to enter after his long sojourn in the wilderness; the scholarly leaders have tried in vain to ford the Jordan, and the rank and file find themselves still in the plains of Moab.

Modern Biblical study has directed attention almost exclusively

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to the literal sense of Scripture, in reaction from the medieval doctrine of its multiple sense. It is held, following the Reformation emphasis,¹ that there is only one sense. This is taken to be what the writer meant when he originally wrote, and the sole business of the expositor thus appears to be to use his linguistic and other knowledge to lay bare that meaning. This is unobjectionable and indeed obvious. It may be a real illumination for a modern congregation to have the original reference of a passage made plain, even though it means an excursus into ancient history. Modern criticism has performed an immeasurable service in this insistence on the original historical sense to the exclusion of allegorical fancies. It has maintained the liberating force of the theological insight of the Reformers. But there is something more to be done than relate a passage to its original environment. For Biblical truth is more than ancient history. The interpretation of the Bible must show proper appreciation of its nature and content;² that is to say, must handle it as the Word of God to past generations and also as the potential Word of God to *all* generations. To deal with it on any other principle is surely to give up the attempt to be scientific. The implication of this for theological training is that lectures on Biblical Introduction are to be used quite precisely as the title says, as introduction to Biblical theology and exposition, as a preliminary study rather than an end in themselves. It has been too long assumed that one who has had the discipline of historical study of the Bible is *eo ipso* equipped to expound it. It is time to awake out of sleep and to put the tools forged by criticism to their proper use. Hermeneutics has lain too long neglected. To those who are still suspicious of it we should say: Doest thou well to be angry?

¹ 'simplicissimae Scripturae simplicissimus sensus.' Luther says: 'In Scripturis nulla videlicet allegoria, tropologia, anagoge, nisi alibi hystorice idem expresse dicatur. Alioquin ludibrium fieret Scriptura' (quoted in Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung*, p. 280 n. 22). Aquinas had already said as much: 'Nihil sub spirituali sensu continetur fidei necessarium quod Scriptura per litteralem sensum alicubi manifeste non tradat' (*Summa Theol.* Q. 1, 10, quoted in Ebeling, *op. cit.* p. 130).

For the Westminster Confession, see Paragraphs VII and IX of the section on Scripture. The Anglican Articles are not so precise on the subject of Scripture, but Article XX (Of the Authority of the Church) prescribes 'neither may it (the Church) so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another'.

² '(scriptura) per sese certissima...sui ipsius interpres. scripturas non nisi eo spiritu intelligendas esse quo scriptae sunt' (Luther, quoted in Ebeling, *op. cit.* p. 297 n. 87).

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Hermeneutics is not to be regarded as an evil thing once expelled but now trying to make entry again into the house of Biblical understanding swept and garnished by three generations of modern scholarship. It is not to be equated with allegory and its irresponsibility of interpretation. The concern for the literal sense and no other is conditioned by reaction from the allegorical treatment of Scripture. This is mainly known in the abuse, but it is time the question was raised whether in this case the fact that the method has so often been misused means that there is no proper use to which we can safely resort. The allegorist admittedly tends to use a text to stimulate fantasy or confirm prejudice; but this is not listening to the Word of God so much as telling God what he ought to say! But does our condemnation of the method have no regard to the fact that great minds like Origen relied upon it? Could it have attracted such great scholars at all if exegesis was really complete with the establishment of the literal sense? Was Newman completely wrong to insist that 'mystical interpretation and orthodoxy stand or fall together'? Is not allegorism in spite of its extravagances a reminder that literalism, however learned and painstaking, is not a key that opens the door to Biblical truth?¹

We seem to be embarking on an argument that the literal sense is insufficient and that allegory must in some way be reinstated. Our own opinion, however, must be made clear that the literal meaning of a passage is the indispensable preliminary. Luther's term *sensus grammaticalis* is perhaps to be preferred: the plain meaning of the words as their author intended them with reference to his contemporary situation. Whatever development or application of meaning

¹ Allegory can be regarded as an endeavour to salvage a rational, non-literal sense and to rise above crudities of interpretation that alienated many (Celsus, for example), and turned some potential converts into 'cultured despisers'. Daniélou in his recent book on Origen distinguishes allegory from typology. The latter he regards as the distinctively Christian method of exegesis, while allegory is a pagan importation ('tradition exégétique non-chrétienne'), which incidentally forwarded Origen along the path to beyond orthodoxy. This is illuminating, though it imposes a precision of terminology which Origen might not have accepted. We should not give up the other way of distinction which sees allegory as exegesis of *texts*, and typology as interpretation of *events* (so Florovsky in *Biblical Authority for Today*, p. 175). In support of Daniélou's view that allegory is a pagan method, mediated from the Greeks by Philo, is the fact that the Rabbis on the whole do not use it (see J. Bonsirven, *Exégèse Rabbiniqne et Exégèse Paulinienne*, especially pp. 246–51).

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is attempted by the exegete must be anchored in this meaning. But he must go on to elucidate the perennial meaning of the text, that is, the significance of it which makes it contemporary for the reader today. This has been called the spiritual sense, even by Luther who rejected the multiple sense of the Schoolmen. But Luther is quite emphatic that it is not an addition to the literal sense, but contained within it, and only discerned after thorough study of the literal sense. This emphasis was a very considerable step forward in Biblical interpretation.

The expositor then has to inquire whether the original meaning of a passage is all that it holds for a modern reader. That may indeed be the case, and the original meaning may be of little consequence: in Gen. xxxviii, for example, and most of Leviticus. But a careful explanation of the situation implied in Isa. vii. 1–9, where the prophet is trying to purify the people's longing for political security by relating it to their faith in God, may well be in itself, without laboured application to modern political upheavals, a sufficient elucidation of the meaning of faith. This is a passage where with the establishment of the original reference the task of the expositor is almost completed. In most cases, however, it will be necessary to build some kind of bridge, as it were, between 701 B.C. or A.D. 60 and the present day. The word of Yahweh to King Ahaz by the mouth of the prophet Isaiah needs to be divested of what refers only to the circumstances of Jerusalem and its water supply in 701 B.C. so that its continuing relevance to the circumstances of today stands clear. All this may fairly be regarded as within the scope of exegesis. The distinction is sometimes drawn, particularly by Continental scholars watchful lest the ideas of man become unconsciously intermingled with the truth of God, between exegesis and application. There is of course a sense in which the application of the truth in a passage of Scripture to his own person and circumstances must be left to the conscience of the hearer; he alone, and not the preacher, must make the application under the leading of the Holy Spirit. We prefer to do without the distinction, and to say simply of the risk of the preacher subtly interspersing his own nostrums into his statement of Biblical truth that it is a risk which must be taken. In the providence of God and by the ministration of the Spirit *praedicatio Verbi Dei* does become *Verbum Dei*, and it is not necessary to be

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content with mere *lectio Verbi*. We use the term exegesis in the comprehensive sense which includes application, and understand its function as dealing with a Biblical incident so that it becomes contemporary; not merely with the literary skill of a Robert Graves, or the actor's genius in presenting Shakespeare successfully in modern dress, but in such a way that what was a veritable word of God to Palestine twenty centuries ago may challenge men in Europe today with the same authority. The shekels and denarii of the ancient world in the pages of Scripture have to be changed into current coin if the modern world is to turn to those pages and heed their message at all.

Our argument at this point may be strengthened by reference to an article by J. N. Sanders,¹ arguing that historical criticism, though performing a necessary task in replacing the centuries-old allegorical interpretation by a true understanding of what Biblical writers really said and meant, is nevertheless often unconscious how much still remains to be done if the message of the Bible is to be transposed into a key of meaning which will claim the attention of the modern reader; for there is the problem of the difference between the ideology of the eighth century B.C. or the first century A.D. and the ideology of today. 'So far the result of the application of historical criticism has generally only been to reveal the existence of the intellectual chasm between men of the first and twentieth centuries, and practically nothing has been done to enable us to cross it and make the thoughts of the man of the first century our own. . . . The discovery of some scientific method of bridging the chasm is the present problem of exegesis.' And this, as Sanders goes on to point out, involves more than reconstructing New Testament theology ('the purely academic task').

As interpreters of the Bible we are concerned for much more than its aspect as literature or history. It is indeed great literature, though it should not be forgotten that this is more true of certain modern translations than of the Hebrew and Greek originals! The Old Testament appears in the four volumes of the Everyman edition under the title, *Literature of the Hebrew People*, and so indeed it is. And yet that description leaves something to be desired if we are trying to bring out its full religious significance. Again, the Bible

¹ 'The Problem of Exegesis', *Theology* (1941), pp. 324 ff.

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contains much history, of which the secular historian will naturally take note as he compiles his history of the Near East. The Biblical expositor too is not free to despise the discipline of historical study. But we must contend for the distinctive nature of the Bible as contrasted with, say, the Assyrian chroniclers or the Greek historian Herodotus. The Bible *contains* historical narrative, but it is not simply history. For the events to which its narrative refers are events in which the divine purpose was being worked out. No doubt the Biblical writers compare unfavourably as historians with some of the ancients—the author of Acts with Thucydides for example. No doubt the full understanding of the situation and its relation to sociological and other factors calls for more accurate research than Old Testament or New Testament writers were able or willing to give. But let their own characteristic concern be appreciated, namely to bear witness to revelation and to the events recorded as events in which there is divine intervention for the salvation of man. It is the business of criticism to keep this to the fore; to evaluate the historical situation as the medium of revelation, not the revelation itself. There is some substance in the charge that the liberal critics of the earlier years of this century lacked precision on this point. ‘The significance of the narrative reveals itself to the interpreter not through the picture of the happenings which he constructs from his examination of the evidence, but only in so far as he listens to the biblical testimony about this narrative.’¹ Among Luther’s *obiter dicta* is the remark that the Devil was the original exegete of Scripture. His well-known depreciation of reason as the Devil’s bride (*diaboli sponsa*) is perhaps connected with that. It is provoking enough, and inclines one to show his judgment little respect. But it ought to remind us that a rational explanation of a passage with historical references and so on is not necessarily an exposition of the real Word of God in that passage.²

The way in which ‘liberal’ presuppositions may obscure the characteristic of the Bible as revelation has been exposed by T. W. Manson in a notable chapter from which we quote: ‘The focus of

¹ Ebeling, *op. cit.* p. 426.

² There is something worth pondering in the remark of Ehrenberg (quoted by Jenkins, *Tradition and the Spirit*, p. 43) that if you wish to find the Holy Spirit in the Bible you look first in passages marked R (Redactor) by the critics.

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interest was moved from theology to Religionsgeschichte; from a body of divine truth making claims on believers to successive generations of aspirants seeking for something to believe. . . . Evolution abhors finality; so the most that can be claimed is that Christianity is the best that has been achieved up to date. . . . God ceases to be thought of as the living active One who intervenes in history. There is no revelation, only human convictions and ideas. Religion is reduced to 'an element in human civilization, the sum of man's deepest and gradually achieved convictions about ultimate reality'.¹ R. M. Grant makes the same point: 'For most historical interpreters the rationalist attitude towards miracles was taken for granted. Later in the century the Hegelian distinction between external ideas and temporary forms was employed. And in the course of the century the differences between Biblical writing and other writings came to be ignored.'² To quote an Old Testament scholar of note: 'Most of our histories of Israel attempt to marshal the facts, and the theories based upon them, in a secularized manner, without any serious attempt to deal with that which was the chief concern of the Biblical writers themselves. The Church cannot afford the luxury of such a seemingly "objective" approach. Its primary aim must be to view Biblical history through the eyes of its interpreters, grappling with those vital questions of faith and meaning with which the Biblical authors themselves were concerned.'³

Having made these criticisms of the critical method itself in order to ensure that it starts with a proper evaluation of the nature of its subject-matter, the Bible, we go on to affirm the indispensability of the critical approach. There can be no other. Criticism may not be by-passed. The excesses of rationalism are not cured by flight into irrationalism, but only by a truer use of reason. In the same way, if Biblical research has wandered from the path of advance, or been too much influenced by the prevailing *Zeitgeist* (here twentieth-century existentialism can be as great a seducer as nineteenth-century liberalism), only the same processes of scientific reasoning can provide

¹ *The Interpretation of the Bible* (1944), ed. by C. W. Dugmore, p. 94. Troeltsch's article 'Offenbarung' in the first edition of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* is a good example of the relativism which beclouded the great liberal critics.

² *The Bible in the Church* (1948), p. 132.

³ G. E. Wright in *Biblical Authority for To-day* (1951), ed. by A. Richardson and W. Schweitzer, p. 222.

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correction. To quote an *ipse dixit* of the master whom this volume is intended to honour: 'It is a testimony to the scientific integrity of the critical school that by applying its own methods more strictly it was led to discard many of the presuppositions upon which it formerly relied, and to arrive at what I believe to be a juster estimate of the material with which it deals. Be suspicious of any suggestion that we can afford to by-pass criticism. The way of advance lies through and not round the critical problem.'¹

The non-critical method is to be rejected not only because of its impossible intellectual demands (assumption of verbal accuracy and the like), but mainly because it obscures the essential truths of Scripture. The supposed denial of Biblical affirmations in the middle of the last century manoeuvred that ultra-conservative attitude and method into the false position of contending for the *verbal* inspiration, rather than simply for the inspiration, of the Bible. Fundamentalism² obscures the centre, by insisting that the circumference is equally important. It fails to notice that big things become recognizable when other things are admitted to be details and pushed into the background. In their anxiety not to empty out the baby with the bath water Fundamentalists seem to pretend that the water itself is significant! More plainly: they will not admit that there is a problem of interpretation, the problem of the hidden Christ, of the Word not fully revealed: hidden in the practices of ancient Hebrew religion, in the customs and geography of ancient Palestine, in the personal and stylistic idiosyncracies of Biblical writers, in the linguistic difficulties of Hebrew and Greek. Such trembling for the ark of God, instead of wise handling of it, is increasingly noticeable in recent years. Because some positions formerly held by critical scholars have proved untenable there appears to be a danger of reaction into a timid obscurantism or authoritarianism which is really a flight from reason and an abdication from the responsibility of commending basic Biblical doctrines to the contemporary mind.

Our contention is then that exegesis must labour for, and never despise, the literal sense. It may proceed beyond it, but without that

¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Bible To-day*, p. 27.

² How regrettable that so expressive a word has become the monopoly of those who believe in verbal inspiration! 'Mere mechanical infallibility is but a poor substitute for a plenary Inspiration' (Westcott, *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels*, p. 41).