

Two (Or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship

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Lecture Notes

A traditional Christian will probably think the whole Bible is a special message from the Lord. What the Lord tells us is trustworthy, so this entire book is authoritative.

It isn't always easy to tell what the Lord is teaching us in a given passage: what he teaches is indeed true, but sometimes it isn't clear precisely what he is teaching.

Colossians 1:24: "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body which is the church."

I. Traditional Biblical Commentary

Scripture a wholly authoritative and trustworthy guide to faith and morals. God is not required to make a case.

The principal author of the Bible--the entire Bible--is God himself, not so much a library of independent books as itself a book with many subdivisions but a central theme: the message of the gospel. "interpret Scripture with Scripture."

Can't always determine the meaning of a given passage just by discovering what the human author intended.

II. Historical Critical Biblical Scholarship

'higher criticism,' 'historical criticism,' 'biblical criticism,' or 'historical biblical criticism' (HBC). An enlightenment project; an effort to understand Biblical books from the standpoint that relies on reason. Spinoza: "The rule for [biblical] interpretation should be nothing but the natural light of reason which is common to all--not any supernatural light nor any external authority" (Theologico-Political Tractate, 14).

One doesn't assume that the Bible is specially inspired by God, or that it contains anything like specifically divine discourse, or that Jesus Christ is the divine son of God, or that he arose from the dead, or that his suffering and death is in some way a propitiatory atonement for human sin.

Luke Timothy Johnson: "It is obviously important to study Christian origins historically. And in such historical inquiry, faith commitments should play no role. Christianity is not more privileged for the historian than any other human phenomenon."

Jon Levenson: "Historical critics thus rightly insist that the tribunal before which interpretations are argued cannot be confessional or 'dogmatic;' the arguments offered must be historically valid, able, that is, to compel the assent of *historians* whatever their religion or lack thereof, whatever their backgrounds, spiritual experiences, or personal beliefs, and without privileging any claim of revelation."

The sources of belief involved, therefore, would be those that are employed in everyday life and ordinary history and science: perception, testimony, reason taken in the sense of *a priori* intuition together with deductive and probabilistic reasoning, Reid's sympathy, by which we discern the thoughts and feeling of another, and so on; but any proposition which is known or believed by faith is explicitly excluded.

Raymond Brown: HBC is "scientific biblical criticism;" it yields "factual results" (p. 9); he intends his own contributions to be "scientifically respectable" (p.11); and practitioners of HBC investigate the Scriptures with "scientific exactitude" (pp. 18-19).

What this means practically and more specifically is that this variety of scholarship deals especially with questions about the composition and authorship of various books. Of course the idea is also to see, as far as this is possible, whether the events reported really happened.

tension between Biblical criticism and traditional Christians. David Strauss in 1835: "Nay, if we would be candid with ourselves, that which was once sacred history for the Christian believer is, for the enlightened portion of our contemporaries, only fable."

William Pringle: "In Germany, Biblical criticism is almost a national pursuit...Unhappily, [the critics] were but too frequently employed in maintaining the most dangerous errors, in opposing every inspired statement which the mind of man is unable fully to comprehend, in divesting religion of its spiritual and heavenly character, and in undermining the whole fabric of revealed truth." Many employing this method believe that Jesus never thought of himself as divine, or as the Messiah, or as capable of forgiving sin--let alone as having died and then risen from the dead.

Luke Oliver Johnson: "The Historical Jesus researchers insist that the 'real Jesus' must be found in the facts of his life before his death. The resurrection is, when considered at all, seen in terms of visionary experience, or as a continuation of an 'empowerment' that began before Jesus' death. Whether made explicit or not, the operative premise is that there is no 'real Jesus' after his death." *The Real Jesus*

Barbara Thiering's *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Jesus was buried in a cave; he didn't actually die and was revived by the magician Simon Magus, whereupon he married Mary Magdalene, settled down and fathered three children, was divorced and finally died in Rome.

According to Morton Smith, Jesus was a practicing homosexual and conjurer (*Jesus the Magician*). Gerd Ludemann (*What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to*

the Resurrection): the Resurrection is "an empty formula that must be rejected by anyone holding a "scientific world view."

G.A. Well: our name 'Jesus,' as it turns up in the Bible, doesn't trace back to anyone at all; it is like the name 'Santa Claus.' John Allegro *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* apparently thinks there was no such person as Jesus of Nazareth; Christianity began as a hoax designed to fool the Romans and preserve the cult of a certain hallucinogenic mushroom (*Amanita muscaria*): and the 'Christ' is really a name of that mushroom. Thomas Sheehan *The First Coming*: Jesus, while neither merely legendary, or actually a mushroom, was in fact an atheist, the first Christian atheist.

Van Harvey ("New Testament Scholarship and Christian Belief," in *Jesus in History and Myth*) "So far as the biblical historian is concerned,...there is scarcely a popularly held traditional belief about Jesus that is not regarded with considerable skepticism."

III. Why Aren't Most Christians More Concerned?

Van Harvey: "Despite decades of research, the average person tends to think of the life of Jesus in much the same terms as Christians did three centuries ago....Why is it that, in a culture so dominated by experts in every field, the opinion of New Testament historians has had so little influence on the public?"

A. Troeltschian HBC

The official method of HBC is to follow reason alone; what one knows by faith is not relevant.

Ernst Troeltsch - Thus John Collins ("Is Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*):

Among theologians these principles received their classic formulation from Ernst Troeltsch in 1898.

Troeltsch sets out three principles...: (1) The principle of criticism or methodological doubt: since any conclusion is subject to revision, historical inquiry can never attain absolute certainty but only relative degrees of probability. (2) The principle of analogy: historical knowledge is possible because all events are similar in principle. We must assume that the laws of nature in biblical times were the same as now. Troeltsch referred to this as 'the almighty power of analogy.' (3) The principle of correlation: the phenomena of history are inter-related and inter-dependent and no event can be isolated from the sequence of historical cause and effect. To these should be added the principle of autonomy: Neither church nor state can prescribe for the scholar which conclusions should be reached."

Within the interpretative community of historical criticism, these principles are taken in such a way as to preclude direct divine action in the world. Rudolph Bultmann (*Existence and Faith*): "...the historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in

the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect. This continuum, furthermore, cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers."

John Macquarrie (*Principles of Christian Theology*): The way of understanding miracles that appeals to breaks in the natural order and to supernatural intervention belongs to the mythological outlook and cannot commend itself in a post-mythological climate of thought....Science proceeds on the assumption that whatever events occur in the world can be accounted for in terms of other events that also belong within the world.

Langdon Gilkey ("Cosmology, Ontology and the Travail of Biblical Language" in *God's Activity in the World; the Contemporary Problem*): "...contemporary theology does not expect, nor does it speak of, wondrous divine events on the surface of natural and historical life. The causal nexus in space and time which the Enlightenment science and philosophy introduced into the Western mind...is also assumed by modern theologians and scholars; since they participate in the modern world of science both intellectually and existentially, they can scarcely do anything else. Now this assumption of a causal order among phenomenal events, and therefore of the authority of the scientific interpretation of observable events, makes a great difference to the validity one assigns to biblical narratives and so to the way one understands their meaning. Suddenly a vast panoply of divine deeds and events recorded in Scripture are no longer regarded as having actually happened...Whatever the Hebrews believed, we believe that the biblical people lived in the same causal continuum of space and time in which we live, and so one in which no divine wonders transpired and no divine voices were heard."

Troeltschian HBC proceeds on the basis of the assumption that God never does anything specially; in particular he neither raised Jesus from the dead nor specially inspired the biblical authors.

B. Why Troeltschian HBC?

(1) *force majeure*. Given our historical position, there is nothing else we can do; we are in the grip of historical forces beyond our control; this thing is bigger than either one of us. historically naive. Perhaps what they really mean is not that everyone nowadays accepts this semi-deism (that is trivially false) but that everyone *in the know* does.

Again, Macquarrie et. al. must know this as well as anyone else; as a matter of historical fact, there are all sorts of scientifically educated contemporaries who don't feel any problem at all in pursuing science and also believing in miracles, angels, Christ's resurrection, the whole nine yards.

(2) the very practice of science presupposes rejection of the idea of miracles.

What I must assume in order to do science, is only that *ordinarily* and for the *most* part these regularities hold.

(3) Van Harvey: "The gulf separating the conservative Christian believer and the New Testament scholar can be seen as the conflict between two antithetical ethics of belief....New Testament scholarship is now so specialized and requires so much preparation that the layperson has simply been disqualified from having any right to a judgment regarding the truth or falsity of certain historical claims. Insofar as the conservative Christian believer is a layperson who has no knowledge of the New Testament scholarship, he or she is simply not entitled to certain historical beliefs at all. Just as the average layperson is scarcely in a position to have an informed judgment about the seventh letter of Plato, the relationship of Montezuma to Cortez, or the authorship of the Donation of Constantine, so the average layperson has no right to an opinion about the authorship of the Fourth Gospel or the trustworthiness of the synoptics."

he thinks the only way to achieve reliable information on these matters is by way of Troeltschian scholarship. What lies at the bottom of this moral claim is really an unargued philosophical/theological assumption: that traditional Christian belief is completely mistaken in taking it that there is a reliable source--a faith-informed reading of the bible, for example--of true and warranted belief on these topics in addition to ordinary reason.

IV. Nothing to be Concerned *About*

We have both Troeltschian and non-Troeltschian HBC, the Troeltschian rules out miracles and divine inspiration of Scripture. It is then not at all surprising that he tends to come up with conclusions wildly at variance with those accepted by the traditional Christian, but why should the Christian worry about that?

The non-Troeltschian relies just on the deliverances of reason.

A.E. Harvey (*Jesus and the Constraints of History*), proposes the following as beyond reasonable doubt from everyone's point of view: "that Jesus was known in both Galilee and Jerusalem, that he was a teacher, that he carried out cures of various illnesses, particularly demon-possession and that these were widely regarded as miraculous; that he was involved in controversy with fellow Jews over questions of the law of Moses; and that he was crucified in the governorship of Pontius Pilate."

John Meier's monumental *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. About all that emerges from Meier's painstaking work is that Jesus was a prophet, a proclaimer of an eschatological message from God, someone who performs powerful deeds, signs and wonders, that announce God's kingdom, and also ratify his message.

Traditional Christians, rightly or wrongly, think they do have a source of warranted belief in addition to reason: faith and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Of course they may be wrong about that; but until someone gives a decent argument for the conclusion that they are wrong, they will not be impressed by the result of scholarship that ignores this further source of belief.

But isn't all of this just a bit too sunny?

A series of letters could be discovered, letters circulated among Peter, James, John and Paul, in which the necessity for the hoax and the means of its perpetration are carefully and seriously discussed; these letters might direct workers to archeological sites in which still more material of the same sort is discovered...

There is no need to borrow trouble, however; perhaps we can cross these bridges if we come to them.

For further details about Alvin Plantinga's views on the need and nature of Christian scholarship and for his views on what he describes as "two or more kinds of Scripture scholarship," see his books: *The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Calvin College and Seminary, 1990) and *Warranted Christian Belief* (forthcoming).

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