

THE UNEASY CONSCIENCE OF MODERN LIBERAL EXEGESIS

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Modern evangelicalism is based upon the affirmation of the reality of God's special intervention in human history, that is, of the genuineness of the miraculous, climaxing in the supernatural life of Christ. Consistent, then, with the possibility of a supernaturalistic revelation, with the positive claims of Christ, and with the uniform assertion of Scripture, evangelicalism accepts the Bible as God-given and as true. The evangelical depends basically upon the mind of Christ, and not upon minor historical corroborations, for his belief in the truth of Scripture; but he naturally rejoices in historical confirmations of the facts of Scripture, as congruous with his overall faith, when such may appear. Whatever may have been said about "the uneasy conscience of modern fundamentalism" regarding social ethics,¹ the evangelical has an easy conscience, based upon a well integrated approach of logical consistency, regarding Biblical historicity.

Liberalism, on the other hand, is characterized by an underlying distrust of the supernatural. Sometimes this is admitted, and the Biblical miracles are dismissed as outrightly fictitious. For example, Robert Pfeiffer states in reference to Daniel:

The traditional theory, by accepting the book at its face value, necessarily presupposes the reality of the supernatural and the divine origin of the revelations it contains. But such miracles as the divine deliverance of Daniel from the lions and a hand without a body writing a message on a wall lie outside the realm of historical facts.²

More frequently, however, modern liberalism, under the influence of Neo-orthodoxy, exhibits an uneasy conscience over the wholesale humanism of the old-fashioned "modernism," an example being the pathetic attempt of the Interpreter's Bible to salvage preaching values from a critically dissected Bible. But such twinges of the liberal conscience are so common on the modern theological scene as to require little comment. They are not the subject of this discussion; and, when all is said and done, they actually constitute but a disguised form of the old antisupernaturalism. For, though lip-service is paid to God's interventions in history, these interventions are so redefined in man's own rationalistic terms as to deny their true historicity: facts become "mythological," "culturally determined," or "supra-historical." The net result is still liberalism and stands in opposition to the presentation of the Bible itself. It therefore remains essential for liberals of both types to deny the infallible truth of Scripture and to emphasize such features of the background to the Bible as may be useful in discrediting its historical reliability.

But when historical discoveries appear that prove to be corroborating instead of discrediting, what can the liberal do then? His antisupernaturalistic presuppositions require his continued affirmation of the untrustworthiness of the Bible, and as he abandons his former criticisms he is impelled to compensate for his specific retreats by an increase in the vehemency of his overall denial. Such activity appears as the outworking of a really uneasy conscience, which is the subject of this discussion, namely the dilemma that arises from trying to maintain a faith in Biblical unreliability despite the decreased legitimacy of a belief in such unreliability.

A remarkably clear example of this uneasy conscience of modern liberal exegesis is provided by J. Philip Hyatt's article in the December, 1956, issue of the Journal of Biblical Literature, entitled, "New Light on Nebuchadrezzar and Judean History."³ The new light consists of the appearance in 1956 of four hitherto unpublished Babylonian texts from the British Museum. Two of these concern the years 608-594 B.C.; and the problem they raise for liberalism is that at every point they confirm the historicity of the Biblical records, some of which had, up until two years ago, been almost unanimously discredited on the basis of "the assured results of modern criticism."

The chief passages at issue are II Chronicles 36:6-7 and Daniel 1:1-2. The former describes an incident in the reign of Jehoiakim:

Against him came up Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and bound him in fetters, to carry him to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also carried off the vessels of the house of Jehovah to Babylon, and put them in his temple at Babylon.

Chronicles gives no indication of the point in his eleven year reign (608-598 B.C.) at which this event took place. The Daniel verses state:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah [calculated at 605 B.C.] came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God; and he carried them into the land of Shinar to the house of his God: and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god.

Since prior to 1956 there was no known, extra-Biblical record of a Palestinian campaign by Nebuchadnezzar prior to the events that led to its capture in 597 B.C., and since the "objective" standard of liberal exegesis seems to have been that Biblical statements descriptive of any such campaign must be false until proven true, the appearance of these "fictitious" statements in Scripture was generally explained by liberalism in one of two ways. (1) Some felt that Chronicles intended to refer to approximately 605 B.C., that this was followed by Daniel, and that "the motive for the formation of this tradition was because thereby a captivity of seventy years might be obtained."⁴ (2) Others felt that Chronicles intended to refer to 597 B.C., thereby teaching that Jehoiakim's reign ended by Nebuchadnezzar's deporting him to Babylon.⁵ This, of course, contradicts the express statement of II Kings 24:6-10 that he died in Jerusalem before the arrival of Nebuchadnezzar; but the motive is said to be to obtain a fulfillment for Jeremiah's curse on Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:19, 36:30).⁶ It should be noted, however, that Jeremiah's curse was only that this king's corpse should be disgracefully exposed outside the gates of Jerusalem, for which there is no evidence to the contrary.⁷ Chronicles, moreover, does not say that Jehoiakim was actually taken captive, only that he was bound in fetters to be carried captive. Presumably, this was only a threat. Josephus, in this regard, repeats a legend that Nebuchadnezzar executed Jehoiakim and had his corpse thrown before the walls of Jerusalem. Daniel, with its express date of 605, is then assumed to have used Chronicles as a source but to have misinterpreted its setting.⁸ S. R. Driver, in a more cautious vein, but still liberal, sums it up as follows:

That Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, and carried away some of the sacred vessels in "the third year of Jehoiakim", though it cannot, strictly speaking, be disproved, is highly improbable.⁹

Under either explanation, the results for the Bible are highly discrediting and, it might not be going too far to say, for the liberal, highly satisfying. In reply Bible believers could only state, as did H. C. Leupold, less than ten years ago,

It is asserted [by liberals] that for the historical event referred to in this verse [Dan. 1:1] there is no historical corroboration --- a statement which cannot be denied . . . We feel that the solution of the seeming difficulty is to assume that though we have no other record of a campaign of Nebuchadnezzar against Jehoiakim in 605 B.C., we are . . . justified in letting the claim stand.¹⁰

But this is now water under the bridge. In 1956 Donald H. Wiseman published the new Nebuchadnezzar texts, and the following facts came out. (1) In the summer of 605 B.C., after his rout of the Egyptian army at Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar claims at that time to have conquered the whole land of Hatti,¹¹ that is, the Western fertile crescent, including Palestine. Furthermore, after the death of his father and Nebuchadnezzar's taking over the throne of Babylon on Sept. 7, 605, he speedily returned west, marched unopposed through Hatti until February, 604, and "took heavy tribute of Hatti to Babylon."¹² Dr. Hyatt, in his article, is therefore forced to the inevitable conclusion, "It was probably in 605, or in the following year, that Jehoiakim submitted to the Babylonian king," even noting the II Chron. 36:6 verse, formerly so discredited, as applying to this

event.¹³ (2) In November, 601, Nebuchadrezzar marched to Egypt; but he was defeated by the Egyptian army, which provides a confirmatory occasion for the statement of II K. 24:1 that Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadrezzar after three years of service. (3) Then, from some time in January, to March 16, 597, Nebuchadrezzar "marched to Hatti; he encamped against the city of Judah, took the city and captured the king. He appointed in it a king after his own heart, received its heavy tribute, and sent it to Babylon."¹⁴ These facts confirm the Biblical record point by point. Dr. Hyatt himself has worked out the harmonization of all the Biblical chronological statements; and, in reference to Nebuchadrezzar's taking the city of Jerusalem, his article states:

There need be no conflict between the Babylonian statement that Nebuchadrezzar "took" the city, and the OT record that Jehoiachin surrendered. When one reflects that in the siege of Jerusalem under Zedekiah the Babylonians had to besiege the city for a year-and-a-half before capturing it, it does not seem probable that they could have captured it after a brief siege of only two months unless the resistance was very weak and the king was disposed to surrender.¹⁵

But at this point the uneasy conscience of modern liberal exegesis emerges. Having admitted these remarkably detailed confirmations of Scripture, plus others that space forbids listing, and having presented not a shred of evidence that in any way runs contrary to the Biblical record, Dr. Hyatt's article goes out of its way, six times in the limited space of three pages of evaluation, to disparage the historicity of Scripture and to reaffirm the conviction that much of it can hardly be considered authentic. These six are as follows.

(1) It is apparent that this Babylonian account agrees in general with the OT accounts, but there are some difficulties occasioned by this account, and also by discrepancies among the various biblical accounts.¹⁶

The article, however, lists not a single such difficulty; the evidence seems not even remotely to suggest any such; and the only inner-Biblical discrepancy it might cite consists of a chronological reference which the article itself proceeds to explain by means of "accession year" reckoning.

(2) Difficulties may be occasioned by the Babylonian record's statement that the Babylonian king took the city as compared with the OT statement that Jehoiachin surrendered Jerusalem.¹⁷

but to this criticism the article's own adequate answer has already been given.

(3) It then discusses the relationship of Jehoiakim's death to the fall of Jerusalem in 597, on the basis of II Kings 24:

From these data, it would appear that Jehoiakim died before the beginning of the siege which is correct. Yet Josephus says that Nebuchadrezzar slew Jehoiakim and II Chron 36:6-7 speaks of Nebuchadrezzar's binding Jehoiakim in fetters to take him to Babylon, cf. Dan 1:1 which has an exile of Jehoiakim in the 3rd year of his reign. The Babylonian record and the account in II Kings 24 are more likely to be authentic.¹⁷

But the article itself goes on to connect the II Chronicles verses with Jehoiakim's submission and Nebuchadrezzar's plundering in 605 B.C., not in 597. Daniel then explicitly says 605 B.C., speaks only of vessels being taken away (not Jehoiakim), and never mentions the events of 597. Why then does this article bring these verses into the discussion of 597, with which they are not even concerned, and then come to the liberal-satisfying conclusion that they do not give as authentic an account of 597 as do the Babylonian record and II Kings? Drawing in Josephus's mistakes has nothing to do with Scripture. Similar is:

(4) The discrepancies in Josephus, and to some extent in II Chronicles and Dan 1, are caused by: 1) a desire to show that Jer 22:19 (curse against Jehoiakim) was fulfilled, and 2) confusion between this contact between Nebuchadrezzar and Jehoiachin and earlier contacts between Nebuchadrezzar and Jehoiakim.¹⁹

But Chronicles and Daniel show no such confusion. Chronicles describes the Jehoiachin contact in its next paragraph (II Chron. 36:10), clearly distinct from and later than the Jehoiakim contacts; and Daniel, as already stated, does not even mention the Jehoiachin events and clearly dates its material to the early part of the reign of Jehoiakim. As to the curse against Jehoiakim in Jer. 22:19, neither Chronicles nor Daniel say anything about this curse of the exposure of Jehoiakim's corpse; they do not even mention his corpse; and they contain nothing that might be interpreted as contributing to the possibility of such an exposure!

(5) In reference to the Babylonian campaigns in Palestine in 605, the article says: "Nebuchadrezzar probably did receive the submission of some of the western states at this time,"²⁰ a grudging admission that the II Chron. 36:6 statement about Jehoiakim's submission might be correct. But, then again, it might not! This, despite the fact that in addition to the clear statements of both Chronicles and Daniel, Nebuchadrezzar himself claims to have conquered the whole of Hatti in the summer of 605 and then marched unopposed through it on his return in November. In fact, the article itself seems to have an uneasy conscience about this inuendo, because on the same page it states --- and this is the last of its six disparagements of Scripture ---

(6) "II Chron 36:6 is probably a reminiscence of the submission [of Jehoiakim to Nebuchadrezzar in 605], with some exaggeration."²¹ The article, however, gives no indication of what this exaggeration might consist. Further, if the Chronicles verse is a "reminiscence" it is a remarkably accurate one; because it either confirms known facts, or adds other facts that are nowhere contradicted and that are inherently probably under the circumstances --- unless one is bound by the apparent liberal presupposition that the Bible must be wrong until proven right.

Here then has been a remarkable thing: six statements impugning Scripture, adorning an article that otherwise wholly confirms Scripture. How could this be? The writer on this occasion addressed the following query to the author of the article:

Dear Dr. Hyatt: . . . I wonder if I might trouble you with an inquiry as to the basis of an apparent continued distrust of the reliability of some of the Biblical statements. For example . . . I am perplexed about the existence of objective discrepancies in the Biblical material. Do they contradict the Chaldaean chronicles in a way I might not have observed . . . and I wonder for which parts there is evidence of unreliability? . . .

The reply was gracious and did not pass off the inquiry as from "just another fundamentalist." But it did avoid the questions:

It seems to me that the difficulties which are caused by the statements in II Chronicles and Daniel 1, to which I referred in my paper, stem primarily from the fact that there is no evidence whatsoever that Jehoiakim was even taken captive to Babylonia by Nebuchadrezzar. Furthermore, there does not seem to be the likelihood of this in light of the new information which we have. Of course it is true that he made submission to the Babylonian king, but there is no evidence for his being taken captive to Babylonia . . .

But Daniel says nothing whatever about Jehoiakim's being taken captive to Babylon;²² and, while Chronicles does state that he was put in fetters that were designed for such a purpose, it deliberately refrains from stating that such a captivity ever came to pass. The article itself claims no more than this in quoting the verse.²³

In other words, the attacks on Scripture were not because of any additional evidence that had not been included in the article; there just is not a single known discrepancy, despite its repeated slurs in generalization. Really, there seems to be only one explanation: liberals may commit themselves to denials of Scripture, when there is as yet no evidence one way or the other, either to confirm or to deny what the Bible says. But when, on occasion, confirmatory evidence does show up, the liberal faces a serious dilemma. The facts force him to abandon his previous denials, but he has an uneasy conscience about this. At heart he still has an abiding emotional faith in Biblical errancy. So, as the little boy defined faith, he has to keep on "believing what y'know ain't so!"

- 1 Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: 1947).
- 2 Introduction to the Old Testament (New York: c. 1941), p. 755.
- 3 Compare the wholly different attitude of Donald H. Wiseman, the original reporter of this find, "The Last Days of Babylon," Christianity Today, II:4 (Nov. 25, 1957), 7-10.
- 4 Edward L. Curtis, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Chronicles (Edinburgh: 1910), p. 521.
- 5 Andrew C. Zenos, A New Standard Bible Dictionary (3rd rev. ed.; New York: c. 1936), p. 417.
- 6 Cf. The Interpreter's Bible (New York: c. 1936), VI:362.
- 7 II K. 24:6 says nothing about a burial at all.
- 8 Pfeiffer, op. cit., p. 748; James A. Montgomery, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel (New York: 1927), pp. 113-114.
- 9 An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament (8th rev. ed.; Edinburgh: 1909), p. 498.
- 10 Exposition of Daniel (Columbus, Ohio: c. 1949), pp. 47-48, 53.
- 11 As reported by Dr. Hyatt, "New Light on Nebuchadrezzar and Judean History," Journal of Biblical Literature, 75:4 (Dec., 1946), p. 280.
- 12 Loc. cit.
- 13 Loc. cit.
- 14 Ibid., p. 278; cf. Wiseman, op. cit., p. 9.
- 15 Hyatt, op. cit., p. 279.
- 16 Ibid., p. 278.
- 17 Loc. cit.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 278-9
- 19 Ibid., p. 279.
- 20 Ibid., p. 280.
- 21 Loc. cit.
- 22 Cf. Leupold, op. cit., p. 57.
- 23 Hyatt, op. cit., p. 278.