

## HAS THERE BEEN A SHIFT IN THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF CRITICISM ?

WILLIAM W. PAUL  
*Central College, Pella, Iowa*

No evangelical scholar should be opposed to critical Biblical research as such. Indeed, some have made noted contributions in the area of lower, textual criticism. But when a researcher employs a naturalistic attitude in carrying out so-called higher-critical investigations, the orthodox student feels that a presuppositional bias has been introduced which is inconsistent with the faith-commitment which the very study of Biblical literature seems to demand. Nineteenth century criticism tended to approach the Bible as a body of religious literature which contained the story of the natural evolution of the Jewish-Christian faith. It certainly did not approach it as inerrant Scripture nor did it assume with orthodoxy the equal authority of its several parts. The practical results rightly alarmed the orthodox Christian: a purely evolutionary theory of religious development was propounded, the gospel stories as well as Old Testament accounts were viewed as self-contradictory, some supposed prophecies were made over into histories by the technique of late-dating of documents, the so-called "quest for the historical Jesus" assumed that the real Jesus was something less than the gospel records with all of their Jewish, Hellenistic and confessional accretions, the possibility of miracles was suspect, and so on.

William Hordern sums up the fundamentalist's attitude toward higher criticism in his *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology* (Macmillan, 1956, pp. 55-57) when he writes that in the fundamentalist's opinion the theologically liberal higher critic refused to take the Bible upon its own terms as a supernatural revelation and quite naturally missed the whole point. The higher critic assumed that his reason was sufficient to know all that one needs to know in order to understand the world, a presupposition which makes revelation unnecessary . . . . He searches for the naturalistic causes of the Bible and in the process distorts the Bible . . . . So the real difference lies in two totally different world views . . . . The higher critic assumes that the world is a self-contained unity, . . . the fundamentalist accepts the reality of the supernatural God and of God's supernatural intervention among men.

Hordern's statement in layman's language dramatized the opposing positions of those who appeal to the divine authority of Scripture and the higher critic who retains a theologically liberal and philosophically naturalistic orientation.

With this historical estimate in mind let us return to the question, "Has there been a shift in the presuppositions of criticism?" This is really two questions in one. It can mean, (1) "Has there been a shift in the presuppositions of *higher criticism* as a theory in recent decades?" and (2) "Has there been a shift in the presuppositions of those *critics* who accept the older criticism with reservations and who theologically have become neo-liberal or neo-orthodox?" These are two quite different questions and it seems to be important that they should not be confused.

In answer to the first it must be said that there have been very interesting shifts in critical theory but with little evidence in shift in underlying postulates. This is especially true of the basic idea of the inerrancy and full authority of all Scripture. The shift from the documentary hypothesis to the theory of form-criticism, where oral traditions behind documents are sought out, has not brought a return to a high

view of the written Word. It has brought, as George W. Anderson points out in his *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1959, p. 5), a new concern for the community within which oral traditions arose and for the light which archeology is increasingly throwing upon community-cultural life. There have been important shifts which seem to favor conservative theology such as the back-dating of the Psalms. But, to quote Anderson, "the older approach was supplemented, not supplanted. Gunkel (form criticism) did not want to dispense with literary analysis, but rather, assuming its general conclusions, to go on to a new synthesis of the material." Anderson himself is happy that criticism continues to "break the tyranny of the old dogmatic approach to the Bible" (p. 8). Much the same is true of the New Testament field. We shall indicate that there have been important changes in details of interpretation in the critical evaluation of the New Testament literature, but the basic presupposition against infallibility and for the gradual evolution of a Christian-consensus continues.

But while the answer to the first question implied by our topic must be no, the second issue, it seems to me, requires an affirmative response. For the critical liberal to become a neo-liberal does involve a change in theological presuppositions. Increasing numbers of those who are now writing about the theology of the Old or New Testament may still speak about the "assured results of critical analysis" or at least believe that higher criticism provides the point of departure for dealing with the Biblical revelation, but as critics they have been endeavoring in practice to break away from the nineteenth century naturalism. In neo-liberalism and in neo-orthodoxy they have been seeking a religion beyond the old humanism, a ground for faith and authority within the Bible, a Christianity in which Christ is somehow again made central. This general change may be due in part to the crisis conditions that have come to pervade our era so that man's condition and religious need can no longer be met by an optimistic and evolutionary humanism. With many the shift is due more to the impact of social conditions than it is due to the impact of biblical instruction. There is thus little agreement, little sense of common direction among those who gravitate toward neo-liberalism and neo-orthodoxy. As Ridderbos points out in his chapter in *Revelation and the Bible* (p. 349), "The tone of the critical scholars is repeatedly less self-assured than it was at the turn of the century." There is a strong dissatisfaction with a merely rationalistic, Hegelian approach, and yet not a thoroughgoing "desire to bow before the divine authority of the Bible." In general the shift has not brought a return to the orthodox attitude toward the Scriptures but it has, nonetheless, involved more than a surface change in biblical interpretation. It is deep rooted and involves basic assumptions, as I want now to indicate by means of several examples from recent Old and New Testament studies. Even a brief treatment of this question will also reveal the fact, I believe, that the neo-liberal critic probably holds to a set of basic commitments which are less self-consistent than those of the older theological liberal. In fact the very inconsistent and paradoxical state of things in some existentialist quarters is welcomed as a theological virtue.

In order to make our point most clearly it will be expedient to bi-pass the philosophical theologians since they tend to reflect the work of older biblical criticism rather than doing present-day literary analysis. It is only in recent years that the neo-liberal students have discovered sufficient unity in one or both Testaments to attempt the task of writing an account of the theology or thought of the Bible. From among those who have been making the attempt we have chosen John Bright and Frederick C. Grant for purposes of illustration.

Professor John Bright's defense of the historical character of the Old Testament has recently been set forth in his *A History of Israel* (Westminster Press, 1959), where, as in the works of Albright, solid use is made of current archeological and linguistic data. Bright's position was precisely presented in his 1954 lectures at Crozer Theological Seminary on "Biblical Authority and Biblical Theology" (reprinted in booklet form from Crozer's *The Voice*, v. 46, no. 4 & 5, 1954). There Bright criticized the views of Hodge, Warfield, and Strong for taking the Bible so seriously in its entirety that they had to resort to "proof-text plucking" (p. 5) in order to establish their theology. Yet he is not satisfied with the liberal Protestantism which sought for a norm within the Bible in the ethical teachings of Christ. He argues that the study of traditions behind the Gospels by form-criticism has shown that Christ was never merely ethical and non-theological but always an object of faith. The eschatological element, for example, must be accepted as part of the original *kerygma* or message of Jesus Christ. Concerning his own field of Old Testament studies Bright reasons that the neat Wellhausen evolutionary interpretation just does not accord with the facts of Israel's religious history, "There is an increasing disposition, while not minimizing the admitted development of Israel's faith, to find in it an essential oneness through all periods of its history" (p.9). He concludes that, "as the older liberalism used it, the Bible ceased except in name to be normative over Christian belief and action. In fact, the church was left virtually without objective authority at all" (p. 10).

John Bright believes that it is possible to recognize the human element and the non-authoritative in Scripture and yet to find a norm and a principle of unity within the Bible. By a "Biblical theology" he believes it is possible to find a normative statement of the Hebrew-Christian faith that can occupy a normative position over the church. The principle of unity is to be found in the New Testament *kerygma*: "The Messiah has come, and he is none other than this Jesus who came, did mighty works, was crucified and now has risen again" (p. 18). If Bright's position allows for more subjectivism and disagreement among scholars than is true of orthodoxy, he nonetheless holds that

the essential features of the Bible faith can be set forth with a great measure of agreement. It is a theme of *Heilsgeschichte*: the God who acts in history to redeem his people, and who acts decisively in Jesus Christ, who ever summons his people to respond to his grace in obedience and to live in covenant under his righteous rule, and who has declared that at the end of history there stands the triumph of his Kingdom (p. 18).

Having found this "saving-history" within the Bible, Bright's final task is to make its meaning relevant to the modern world. Here he agrees with Bultmann that the Bible must be re-interpreted. But not by Bultmann's "de-mythologization", for this really amounts to "de-theologizing" the Bible. "Rather", argues Bright, "we should retain the language, while admitting its difficulty, but ask if there is not behind it some theology which, if rightly understood, we might not affirm—albeit in different language—as clearly as did Biblical man, and which might be normative for our faith" (p. 21). This willingness to affirm the *theology* expressed in the story of creation and fall, and in the laws of land tenure or in the laws of sacrifice, and so on, makes it possible for Bright to come to a much fuller confession of faith than was possible for the older ethical-modernist. Such a shift, it seems to me, implies an alteration in basic presuppositions.

Professor Frederick C. Grant's *Introduction to New Testament Thought* (Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950) affords another clear example of the postulates of neo-

liberalism. He finds an underlying unity in the midst of much diversity of thought in the New Testament and between the Testaments by appealing to form-criticism to uncover the New Testament message as it developed in oral and written form within the early church community with all of its Judaic and Hellenistic background. As early as 1933 in his *The Growth of the Gospels* (Abingdon Press, p. 18) Grant expressed his dissatisfaction with the destructive and evolutionary criticism. His 1950 study is an attempt to find an alternative to liberalism and orthodoxy, to find within the New Testament a "revelation of God in Christ."

Grant's presupposition for the interpretation of the New Testament is made clear in his statement that "neither a philosophy nor a historical tradition is the central factor in New Testament thought, neither Greek 'wisdom' nor Jewish tradition but the *new life in Christ*" (p. 54). No longer does he follow Harnack's thesis of Hellenistic influences in the New Testament as strongly as in earlier works. (It is still there in some of his interpretations of Paul, Mark, Hebrews, and especially John.) Now Grant devotes a great deal of attention to Jewish influence and to the Old Testament theological background. He claims that "The Old Testament view of God, of creation, of man, of history, of sin, of salvation, and of human destiny acted as a catalytic agent in precipitating and crystallizing the ideas of the apostolic church. It not only preserved and carried over many of the major doctrines of Judaism, but helped to give form to the new ideas and doctrines that sprang fresh and unique out of Christian experience" (p. 53). Beyond this Grant recognizes that in the New Testament "it is everywhere taken for granted that Scripture is trustworthy, infallible and inerrant . . . No New Testament writer would ever dream of questioning a statement contained in the Old Testament" (p. 75). At times he even appears to regret that this view has now become too "old fashion" for him (p. 87).

The clearest way to check the presuppositional shift in a thinker like F. C. Grant is to note what he has to say about miracles and the supernatural. In discussing the importance of miracles in the New Testament he says that after two centuries of attempt the effort to remove "the miraculous" from the Gospels appears hopeless, Christianity, he affirms, is "supernaturalistic to the core" (p. 157). This does not mean that Grant believes all the miracle stories should be accepted although they all appeared miraculous to the first century believers. But he cannot accept such nineteenth century explanations as the feeding of the multitude as simply an example of a boy sharing his lunch, or the "walking on the water" as being really a walking "along" the lake. Grant's criterion here seems to be that such rationalizations just don't help us to understand the religion and theology of the New Testament in the first and second century setting. It is better, he says, to leave them as they stand "as an indispensable element in the gospel story, and as the evidence (for the first century) of the stupendous power and true nature of the oncoming kingdom of God" (p. 158).

This last statement points to Grant's own positive theory, the "eschatological interpretation of miracles." By eschatological interpretation Grant means that miracles are signs of the unfolding of God's plan of action for the ages. Biblical miracles did not simply confirm the message of God's prophet (as they do, he says, in John), but "they actually advanced the change which God was bringing about in his world; they drove back the forces of evil and led on the forces of the divine kingdom" (p. 149). It is this very eschatological quality, he feels, which distinguishes New Testament miracles from pagan accounts. The Synoptics especially present Jesus as saying, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk. 11:20, Mt. 12:28).

Now it should be noted that this approach to the miraculous enables him to give to many of the Biblical miracles a theological significance and to more or less bi-pass the question of their historicity. We just can't apply twentieth century scientific methods to the first century world, he argues. Rather, "The real test of a miracle with religious value was, then as now, and as in every age, whether or not it supplied proof of the presence, the power, or the purpose of God" (p. 148). As far as evidence is concerned, according to Grant, the first century people were credulous, and they were satisfied to interpret the reported phenomena, not the evidence (p. 155). However, the evidence for Jesus' miracles, he insists, was more than hearsay or common report. Jairus' daughter for example, was given food, the chronic hemorrhage was cured in a crowd, and the blind man "sees everything clearly" and is sent home.

Grant places a great deal of stress upon the fact that there was a central miracle in the Old Testament: the deliverance from Egypt culminating in the giving of the law, and a central miracle in the the New Testament: the resurrection of Christ culminating in the coming of the Spirit and the establishment of the New Israel (Chap. VII). And, he says, "the evidence for this greatest miracle of all . . . is stated repeatedly" (p. 156). The very diversity of the evidence shows that it could not have been devised by one man and its amplitude and importance was never questioned by the early church. This is not to say that Grant accepts all the details concerning the resurrection. He thinks, for example, that there are late additions: the emphasis on "forty days," on the "physical," the idea of eating with the disciples, etc., which, he reasons, probably came in to meet the Gnostic peril (pp. 227-9).

It must be admitted that more of the naturalistic or rationalistic element lingers in the approach of Grant to the Bible than is the case with Bright. But the point remains that Grant has found a way to preserve in his theology the concept of the supernatural. Like Bright, he wants to find a unifying theme in the Bible and to base his Christian faith and thought upon it. Like George Ernest Wright (*God Who Acts*, London, SCM Press, 1952) these men believe they have found a way beyond the more rationalistic and evolutionary presuppositions of the older liberal critics. As Bright says, Biblical theology is based on *Heilsgeschichte*, on God's redemptive acts within man's history, and Grant has a parallel "eschatological" approach to God's plan of action. This surely represents a shift in presuppositional emphasis. It does *not* mean that these men have a desire to return to orthodoxy, especially if that means returning to the view of the Scriptures as inerrant and as of divine authority in all its parts. And it does *not* mean that these men have the emphasis on objective historicity which has generally been characteristic of orthodox Christianity. We must conclude that the new "existential theology" leaves its exponents with many problems and unresolved issues, but they are not all the same difficulties by any means which orthodoxy uncovered in the older critical position. There has been a shift in the presuppositions of those doing critical theology today—a shift which is gradually bringing about a reevaluation of "higher criticism" itself—and it is imperative that evangelical scholarship should not only point up the continuing influence of the older naturalistic and rationalistic assumptions but also understand and meet the newer existential and eschatological perspective as it is actually being propounded by its increasingly influential advocates.