

# TODAY'S CRITIC—PRESUPPOSITIONS, TOOLS AND METHODS

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Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in the Word of God. The "theology of the Word of God" is much more popular than it was in recent decades.

For an evaluation of the Word of God many a theologian, philosopher, minister and in turn the layman is dependent upon the scholar who primarily devotes his intellectual efforts to biblical studies. As the latter expresses his reasoned opinions, involving a judgment of the value or trustworthiness of the Scriptures he becomes known as a critic. Consequently today's critic has a vitally important role in the attitude toward the Word of God.

Any critic is immediately confronted with the problem of presupposition. In the preface, or the introductory chapter, the author of a volume dealing with the Word of God usually states his position. Should the Bible be regarded as literature, as a cultural tradition, as inerrant scripture, as the record of a religious encounter? All of these and possibly more come into focus when any critic is faced with the written record, the Bible.

Basic among all these questions is the presupposition of the critics regarding the trustworthiness of the Bible. This is the watershed that ultimately divides them into two camps. One group regards the Bible at face value—reliable, trustworthy and inerrant. The other group may presuppose various other positions except the recognition that the Bible is reliable throughout.

Clearly illustrative of the former position is the book by E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1949), p. 33, "The viewpoint adopted in this present work is that the Old Testament is the very word of the God of truth." Interpretation throughout is based on this assumption.

The latter viewpoint is vividly set forth in the *Introduction to the Old Testament* by the late R. H. Pfeiffer of Harvard (Harpers and Bros.), p. 141. He wrote as follows: "Broadly speaking, the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis is adopted as fundamentally sound in the following analysis of the Pentateuch." This statement represents the key to his interpretation of the Old Testament.

Undoubtedly a more mediating position is represented by W. F. Albright who has frequently used archaeological evidence to verify historical parts of the Scriptures. However, he often disregards scriptural statements, holding them as invalid when they do not agree with his viewpoint. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, illustrates this point vividly: p. 247:

"It will be observed that Albright's acceptance of the single statement of II Chron. 16:1—on the a priori assumption that the Chronicler must be regarded as the preserver of certain reliable facts not preserved in Kings and that we have no right to disregard the datings by regnal years of the kings of Judah which we find there, especially when they are as consistent and reasonable as e.g., in the case of Asa<sup>17</sup>—involves him in a denial of seven other Biblical statements. And this result is not all an opposition of Kings to Chronicles, for in order to accept the validity of II Chron. 16:1 Albright rejects the validity of II Chron. 12:13 and 13:1. In order to accept a single statement in Chronicles he rejects two others in Chronicles in addition to five in Kings. Can it be that in order to have this one

reference in Chronicles correct, two other references in Chronicles as well as give in Kings must be wrong?" (p. 247-248)

More recently the presupposition that the Scriptures cannot be regarded as inerrant is specifically set forth by Norman Gottwald in his volume, *A Light to the Nations* (Harper & Bros., 1959). After defining the theory of verbal inspiration (p. 7), he asserts that "those who categorically reject the premises and conclusions of verbal inspiration must not be cast in the role of the devil's advocate, for rather than disparaging the Bible they seek the overthrow of a theory about the Bible that is historically untenable and religiously deceptive."

Gottwald further adds that "it can be argued that the only presupposition common to all Old Testament critics is the necessity of questioning tradition, of examining a religious literature as we would examine any other writings in order to determine authorship, date, sources, and historical background. This at once sounds the death knell for verbal inspiration, but beyond that it does not dictate conclusions as to the basic philosophical or religious framework through which the Old Testament should be viewed." (p. 9)

Although Gottwald seeks to be objective in his approach to the Old Testament he seems to presuppose that the scriptures cannot be regarded as inerrant. In fact, as he delineates his angle of vision he admits that "the fact is that value judgments are inescapable. We all come to the Old Testament with some ultimate perspective, even if it is to deny the ultimacy of the Hebrew claim. It is not only the student who belongs to one of the traditional religions who possesses presuppositions. His may be more obvious and, because the Old Testament is Scripture to him, he may have greater initial difficulty in striking off the shackles of tradition. But the agnostic, the naturalist, the humanist, the pantheist (and these terms may be taken to refer not so much to clearly distinguished, hard and fast groups as to the various opinions to traditional religion)—each has his own conceptual framework within which he views the common subject matter." (p. 13)

The common denominator to Old Testament critics seems to be the presupposition that either the scriptures are inerrant, trustworthy and reliable or that they are treated on the purely human level. For the latter the value judgment of the critic is imposed on Scripture while for the former the Scripture is accepted as the standard to which all value judgments are subjected.

A simple illustration of this is the Book of the Covenant, Ex. 20:23 - 23:19, which purports to be given at Mt. Sinai and ratified by the Israelites if the Scriptures are taken in their natural context. With the presupposition that the Scriptures are not trustworthy this passage is relegated to a period after Israel entered Canaan and divorced from its Mosaic association historically. The verses in Exodus 24 which specifically state that Moses wrote down all the Lord's pronouncement are not regarded as reliable but assigned to the *E* document in the days of the Divided Monarchy (Gottwald, p. 251).

In their analysis of the Pentateuch as a whole, today's critics who do not recognize the Bible as reliable ignore almost all of the internal references that ascribe writing to Moses. Rather than regarding the simple statements that Moses wrote certain parts of the Pentateuch they accept the presupposition that oral tradition prevailed. Writes Anderson in his book, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Prentice-Hall, 1957), p. 156, "The period from Moses to David was the period par excellence of the oral tradition." Religious traditions of Israel were handed down orally until the Divided Kingdom era when these oral traditions were transmitted to documents  
(cont. on p. 92)

scholars had concluded either that the Biblical text was corrupt, or that it was historically untrustworthy. Thiele, operating on the principle that the record was truthful, though obscure, showed quite satisfactorily that it involved two methods of reckoning that changed without notice in the text. While he did not solve all the problems of chronology immediately, his simple explanation reconciled the conflicting figures and confirmed the existing account. Accepting the presupposition of essential truthfulness led to fuller investigation and to sounder conclusions.

The recognition of these limitations is not a plea for obscurantism, but for more persistent research. Where the Bible seemingly disagrees with history, we need to probe deeper into the available evidence and to be ready to rearrange our thinking, if necessary. Hypotheses may come and go; understanding may be imperfect; but truth is eternal, and is available to those who will pay the price for it.

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#### *The Bible and Non-Inspired Sources (cont. from p. 81)*

study of genealogies kept them from the truth of the gospel. Accordingly, that same apostle who teaches us that "all Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" also warns us against the perils of inordinate speculation, admonishing us in Titus 3:9 to "shun foolish questionings, and genealogies . . . for they are unprofitable and vain."

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#### *Today's Critics (cont. from p. 88)*

and ultimately combined into the Pentateuch about 400 B.C. (cf. also Gottwald, pp. 16 ff.).

The position that a critic takes regarding the Scriptures is basic. Either he regards them as reliable, authoritative and a trustworthy basis for his treatment of the biblical period or he rejects it as trustworthy.

Once the critic has decided this basic question he should consider the Bible as literature, evaluate it in its cultural tradition and as a record of a religious encounter. Interpretations throughout, of course, will be directly effected by his basic presupposition.

The tools of the critics fundamentally are the same: the text in the original language, grammar, dictionaries, archaeology, history, geography, and other studies that shed light on the Scriptures. Methodology likewise is similar and varies only as it is determined by the basic presupposition of the critic. His attitude toward the validity of Scripture is paramount.

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