

EDITORIAL

· “The problem of God now stands before us as the critical problem of the next decade, and it is the fundamental issue for all mankind.” So ended the address by Dr. Carl Henry before the Evangelical Theological Society assembled in their nineteenth annual meeting recently held in Toronto, Canada.

Why has God become a problem to this generation? How is it that the twentieth century mind has become so crucially absorbed in the theological quicksand that it even arrogantly ponders the idea of endeavoring to comprehend who God is, what He is like, and above all assumes the authority to make pronouncements that God is dead?

Beyond the manifestation of God in nature our knowledge of God is based on the Bible. Perhaps we do well to consider what kind of a Bible our generation of modern theologians is reading in developing the recent theology which Dr. Henry has outlined so vividly.

The Bible for the twentieth century scholar is all too often a book primarily composed of myths and legends with some history, prophecy, and other varieties of literary form. A story in the Bible is defined by modern scholarship as myth when one of the actors transcends the probability of human sense perception. Consequently whenever God breaks through into the human realm as actor the story is a myth. Individuals like Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Noah and others are imaginary characters. What is said about God or what God says in these stories actually is regarded as the idea of the author who composed these narratives some time between the tenth and fourth centuries B.C. Is it any wonder that the God portrayed in this context is not a reality? After all the “god” in this context of myth and imagination is not real but merely reflects the theological ideas of these authors who through their creativity refined or enlarged the oral tradition that had been transmitted to them by bards and camp-romancers.

In legends, as defined by some modern scholars of biblical literature, there is a certain degree of probability that these actors and events actually occurred in flesh and blood history. Such stories in the Bible possibly have a historical basis but the twentieth century reader of the Bible is duly warned that these legends are based on imaginary accounts which often replace the facts which have been lost to memory in the course of oral transmission from generation to generation. The story of Abraham’s temptation serves as a typical example of a legend in the Bible. Of course the parts where God is speaking are myth.

History in the biblical literature may deal with persons and events but frequently it is interwoven with myth and legend. Consider the account of Abraham in Genesis 12-25. Around the turn of the twentieth

century the prevailing view on the patriarchs was that they were mythological characters created by literary geniuses between 950-400 B.C. Today, as a result of the impact of archaeological data as applied to biblical literature, the patriarchs are recognized as having been alive in history. Abraham is now acclaimed by most scholars as actually historical. The Genesis account of Abraham, however, is recognized by a large segment of biblical scholarship as a reconstruction of the original documents which has been interwoven with myth and legend.

Is it any wonder that God is not a reality to the modern theologian who views this account as a mixture of myth, legend, and history? Is there any logical basis for deriving any reality for the existence of God in the rest of the Bible which is interpreted by the twentieth century theologian from the same limited human perspective of the Bible as literature?

Modern theologians would have a firmer foundation if they approached the Old Testament scriptures with the attitude that Jesus and the apostles had. They regarded Adam, Abel, Cain, Noah and other individuals as genuine. They regarded the communications of God to Abraham and Moses and others as actual events in which God was revealing Himself to these individuals. Were Paul's conception of God as expressed in the New Testament and based on the Old Testament used as a norm for constructing theology by our twentieth century scholars a more constructive theology might be forthcoming.

S. J. S.