

## FRONTIER ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

With Dr. Carl F. H. Henry as moderator this topic was discussed at the Seventeenth annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society held at Nashville Tenn. in December 1965. As a basis for stimulating participation the following papers were presented from areas of Biblical, historical, and theological perspectives.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT

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A major point of tension in contemporary theological dialogue, and consequently a frontier issue, is the problem of the nature of Biblical history and its relation to the phenomenon of revelation. One of the major affirmations made by Evangelicalism is that history, as it is commonly understood, is the channel of God's self-disclosure and that revelation takes place progressively in the milieu of history's succession of events. These divine self-disclosures occur within the plane of ordinary human experience and in historical sequence. Biblically there can be no reason for the difference made by some writers between history and supra-history, this supposed difference being defined on the basis of extra-Biblical existentialist assumptions.

The distinction made by some scholars between *Historie* and *Geschichte* is artificial and invalid. Bultman, following Kierkegaard, insists that the true events of the Judeo-Christian faith are not historical events in the usual and proper sense of the term (*Historie*) but rather existential events (*Geschichte*) which are not subject to historical investigation. The evangelical affirmation that the divine self-disclosure takes place within history is of vital importance for the whole range of theological disciplines as well as for the Bible's practical relevance for the problem of the relation of the church to the world.

It is history that forms the line of encounter along which many a theological advance has taken place. And it is the Old Testament that provides the main anchorage for revelation through history. Biblical revelation cannot be uprooted from its historical setting in the life of God's historical people and then be treated as though it were merely a general truth, a scientific principle, a proposition in logic, or an idea wholly unrelated to time. The truths of Biblical revelation are truths of national and personal encounter with God and are revealed in life, and in history. Examples of the divine self-disclosure in history are the flood of Noah, the Exodus under the leadership of Moses, and the Babylonian Captivity. One must hasten to remark that added to the revelation that takes place in and through the events of history, another channel for

the divine self-disclosure is that of direct verbal communication. It is an inescapable fact of the Old Testament that God makes special verbal communication with particular men on specific occasions. In moments of special revelation and historical crisis God spoke to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees (Acts 7:2), and to Moses at the burning bush.

A great gain for Evangelicalism in recent years is the growing realization among all scholars that the witness of the Scriptures to the revelatory acts of God is trustworthy. The acceptance of the fact of the reliability of the Biblical historical record has, according to evangelicals, been of great importance. Although liberals do not speak in terms of an inerrant Scripture, they do speak in terms of a generally reliable record. This is a great gain when compared to the situation only a few years ago. The big names of Old Testament scholarship of those days can be quoted for holding that the events of Genesis are late inventions for etiological purposes, and that consequently these events were not to be taken seriously as reliable history. Today there is hardly a single Old Testament scholar who has not been affected by the archaeological data supporting the historical record of Genesis chapters 12 to 50. It is also true that archaeology confirms the historical data found in the written records of the rest of the Old Testament.

A clear example is the attempt of C. C. Torrey and others to show that there was no Babylonian Captivity.<sup>1</sup> This attempt has been shown to be without foundation. The denial by this school of the invasion of Palestine by the Babylonians, the captivity of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, and the return of the Hebrews under Cyrus has important implications not only for the accuracy of the Biblical record but also for the Messianology of Old Testament Biblical Theology. In the light of the archaeological reconstruction of Judean history, Torrey's position has collapsed completely. Even the historicity of the Edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5) in 538 B.C. has been substantiated by archaeological discoveries.<sup>2</sup>

The historical contexts of the revelatory acts of God must be understood in terms of *Heilsgeschichte*, that exposition in the Scriptures which unfolds God's redemptive purpose through His people in history. Some liberals profess to find a difficulty in uniting or coordinating *Heilsgeschichte* and the historical facts as reconstructed by modern historians on the basis of archaeological discoveries. James M. Robinson exaggerates this difficulty.<sup>3</sup> In trying to show that *Heilsgeschichte* and historical fact do not converge he uses a reference that will not stand the

1. C. C. Torrey, *Ezra Studies*, (Chicago: 1910); *Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Original Prophecy*, (New Haven: 1930)
2. Roland de Vaux, *Revue Biblique*, 1937, pp. 29-57; E. J. Bickerman, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXV (1946) pp. 249f.
3. James M. Robinson, "The Historical Question" in *New Directions in Biblical Thought*, edited by Cyril Blackman (Reflection Book Association Press, N. Y. 1960) See A. Kuschke, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*; 3rd ed., III, 1959, p. 591.

test of careful scrutiny. In his essay on, "The Historical Question," published in the Reflection Book, *New Directions in Biblical Thought*, edited by Cyril Blackman in 1960, on page 83, he quotes from a recent encyclopedia article on Jericho by A. Kuschke to illustrate the problem he raises. Kuschke says, "The most recent excavations led by K. Kenyon have led to the incontestable conclusion that at the time of Joshua Jericho no longer had a wall."

The fact of the matter is that even though practically all of the Late Bronze Age (Ca. 1500-1200 B.C.) stratum of Tell es-Sultan, the recognized site of Jericho, has been eroded and the building materials carried away by the builders of later centuries, a small area of the Late Bronze Age remains to show that there was a city of Old Testament Jericho in Joshua's day. One needs only to read Miss Kenyon's report of the excavations.<sup>4</sup> William F. Albright says concerning Jericho that on that site there is, "a Late Bronze mud-brick stratum which was all but completely eroded by wind and rain during the four centuries between the probable date of its destruction by the Israelites and its re-occupation in the time of Ahab. Such phenomena are exceedingly common in the Middle East."<sup>5</sup>

But not only has there been established the general recognition of the reliability of the Old Testament historical record. The same kind of evidence has made generally acceptable the fact of the accuracy of the transmission of the Masoretic Text. The position of Millar Burrows in 1941 has never been refuted, in fact, it has been abundantly verified by later studies. In his book, "What Mean these Stones," Burrows wrote that archaeological discoveries have, "shown that not only the main substance of what has been written but even the words, aside from minor variations, have been transmitted with remarkable fidelity, so that there need be no doubt whatever regarding the teaching conveyed by them."<sup>6</sup> Albright refers to the "light-hearted emendation in which Old Testament students used to indulge," and then goes on to say about the changed picture today, "One thing is certain: the days when Duhm and his imitators could recklessly emend the Hebrew text of the . . . books of the Bible are gone forever . . . We may rest assured that the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible . . . has been preserved with an accuracy . . . unparalleled in any other Near-Eastern literature."<sup>7</sup>

William Irwin, until his retirement Professor of Old Testament at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, puts this fact in bold relief when he says, "the reliability of the Bible is now assumed; so

4. K. M. Kenyon, *Digging up Jericho* (1957) 2gl, 262; *Archaeology in the Holy Land* (1960) pp. 209 ff.
5. William F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (Harper and Row, 1963) p. 28; See also G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Phila. Westminster Press, 1960, abridged edition) pp. 27, 48.
6. Millar Burrows, *What Mean these Stones?*, American Schools of Oriental Research, New Haven, 1941, p. 42.
7. William F. Albright in *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, p. 25.

that when some rich find, such for example of the Lachish letters, fits with astonishing precision into the Biblical records, it is accepted with gratification, but scarcely with surprise. The objective rather is to re-create the entire political and cultural situation out of which the Bible in its successive parts arose. Archaeology, one might say, has been removed from apologetics to biblical exposition; it is the resource of the exegete."<sup>8</sup>

In that monumental work, "The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology, Studies in Honor of C. H. Dodd," K. W. Clark of Duke University makes the interesting statement, "While the search for the 'true text' does not in itself imply a theory of verbal inspiration, the living word contains a message of life and the importance of that message is one with the importance of the literal word. The textual critic has always been a theologian, but it is equally essential that the theologian shall be a textual critic. Certainly the two functions are indivisible and whether carried on in one mind or in two they must find close partnership. Therefore, the effect of textual criticism upon Biblical studies must be continuous, and the textual critic is called upon at all times to persist in the preparation of a better textual foundation upon which the structure of Christian faith may stand firm."<sup>9</sup>

These represent gains for the evangelical position in its encounter with liberalism even though these shifts are the fruit of the application of the critics own methods, disciplines, and techniques. But the evangelical takes a step beyond the critic and pronounces the Scriptures inerrant and believes that this is the great pillar of the evangelical structure.

A point at issue is the question of the hermeneutic to be employed when one approaches the text of Scripture. It is widely agreed that the witness of the Biblical record must be interpreted inductively according to the grammatico-historical exegesis, because the message was spoken within and to a concrete historical situation, and so was historically conditioned. This is the safeguard which keeps the "theological" or "spiritual" exegesis from getting out of hand. It is the anchor without which theological interpretation floats in the air. The Bible must be interpreted from its own center, and must be allowed to provide its own canons of interpretation. We cannot be truly scientific in our approach to Scripture when our assumptions are drawn from an extra-biblical perspective. An example of the failure of a system based upon a philosophy foreign to the Scripture was Julius Wellhausen's use of the dialectic of Georg Hegel to explain the religion of the Old Testament. His unilinear evolutionary historicism now stands discredited. Yet the pen of Wellhausen had made it seem to be the ultimate answer.

The same result seems certain to follow the popularity in some areas of the existential approach to Scripture. Already the forces for

8. William Irwin, "The Modern Approach to the Old Testament," in *The Journal of Bible and Religion*, Sept. 1953, p. 13.
9. K. W. Clark, *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology, Studies in Honor of C. H. Dodd*, p. 51.

change are evident. We hear now of the post-Bultmannians, led by Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling, who have apparently traveled far along the road of "neo-liberalism" and have developed the "New Hermeneutic." Norman Perrin of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago says a true existentialist interpretation of the Scripture, "is one through which faith comes to be word or language event for us, and the hermeneutic by means of which this is to be achieved is the New Hermeneutic. . . in a sense we have come full circle, from nineteenth century liberalism to the twentieth century neo-liberalisms of the New Hermeneutic."<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand Evangelicalism in modern times has worked steadfastly with a Biblically controlled perspective. It is true that we can never escape altogether the influence upon our interpretation of the age in which we live, for this is the point from which we approach the Scripture. But the interpreter is under the obligation to seek to understand the Bible in its own terms, rather than his own.

With the passing, generally, of unilinear evolutionary historicism, and especially the idea of evolution in the religion of Israel, there still remains the issue of organic evolution. It is questionable that any form of organic evolution, whatever it may be called, or however interpreted, may be squared satisfactorily with the creation account in Genesis. General agreements there are, of course, between organic evolution and the Genesis creation account. This is natural and to be expected. But when detailed comparisons are made, for example, between Genesis and historical geology, serious discrepancies arise, for one thing, in the sequence of the appearance of the various forms of life.

Using this concordistic approach to the creation account in Genesis to solve the problem of organic evolution and the Bible, one is in danger of attempting to interpret the text on the basis of an assumption drawn from an extra-Biblical perspective deduced from a prominent aspect of the pattern of our twentieth century culture. In this respect a statement of Paul Roubiczek of Cambridge University is interesting. Some of his University lectures were published under the title, "Existentialism—For and Against," by the Cambridge University Press. Roubiczek says, "It is important to remember that biologists speak of a *theory* of evolution, and that we ought always to bear in mind that it is a theory; single facts have been discovered, but the link between them is an assumption, a hypothesis. As a scientific hypothesis, the idea of evolution is extremely useful; it helps to explain facts to such an extent that further fruitful research becomes possible. But, as with all theories, the scientist has to be prepared to change it if new discoveries are made which do not agree with it, or to replace it altogether if it cannot be adapted to the discoveries. After all, there have been important changes since Darwin,

10. Norman Perrin, "The Challenge of New Testament Theology Today," in *Criterion* Spring, 1965, p. 33.

such as the introduction of the concept of mutations and of genes; sooner or later such modifications of the theory may affect the fundamental idea itself. In other words: the theory of evolution shows, as do all theories, the limitations of knowledge; it should not, therefore, be accepted as a complete basis for philosophy or as ultimate, absolute truth. Scientists are fully entitled to make it the basis of research, but philosophers should consider its limitations critically."<sup>11</sup>

The date of the creation of man according to Ussher's chronology cannot be supported by a careful study and exegesis of the pertinent Biblical passages. A comparison of the genealogical lists in Genesis chapters 5 and 11 with Matthew 1, together with other passages, indicates an elasticity which the date 4004 B.C. does not take into consideration. The archaeological excavations of Robert Braidwood of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago at Jarmo, in Iraq, place man in his first community life there about 9,000 years ago.<sup>12</sup> This is entirely within the range of Biblical chronological perspective, and consequently acceptable to evangelicals.

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11. Paul Roubiczek, *Existentialism—For and Against*, (Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 22, 23.
12. Robert Braidwood, "The Biography of a Research Project," in *Chicago Today*, Fall, 1965, p. 23.