

Faith vs. Scientific Study of the Bible

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[p.4]

My lifelong interest in the Bible has a very personal basis:^{*} Since I am a Christian (an evangelical Christian at that), I find in the Bible the record of God's redemptive revelation of himself, which was crowned in the person and work of Jesus. But if I am asked (as I sometimes am) if my personal commitment to the central message of the Bible does not inhibit the scientific study of the Bible, I have to answer, "Not at all"; rather, its scientific study is stimulated and encouraged by my commitment to its message. The biblical message inculcates, among other things, a love of truth for its own sake and a willingness to follow the evidence wherever it may lead.

The biblical documents invite literary and historical criticism. In order to understand them we have to ask questions about their text, genre, structure, date and authorship, and their historical and sociological setting. The answers to these questions cannot be prescribed in advance, by some external authority; they have to be found by a consideration of the relevant evidence. That means primarily the internal evidence of the documents themselves. It is useless, for example, to discuss the date and authorship of Isaiah 40-55 without looking at the contents of these 16 chapters and asking where in the course of ancient Near Eastern history—or where in the course of the biblical narrative—they fit in most naturally. When that question is asked, it is not difficult to locate the historical setting of these chapters within a decade—the years during which Cyrus the Persian was already marching from victory to victory in Western Asia, but had not yet captured Babylon. His capture of Babylon is predicted in those chapters; it is not yet a *fait accompli*. Therefore, the period immediately preceding 539 B.C. is indicated for the composition of this section of the book of Isaiah. If one asks why this section is treated as a self-contained literary unit (known as deutero-Isaiah), or what its relation is to the other sections of the book of Isaiah, the reply would be: These are questions of literary criticism, which can be answered only by internal evidence from this section in the context of the entire book of Isaiah.

The biblical narrative is related to the course of over 2,000 years of Near Eastern history. Much of it shows how members of a tiny nation living between powerful empires felt as those empires marched their armies through the small nation north to the Euphrates or south towards Egypt. The narrative and, even more, the prophetic messages that accompany it show the reader also how hard conditions could be for those who were at the mercy of abrupt economic and social change—from nomadic to sedentary life, for example; from the simple coexistence of free smallholders to the concentration of land in the ownership of a few more powerful persons, with the reduction of their poorer neighbors to virtual serfdom; from country life to sophisticated urban civilization. At each of these transitions the lot of the

^{*} Until I retired from active involvement in academic life in 1978, I had been a university teacher of biblical studies for over 30 years. Earlier still, had studied Greek and Roman literature and history for seven years at three universities and had taught classical Greek for 12 years at two other universities. The academic foundation for my later career as a teacher of biblical criticism and exegesis was laid in the Faculty of Arts, not in any theological school.

The transition from classical to biblical studies came when I spent nearly ten years writing a commentary on the Greek text of the Acts of the Apostles, treating that book as a distinguished example of Hellenistic history writing. After the lapse of many years, largely devoted to the study and interpretation of the letters of Paul, I have recently advised and updated my early work on Acts, but still regard Acts as a distinguished example of Hellenistic history writing.

underprivileged is championed by the great prophets of Israel, but they can do little to halt the process; only, when their warnings about the disasters in store "where wealth accumulates, and men decay" are fulfilled, their wise words are remembered and recorded for future generations. We can appreciate the wisdom of the Persian ruler Cyrus, who saw how senseless it was for a ruler to fill his realm with discontented "displaced persons" when he could win their gratitude cheaply by permitting them to return home if they so wished.

Similarly, in the New Testament one can see how the family life of ordinary people could be dislocated at the most inconvenient time by a Roman emperor's census decree; how the need to maintain the Roman peace meant that political expediency took precedence over "human rights" (to use a modern expression): "It is

[p.5]

expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." We are shown what adjustments were necessary when a message first proclaimed in Galilee was presented and made relevant to the inhabitants of great cities in the eastern Roman provinces (as in the ministry of Paul), or how a change of idiom was called for (as in the writings of John) when that message was communicated to the Hellenistic world two generations after the time of Jesus, who first proclaimed it in the idiom of his own environment.

We are shown, too, how (especially in the pagan world of that day) the acceptance of the Christian message and the Christian way of life involved a process of desocializing and resocializing, which goes far to explain the tension between church and pagan society under the Roman Empire.

In such transitional periods, life could be particularly hard for the powerless, who had neither influence nor resources. The Bible, especially in the words of psalmists and prophets and those who stood in their spiritual succession, helps us to see military, political, economic and social changes through the eyes of the underprivileged, and reveals God as being on their side. Since the scales are so heavily weighted in favor of the rich and powerful. God redresses the balance and declares himself the champion of the poor and oppressed. Those who believe God's character to be as consistent as the Bible says it is may be sure that he has not changed in this respect: he is still the friend of outsiders, the protector of the unprotected.

Nor is the God of the Bible concerned with human beings only: he cares for such inconsiderable creatures as sparrows, and his children are expected to imitate him in this regard: "A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast." Besides, since God's "compassion is over all his works," the inanimate creation is not excluded from his care. The human race has been entrusted by him with the task of tending the earth and its fruits. If selfish exploitation can turn the good earth into a dustbowl and infect the world's waterways with deadly pollution, responsible stewardship (reasserting the ancient biblical principles of the creation mandate) can make the desert blossom like the rose.