

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: CRITICAL JUDGMENTS IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

by E. EARLE ELLIS

AMONG the papers presented at the International Seminar on Scripture held on the campus of Gordon Divinity School, Wenham, Massachusetts, in June, 1966, was the following discussion on biblical authority by Dr. E. Earle Ellis, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies in New Brunswick Theological Seminary and a distinguished evangelical New Testament scholar. It is a pleasure to present it to a wider public in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY.

AMONG those committed to a high view of biblical authority there may arise different understandings of the teaching of Scripture about itself. Or there may be different responses to criticisms of traditional viewpoints. The evangelical biblical scholar will be guided by at least two presuppositions, his role as an historical-literary critic and his commitment to affirm the authority of Scripture and to structure his theology in biblical categories. Within this framework the present paper suggests an approach to several modern objections to biblical authority.

Such objections occur in four areas, moral, theological, literary-historical, and scientific. Sometimes they can simply be countered. Sometimes, however, the best or even an adequate answer may require a reformulation of one's own point of view. New assessments, of course, must not only provide better answers to the problems and objections; they must also be agreeable to the Scripture's own estimate of its Word of God character. The following observations are made in the hope that they meet these requisites.

In his recent book on the use of the Psalter in worship, John Stott suggests why Christians often feel uncomfortable reading the imprecatory Psalms: we read into them the same kind of vindictiveness that those words evoke in us.¹ At a more general

¹C. S. Lewis poses a different question: whether the views of the Psalmists—any more than those of Eliphaz—are always the teaching of God. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York, 1958), pp. 20-33.

level the moral dichotomy between law and Gospel, Old Testament and New Testament, love and justice, sometimes reflects the same kind of inability to hear Scripture within its true intention. Quite often, I suspect, it arises in its modern form from the sentimental view of God and of Jesus that was popular in nineteenth-century liberalism, and that has perhaps been given a new lease of life by the 'new morality'. But this Jesus has no relationship in fact to the Jesus of the New Testament.

In their essential form the moral objections to biblical teachings have remained pretty much the same since the time of Marcion. They cannot be met by a theory of progressive revelation nor even by an espousal of a canon within a canon. For both hard sayings and gracious sayings are found in all strata and in all authors of Scripture.² Any serious critic must recognize that a theory of biblical authority is purely arbitrary that affirms gracious sayings as Word of God and rejects hard sayings as human weakness. There are, to be sure, moral problems posed by some biblical teachings. We cannot dismiss them with pat answers but must live in creative tension with them.³ But they have always been an issue for the whole Church. They are peripheral and hardly germane to the present paper.

More in point are the theological, literary-historical and scientific criticisms of traditional views of biblical authority. I should like to speak to these criticisms in the context of three questions. What is the nature of revelation, divine truth available or divine truth mediated? What is the locus of biblical revelation, the original words or the message that resides both in the autograph and in any reasonably accurate copy? What is the scope of revelation in Scripture, what it touches or what it teaches?

I

As Gentile Christians we believe the Scriptures because we have first believed in Christ. Thus, to discover the nature of

² For example, some of the most gracious words of the New Testament, love of neighbour and enemy (Romans 12: 20; 13: 9f.), are taken from the Old Testament. Some of the hardest words appear in Jesus and the apostles (e.g., Matt. 23; Luke 18: 7f.; 2 Thessalonians 2). It is the God of the New Testament who strikes dead Ananias and Sapphira and ordains the destruction of Jerusalem—including the women and children.

³ It is not only our unsaintliness, to use John Stott's imagery, but also our lack of experience that prevents us from seeing God's truth in an apparently harsh passage. An imprecatory Psalm may become Word of God to one, if I may use a Barthian term, only when one's 'life' is threatened by an enemy (cf. Luke 18: 7f.).

revelation or of biblical authority our first task should be to ascertain our Lord's teaching. The relationship of history and interpretation in the Gospels remains a complicated and unclarified field. But that the Gospels represent substantially the views of Jesus toward Scripture is a quite probable conclusion of historical analysis.⁴ Nor can Jesus' views here be set aside as an accommodation to popular error or as an element of the kenosis of his pre-resurrection state. His own understanding of the meaning and the fate of his message and mission is entirely bound up with his understanding of the Old Testament.⁵ If his teaching authority on the nature and content of revelation is invalid, it is difficult to see why it should be accepted elsewhere. Both in his use of Scripture and in his statements about Scripture Jesus discloses his attitude. As one might expect, it is no different from that of the New Testament writers.⁶

Recent discussion has emphasized that revelation consists in God's acts (Wright) and God's revelation of himself (Barth, Baillie) to which the Bible witnesses. Or revelation is identified with God's existential encounter and demand for decision (Bultmann). In themselves these are good emphases. But it is a mistake to use them as substitutes for the conceptual and propositional aspect of divine revelation. In Austin Farrer's apt comment, Scripture reduced simply to witness too often becomes only "what St. Luke couldn't help fancying someone's having said he thought

⁴ This is true if only in that those views are entirely fitting to a first-century Palestinian Jew. The highly sceptical conclusions of R. Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York, 1963 [1931]), appear to be determined more by his philosophical presuppositions than by the requirements of historical criticism. In agreement with C. H. Dodd (*According to the Scriptures* [London, 1953], p. 110) I believe that the chief scriptural motifs and references ascribed to Jesus by the Gospels originated in his own pre-resurrection usage.

⁵ Only rarely (e.g., Matt. 16: 17) does Jesus refer to direct revelation as a source of true knowledge about his mission, and even there it may imply a God-given discernment of Jesus as a fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. Characteristically, he appeals to Scripture for divine witness to his mission and message (cf. Luke 4: 21; 7: 22, 27; 18: 31; 20: 16f.; 24: 44ff.).

⁶ For Jesus to say, "Scripture says", is no difference from his saying, "God says" (Matt. 19: 4). The Scripture is the Word of finality which cannot fail of fulfilment (Matt. 4: 1-11; 5: 18). The source of the Sadducees' theological error is that they do not know the Scriptures (Matt. 22: 29).

he remembered St. Peter's having told him." The God of the Bible is not just the God who acts or who speaks only to utter his Name. He is also the God who allows the prophet to be his mouth to convey a divine message through imagery and assertion.⁸

There is, however, no justification in the New Testament for a simple identification of the words of the Bible with the Word of God, i.e., the *graphē*. Insofar as modern theology has pointed to this distinction, it has provided a helpful corrective to some traditional thinking. As I have argued elsewhere,⁹ Paul is concerned at times to distinguish the Spirit-carried message of the Bible from the *gramma*, the dead-letter of the Bible. This same distinction may be observed in the Gospels. By their traditional interpretations of Scripture the theologians did not just 'transgress' (*parabainō*) God's Word but actually 'invalidated' it (*akuroō*; Mark 7: 6-13 = Matthew 15: 3-6). Although intensely schooled in the Bible, the Sadducees did not know the *graphē* (Matthew 22: 29: *mē eidotes tas graphas*). Paul expresses the same thought when he declares that the unbelieving Jew reads the Bible veiled or blindfolded (2 Corinthians 3: 15). Or in a similar imagery the Word of God, i.e., the Gospel message, scattered by the sower, profits only those to whom God has 'given to know' the secrets (Luke 8: 10ff.). To know the Gospel (or God) is nothing less than to have it revealed (*apokaluptō*; Luke 10: 21f.). The parallelism in Scripture between revelation and knowledge is closer than one might suspect.¹⁴

While biblical revelation is not to be separated from the words of the Bible, in the light of these facts it is hardly correct to speak of the Bible on the table as revelation. For in Scripture revelation is not truth available but truth—personal, propositional, or otherwise—mediated. In this context, and with the cautions raised by Geoffrey Bromiley, the phrase 'the Bible becomes the Word of God', is not improper.¹¹ Some of us, indeed, learned

⁷ A. Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (London, 1948) p. 47. Cf. G. E. Wright, *God who Acts* (London, 1952); J. Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (London, 1956), pp. 19-40; R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York, 1960), p. 78f.

⁸ Cf. Exodus 4: 10-16; J. Barr, *Interpretation* 17 (1963), pp. 196-203. This is presupposed by the prophets' formula, "Thus says the Lord".

⁹ E. E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 25-28; cf. Romans 2: 27ff.; 2 Corinthians 3: 6f.

¹⁰ On the concepts cf. R. Bultmann, *Theological Dictionary*, ed. G. Kittel (Grand Rapids, 1964), I, 696-713; *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen, 1958-60), I, 268-93; III, 1-34.

¹¹ G. W. Bromiley, *New Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson (London, 1954), p. 22. Cf. Eph. 1: 17: "a spirit . . . of revelation in the knowledge of him".

the same thing from our grandmother's idiom, 'the Lord gave me a verse'. It may be more precise, however, to speak of Scripture in terms of the Word hidden and the Word revealed. In any case revelation is never a static or abstract datum¹² but an event in which God's Spirit is dynamically active to disclose God's truth to the prophet, to his hearer, or to his twentieth-century reader.

II

Textual criticism has been practised in the Church at least since the time of Origen. But the connection of biblical infallibility to the original text appears to have begun with the Reformers¹³ or with the post-Reformation writers.¹⁴ As long as the autograph was regarded as essentially identical with the (Hebrew and Greek) copies in hand, no problem arose. Two shock-waves of historical research altered this situation. The Hebrew vowel points were found not to be original and, in the nineteenth century, the traditional text was found to be substantially at odds with the best and recently discovered New Testament manuscripts. Once the locus of revelation was viewed to rest in a text and the perspicuity of Scripture was asserted, the inspiration of the vowel points was a logical conclusion. The Lutheran dogmaticians who argued for this were seeking to preserve something very precious, namely, that the infallible Word should also be a meaningful word.¹⁵ Similarly, one cannot read the works of Dean Burgon without realizing that the divorce of the Church's traditional text from the inerrant autographs involved for him a crucial theological

¹² This appears to be implied by B. B. Warfield (*The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* [Philadelphia, 1948 (1915)], pp. 100f.) when he writes that "the aggregated revelation lay before the men of the New Testament" and speaks of the revelation "accessible to men". A more biblical thought-pattern might be to speak of the Bible as a record of past revelations which, through the instrumentality of the Spirit, becomes revelation anew in the present.

¹³ So, regarding Luther and Calvin respectively, J. T. Mueller and K. S. Kantzer in *Tradition and Interpretation*, ed. J. F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids, 1957), pp. 102f., 144.

¹⁴ Some Lutheran dogmaticians asserted the inspiration and, therefore, the inerrancy of both autograph and copies (cf. R. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture* [Edinburgh, 1957], pp. 30, 48f.; J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* [New York, 1957], pp. 88f. Although the matter is by no means clear, the Westminster Confession (I, 8) may set apart the autographs as inerrant (so, B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* [New York, 1931], p. 237).

¹⁵ Cf. Preus, *op cit.*, pp. 141ff.

question.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the conclusions of the research could not be resisted even by conservative scholars. Thus the infallible Word of God had to be identified with an infallible text that for 15 centuries had been inaccessible to the Church and, if found, would in the Old Testament be hopelessly ambiguous and obscure.

Quite a different picture emerges when we examine the New Testament attitude to Scripture. The New Testament writers were well aware of different Old Testament textual traditions, but they had no concern whatever to identify God's revelation with the most ancient or an original text. On the contrary, their choice of a given textual or targumic tradition depended on whether it gave the meaning they believed to lie within the Old Testament passage.¹⁷ They, their sources, and the Christian preachers as they represent them (e.g., Acts 7: 42f.) sometimes created their own *ad hoc* paraphrases to get at that meaning. Furthermore, it is precisely these selected and created renderings of the Old Testament passage that the writers introduced with such formulas as 'God says', 'the Lord says', and 'the *graphē* says'. That is, the Word-of-God character of Scripture, its infallible and revelational character, was always bound up with its meaning and, we may add, its meaning for the contemporary hearer.

There is no question of the importance of textual and historical criticism. Very often these disciplines can raise or exclude possibilities or probabilities of meaning within a given passage. But it is a vain hope to suppose that they can finally secure the meaning, even, *pace* Stendahl, the historical meaning of a biblical passage.¹⁸ The Evangelical and Roman theologians were guided by a good and true instinct in their affirmation of the infallibility or, to use a less happy term, the inerrancy of Scripture. But post-Reformation developments led to an expression of this teaching that was most unfortunate. From practical exigencies and from theological presuppositions that were quite unbiblical scholars shifted the locus of the Word of God character of Scripture

¹⁶ Cf. J. W. Burgon, *The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels* (London 1896), pp. 13-18, 29-39. More recently, see E. F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended* (Des Moines, 1956).

¹⁷ Ellis, *op cit.*, pp. 139-48; B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (London, 1961), pp. 259-72.

¹⁸ K. Stendahl in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (Nashville, 1963), I, 422ff. See the critique of A. Dulles in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. P. Hyatt (Nashville, 1965), pp. 210-16. One only has to read the commentators to discover that for virtually every significant biblical passage a half dozen meanings are asserted. And most are confident conclusions based upon historical, critical analysis.

from its message to a text viewed in the abstract. The Word of God became somewhat like a prize bull whose excellence lay not in the calves he bred but solely in the blue ribbon he got at the fair.¹⁹

The development, however, was not altogether one-sided. Even some of the seventeenth-century dogmatists insisted that "if the Spirit is separated from the Word of God it is no longer the Word of God".²⁰ And in recent years there has been a growing awareness among conservative evangelicals that the proper locus of revelation is not an infallible text nor an infallible book but the infallible Word or message.²¹ This brings us to the last question, what is the scope of revelation in Scripture?

III

In *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (London, 1956), pp. 38f., the late Principal Baillie draws back from Austin Farrer's theory of image revelation. For it, like "all propositional apprehension of truth, contains a human element and therefore an element of possible error" and "it offers us something less than personal encounter". Without disparaging the fact that divine revelation involves personal encounter with God, it is still unclear why encounter and proposition are to be set in opposition. Human element is not less present in man's psyche than in his mind. If it necessitates error—and this is a rather large assumption—one must frankly recognize that there can be no infallible, i.e., divine revelation of either proposition or encounter.

It was argued above that for the biblical writers the scope of revelation does indeed include imagistic and propositional truths. Nevertheless, the question remains whether the revelational character of the Bible includes all that it teaches or all that it touches. Most seventeenth-century orthodoxy refused to allow

¹⁹ For example, today a conservative theological society makes no other requirement of its members than that they affirm the inerrancy of the biblical autographs.

²⁰ Preus, p. 184. Cf. the words of Charles Simeon, "Even the Scriptures themselves will be a 'dead letter' and a 'sealed book' unless the Spirit of God opens the understanding to understand them" (cited in H. D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation* [London, 1959], p. 234).

²¹ Cf. Inter-Varsity Fellowship's statement on infallibility cited in *EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY* 28 (1956), 132: "by using infallibility in reference to the Holy Scripture, we mean that is in itself a true and complete guide, and requires no correction by Church or tradition". See also J. I. Packer, "*Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, 1958), pp. 90-98.

any distinction between the two. Therefore, L. Capellus (1650) argued that where New Testament quotations differed, even verbally, from the Hebrew text, the latter must have been corrupted.²² In more recent times some conservative scholars have admitted verbal and grammatical discrepancies but at the same time have attempted to retain the logic of the seventeenth-century writers. Those following this view have been particularly concerned to establish the accuracy of every scientific and historical item occurring in Scripture. Sometimes this involves the assertion that the latest scientific view was in the Bible all along. Thus one scholar can write that "every reference to astronomy in this first chapter [of Genesis] is corroborated by the best of our present scientific information"; another that "the absence of chemical errors in the Bible only confirms our faith in the Holy Record".²³ A glance at Church history shows the risk involved in this approach. Contemporary science, tied to Scripture, can return to haunt the Church. It was, I believe, Luther who found against Copernicus that the Ptolemaic system was confirmed in Joshua (10: 12f.). And the bees in the lion's carcass (Judges 14: 8) gave a scriptural seal to the accepted scientific theory of spontaneous generation.²⁴

Among recent evangelical writers Bernard Ramm and James Packer have argued that there is a distinction between what the Bible asserts or teaches and what in Scripture is incidental to and no part of its teaching. They conclude that the scientific assumptions of biblical writers ordinarily belong in the latter category and are not part of its infallible message.²⁵ By the same rule of thumb one may also argue that certain historical data in Scripture are no part of the message of Scripture.

This approach also involves certain risks. The line between what Scripture teaches and what Scripture touches will vary from interpreter to interpreter. The way even is open for one to assert (wrongly) that the Word of God character of Scripture is reduced

²² Cf. Preus, pp. 76-85.

²³ P. W. Stoner and R. L. Harris in R. J. Voskuyl, *et al.*, *Modern Science and Christian Faith* (Wheaton, 1948), pp. 22, 259.

²⁴ C. E. Raven, *Natural Religion and Christian Theology* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 8.

²⁵ B. Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, 1956), p. 156; Packer, *op. cit.*, pp. 96ff. Even when Warfield (*Inspiration*, pp. 200f., 221) affirms that Scripture is infallible "even in accidental details and passing allusions", he interprets these as "a body of incidental teachings".

to one teaching only: Jesus is Lord. On the other hand, some will use it as an escape hatch to avoid critical problems or uncomfortable doctrines. Nevertheless, several considerations show that, when used with integrity, it is a better way. (1) It is in full accord with the New Testament understanding and use of the Bible as Word of God (see above) and with the best insights of Reformation and evangelical tradition. (2) It delivers the Church from viewing the Bible as revelation in the abstract, a view arising out of philosophical deduction and not out of biblical teaching. (3) It allows the biblical scholar committed to the authority of Scripture to pursue his proper task, the elucidation of the biblical message. It frees him from arbitrary and defensive judgments on historical minutiae, and from being a specialist in discrepancies and a monitor of scientific theories.

In conclusion, there is in my opinion a danger today that evangelical Christianity, like the orthodox churchmen of Jesus' day or the Roman Church of the sixteenth century, may slip into the role of merely being defenders of the tradition. There is in any case a shyness to criticize our own tradition with the same analytical eye that is directed to the foibles of nineteenth and twentieth century liberalism. To be an instrument of the Holy Spirit in our time requires much more than a good defence. Without becoming infatuated with the novel, we must be willing in the light of Scripture to respond positively to new insights. We must be eager not only to correct aberrant theology but also to leap-frog it and, as theologians disciples in the Kingdom of God, to present to the Church treasure both new and old (Matthew 13: 52). Only then can evangelicals become the cutting edge of the Church's theology as, indeed, those who proclaim the good news of God should be.

*New Brunswick Theological Seminary,
New Brunswick, N.J.*