

THE BIBLE TO-DAY

THE return to the distinctively Christian doctrines of God and, still more, of man is the most noticeable feature of the theology of to-day. That brings with it, inevitably, a renewed sense of the unique place, the solitary eminence, of the Bible. Old controversies within the Christian tradition, as to the relation of the Bible to the Church and the precise nature of Biblical authority, have little significance in this context. Nor do the much later discussions as to inspiration and inerrancy very greatly affect the present movement or exercise much influence upon it. Barth and Brunner and those who, in more or less close attachment to them, have revolted against the theological liberalism of an era still within living memory have not based their revival of the dominant notes in the theology of the Reformation upon any particular doctrine of Biblical infallibility. Their exaltation of the word of God in the Bible, of the Bible as the word of God, has not led them to affirm either traditional authorship of the various books of the Bible or the exact historical accuracy of the Bible in all its parts. Barth made it quite plain in his preface to the *Römerbrief* that he had no quarrel with the 'critical' movement in its own field. Where he found it lacking was in its failure to push on into the theological field. For that lack, he and those who look at the Bible and at Christian theology, if not through his eyes at least from his angle, have made ample amends. Yet one could not say that they have clarified the relation of historical and theological truth in the Bible. It is not, for instance, clarified in the posthumous work on the Fourth Gospel by Sir Edwyn Hoskyns. And it is noteworthy that Rudolph Bultmann can be classed as in substantial sympathy, on the theological side, with the position that Barth occupies. Now, *qua* critic, Bultmann is radical, just as Loisy was radical—and it seems to me to be natural at this point to bring in the name of Loisy.

When Loisy wrote *L'Église et L'Évangile* he was combining radical criticism with the affirmation of the traditional dogmatic of the Church both in the Nicene age and after the antithesis Roman Catholic-Protestant had come into being. He had his own way of making that affirmation, and it was not one that was found to be acceptable in respect either of its doctrinal character or of its apologetical value. But he was attentive to the relation, passing into tension, between the historical and the theological elements in Christian faith; he saw the problem which it involved for the individual Christian who wished to be loyal both to that faith which had come to him as his spiritual heritage and to the science of Biblical study. Undoubtedly it was his desire to show or point to the way whereby both loyalties could be maintained. That desire was the impelling motive within the

movement that we know as Roman Catholic Modernism. And the history of the movement made the interconnexions of the Biblical and the dogmatic questions increasingly clear; whether that clarification of the problem extended to a clarification of the solution, either during the movement's progress or, from the opposing side, at its condemnation, is another matter.

All that happened thirty years and more ago, and the work that has gone on in the Biblical field, whether history or theology has been in any particular case the primary objective, has led to new outlooks and provided new perspectives for the examination of old and still difficult and unsolved problems. Thus, nothing in those days was of so explosive a character in relation to the study of the Gospels as the pressure exercised first by Johannes Weiss in his emphasis upon the eschatological material present in the synoptic tradition. Loisy, von Hügel, and Tyrrell were facing this issue years before it became widely known in England through the translation of Schweitzer's *von Reimarus zu Wrede*. Its bearing upon ultimate questions of a strictly theological character was obvious. If Weiss and Schweitzer were fundamentally right, a Parousia expectation, which was not fulfilled, was the key to whatever could be known of 'the historical Jesus'. Clearly, if this were the case and Christian faith in Jesus as the Son of God were to be maintained, something like a new dogmatic of the relation of history to doctrine would be necessary. As to Schweitzer's central thesis, I have the feeling that both the particular lines along which New Testament scholarship developed and the rise of the dialectical theology on the Continent resulted in that thesis being neither accepted nor rejected, but by-passed. Yet the stress upon the eschatology of the Gospels has not been abandoned. The exegesis of the Synoptic record as a whole and of particular passages, e.g. Mark vii. 35, set out in Sir Edwyn Hoskyns's and Mr. Davey's book, *The Riddle of the New Testament*, along with the interpretation of the evangelic material to be found in Professor Dodd's writings, have familiarized students with the idea of a 'realized eschatology', a Messianic age attested by the signs displayed in its midst, and, therefore, of a *Messias praesens*, not simply of a *Messias futurus*. The Kingdom of God was an eschatological truth, but it was not a truth of the future as contrasted with the present. The end-age, τὸ ἔσχατον, had come with Jesus. This meant no return to the old 'liberal' notions of a Kingdom immanent in the hearts of men obedient to God's will, and manifesting itself through moral and social progress; but it gave a different picture of the context of the events and sayings on which Schweitzer had relied for the justification of his sharp antithesis between what was and what was to be. It made the Pauline and Johannine Christologies more intelligible in relation to the theology

of the synoptic Gospels, and closed the gap that lay wide open in Loisy's distinction between what was given in history and what was given in and for faith, *comme deux Christs*, and in that eloquent closing passage where Schweitzer turned from history to experience. Thereby, it may be said that the theology of the Bible, at its central point, is vindicated by an appeal to the actual history. And Biblical theology, as a whole, is an interpretation of history.

It might seem, therefore, as though the Bible existed for the sake of its theology: and in a sense that is true. It is in its theology that the Bible comes to us as the word of God; it is that which lifts the Bible out of the category of religious literature and condemns the assumption that there are many Bibles. The final relevance of the Bible lies in the fact that there is nothing to take its place. It is 'profitable' in a manner to which there is no parallel in other writings, whether or no they be classified as sacred books.

Because that needs continually to be made clear, the task of the Christian expositor and interpreter of the Bible never ceases. It is a task to be fulfilled in many ways; a great commentary reveals more of the meaning of the Bible than any study which is concerned with the way in which the books have been composed or the historical sources on which the authors have drawn. But commentaries are, on the whole, for the few among Christian people, many of whom will nevertheless wish to be guided in their understanding of the Bible and to be helped towards the meeting of problems and difficulties that do not shake their faith but perplex their minds.

It is guidance of this kind that Dr. Rowley seeks to supply in a recent book.¹ It belongs to the class of literature which, within this century, Dr. Marcus Dods and Dr. A. S. Peake adorned with works of lasting value. It is no depreciation of Dr. Rowley to say that one is not inclined to rank his volume with theirs. On the other hand, his final chapters, 'The God of the Bible', 'Sin in the Thought of the Bible', and 'The Person and Work of Christ', are specially notable in bringing the reader face to face with those theological themes which determine the nature of the Bible as a record of divine revelation. It is in them that the true relevance of the Bible consists. The disjunction of theology from religion means a breaking with the Bible at its centre. The attentive student of Dr. Rowley can hardly fail to be aware of this. There are points, not unimportant ones, in his theological interpretation which do not satisfy me. He seems to belong to the more extreme school of those who affirm divine passibility, and I am not sure that his suggestion of the two foci in man, that which is of God, and that which is not of Him, as coinciding in

¹ *The Relevance of the Bible*, by H. H. ROWLEY, M.A., D.D., B.Litt. Pp. ix + 192. London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1942. 6s.

Christ, with, as the result, Christ's life becoming 'not the ellipse, but the circle, perfectly centred in God, yet equally centred in Himself, for He and the Father are in perfect harmony', really helps towards a satisfactory Christological statement. At the same time, it should be said, these pages of Dr. Rowley show no tendency to resolve the divinity of Christ into a 'divine', because supremely moralized, humanity. And any differences of opinion do not abate my appreciative recognition of the fact that Dr. Rowley is always wanting to bring his readers into touch with the Biblical, especially the New Testament, proclamation. Only when that is done can the relevance of the Bible be discerned.

The earlier chapters of his book deal with familiar subjects such as 'The Inspiration of the Bible', 'The Prophets of the Old Testament', and 'The Unity of the Bible'. They represent, on the whole, that liberal standpoint which the Higher Criticism did so much to establish. 'Progress in revelation' is affirmed, and its meaning carefully explained. Inspiration is not to be supposed to yield us 'verbal infallibility'. The miracles, whether of the Old Testament or of the New, are neither accepted or rejected *en bloc*; Dr. Rowley rules out as dishonouring God the notion of 'any suspension or reversal of the laws of nature', a concern which seems to me to belong to an earlier date in the discussion of miracle, though it is possible that some readers of the Bible are still embarrassed by the supposition that, to put it crudely, they are expected to believe that God breaks His own laws. What is of permanent value is the emphasis that Dr. Rowley lays upon an approach to the Bible which involves something more than intellectual interest and acumen, what he calls 'spiritual receptivity'. The message of the Bible cannot be heard and understood by those who do not listen to it humbly as addressed to them. It is in this that the relevance of the Bible is grounded, that, while its words come to us from particular and different ages and have contemporary needs in view, the word which makes it a unity speaks to all ages. Dr. Rowley rightly rejects the modification of the old phraseology that the Bible is the word of God into the affirmation that the Bible contains the word of God. It is one word of God that is unveiled in the manifold diversity of the Biblical literature.

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