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Is there ever Biblical Research without Presuppositions?

Seth Erlandsson

Bultmann's famous question about presuppositionless exegesis is here taken up afresh and answered by a young Scandinavian scholar who lectures in Old Testament at Uppsala and is director of the new 'Biblicum' institute established there. The paper, which is based on an address given at an IFES conference for theological students in 1970, first appeared in the IFES journal for theological students, Themelios (7: 2/3, 1970, pp. 23-29), and we are grateful for the opportunity to republish it here.

It is often maintained that in the historical-critical Bible research which grew up in the time of the Enlightenment and afterwards, we have *voraussetzungslose Bibelforschung*, Bible research without presuppositions. Prior to this, so it is supposed, the church imposed its own presuppositions, in accordance with its faith, upon biblical scholarship and, as a result, it was not possible to obtain any objective or scientific results. But now, since the historical-critical method has taken over, biblical research has become free to seek the truth without being cramped by the faith of the church. Through this development, it is maintained, science has been able to point to a number of truths about the origin and the content of the Bible which the church formerly had suppressed. It is often said, for example, that science *has proved* that the book of Daniel does not come from some prophet and statesman named Daniel who was active in the sixth century before Christ. It is further maintained that prophetic literature goes back only to a small degree to the supposed prophet himself and contains a great many later additions and editorial emendations, which at times contained polemics against the original teaching of the master-prophet or which point to a misunderstanding of the prophet's intention; it is also said that many texts are unreliable, full of contradictions, of legendary elaborations, of later rationalizations, *etc.*

All this is, according to the opinion of many, a result which is based upon presuppositionless research and which every intellectually respectable person ought to accept as factual. But according to others, as a result of all this the Bible is now losing its authority. If the Bible is criticized and charged with errors, is it then any longer inviolable and the absolute authority for the church? From the other side it is often answered that the church has nothing to lose from the free quest for truth, because whosoever believes in Him who Himself is Truth need not fear the truth. For this reason the church ought to accept

the results of historical-critical biblical research and model its view of biblical authority accordingly. In the midst of all the Bible's faults and defects, we will still find the central ideas which the church has to preach. Critical research helps us to get a better and better grasp of what these central ideas may be, it is asserted. Seen in this way, the Bible does not become a static book of law, but a dynamic and human book, which helps to strive for the right goal.

In order to be able to orient ourselves a bit more precisely concerning the positions of either side, we must attempt to gain clarity about what is meant by the expression 'presuppositionless Bible research'. One would now expect that this would mean that we should take as our point of departure only that *which we factually know*, and only take as facts those which can be verified. Against such research there is nothing which can be objected. The task is to try to get at what the biblical authors wanted to say with the help of all the tools of historical and philological science, without mixing it up with any irrelevant or subjective opinions.

However, at the same time that this is being asserted with justification, it is often said in the same breath that the Bible has to be considered *just like any other human literature*. With this statement it is not meant to say only that the Bible has been written in human language and contains the literary niceties and expression of human language, something which hardly anyone has denied. No, to take the Bible like any other human book means that everything that is reported in it is conditioned by human forces or can be explained by *this-worldly* factors. If an other-worldly cause has played a role, it cannot be analyzed historically, and for this reason we have to presuppose that this other-worldly factor, if there is one, has made use only of this-worldly means. To presuppose this is said to be 'presuppositionless'.

This is a remarkable logical somersault which, along with others, can be found executed in the opening words of many 'introductions' to the New Testament. In fact, the biblical texts maintain time after time that that which is portrayed there often lacks any human explanation. Miracles take place which no man can explain and it is underlined that it is the Lord who has intervened. In accordance with these texts, the church maintains that events with otherworldly causes have taken place, for the church presupposes (= believes) that the God about whom the Bible speaks really exists. But if you presuppose

(= believe) that the God about whom the Bible speaks does not exist, then it is necessary to give a more human explanation for the description of God's direct intervention than that which is given by the texts themselves. Thus it would be a question of ordinary events which, in accordance with men's religious convictions, are conceived of and interpreted in religious categories, or else the action in question is a construction, a legend of some kind in order to explain a certain phenomenon in a pious way.

It is often maintained that the Bible is first of all a human witness to faith in God and his action, which is to say that in the Bible we find various examples of how different people have conceived of God and how they interpreted history in a religious way. The men of the Bible accordingly had, so it is maintained, a *religious* conception of history; we modern men, by contrast, have an *a-religious* one. This means that if our a-religious view of history had reigned in Joshua's time, then the conquest of Canaan would have been shown entirely without any admixture of God or of His activity, and that if *vice versa* the religious conception of history were ruling today, then our men of today would portray and explain what is happening now with reference to God and His activity. Thereupon, people made a decision and presupposed that in reality God did not intervene any more in Joshua's day than He does today. But how do we know that?

It is perfectly clear that at the same time that we are trying to do research without presuppositions in a historical-critical manner, it is very easy for a number of presuppositions to creep in. If the texts in the Old Testament which show God's direct intervention are said to be legends of various kinds, then it is not added that this result is reached on the basis of the presupposition that in reality nothing supernatural happened. But it is just as much an article of faith to maintain that nothing supernatural in reality did take place, e.g. during the conquest of Canaan, as to rely upon the information of the text and to say that in fact supernatural events did occur. Therefore it is misleading for many students of theology when they read in handbooks and commentaries that according to presuppositionless research this or that is a constructed aetiological legend. Many accept such a definite statement as that science has proved that the book of Joshua contains a number of aetiological legends when, in fact, it is a question of the scholar's attempt to explain the actions which are portrayed in that book without reckoning with the fact that any God has directly brought them to pass. Why should people who believe in a God who has revealed Himself in many ways and who has directly influenced happenings in Old Testament and New Testament times accept a result which is dependent upon the presupposition that no supernatural factor could have played a role then any more than today? What kind of proof could be used to demonstrate that one of

these two presuppositions is based on *knowledge* or is *scientific* and not the other?

It would be incorrect to assume that all scholars who presuppose that the actions described in the Old Testament can be explained as having been caused by this-worldly or human factors must, for that reason, be atheists. Many assert on the contrary that the texts still have a religious meaning of great worth, and many believe that there is a God. But they begin with the assumption that God did not act any differently in Bible times from the way He does today. As a rule, they do not reckon with any *distinct* direct revelation. On the basis of the experiences which we have with divine action in the world today, they take as their starting-point the principle that *God only acts through ordinary human causes*. It is certainly a matter of faith whether one is willing to see God's action behind human actions, but scholarship has only to make the human relationships clear, which, according to this view, would be unaffected by whether there is a God or not. Exaggerating a bit, one could paraphrase this view thus: whether there is a God or not, He acts as though there were no God, which is to say that all of his actions are channelled through this-worldly causation. For this reason an atheist and a Christian have no need to come into conflict when they are faced with the task of analysing a series of events which are shown in a biblical text, it is asserted.

This concept also has its consequences for our view of the origin and message of the biblical books. If we start from the presupposition that the thoughts and ideas contained in the Bible originated in an ordinary human manner, then it will be quite natural to attempt to establish how these ideas grew up out of different human impulses. An evolutionary perspective is gladly embraced here, for one assumes that the more highly developed ideas could not come into being altogether suddenly and in a context in which no similar ideas had prepared the way for them. Consequently it is necessary to explain a whole row of sections in the biblical texts as later additions because of the fact that they contain thought processes which are held to be quite strange for such an early date. An investigation of the criteria which underlie the fragmented picture which scholarship has given to Isaiah 1-39 has shown 'that most of them are dependent on the scholar's view of Israel's ideological history' (Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon*, 1970, p. 55). But what has science been able to prove in this connection? On the one hand, any argument based on ideology alone is risky as long as a certain idea cannot be accurately dated, and on the other *not one scholar knows* that the thoughts and ideas contained in the Bible have been formed and preserved by the prophets without any direct and supernatural intervention on the part of God to reveal what they were to say (cf. 2 Peter 1: 21). The Bible itself not only does reckon with the fact that thoughts and ideas were

revealed to the prophets and apostles through the direct mediation of God's Spirit, but also holds that as a rule *these are thoughts which these men themselves could not have thought out and which were not current in their day*. No scholar knows that this biblical report and claim is false, and to presuppose that such a revelation did not take place is neither more elegant nor better exegesis than to presuppose that the Bible's report is true. In both cases it is a question of faith.

It is troubling and confusing to many that results which are built upon certain presuppositions are accepted as facts. When, for example, G. W. Anderson maintains in his *Introduction* 'that the Old Testament is a mutilated literary torso' (p. 235), he calls this view 'the fact', in spite of the fact that it depends upon the presupposition that the message of the Old Testament was thought out by men in the same way as the content of other books. It is obvious that if this presupposition is right then it is natural to expect a number of contradictions and conflicting views in the Bible, for we know by experience that human beings have differing thoughts and report the same action in different ways. We also know that human nature as a rule cannot predict distant future actions with precision, and hardly can be so at all before the point at which certain signs indicate that something specific is going to happen. Consequently Isaiah's prophecy about Cyrus first arose, we are to conclude, when reports about Cyrus's successes began to be heard, *i.e.* after the year 550 BC; the allusion in Jesus' parable to the killing of the son of the owner of the vineyard *outside* of the vineyard (Mt. 21: 39) was thus placed in the mouth of Jesus after it had been seen that Jesus died outside of the city walls; Jesus' word about the destruction of the Temple (Mt. 24: 2; Mk. 13: 2; Lk. 21: 6) was placed in Jesus' mouth only after the year 70 or just before it, and so forth.

Because of the fact that historical-critical Bible scholarship, in spite of its claim to be fully presuppositionless, so often takes entirely predetermined presuppositions about the origin of the biblical text and makes them its starting-point, its results are in a way important principally for those who share the presuppositions. For this reason, it is remarkable that so many people believe that it is quite obvious that the church should accept all of the results of this historical-critical research, although people ought to realize that the church cannot share the presupposition that the Bible's content originated through purely human causes. If it were the case that scholars knew that God did not speak from Sinai and did not cause certain people to bring forth an entirely determinate message from Him, then one could understand the zeal which appears among those who speak about the 'a-proven results' of historical-critical research and who say that the church must dare to accept this 'truth'. But why should the church surrender something which it is convinced is true and

which in reality no science has been able to prove cannot be true?

If we have directed our criticism here against the claim of historical-critical research to be presuppositionless, this does not mean that everything that has been produced by the work of the historical-critical scholars should be thrown away. When they maintain that it is important not to allow oneself to be bound by certain pre-existing, ready-made opinions or views without trying to see what the material to be examined has to say itself, then we will really approve such research, but unfortunately it is just this which happens all too seldom, namely that people really try to see what the material to be examined really has to say itself. A correct description of the content of the material often is pushed into the background from the very beginning for the sake of some kind of a hypothetical reconstruction of the text's original content and of the actions related therein on the basis of presuppositions which do not belong to the material itself.

In this respect, Old Testament research is remarkably different from Near Eastern research. It is normal practice to assume the general reliability of statements in ancient Near Eastern sources, unless there is good, explicit evidence of the contrary. 'Unreliability, secondary origins, dishonesty of a writer, or tendentious traits, all these must be clearly proved by adduction of tangible evidence, and not merely inferred to support a theory' (K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, 1966, p. 29). As a matter of fact, humanly speaking, the Old Testament is a part of ancient Near Eastern literature, history and culture, but Old Testament scholars do not, as a rule, bring the same approach to bear on the Old Testament. The reports of the Old Testament are not accepted as correct or even possibly correct until clear evidence is presented that they are fallacious; instead, one starts in a *a priori* fashion from the conviction that many texts cannot be reliable, and this often on the grounds that we *hold causal relationships which the text sees as possible to be impossible*. In this manner the scholar, contrary to what he maintains ought to be the case, is bound from the outset by certain fixed ideas and opinions and does not attempt to see what the material itself has to say. If we are to be able to get away from a subjective reconstruction of the origin of the biblical books as a gradual consolidation of a great number of small units from different times and different authors, we must first take seriously the text's own claim to be a unity.

In order to be able to understand what the material itself has to say, it is necessary to approach it *on its own terms*. This is taken for granted when it is a question of any research other than biblical research. In order to be able to tune in to a radio emission, it is necessary to conform oneself to the capacity which the sending station has, and to agree to allow the

sender to determine what wave length one must tune in. The listener cannot himself determine the wave length and the output. In the same manner it is not possible properly to investigate a flower if you begin by prescribing how the flower should look, how many leaves it shall have and what sort of a smell it shall exude. All of this proceeds from the flower itself, and if one is intent on gathering precise knowledge about that flower, one will simply have to come to terms with the fact that it has precisely the colour, the smell and the number of petals which it has, even if one had expected something else. It is only after this that we put the information which we have gathered along with what we already know about the climate, the vegetation, *etc.* of the place in question, into relation with our observations. If the flower that we have been investigating shows itself to be quite unique, or if it should emit quite a remarkable aroma, we do not question the genuineness of the find on these grounds. First it would be necessary to prove that the flower's aroma or appearance have been altered, for example because somebody wanted to play a joke on the scientist.

In the same way, it is necessary to listen to the biblical material starting from its own presuppositions and not to dictate beforehand that it must be nothing but human words, a late redaction of the viewpoints of different theologians, a religious interpretation of certain events which in reality do not require us to suppose any supernatural influence, and so on. No, if the text maintains that this is what the Lord said at a certain time through the prophet Isaiah, then really to participate in the text means that we will also listen to what it has to say in all of its details. Only afterwards should the data which has been gathered be placed in context with all the other things we know through archaeology, historical research, literary and philosophical studies.

It is quite astonishing for many people that the more knowledge we have about the ancient Near East, the clearer it becomes that earlier assertions about the errors in the Bible were overly hasty. 'It is the lack of *really early* manuscript attestation, which has permitted so much uncontrolled (because unverifiable) theorizing in Old Testament studies' (Kitchen, *op. cit.*, p. 23). Now that we know more about the techniques of composition and narrative technique in the ancient Near East, to take an example, it is impossible to maintain many of the earlier evaluations of the biblical text as heterogeneous compositions of partially inconsistent elements. For what previously was looked upon as an inadmissible leap in the thought or an inadmissible repetition has shown itself to be in the highest degree admissible and good narrative technique in the case of extra-biblical material which has now become available. Another example is sacrificial terminology. According to Wellhausen, this was created in post-exilic times in priestly circles, and for this reason, among others, he considered it

proven that the regulations concerning the law of sacrifices and thus the books of Moses have a late origin. Through finds in old Ugaritic, this sacrificial terminology has meanwhile been shown to have been known quite early.

Can a scholar who believes in the Bible's reliability do research without presuppositions? Our answer is 'yes' if we clarify what we mean with the term 'presuppositionless'. We have seen that the historical-critical scholars who claimed that they worked without presuppositions at the same time take as their starting-point absolutely fixed presuppositions. A conservative scholar will not allow these presuppositions to determine his whole investigation or to condition its results. Instead he wants 'without allowing himself to be bound to pre-given ready opinions and views to look for what the material to be studied really has to say itself' (Lindblom, *Ten Chapters on the Bible* [Swedish], 1969, p. 139). Such a conservative scholar does not have a lack of trust on principle in the material without giving it a real chance to impart its point of view to him. If the material maintains that wonders have taken place, then he will also listen to these reports and will not dismiss these wonders in *a priori* fashion as un-historical. When he has thoroughly listened to the material itself, then the conservative scholar also places his material in relationship with other data and tests the reliability of the text.

But does not this mean that he is behaving in a less critical fashion than his more liberal colleagues? Not necessarily. In the case of the liberal scholar, he is generally more critical of the biblical texts than of the different theories about its unreliability. It is astonishing how uncritical he can be towards hypotheses which twist the text's reports back and forth and how unwilling he can be to give up his theses, even when very strong reasons speak against them. It has been clearly established that the great Wellhausen must have become aware of archaeological results which undermined many of his theses, but he also refused to consider them. When we are dealing with a conservative scholar the reverse is true: he is inclined to be more critical towards the different theories which criticize the Bible than towards the Bible itself. However, in this he is in good company with non-biblical scholars, who first attempt to get a correct description of their material and rely upon its reports until it can be entirely and clearly shown that errors are contained in them. Here we can also draw attention to legal practice according to which a person is innocent until it has been proven with full evidence that he is guilty. Many critics entirely reverse this practice: 'The Bible is full of errors until it has been proven with full evidence that it is free of errors.'

The conservative scholar does not trust the reliability of the Bible by closing his eyes to facts, but on the contrary because he has carefully examined

them. Before he has won his doctoral degree, he has thoroughly made acquaintance with a number of theories about the Bible's unreliability and its mixed character. That he nevertheless is conservative rests on the fact that he has found that if one goes to the bottom of the problems and really lets all the facts of the case be heard, then it becomes evident that one hypothesis after another is based on all too fragile material or upon no material at all. If a new result is put forward to the effect that biblical material is defective then he does not close his eyes to that. On the contrary, he carefully seeks to grasp it in order to gain real clarity as to whether the criticism which previously had shown itself, time after time, overly hasty or entirely based on hypotheses can now in

some point be scientifically motivated. Admittedly the Bible texts show us many things which are difficult to understand, but not yet has anything been brought to our attention which should induce the church to revise its trust in the prophets and the apostles or to give up its submission to the teaching of Scripture. Instead there is every reason for the church to take a very critical attitude towards the results of scholarship which are based upon presuppositions which are foreign to the material but which are nevertheless presented as objective facts. Conversely, the church has nothing to fear from a really objective and scientific Bible study which does not mistrust the object of its study for subjective reasons.