

# The Status of Scripture in Theology from the Enlightenment

## The Rise of Biblical Criticism

The Reformation, with its emphasis upon the Bible as the sole authoritative means of knowing God and his will, fuelled the development of linguistic and textual studies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries within both Protestant and Catholic institutions. This led, somewhat ironically, to the raising of significant questions which had not been particularly pressing in previous generations, such as those relating to variant readings in different manuscript sources and even to the antiquity of the Masoretic vowel points in the Hebrew text, a matter which touched directly upon notions of scriptural sufficiency. The work of Protestant, Brian Walton on the London Polyglot (1657), and of Catholic, Richard Simon (*Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, 1678), were highly influential in this regard. In addition to these novel textual questions, shifts in epistemology also contributed to the weakening of the traditional approach to Scripture. In England, the rise of Socinianism and Unitarianism, and the philosophical empiricism of Hobbes and Locke raised questions about the metaphysics traditionally used to understand key scriptural doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation; this was later followed by Hume's radical scepticism which effectively denied human warrant for belief in miracles. Each of these streams of thought, of course, raised significant questions concerning the reliability of the scriptural testimony. On the continent, the work of Benedict Spinoza was important in raising both textual and philosophical questions which struck at the very heart of accepted Christian orthodoxy. Then came Immanuel Kant's major analysis of the limits of human knowledge, with its radical delimitation of what can and cannot be known in the theological and metaphysical spheres. For Kant, and for those following in his wake, religion was essentially morality, with all of the implications for reading Scripture which that carried with it.

In response to the epistemological and textual attacks on traditional Christianity, theologians offered a number of responses. Pietism and revivalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century came to emphasise experience and feeling over doctrine and thus attempted to bypass the difficult questions raised by text criticism while perhaps inadvertently appropriating some of the epistemological critique of the Enlightenment. At a philosophically more sophisticated level, yet still in a manner reminiscent of the experiential emphasis of the pietists, the German theologian, F.D.E. Schleiermacher, attempted to reconstruct the whole of Christian theology. He did this in a manner which saw Christianity as a feeling of absolute dependence upon God, and therefore Christian doctrine as an expression of human psychology not, in the first instance, truth about God. This kind of approach had little need for emphasising historicity as a basic category for understanding Scripture, and so there was little doctrinal need to resist the radical application of biblical criticism to the scriptural text.

## The Princeton Approach

In the nineteenth century, Princeton Theological Seminary provided much of the intellectual leadership in the world of orthodox theology. Its development and formulation of biblical authority was particularly significant and continues to set the broad trajectories of much evangelical thinking on the authority of Scripture down to the present day. Perhaps most significant in this regard is the work of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield. In an article, authored with A.A. Hodge in 1881, he laid out what he took to be the broad church tradition on inspiration, a position which he then elaborated and defended in further articles. Several points are significant here:

- While revelation is not restricted to the written text of the Bible (i.e., God also reveals himself in mighty acts, in the Incarnation etc), all of these actions need explanation; and this is provided by a reliable, authoritative written account of God's acts in history.
- The Holy Spirit supervised the writing of Scripture in such a way as to guarantee that what was written down was what God intended and was therefore consistent with God's character (i.e., when claims concerning truth are made, then the Bible must be true). Such supervision, while extending to the very words of Scripture, was not, however, crudely mechanical but worked in and through the minds and personalities of the various writers, thus preserving their individual humanity in the act of inscription.
- The variant readings we have in the various manuscripts do not damage this thesis. The original autographs have been lost and all we have are copies into which copyists' errors have crept. The copies we do have are thus errant in places; but the errors are minor, with textual consensus on all key texts which touch on the central tenets of the faith.

The Warfield thesis on Scripture has been criticised as a novelty or innovation and as not representing a longstanding tradition within the church, most notably by Jack Rogers and Donald McKim. They see it as the result of 'scholastic' (seen here as equivalent to 'rationalist') streams of thought within Reformed theology, combined with the impact of Scottish common sense realism (SCSR). The case is overstated. Certainly, Warfield was influenced by SCSR, and also had a naïve confidence that historical text criticism would bring scholars closer and closer to textual consensus, but in all major respects his thinking is consistent with traditional orthodox approaches stretching back through the Reformation and Middle Ages to the patristic era, as the work of scholars such as John Woodbridge and Richard Muller has shown.

## Karl Barth

Barth's approach to Scripture has proved highly contentious in evangelical circles with often bitter divisions existing between those who regard his position as a legitimate development of the Reformation position and those who regard it as little more than another example of post-Kantian liberalism. Rejecting liberal attempts to assimilate theology to human psychology in a manner which ultimately reduced God to the dimensions of humanity, Barth focused on the Incarnation, arguing that only in Christ is God revealed. The result: Scripture was only indirectly revelation, being rather a witness, albeit a uniquely privileged one, to the one and only revelation of God in Christ. For Barth, this meant that Scripture must be taken seriously, as it is this which points us to Christ; but also that questions of historicity had little interest for him. Indeed, such questions for Barth missed the central, instrumental purpose of Scripture as pointing to Christ who breaks into history but cannot be subordinated to categories of history.

Barth's doctrine of Scripture is important for the way it brings to the fore the dynamic power of Scripture, something which can often be lost in evangelical debates about historicity etc. which

can become ends in themselves and lose sight of the larger salvific purpose of God's revelation. Nevertheless, the separation of the function of Scripture and the content of Scripture, of Scripture's claims about Christ and the reality of Christ, is most unfortunate and can lead to radical subjectivism. Further, the basic rejection of historical-critical questions as irrelevant, and the emphasis on the essential fallibility of Scripture so as not to distract from the uniqueness of Christ is surely an overstatement of the case, and would appear to present the problem as if it were part of the solution.

## Current Evangelical Thinking on Scripture

### 1. Infallibility and Inerrancy

There is considerable diversity within evangelical thinking on Scripture at the current time

- Some scholars see Scripture as being infallible, by which they mean that Scripture is sufficient to achieve the end for which it is intended. This position allows for errors in Scripture on detail (e.g., the apparent discrepancies between the gospels) while maintaining the power of Scripture as the unique Word of God for salvation. The problem with such a position is, of course, the logical one – that the end for which it is intended is itself predicated upon its own self-testimony. Some scholars have attempted to argue the historical normativity of something approaching the infallibilist position, but more recent work has demonstrated that neither the infallibilist idea, nor its close relatives, those positions associated with figures such as Karl Barth and G.C. Berkouwer, are representative of the views of the church prior to the Enlightenment, and that such should therefore be read more as breaks with the church's tradition in response to the critical textual, epistemological, and moral theories of Enlightenment thinkers.

- Some scholars see Scripture as being inerrant, by which they mean that it contains no errors of fact and is all-sufficient for the purposes for which it is intended. Central to this position is the argument that the Bible itself teaches its own inerrancy, a view which was given a strongly Christological basis by the work of John Wenham. The position is ably summarised in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Inerrancy, however, should not be mistaken as teaching that the meaning of Scripture is rendered obvious in all cases and as thus bypassing the need for proper interpretation. Indeed, the issue of hermeneutics is now one which preoccupies much of evangelical thinking on Scripture.

### 2. Hermeneutics

Since the groundbreaking work of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud in their respective disciplines, it has become a truism that readers bring many of their own interpretative strategies and agendas to bear on the interpretation of texts, and theologians have been assiduous in their application of this insight to the Bible. Of course, traditional Christian emphasis upon the need for readers of the Bible to be assisted in their understanding by the Holy Spirit, and upon the supernatural nature of faith, have also meant that issues relating to the role of the reader in understanding Scripture have never been far from the surface in discussion. Indeed, it is arguable that the Christian understanding of the self-deceptive nature of sin means that Christians, of all people, should be aware of the way in which they will tend to manipulate God's words for their own ungodly ends. Nevertheless, Christian commitment to a God 'who is there and who is not silent' prevents the kind of reductionism which makes all meaning merely a function either of the reading community's own horizon of expectation or of the power structures within which the reading is taking place.

Useful evangelical contributions to the field of hermeneutics can be found in the writings of

Anthony C. Thiselton and Kevin J. Vanhoozer. These scholars have profitably applied to the Bible the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin and John R. Searle. This is a theory which brings to the fore the idea that speech involves action, i.e., it does not just describe a state of affairs but can be used to do a variety of tasks, including changing the status quo. For example, the words 'I do' in a wedding ceremony actually change the individual from an unmarried person into a spouse. Applying this insight to Scripture allows for attention to traditional attention to genre in order to establish meaning. It also ties the doctrines of God and Scripture together in a way that points forward to the overcoming of the radical scepticism of the 'death of the author' schools of literary theory which in recent years have created such interpretative chaos in the field of general literary theory. In addition, both scholars have drawn on the theology of the cross as outlined by Paul in 1 Corinthians as a way of making the reader aware of the temptation towards manipulation which is inherent in the interpretative task and as a means of bringing all interpretations into line with God's revelation of himself in the life, work and words of Christ. As such, their work attempts to transcend the division which sometimes exists between a dynamic (Barthian; infallibilist) understanding of Scripture and a propositional/cognitive (inerrantist) approach.

### 3. Redemptive–Historical Approaches to Scripture

One final trajectory of theological reflection upon the nature and meaning of Scripture is that which focuses on redemptive history. Arising in the critical milieu of the late eighteenth and pioneered by figures such as J.P. Gabler, this approach made a distinction between the categories and methods of systematic theology and those of biblical theology, the latter being conceived as a discipline which was shaped less by synthetic categories and more by the shape of biblical history. In the nineteenth century, Geerhardus Vos of Princeton, a friend of Warfield, baptised this paradigm into a traditional evangelical framework, emphasising that the meaning of the Bible was to be found essentially in the story of Israel which culminated in Jesus Christ. Scripture was thus authoritative both because it was divinely inspired (i.e., according to its mode of delivery) and because it focused authoritatively on Jesus Christ (i.e., according to its content). This method has been fruitfully expanded and developed in the last fifty years in evangelical circles by scholars such as Herman Ridderbos, Willem VanGemeren, and Graeme Goldsworthy.

### Conclusion

For most evangelicals, the terms of debate continue to be those set by the pre-Enlightenment testimony to the Bible as verbally inspired, refined by the work of such as Hodge and Warfield in the nineteenth century, and developed in a context which is increasingly aware of the issues raised by hermeneutical theory. What is clear is that a rounded doctrine of Scripture must not simply deal with text critical issues or with matters of interpretation but must co-ordinate all of the concerns which have been raised, textual, epistemological, moral, christological, and hermeneutical, if the Bible is to be adequately understood, preached and defended as the Word of God.



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