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IN THE STUDY

Biblical criticism is conventionally given German roots. British self-esteem can then be preserved. We take to ourselves the role of pruner of excesses, and honour is satisfied. There is of course truth in this picture. Is it the whole truth? Shall we take kindly to a mammoth continental study[1] that purports to demonstrate that the real problems were actually home grown?

Reventlow's historical investigation can be assessed from two points of view. We may and must ask about the adequacy and accuracy of the evidence tabled. We must also attempt some adjudication on the case being argued and the conclusions being drawn. Either way, the starting point must be some broad description of the ground that is covered.

Reventlow properly begins pre-Reformation. This enables him to introduce two terms which emerge as pivotal for the whole survey. The one is humanism. The other is spiritualism. Humanism, we know. It is the shorthand marker for the cultural pattern of the Renaissance where the rediscovery of antiquity was deemed to power a massive central emphasis on the human spirit individualistically and moralistically understood. Petrarch was its founding father. An anthropocentric view of the world was its abiding legacy. Spiritualism, however, needs even more careful definition. It is here used to refer to a cultural movement characteristic of the late Middle Ages. Dualism of spirit and matter, outer and inner, institution and person, is its pervasive sign. Joachim of Fiore is its familiar eschatologically orientated flag bearer. A spiritual illuminism that overwhelms scripture is part of its intriguing legacy. Among its heirs is John Wyclif. Superficially he deploys sola scriptura against the Church. Actually he reads scripture legalistically and moralistically, and identifies the Law of Christ with natural reason. Dualism, spiritualism, rationalism and moralism are already threatening to conspire in unholy alliance. And since State and Church are seen as in some sense coinciding, the legalism of scripture is determinative also for the polis. Thus Puritanism casts its shadow before it.

So the Reventlow tramlines are laid. All that follows is neatly fitted into them. Erasmus emerges as dualist, spiritualist and moralist, downgrading the Old Testament, understanding the heart of the New Testament to be the teaching of Christ. The Left Wing of the Reformation is presented as a key link in the ongoing chain of development of a spiritualistic understanding of scripture, with admitted distinctions between Anabaptists, Spiritualistics, Enthusiasts, and Rationalists not permitted to menace either the deep harmony that yet prevailed between them or their common rooting in mediaeval sectarianism. In their use of the Bible the Anabaptists are judged Erasmian - though with even greater devaluation of an Old Testament which survives basically and practically for prophetic and typological interpretation. Even Bucer is connected at crucial points with the

1 *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* by H. G. Reventlow. S.C.M. £25. 1984

Neville Clark, "In the Study," Baptist Quarterly 31.3 (July 1985): 137-143.

humanist and spiritualist tradition. For him, the whole of scripture is 'teaching' (lex, doctrina), spirit and letter are dualistically differentiated, state and church are married under the overarching concept of the Kingdom of Christ, New Testament institutions and ministries become normative for the sixteenth century Church, the Old Testament becomes determinative for the political life of England.

On then to the Puritans. Here the discussion is nicely nuanced and a properly theological approach provided. Zurich not Geneva, Bullinger not Calvin dominated the English Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century. Tyndale provided a homegrown national covenant theology, with the Old Testament offering a direct model for contemporary politics. In Puritan church order, scripture bindingly rules. In Puritan doctrine, the emphasis subtly shifts from justification to sanctification and the personal experience of assurance. In Puritan ethics, Decalogue Law takes centre stage (no bowls on Sunday afternoon à la Calvin). The battles over the ordering of the Church and its relation to the State were fought on the basis of scripture. From humanism with its background in antiquity came the primitivist use of the New Testament as legal norm regulative for church order. From mediaeval typology came the use of the Old Testament and especially its kingship as controlling model for the ordering of society. Puritans and Anglicans clashed by way of divergent presuppositions over biblical use and authority. The one wielded humanist and spiritualist traditions. The other majored in scholastic rationalism. Both, however, stood foursquare on a typological interpretation of the Old Testament.

In the seventeenth century, further development took place. Increased injections of rationalism and moralism are observed. Natural Law begins to displace typology, as the writings of both Hooker and Milton bear witness. Reventlow devotes much space to Thomas Hobbes, to the Latitudinarians, and finally to Deism and the whole Deistic debate. Even to summarise the extensive ground thus covered would be impossible. From one point of view the omission is not crucial. The heart of the case has already been argued. It remains but to notice that from English Deism a direct line runs not only to the formative years of the United States but also to the German Enlightenment.

In retrospect, I wonder whether the trouble with this book is not that it leaves the impression of never having quite made up its mind what it is about. The authority of the Bible? The continuing effect of mediaeval thinking upon the modern world? The cultural seed-bed of biblical criticism? Deism, its patterns and precursors? Certainly, these are not in conflict. This study tells us something about all of them. Yet again and again the question imposes itself: 'Why has this been included; why has that been left out?' Part of the answer may be found in the lack of unified drive that is likely to arise when research assistants are employed to cover the ground. Yet perhaps a more precise, if limited, target would have made for a more

Meanwhile, the strengths of this wide survey are obvious. A vast amount of significant material is quarried, presented, and given a measure of coherence. It is enormously valuable to be reminded of the dominant role of scripture and the theological ideas its interpretation

fostered in the struggles and controversies of sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century England. Scientists and philosophers could not, did not, and would not ignore the Bible. Whigs and Tories deployed it to win political and ideological battles. We are indebted to R ventlow for placing the critical understanding of scripture against the wide background and within the total context in which it came to birth. If there is more concentration on the Old Testament than on the New that is partly because it is an Old Testament scholar at work.

Where the basic hesitation arises is in respect not of the rich material offered but of the case being argued. I suspect a hidden agenda that never quite clearly surfaces. Spiritualism, humanism, rationalism, the Left Wing of the Reformation are, if you like, among the villains, in that they partly determine the 'way' in which biblical criticism emerged and the 'presuppositions' it bore. We hear briefly about 'ethical monotheism' in Old Testament understanding and emphases on the proclamation of Jesus and on Paulinism in New Testament understanding. It is hinted that had criticism taken its rise from Luther and Calvin, the story would have been significantly and valuably different - though Reventlow is somewhat coy in saying directly how. If this is the overtone of the argument, it seems to be simplistic and, in this book, undemonstrated.

If you think that Old Testament prophecy has suffered more than its fair share of arbitrary interpretation, you are likely to put considerable weight on the study of prophecy in historical and phenomenological terms. At any rate, this is the preferred approach of a recent comprehensive examination of the prophetic terrain.[2] Blenkinsopp starts with the Settlement and ends with the Hellenistic period. He attempts to assign the literature to its historical context and to allow that context to provide interpretative illumination. In the doing, he gives due place to recent concern with uncovering the social world(s) within which prophecy belonged, flourished, decayed.

Of course, all the old familiar problems soon surface. At many of the crucial points we are short on data. Though this is most obviously true in respect of the fourth and third centuries B.C. it is also a running irritant through most of the story of the relevant years. If early prophecy is to be accurately assessed, then precarious decisions have constantly to be made in working back behind the Old Testament's great narrative complexes, particularly the Deuteronomic. If later prophecy is to be convincingly expounded, then a whole series of complex judgments about 'editorial' reworking of prophetic traditions has to be recorded, and the criteria employed in the doing may seem to be the result of circular arguments. No wonder that the ranking temptation is always to start with a controlling theory and run it to death.

Blenkinsopp on the whole resists the temptation. He moves steadily through from Samuel, Elijah, Elisha to Amos, Hosea, Isaiah(1), Micah, to Zephaniah and Nahum, Habakkuk and Obadiah, Jeremiah,

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2 *A History of Prophecy in Israel* by J. Blenkinsopp. S.P.C.K. £9.50. 1984

Ezekiel and Isaiah(2), and on to Haggai, Zechariah(1), Isaiah(3), Joel, Zechariah(2), Malachi and Jonah. It is all done with measured tread, with close attention to historical rooting, with even handed respect, with healthy scepticism for fads and fancies.

Inevitably there is a price to be paid. Sometimes the complexities of the historical story seem to be pursued for their own sake rather than because they shed any really significant light on the understanding of the prophetic literature. Successive dabs of paint are added to the historical canvas with arguably too few pauses for indicating the shape of the picture emerging. The book rather peters out with the tabling of Jonah as a reflection on the problem of unfulfilled prophecy. A drawing of the threads together just here would surely have assisted the reader.

It would be a pity if such possible weaknesses of presentation were to conceal the strengths which this study contains. It is a balanced survey of the totality of the prophetic literature and the phenomenon of Old Testament prophecy. It provides comprehensive bibliographies. It is not afraid to question time-honoured orthodoxies, perhaps most obviously in its treatment of the so-called Servant Songs. And on the whole it asks the right questions.

If it remains an interim report, there are at least signs that some of the materials for a firmer redrawing of the prophetic landscape are beginning to emerge. Key questions are imposing themselves. We may look in vain for firm unchallengeable answers, but the very posing of the questions provides additional purchase on the limited evidential material available. How were the prophets related to society and its institutions both by way of support and by way of antagonism? What were the criteria for their legitimation? To what extent were they necessarily locked in symbiotic embrace with monarchical Israel? What is the significance for prophecy of the move from oral announcement of the divine will and word to life embodiment of it? What profound transformation is signalled by the move from direct pronouncement to commentary on existing prophetic text? Even to table such issues is to indicate that there remains a fascinating future for an involved wrestling with those strange figures of Ephraim and Judah, spokesmen for the divine council, enactors of the divine judgment and promise, and sometimes power brokers of ancient Israel.

A book sub-titled 'A Structural Introduction to the Pauline Letters'[3] suggests formidable hurdles ahead. It is not altogether comforting to remember that its author's brief survey of structural exegesis a decade ago was peppered with the charts, signs and jargon that seem inalienably involved with this sub-discipline. An initial word of reassurance may therefore be in order.

Structuralism is not the code word for one single method or approach to texts. It has both different schools and different meanings. It may (at its most abstract level) refer to the search for the deep symbolic structures of the human mind which (unconsciously)

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3 *Paul's Faith and the Power of the Gospel* by Daniel Patte. Fortress Press. £15. 1983

undergird the making of myths and the telling of stories. It may relate to the unveiling of the dynamics of actual narrative structure in drama, story or folktale. It may refer to the plotting, by analysis of linguistic structures, of how words function in sentences. Either way, we are dealing with a form of literary criticism. Either way, the final end product in terms of scripture is called structuralist or semiotic exegesis of the biblical text. But, according to where the methodological emphasis lies, the level of abstraction or concreteness attained and the tangible character of the results accruing may be expected to vary.

Where in all this does Patte stand? He is to be located not in the German school of Erhardt Guttgemanns but in the French school associated with the name of A. J. Greimas. Greimas has developed a systematic theory of language and communication. Patte uses it as a springboard, and deploys simplified facets of it for a particular purpose. That purpose is the systematic study of the characteristics of Paul's 'faith', of what might be called the semantic world of the text of the Pauline letters - a different enterprise from that of the uncovering of Paul's 'theology'. The concern is with Paul's system of convictions not with the rational logic of his theology. For it is his faith that structures his way of thinking, his way of writing, his life and ministry. If reassurance is still lacking, let me emphasise that Patte assumes rather than spells out his structuralist theory, that the technical vocabulary is at a bare minimum, that he builds upon the more familiar methods of exegesis, and that he is constantly engaging the specifics of the biblical text. Since convictions structure behaviour and communication, access to Paul's convictional patterns is heavily via attention to an appropriate reading of his letters in terms of the pattern of behaviour he affirms, the shape and sweep of the arguments he advances, and the interrelations of the convictions thus exposed.

How is such a stance worked out in practice? We begin with successive 'readings' of Galatians, first from a historical perspective and then with a structural approach, and thereby uncover some provisional understanding of Paul's system of convictions, of the systems it confronts, and of the convictional pattern characterising the apostle's faith in the Gospel of freedom. We continue with a closer examination of the system of convictions native to Phar saic Judaism, Paul's ranking sparring partner. I Thessalonians, Philemon and Philippians are then 'read' so as to identify the revelatory situations which ground Paul's basic convictions, the interrelationship of those convictions, and the convictional pattern they form. The role played by scripture in the apostle's system of convictions lies at the heart of further selected 'readings' in Galatians, Romans and I Corinthians. Throughout, a distinction is drawn between what are called the dialogic and the warranting levels of the biblical text. The first refers broadly to the contemporary situation which houses both present exhortations and subsidiary convictions. The second refers to the more basic frame that undergirds, validates, and convinces.

We might say therefore that the overall progression is spiral in character. 'Readings' produce hypotheses and provisional presuppositions. These are checked and corrected by further 'readings', which in turn expose new interrelationships. The study of

Galatians is alerted by argumentative anomalies to the underlying congruities and oppositions of the convictional logic. The study of I Thessalonians, Philemon and Philippians uncovers dialogic and warranting levels. The study of sections of Galatians, Romans and I Corinthians provides confirmation of a skeletal convictional model to be tested and refined by a wider examination of Romans. Then, in a final penetration into I and II Corinthians, an exposure of the apostolic implementation of his convictional system is attempted. Improved performance by a succession of trial structural runs is the name of the game.

What is achieved? Much, everyway. Some of the critical judgments seem to me just plainly perverse. Some of the basic insights have been reached by an Ed Sanders, a Hans Dieter Betz, or an Ernst Kasemann by much more conventional methods. Some of the key conclusions will raise more than one eyebrow among the faithful; though whether the polemic against the misunderstanding of Jesus Christ as the complete and final revelation means too much more than the familiar recognition that 'Gospel' includes its contemporary proclamation - and, if so, what? - remains to be considered. But anything that furthers coherent 'depth' reading of the Pauline letters deserves an unreserved welcome. And faced with structural method that produces sane and abundant exegetical fruits we can only stand and cheer.

Understanding of the Lord's Supper has traditionally been one of the most intractable issues dividing Protestants and Roman Catholics, though recent attempts have not been lacking to convince armed combatants that a good deal of the furore has been much ado about misunderstandings. Alasdair Heron has recently offered[4] a measured survey of the battleground, with some A.C.A.S.-type hints as to possible terms of settlement. The New Testament material is first assessed, with heavy and grateful dependence on the labours of Johannes Betz. The main outlines of the history of interpretation are then plotted.

The New Testament probe suggests that even in early years there was a shift in the interpretative focus from Jesus as the personified covenant of God against the background of Isaianic Servanthood to his sacrificial death and sharing in it against the background of Sinaitic covenant-making. The Passover background of the Supper is seen as reinforcing its sacrificial aspect, even if this emphasis was not initially in the mind of Jesus. Paul and John underscore the consequent sacramental realism.

I am not sure that this delineation carries us much further forward. Most of the basic uncertainties remain. Most of the conclusions are not significantly different from what might not unfairly be called the modern interpretative consensus. What the Betz theory most obviously enables Heron to do is to pin an immediate qualifier on to any garish sacrificia label by driving a partial wedge between Jesus on the one hand and Paul and John on the other. The more important reminder may be that the proper starting point must always

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4 *Table and Tradition* by Alasdair Heron. Handsel Press. £7.75. 1983

be the eucharistic reality and its historical rooting, not some a priori definition of a sacrament.

Once launched beyond the pages of the New Testament, Heron writes the history of developing eucharistic interpretation round the three themes of the nature of a sacrament, real presence, and sacrifice. Justin and Hippolytus, Clement and Origen, Irenaeus and Cyril, Augustine and Chrysostom, all make their expected brief appearance. What seems to me rather more significant is that the familiar polarities begin to surface: symbolism/sacrifice, word/epiklesis, validity/efficacy, president/priest. Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism brood over the eucharistic scene, bending understanding in ways that were to prove almost fatally enduring. Christological lurches trigger eucharistic stances. With hindsight, it is all so apparently predictable. Chrysostom emerges as Heron's preferred candidate, as the potential integrator between both cross and heavenly intercession and earthly sign and heavenly reality.

If Arianism prompted the expulsion of Christ into the godhead and his replacement in the mediatorial role by the Church, more severely practical considerations shifted the focus of the church eucharistic from laity to priest. Sacraments were systematised as causes of grace with Aristotelian conceptions presiding. The doctrine of real presence was formalised with impressive and coherent power. The eucharist availed as sacrifice rather than via sacramental communion. Plenty there for the Reformation to get its teeth into.

As indeed it did. Heron rehearses the variant positions of the great Reformers, making inter alia the shrewd point that Luther's divine omnipresence doubles for Aquinas' non-spatial 'substance'. Not unnaturally, Heron awards Calvin the best marks. He also locates at the heart of the controversy the Reformation challenge to the status and power of the priest as necessary celebrant of crucial sacrifice and to the Church as extension of the incarnation.

Where do we go from here? Take more seriously the eschatological perspective of the New Testament, and the significance of the Holy Spirit in that connection. Recognise that Jesus Christ is the fundamental 'sacrament', and that right understanding of him must shape sacramental understanding. Keep the area of interpretation of real presence bounded but open. View the eucharist as both a receiving of Christ and a sharing in his offering of us to the Father. All this is wisely, if inconclusively, said. It stands at the end of a fair and thought-provoking summary presentation of the history of eucharistic interpretation which has the additional negative merit of totally ignoring what must surely be adjudged one of the most groundless of modern hoaxes - the Dixian preoccupation with the alleged controlling fourfold shape of the eucharist.

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