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The Value of Critical Disciplines

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For the sake of convenience, the critical disciplines discussed will be dealt with under a series of separate headings, but it should be observed at the outset that they ought not to be thought of as mutually exclusive. Nor is it always possible to distinguish clearly between their different applications. However, we must catalogue them for the sake of our own clear thinking.

Literary and Historical Criticism

In years gone by, this discipline was known as Higher Criticism in order to distinguish it from Lower Criticism (now referred to as Textual Criticism), i.e. the art of comparing ancient manuscripts of biblical books with the aim of arriving as nearly as possible at an edition of the original text. There is not space here to enlarge on the complexities of Textual Criticism, since it is our purpose to describe the critical disciplines which proceed from the established text.

Literary and Historical Criticism work hand-in-hand. By Literary Criticism we mean the examination of such matters as authorship, purpose of the author, integrity of the text, and its authenticity. These may be determined with the help of grammatical and philological analyses of the text. Historical Criticism, however, looks not so much at the text itself, as at its context, both its historical situation and its prehistory. It takes into account archaeology, as well as the religious, political, social, and literary life of the contemporary world. It will also examine the history of religions and how the religious thought-forms current in Bible times and lands were dealt with by biblical writers.

There are two aspects of Literary and Historical Criticism which are worthy of special attention. These are Comparative Religions Criticism and Source Criticism.

Comparative Religions Criticism

In the words of G. E. Ladd, 'this method represents the most thorough-going application of naturalistic historicism to the study of the Bible'. It sees biblical religion not as the progress of divine revelation, but as an evolution of religious ideas influenced by and borrowed from the religions of the neighbouring environment. It was a discipline popularized by J. Wellhausen in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1878; first published as Bd.1 of *Geschichte Israels*).

Using this approach, Jesus comes to be viewed as a Jewish apocalypticist who proclaimed an event (the immediate catastrophic end of the world) which did not happen (so A. Schweitzer). At the other extreme are those attempts to interpret the New Testament in the light of the dying and rising cults among the Hellenistic mystery religions.

It is plain that such theories are dictated not by an objective assessment of the biblical text, but by presuppositions concerning the nature of history and religious development. The witness of Scripture is forced into a preconceived philosophical mould. While the Christian may recognize that God has made use of ancient religious rites and practices (e.g. sacrifice, circumcision, and ablutions), just as he has used the language and history of mankind to reveal his will, this in no way implies that the religion of the Bible is a mere human synthesis of religious concepts. Conversely, revelation does not necessitate uniqueness at every point.

Source Criticism

Source Criticism attempts to discover constituent documents which have been brought together in the production of a biblical text. It may be seen to lie mid-way between Form Criticism (the oral stage) and Redaction Criticism (an author's editorial use of sources). Thus, for example, Source Criticism of the Hexateuch (i.e. the first six books of the Bible), classically formulated in the nineteenth century by J. Wellhausen, has proposed four prior sources in the composition of these books. The two earliest sources have become known as J (from the use of the name 'Jehovah') and E (from the use of the name 'Elohim'). These two sources are said to differ in other points; e.g. the emphasis on Abraham and Judah in J, but on Jacob, Reuben, and Joseph in E, the different use of synonyms (e.g. *shiphah* in J, but *'amah* in E, both meaning 'female slave'; and 'Sinai' in J, but 'Horeb' in E), and a whole multitude of other details. The third and fourth sources deduced were labelled D, i.e. the Deuteronomic Code said to have been discovered in

the temple in the time of King Josiah, and P, the Priestly Code. However, the unravelling of Hexateuchal sources is not today considered to be quite so simple as it appeared at the beginning of the century.

In the New Testament, Source Criticism's most notable achievement has been its application to the Synoptic Gospels. Here its application was seen to proceed with the greater ease, for in this case three documents were ready to hand for comparison and provided a firm basis for critical enquiry. The most enduring theory here has been what is popularly known as the 'two-source theory', i.e. the theory that Matthew and Luke made use of Mark and Q. Q (from German *Quelle*, 'source') is a hypothetical body of material common to Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark and sometimes thought of as an oral source, or as used by Matthew and Luke in different editions. It should not, however, be assumed that alternative theories have ceased to be propounded, e.g. the priority of Matthew, or B. H. Streeter's four-document thesis which postulated the additional sources M (used by Matthew alone) and L (used by Luke alone). Other sections of the Bible in which parallel passages have provided grist for the source critics' mill are Kings/Chronicles, 2 Peter/Jude, Micah/Isaiah, and some Psalms.

There is no need to think of the biblical writers' use of sources in terms of modern notions of plagiarism and some passages in the Bible itself would seem to acknowledge the use of sources: e.g. Num. 21:14; Luke 1:1; and cf. 2 Mac. 2:19-32.

Where the Source Critic has parallel passages to work with, his analysis of the sources will deal with points of similarity and difference in wording, order (e.g. in Matthew the Q material is scattered throughout the Gospel, while in Luke it occurs in two main blocks: 6:20-7:35; 9:57-13:34), contents (e.g. does Mark's omission of large portions found in Matthew indicate Mark's priority or his desire to omit specifically 'Jewish' material?), style (is Mark primitive?), ideas, and theology (is a high Christology always a late Christology?). Where there are no overlapping texts, the work of the Source Critic is more difficult and some would say, more hypothetical. We may compare it to looking for stitches in a garment, the 'stitches' being the apparent tell-tale signs of awkward breaks and dislocations (a possible example being the section 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 which seems to interrupt the line of Paul's argument), stylistic variations (e.g. does Luke's nativity narrative demonstrate a Palestinian Aramaic style?), and supposed inconsistencies, whether theological or historical. It should be observed that other explanations of these phenomena may perhaps be given without resorting to the Source Critic's scissors.

But what are the values of Source Criticism for the intelligent Chris-

tian? First of all, it should be recognized that Source Criticism may help to shed light on the relatively 'dark' period of history between the events described in the Bible and the actual record of those events which lies in our hands. Secondly, a recognition of a writer's use of sources may deepen our awareness of the historicity of biblical events, since a writer has taken the trouble to document his account from earlier material. We see that the biblical writers did not feel free to write just as they pleased, but were concerned to preserve an authentic account. In addition, Source Criticism may help to reveal a writer's distinctive outlook. We may take for example the question whether Matthew's Gospel was particularly centred on the Jewish people. If we can demonstrate that he used Mark (a comparatively 'unJewish' Gospel) as a source, we will probably answer the question in the affirmative. But if we feel that Matthew used as a source some strongly Jewish traditions emanating from the Jerusalem church, we will probably answer the question in the negative.

Form Criticism

Unlike Source Criticism, which concentrates on the study of written documents underlying a text, Form Criticism is an attempt to analyze the types of oral traditions which have been incorporated into an ultimate literary work. Although anticipated earlier (e.g. in the study of folk literature and classical literature), the discipline was developed after the First World War by a number of German scholars: H. Gunkel (who was influenced by the Grimm brothers' classification of folk traditions into categories such as fairy tales, myths, sagas, and legends), A. Alt, and a number of others working on the Old Testament; and K. L. Schmidt, M. Dibelius, and R. Bultmann in the New Testament. In the Old Testament it was first (and perhaps most successfully) applied to the Psalms, while in the New Testament it was first applied to the Synoptic Gospels and later, following the lead of E. Lohmeyer, to the Epistles and Revelation.

The form of each 'unit of tradition' is said to depend on the function it performed in the believing community. The technical term for this occasion which demands the tradition is *Sitz im Leben* ('life-situation'). As an example of a *Sitz im Leben*, we may take von Rad's analysis of Deut. 26:5ff. ('A wandering Aramaean was my father . . .') as a nucleus around which the Exodus legends are said to have been gathered in a formula which had its life-setting in the celebration of the Feast of Weeks. An obvious *Sitz im Leben* for a Psalm is Israel's worship or thanksgiving. It should be observed, however, that a passage may have

more than one *Sitz im Leben*. For example, a prophetic speech may have its setting in the life of the prophet himself, in the cultic, legal, or other institutions, and in the situation whereby the speech was collected. We should beware, however, of hypothetical *Sitze im Leben* which depend upon certain preconceptions. A radical Form Critic may, for example, assert that the pericope in which Jesus speaks of the founding of his church cannot have its *Sitz im Leben* in the life and teaching of the historical Jesus (since he is viewed by this critic merely as an apocalyptic prophet to the Jews), but rather in the apologetics of the Christian church, which was anxious to vindicate its existence by appeal to a supposed saying of the historical Jesus. A careful scholar will need to beware of drawing conclusions such as these, based as they are on certain preconceptions about the historical Jesus.

The form of the narrative will vary according to what is deduced to have been its original *Sitz im Leben*. As S. H. Travis puts it, 'Just as information about the qualities of a particular toothpaste will be told in a distinctive manner by an advertisement, but in a quite different manner by a scientific report, so stories about Jesus acquired different forms or shapes according to their *Sitz im Leben*.'² The particular *Sitz im Leben* may sometimes be betrayed by some introductory or concluding formula. We may for comparison consider how in modern literary conventions, the phrases 'once upon a time' and 'they all lived happily ever after' commence and terminate the specific genre of fairy tales, the original *Sitz im Leben* of which was evidently the adult's desire to amuse children by story-telling. This stereotyping of formulae arises from the recurrence of the same, or similar, life situations. From the biblical point of view, we may note how such stereotyped formulae as 'the word of the LORD came . . .', or 'thus says the LORD . . .' may introduce a prophetic speech, or how the use of symmetric parallelism may indicate the extent of a poetic fragment.

Some of the commonest forms, or literary genres, which have been deduced are *paradigms* (i.e. episodes culminating in an authoritative saying or 'punch-line', e.g. Mark 12:13-17), *tales* (most frequently miracle stories told not so much to point a lesson as to gratify by narrative and to demonstrate God's power), *legends* (which may be historical, illustrating the lives of God's messengers, e.g. Elijah, Peter, and especially Jesus), *myths* (in which the supernatural breaks in on the human scene, e.g. early chapters of Genesis, the baptismal miracle, and the transfiguration — cf. however 2 Pet. 1:16), *fables* (which point a lesson, e.g. Jotham's fable, Judg. 9:8-15), and *exhortations* (e.g. sayings of Jesus). Other forms include speeches, records, annals, sagas, laws, songs, hymns, laments, thanksgivings, liturgies, royal psalms, oracles, riddles, allegories, early creeds, etc.

What value may the methods of Form Criticism have? Firstly, we may gain clues about early Christian preaching, teaching, and debate. Secondly, it may aid hermeneutics, since the *Sitze im Leben* once deduced may be seen to recur in later ages and so we may understand how to re-apply Scripture. Thirdly, it may aid exegesis. For example, a comparison with similar forms in ancient Near Eastern literature may help to shed light on the structure of the ancient Israelite covenant ceremony.

Against these advantages to be gained, however, we must place certain reservations. To balance the last point made, we should remember that a literary form in the Bible ought sometimes to be *contrasted* rather than *compared* with an extra-biblical form; e.g. A. Alt's analysis of the apodictic form of law in the Old Testament, a form which is seen to be distinctly Israelite in origin. Again, while Form Criticism may on occasion assist in exegesis, it is no *substitute* for exegesis. It merely suggests the possible background(s) against which a passage is to be understood. Furthermore, there is disagreement among critics over the classification of supposed forms; e.g. is it structure or content which denotes a form? It is also impossible to fit all passages neatly into form categories. Mongrels stalk the text and pigeons sometimes lose their wings as they are forced into their holes; e.g. the doctrinaire assumption that a parable must only teach one point and that any second point must be an addition of the church. The 'laws of tradition' (e.g. that traditions develop from the simple to the complex) are also assumed to be beyond question, but E. P. Sanders has demonstrated that this is a dubious assumption. Generally speaking, Form Criticism gives too much license to the supposed creative imagination of the believing community. More attention ought perhaps to have been focused on rabbinic faithfulness to detail in transmission. This fault may, however, be on account of the fact that the leading exponents of Form Criticism have been German liberal theologians. A more conservative Form Critic, such as Vincent Taylor, has come to radically different conclusions, expressing a high view of the Gospels' historical reliability.

Tradition History

Tradition History is another attempt to analyze biblical material in order to show how it has developed before assuming its final form. It considers not so much the influence that any one individual may have had on the formation of a literary document (see Redaction Criticism below), but rather the influence exercised by communities or groups:

the priestly circle in ancient Israel, 'wise men', prophet groups (said e.g. to be influential in the formation of 'Second Isaiah'), and perhaps preachers (so von Rad interprets the background to Deuteronomy).

Where there are differences in two or more accounts of the same events, Tradition History seeks not to show that more than one event is being described, or that the accounts may be conflated to produce a coherent whole, but rather to separate the 'real' event from the accretions it has assumed before being reduced to its final literary form. It is clear, for example, that the relationship between the ancient Mesopotamian flood stories and the Genesis account is more than a matter of Source Criticism. The differences in underlying viewpoint (e.g. polytheism over against monotheism) as well as the many details are too striking to pass off as variant sources. It is the religious outlook of the different peoples that has moulded the tradition in different directions.

As well as the influence of the community, Tradition History is concerned with the influence which a particular geographical location may have had in the formation of a narrative, since certain traditions appear to be closely associated with specific locations; e.g. some Jacob traditions and Bethel, and some covenant traditions and Shechem (Deut. 27; Josh. 24; Judg. 9). Tradition History also seeks to take account of the social, political, and cultic milieux in which the literature developed (cf. Form Criticism's *Sitz im Leben*).

To some extent Tradition History represents a revolt against Source Criticism (conceived as a critical method founded on Western assumptions about the ways in which a literary document is produced) and in favour of emphasizing the part played by oral tradition in the formation of a written account. This was the particular thesis of the Swedish Old Testament scholars H. S. Nyberg and I. Engnell, but it has had to be modified to some extent by later research.

We may note some of the weaknesses of this critical method. First of all, Tradition History as commonly applied appears to disregard all attempts to harmonize apparently conflicting accounts (e.g. the resurrection appearances) and seems positively to look for and even create discrepancies as grist for its mill; e.g. the suggestion that there is a conflict in the reasons given for Jacob's migration to Padan-aram, one tradition viewing it as a flight from Esau (Gen. 27:41-45), the other as an expedition in quest of a wife (Gen. 27:46-28:2). The emphasis on creative tradition tends to minimize the historical accuracy of Scripture. A buffer of uncertainty is thus erected between the modern reader and the historical events. This is because the task of the Tradition Critic is so intricate and so many different Tradition-historical interpretations may be given of an apparent problem, that the resultant impression is often one of vague uncertainty. The cause of this

may in part be our actual lack of knowledge about the supposed communities within which accounts are said to have developed.

Redaction Criticism

Although anticipated earlier, Redaction Criticism is a discipline which generally took off after the second World War, propounded by the three German scholars: G. Bornkamm, H. Conzelmann, and W. Marxsen. By way of a simple definition, Redaction Criticism may be said to be the study of observable changes made by biblical writers in the traditional materials used by them. While Form Criticism views the writers of books as 'scissors-and-paste' compilers of units transmitted by the believing community, Redaction Criticism is more concerned with the end of this process, whereby the compiler impresses on his material his own personal interests and emphases. To take a simple example, Matthew favours the expression 'the kingdom of the heavens' (which may have been more suitable to Jewish readers), while Mark and Luke favour 'the kingdom of God' (which seems more meaningful for Gentiles). Similarly, Redaction Criticism is interested in the writer's ordering of events to achieve different emphases; e.g. the temptation narrative reaches its climax in Matthew (unlike Luke) with the invitation by Satan to worship himself.

Redaction Criticism clearly has the advantage of treating biblical books as whole units and thus it somewhat makes up for the dismemberment which attends Source, Form, and Tradition Criticism. Furthermore, it helps us to appreciate more clearly the distinctive viewpoints of biblical writers such as the four evangelists and to appreciate the unity contributed to by diverse analyses.

Redaction Criticism is not, however, without its weak points, not least of which is the subtlety of analysis achieved by Redaction Critics, a subtlety which might have amazed the biblical writers themselves, since their imagination has frequently led them to widely divergent views of the tendencies evidenced by different redactors. Furthermore, Redaction Criticism presupposes that the special contribution of biblical writers may only be detected when they diverge from their source in one way or another. However, their concurrence may equally well be evidence of their personal approach, since the unaltered tradition may have adequately expressed their own understanding. Redaction Criticism seems to suggest that authentic history may only be arrived at after a writer's redactionary work (as well as the Form-critical and Tradition-historical moulds) have been stripped away. The remaining 'authentic' words are, needless to say, often very sparse indeed. But

this approach too readily assumes a complete dichotomy between history and the way in which it is handled orally and in written form. A redactor's distinctive material may be just as authentic history as anything else. Redaction has been too easily equated with inventive composition, whereby history has been swallowed up in theology.

Structuralism

In a survey of critical disciplines as brief as this, it is extremely difficult to give a coherent and meaningful description of Structuralism, since its approach to biblical criticism is altogether novel and bears little resemblance to anything discussed so far. Nevertheless, we must make the attempt for the sake of completeness and in view of the undoubted fact that Structuralism is attracting more and more attention. It is in fact a new vogue, beginning in the mid-1960s in France, later gaining ground in Germany, N. America, and S. Africa. At the risk of stating generalizations which explain nothing, we may define it as an attempt not at exegesis of the text, but a resolution of the mental patterns on which the text is structured. These patterns are seen not necessarily as conscious creations, but as expressions of the sub-conscious ordering of data which is common to all human minds. It derives its inspiration from psycho-linguistics and from folk anthropology and it is seen by its literary practitioners as part of the enterprise of semiology or semiotics, i.e. the science of signifying systems.

A structure may be defined as 'a whole formed of mutually dependent elements, such that each depends on the others and can only be what it is by its relationship with them.'³ Basic to Structuralism is the distinction between 'syntagms' and 'paradigms'. A linguistic unit stands in linear relation to other units placed before or after it in a sequence. This is a syntagm, related by association to its context. However, the unit is also related to any other units which might be substituted for it in a context so as still to produce a meaningful combination. In this sense it is a paradigm. For example, in the phrase 'the blue light', 'blue' stands in syntagmatic relation to 'light', but in paradigmatic relation to 'green'. Thus meaning is produced by combination and choice, so that different units may be arranged together in a system of relationships within a formal structure. These units may be words, pieces of narrative ('narremes'), parts of myths ('mythemes'), or other semantically meaningful units ('semes'). What interests the structuralists is not so much *parole* (the individual spoken message), as *langue* (the 'code' by which paradigmatic relationships are stored in the subconscious).

We may take as an example R. C. Culley's analysis of six Old Testament 'deception stories': 'the midwives and the king of Egypt' (Exod. 1:15-21); 'the patriarch, his wife, and the foreign king' (Gen. 12:10-20); 'the Gibeonites' (Josh. 9:3-15); 'Michal's helping David escape from Saul' (1 Sam. 19:11-17); 'Ehud kills the king of Moab' (Judg. 3:12-30); 'Jael kills Sisera' (Judg. 4:17-24). Many details recur in each of these narratives (e.g. relations with foreigners; a king versus the weak), but in general it may be said that they all 'share a three-phase structure moving from an opening situation which calls for action to a response which involves a deception and finally to an outcome which is an improvement over the original situation' — crisis, response, denouement.⁴

Does this kind of Structuralism have any value for the intelligent Christian? Well, it may serve to discover some new relationships between narrative themes and so help to structure sermons,⁵ but we should remember that structural analysis derives from radically different presuppositions than those which underlie traditional text-outlines; it is totally humanistic. Structuralism may, however, act as a corrective to some extreme forms of Source Criticism. Instead of dissecting the text into various documents, Structuralism actually *seeks* repetitions, parallelisms, and inversions. Likewise, it may also counterbalance the extremes of Form, Tradition, and Redaction Criticism which seek to prune away 'accretions' in a quest for authenticity. Structuralism regards no text as irrelevant and treats the text as a given whole.

But is Structuralism a new kind of demythologism? Indeed, in its quest for 'universal values', it has so far shown a complete lack of interest in history⁶ or 'surface meanings' in the quest for symbolic relationships. In its quest for the code or system, the actual text frequently becomes obliterated so that instead of exegesis we have only vague generalizations — many trees, but no wood. We should bear in mind that biblical revelation is not merely an expression of the human spirit and should not be reduced to that level. In the words of Günther Schiwy, "The prophetic talent consists precisely in the ability to transcend the linguistic and conceptual categories of a system."⁷ Structuralism makes a very fine show of supposedly scientific analysis, but we are left wondering if anything really substantial is achieved by it. Perhaps we may dare to suggest that this 'emperor' has in fact no clothes.

Some Conclusions

'The Bible is the Word of God given in the words of men in history.'⁸

This is a useful definition and teaches us to regard as of importance both the divine and human aspects of Scripture. Yet, 'no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God' (2 Pet. 1:21). If this be so, then we must beware of placing too great an emphasis on the human origins of Scripture. It will be apparent to those who have attempted to understand the critical methods briefly reviewed above, that modern critical methods of Bible study were in the main developed by rationalistic scholars who saw the Bible as *only* a human document. In the use of critical methods therefore, one should take great care in sifting critical arguments to discover on what preconceptions they may be built, in order to avoid arriving at some of the 'conclusions' which have been reached by liberal scholars. Take, for example, the sweeping comments which appear in a recent work by A. T. and R. P. C. Hanson: 'These doctrines (the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible) have been rendered impossible for intelligent people to hold today because of the rise of historical criticism . . . once historical criticism was seriously applied to the Bible the old doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy became no longer tenable. They vanished like shadows in the light of day.'⁹ This is, of course, not the kind of language that the Lord or the apostles used of Scripture (cf. John 10:35; 2 Tim. 3:16) and a reverent Christian would not wish to pervert critical methods to these ends.

There is indeed a human element in Scripture, but, to quote the words of J. N. Darby, it is not 'as if God's using man — his lips, or his understanding, his mind in every way — meant the same as leaving him to himself, and me to his folly, so that what God did give should be uncertain, as inescapably mixed up with what is man's.'¹⁰ Scripture is indeed both human and divine, but not a mixture of the divine with human error. It is not men left to their weakness and mistakes, but men divinely inspired and sustained against error. 'Critical science does not keep its place when, instead of being a scientific inquirer, it would be a judge; when, not content with collecting together the oracles of God, it sets about composing them, decomposing them, canonizing them, decanonizing them; and, when it gives forth oracles itself! Then it tends to nothing less than to subvert the faith from its foundation.'¹¹ We should take heed then to the insinuation made to our first parents by Satan himself: 'Has God said . . .?' Could it be that the formulation and use made of the critical methods, reviewed above, by liberal scholars is merely the same insinuation in modern dress? So often the biblical text appears to be treated like so many tea-leaves which the ingenuity of the modern interpreter re-arranges into a pattern to tickle the intellectual ears. Is the result godliness, or is it the god Diffidence? Perhaps these comments may appear too scathing, but

I believe that when we are considering the critical methods which men have devised to analyze the Word of God, we should remember at all times that it is not we who shall judge the Word, but the Word which will judge us.

'And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers' (1 Thess. 2:13).

NOTES

1. *The New Testament and Criticism* (London, 1970), p.196.
2. 'Form criticism', in I. H. Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation* (Exeter, 1977), p.154.
3. E. Benveniste, *Problems in general linguistics*, tr. M. E. Meek (Coral Gables, 1971), p.82.
4. 'Structural analysis: is it done with mirrors?', *Interpretation*, vol. 28 (1974), p.171-180.
5. Cf. for example the comparison drawn by R. A. Spivey between John the Baptist and Jesus, in 'Structuralism and Biblical studies', *Interpretation*, vol. 28 (1974), p.139.
6. I.e. the concrete and particular events in time that are recounted in the biblical narratives. Cf. the unguarded comment of E. Leach: 'King David and King Solomon are no more likely to be historical than are King Agamemnon and King Menelaus' ('The legitimacy of Solomon: some structural aspects of Old Testament history', in *Structuralism: a reader*, ed. M. Lane (London, 1970), p.449).
7. *Structuralism and Christianity* (Pittsburgh, 1971), p.37.
8. G. E. Ladd, *op. cit.*, p.12.
9. *Reasonable belief* (Oxford, 1980), p.42.
10. 'The human element in inspiration', in *Collected writings* (new edn.), vol. 6 (Kingston-on-Thames, 1964), p.375f.
11. L. Gaussen, *The divine inspiration of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, 1971), p.324.