

# Will the Real Moses Please Stand Up!

*Students in Conflict with Old Testament  
Criticism*

Many a young man who has received his spiritual nurture within the evangelical tradition, and who seeks to test his fitness for the Christian ministry, finds the very fundamentals of his faith challenged, modified, and even rejected outright by the theological teachers under whom he places himself. Often the evangelical theological student is limited by his denominational interests in the choice of theological school, but more often than not he is faced with a number of options from which to choose. As one who has been involved in theological education over the past fifteen years as an undergraduate, graduate student, and teacher, I would express the following firmly-held convictions as a preliminary to the discussion of Old Testament criticism. The choice of theological school requires the consideration of many factors, but other things being equal, the place for undergraduate training in theology is undoubtedly at a good evangelical school. This is not a matter of avoiding the challenges to one's faith which come from a non-evangelical point of view ably and convincingly argued, but a matter of *finding the place where first things are put first*. My own observation of "liberal" or "critical" training is that, because of its rejection of the orthodox Christian faith and of biblical authority, it can never present a coherent basic account of biblical theology. The all-too-limited time available is not given over to the study of what the Bible says as the Word of God, but disproportionately allocated to the study of the makers of modern theology. The orthodox theology of centuries is relegated to a position equal among, or even inferior to, those temporary aberrations which are born upon the wings of the latest fashions of continental philosophy. Calvin, Luther, and the English Reformers are studied mainly for their historical interest, as are the Thirty-

Nine Articles and the Westminster Confession. The fact is that a school which is oriented towards modern theology and higher critical views of the Bible is incapable of presenting a curriculum which can prepare a man for the Gospel ministry. Modern-day pulpits are too often filled by the products of liberal seminaries who are either utterly confused or plainly ignorant of what the preaching and teaching function of the ministry is and who therefore must substitute all kinds of well-meant programs of social action and ecumenical fervor for the Gospel ministry. Preaching is lamentable because there is nothing to say. At the same time the myth of the irrelevance of the orthodox faith to modern needs has led to the breeding of new deformities of the Gospel which seek to be accommodated by unregenerate and unbelieving minds rather than to transform and renew them. It is possible that the evangelical may derive some benefit from having to sharpen his wits and defend his convictions against modern criticism, but it must be at the cost of missing out on the basic training in the theology of the Bible, and it will almost certainly lead to frustration and confusion. Going to an evangelical school is not a matter of running away from the hard facts; on the contrary it is a matter of facing the real facts of revealed truth and of the nature of the ministry.

In offering the following comments I have in mind the student who for various reasons elects to take his undergraduate theological training at a non-evangelical seminary. It is earnestly to be hoped that teachers at evangelical establishments will take some time to acquaint their students with the history and methods of higher criticism, and to teach them the basic means by which the positive contributions may be discerned from the negative conclusions which it produces.\* The evangelical pastor must be

able to gauge that which he may profitably employ of the results of criticism and why he may do so, as well as the errors which he must reject and against which, if necessary, he must enter the apologetic arena.

Let us recognize first of all that the conflict between orthodoxy and modern criticism does not affect the Old Testament alone; New Testament studies, Dogmatics, Pastoral Theology and Homiletics all stem from an understanding of the whole Bible, and are therefore all subject to the same type of problems as is the study of the Old Testament. However, we will confine ourselves to this area, which has traditionally held the most difficulties for theological students.

## I. THE MAIN AREAS OF CONFLICT

### *1) Introductory studies*

The discipline which we call Introduction enquires into the definition of the material to be studied, its origins and forms, its date and authorship, and the history of its oral and literary transmission. Former exponents of orthodoxy were also interested in these matters but had not the advantages of the modern scientific studies on a number of fronts which have been available to scholars of our time. We can be sure that had these tools been available to them they would have used them. But the great advances over the last century in the fields of archaeology, comparative studies and linguistics are frequently applied by the biblical critics in a way which implies that their resulting conclusions about the Old Testament form part of a simple continuum of understanding ranging from the relatively naive approach of pre-critical orthodoxy

\* In general, students at evangelical schools are required to know the important non-evangelical literature. —Editor

through a sophisticated and ever-growing modern scientific knowledge. This is only partly true, for the developments represented by modern criticism are not only scientific but philosophical. Intimately bound up with scientific advance, but not essentially part of it, has been a new philosophy which exalts the scientific method to a position which excludes all other sources of truth and understanding. Biblical studies have been made to switch horses from a philosophic supernaturalism to naturalistic empiricism. The grand delusion which still persists is that this switch was an integral part of the application of scientific studies to the Bible. This exalting of scientific method so that it excludes willy-nilly the truths of supernatural revelation because they are not open to direct scientific verification is in itself quite unscientific. Yet it is on this basis that most introductory studies to the Old Testament proceed. As a consequence, questions of revelation and inspiration become almost meaningless because empiricism demands that the biblical documents should be treated as merely human productions to be evaluated as any other historical data. Scientific method in its application to biblical studies is thus subjected to an intolerable totalitarian philosophical approach which regards supernaturalism as unscientific and therefore invalid.

It was to be expected that the documents of the Old Testament which claimed to record the most ancient events would come under the heaviest fire from the new naturalistic criticism. So it was with Wellhausen's concentration upon the Pentateuch, and with the work of his successors as they broke the documents up into main J, E, D, and P sources, assigning them to certain periods in a reconstructed historical scheme on the basis of an evolutionary theory of development from the most primitive to

the most complex. Despite the fact that modern critics claim to have repudiated the naive evolutionary framework of Wellhausen it is abundantly clear that an assumption of natural development still underlines their conclusions. Form critics in their search for the original elements of any tradition, the situation in life which evoked them, and the consequent growth of the tradition, likewise constantly assume that the original elements had to be basic, simple, short forms which developed under the influence of changing situations. We have come a long way from Wellhausen's reconstructions, but this is due more to the overwhelming evidence from archaeology, linguistics and comparative studies, rather than to an escape from Wellhausen's evolutionary assumptions. The assertion that criticism *has* escaped them is another myth to be exploded.

In the space available we can neither adequately describe the form of critical studies nor criticize details. We can do little more than take note of the continuing philosophical presuppositions which underlie the bulk of critical evaluations of the Bible and which are essentially at variance with biblical supernaturalism. The rejection of details of higher critical conclusions of fifty years ago, due to the sophistication of methods and the application of ancillary studies, is a welcome modification but it does not remove the fallacy which builds a rejection of biblical assumptions into introductory studies.

## 2) *Historical studies*

The reconstruction of the history of Israel is closely related to Introduction, and it was primarily the historical question which interested Wellhausen. It is generally assumed that the biblical documents are to be regarded on the same level as any other historical evidence. The assumption that they are merely

human documents leads to a historicist attitude to biblical authority, that is, we accept the authority of the biblical documents only insofar as they involve us more closely in the events of saving history than any other documents. Because considerations of supernatural inspiration and revelation are apparently considered to be inadmissible in historical method, there must of necessity be a prevailing scepticism about those historical elements in the scriptures which do not have obvious extra-biblical corroboration.

Conservatives have not been without fault in the problem of Old Testament history, for they have often assumed that we know all that needs to be known about ancient Hebrew historical method and writing. The higher critical method may apply the wrong presuppositions but it nevertheless has often led the way in asking the right questions about the nature of the literature before us. When evangelicals unquestioningly apply modern historical standards to the biblical record as if it were a piece of twentieth-century scientific history, the result can be both naive assertions about what the Bible says and also the creation of unnecessary tensions between these assertions and legitimate external evidence.

### 3) *Old Testament Theology*

When the rationalist and empiricist assumptions of the late nineteenth century were applied to the Old Testament the inevitable result was the loss of theology. It became possible to speak only of the history of Israel's religion. Since the early 1930's there has been a considerable revival of the subject of Old Testament theology. This in itself is a matter of only limited satisfaction because the new understanding of theology is inevitably shaped by the critical view of the documents, their relative dating, and by a naturalistic view of revelation.

The definition of Old Testament theology ranges from Israel's testimony to what she believed took place in her past history (*Heilsgeschichte* or salvation history), to a systematic account of the religious ideas expressed in the Old Testament.

The relationship of the Old Testament to the New is inseparable from the problem of theology since orthodox Christianity has always recognized that it is Jesus Christ who gives us the Old Testament as the Scriptures which "cannot be broken" (John 10:35), that is, as the Word of God. Orthodoxy also maintains that there is an inconsistency in the modern "biblical theology" movement which draws upon the Bible for quite definitive information about almost any doctrine except the one which refutes the modern critical presuppositions, namely the biblical doctrine of "Doctrine" and of Inspiration.

## II. THE REASON FOR THE CONFLICT

In reviewing the areas of Introduction, History, and Theology, we have seen that in each of them the conflict between orthodoxy and modern criticism reduces to a basic opposition of philosophical standpoint. It is unfortunate that this fact is so little acknowledged and that the conflict often becomes one of unseemly name-calling. Many evangelicals err in refusing to listen to anything that smacks of "criticism" while at the same time ignoring the tools which are available for the exegetical task of finding out what the biblical text means to say. It is also unfortunate that higher critics shut their eyes to the alternatives of supernaturalism, branding them as unobjective and obscurantist. Both extremes are the result of laziness. Objectivity is another myth, and there is nobody so obscurantist as the critic who uncritical-

ly accepts the so-called "assured results" of criticism as if they were infallible words from God.

C.S. Lewis in his essay, "The Funeral of a Great Myth,"<sup>1</sup> quotes an academic who contends that biological evolution "is accepted by zoologists not because it has been observed to occur or . . . can be proved by logically coherent evidence to be true, but because the only alternative, special creation, is clearly incredible." Lewis comments, "This would mean that the sole ground for believing it is not empirical but metaphysical—the dogma of an amateur metaphysician who finds 'special creation' incredible." Whether we accept the view which Lewis quotes or not, it provides a fair analogy with what seems to be the situation among many critics. Is it too much to suggest that much critical dogma stands not on the empirical evidence, but rather on the assumption that the orthodox alternatives are too incredible? The student at a liberal seminary is not likely to find the orthodox position treated as anything but an outmoded and no longer viable alternative to naturalism which has been discredited by objective and scientific research.

The older liberalism which simply expunged all supernatural elements from the Bible has been largely replaced by a more sophisticated criticism which tends to side-step supernaturalism rather than to confront it. Now we are told to interpret the supernatural elements, to enquire why they were written, the way they were written, and out of what circumstances (usually assumed to be other than the account relates). Miracles are interpreted according to the needs of the community which created or adapted the story containing them, but never seen as credible in themselves. The resurrection in the New Testament

is looked at in terms of the need of the primitive church to interpret its own existence, but the reality of the resurrection becomes a non-concern.

### III. THE POSITIVE REACTION

Neither the individual's evangelical faith nor the wider cause of orthodoxy is served by over-reaction to rationalistic criticism. It stands to reason that all truth is God's truth and the findings of scientific investigations in many fields related to biblical studies are to be welcomed. Nevertheless we still have to be careful to ensure that the application of such findings is governed by sound principles. False criticism sits in judgment upon the Bible informing it that it must conform to certain standards drawn from the world of empirical knowledge, or else it must suffer to be rewritten. True criticism, on the other hand, is that which stands under the authority of God's Word in order to find out the principles which govern our understanding of reality. The application of the so-called tools of critical study is made in order to better understand what the meaning of the text is in its historical context. But unless human reason is instructed as to the proper standards to apply to Scripture it will treat it as a merely human book.

Thus it is only partly true that rationalistic criticism exalts human reason above Scripture's authority, for such a proposition appears to imply that human reason is suppressed when orthodoxy exalts scriptural authority. Reason cannot be regarded in this context as a *thing* or as a stable body of truth to be compared with the assertions of Scripture. Reason is the instrument or process which handles and applies the presuppositions which are "programmed" into it in order to decide what is

<sup>1</sup> *Christian Reflections*, (W.B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1967), p. 85.

“reasonable” or “unreasonable.” Either the universe of empirical knowledge is a closed system of truth, as naturalism assumes, or there is a wider reality. If the biblical assertions that man’s only way to the knowledge of God is through supernatural revelation are true, the whole naturalistic view of a closed system breaks down.

When we apply the canons of supernatural revelation to the Bible, allowing that God *is* God, then the notions of special creation, spiritual regeneration, miracles, the resurrection, and the inerrancy of the biblical record are all eminently reasonable. The task of true biblical criticism is to clarify the exact meaning of the biblical propositions by seeking to bridge the time, culture, and language gaps between us and the biblical authors. Criticism takes account of the problem of canonicity; what documents are part of the authoritative corpus and why are they recognized as such? It takes account of the problem of the text; what is the nature of the text before us, and how does the knowledge of its historical background, insofar as it can be recovered, aid us in the understanding of its author’s intended meaning?

The literalist who says that he does not employ criticism, that he does not interpret, but only reads the plain meaning of the Bible, is really deceiving himself! There is no ultimately unambiguous language; even the simplest propositions in the indicative can be metaphorical: “I am the true wine”; “The Lord God is a sun and shield.” The existence of parables, metaphors, and various kinds of poetic and symbolic language in the Bible ought to remind us constantly of the possibility that larger units, even whole books, may present truth in a form that we do not readily comprehend without an appreciation of the ancient Near Eastern literary methods. But true

criticism is concerned not only with the human factors in the shaping of the Bible, but also with the divine factors.

In conclusion I would like to suggest a very practical step for the student facing liberal criticism of the Old Testament. Begin now to build a bibliography and, as far as possible, a library of relevant material both in journals and books. Begin now to develop your own apologetic, concentrating at first on the positive apologetic for the evangelical view of scripture. Remember that the pastor must be able to guide his people both away from error and into truth. Make sure that positive and negative apologetics are built from the ground up; begin by understanding the basic presuppositions upon which the differing positions stand, for many a futile argument about details could have been avoided if the protagonists had recognized that they were arguing from different premises. Learn to read both conservative and higher critical authors with discernment for there will be good and bad in both.

Finally, some bibliographic suggestions: Conservative introductions to the Old Testament have been written by E.J. Young, Gleason Archer, and R.K. Harrison, the latter being the latest and most comprehensive. The essay by C.S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” in his volume, *Christian Reflections*, is a penetrating commentary on the assumptions of many literary critics. The Jewish scholar Cyrus Gordon discusses his rejection of the JEDP analysis of the Pentateuch in “Higher Critics and Forbidden Fruit,” *Christianity Today* IV:4 (1959), pp. 131ff. Other Jewish scholars whose works show a rejection of the JEDP theory are Umberto Cassuto and Moses H. Segal. K.A. Kitchen in *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1966), shows that the facts just do not support so many critical con-

clusions. On the important subject of biblical inspiration and inerrancy read the two brilliant books by J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, and *God Speaks to Man*. From the references in these few works a very much larger bibliography may be built which will provide the thoughtful evangelical

with the spiritual and intellectual equipment needed to stand firm against the destructive fallacies of naturalistic criticism.

See the bibliography of conservative works on the Old Testament in the present *Themelios*, pp. 55ff.

