

Editorial . . .

The Inevitable Word

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To a degree which could not have been anticipated twenty years ago, the Bible has again been recognized as being crucial for the thought of the Western world. This manifests itself in theological circles today by the question raised: Is it biblical? More generally, it appears in the concern which sensitive persons feel for the Bible as a book containing the answers to life's supreme concerns.

Derived from this is the growing tendency to view Communism analytically, and then to reject it, not upon purely emotional grounds, but because its rejection of supernaturalistic considerations seems superficial. It is, of course, possible to overestimate the significance of our Western return to interest in spiritual realities; however, the acknowledgment of God in our time has not been without its reflex in the raising of the question, whether God may not after all have spoken in the Bible, and if so, whether what He has said does not deserve careful attention.

This does not mean that a return to interest in the Scriptures has always been in terms of an adequate understanding of their significance. Indeed, many who come to regard the Bible with new concern still retain much in their thinking which seems to undercut the proper meaning of the Word for them. There is need for placing a "floor" beneath our understanding of the Christian Scriptures as the Word of God. This will be done in a later article in this issue. For the present, it will be helpful to note some alternative ways of regarding the Word.

Some, faced anew with the question of taking the Bible seriously, seek to consider it chiefly in terms of a book of mystical devotion. These see its excellence to inhere mainly in its power to mirror the moods of the soul, and to enhance those moods. Now certainly the Scriptures are amazing in their grasped insight into man's inner life. It is safe to say that there is not an aspect of the life of devotion that has not been experienced by the inspired writers and set down in im-

pressive form. One of the marvels of the Psalter is its ability to give perfect expression to every phase of the devotional life.

And yet, subjectivism as a category for the understanding of the Word has been tried and found wanting. Its chief weakness is that any empirical discipline by which the Christian faith is analyzed purely in terms of its inner manifestations leaves untouched a major question. This question is that of the objective reality of the relationships which the subjective approach seeks to study. The Church's supposed witness to its own experience cannot stand alone. If one takes the Bible seriously at all, he finds this experience to rest upon facts of real objective significance; and this leads again to the question of the propositional accuracy of the written Revelation.

The typical 'liberal' view of the Bible seems to be crumbling at so many points that fewer and fewer people appear to be charmed by it. This view is, in reality, many views with a common denominator. They agree upon the following points: (1) that the Bible is not to be equated with the Word of God, but that some parts of it (especially selected sayings of Jesus) are divine revelation; (2) that any 'inspiration' claimed for the Bible is not something qualitatively unique, but only quantitatively different from that which impelled other writers to pen their statements; (3) that the canon of Scripture is purely human in its inclusion, and thus it is theoretically open; and (4) that the Bible contains much in its record that is naive and erroneous.

This type of approach to Scripture has fallen upon evil times. Carl F. H. Henry says:

The liberal view of the Bible was in the main a reflex, as we have seen, of an undergirding philosophy of religion, as well as of nature and history, which has now fallen on days of judgment. Hardly a year passes but that the last defenses of this position are weakened by the exodus of former advocates to opposition territory.¹

This does not mean that the alternatives have been adequate alternatives. The most tempting of them has been that of the neo-supernatural or so-called 'neo-orthodox' approach to Revelation. This approach has been discussed at such length that most readers are familiar with it. It centers in the view that the Bible is a fallible witness to a special divine revelation. This does not mean that the Bible itself is to be

¹ John W. Walvoord (ed.), *Inspiration and Interpretation*, p. 265.

identified with that revelation. It is rather a record of a 'revealing deed,' which may become revelation, as it induces a revelation-encounter in the case of the one who reads it.

There are indications of fundamental instability in this view. The easier answer may not, after all, be the correct one; and while the dialectical theologian's solution to the question promises to enable its holder to retain both the evangelical concept of Revelation and the 'scientific findings of liberal biblical scholarship' one wonders whether this alloy of iron and clay can prove itself stable. Actually, it has not done so.

The fashion at this moment is to seek a solution which goes 'beyond liberalism' and which presumably avoids some of the extremes of neo-supernaturalism. After all, the extreme view of the transcendence of God is somewhat arid and sterile. No doubt it is this which has impelled the post-liberals to move beyond it. Of this we shall say more shortly; but in the meantime, attention should be drawn to the role of archaeology in bringing the Bible again to the center of the stage of human attention.

William F. Albright has recently written an article under title, "Return to Biblical Theology," published in the *Christian Century*, November 19, 1958. He emphasizes that the branch of biblical study in which he has distinguished himself, namely that of archaeology, has served the following purposes: it has set the Bible at the center of history; it has reduced the probable span of man's history; it has forced a return to a general appreciation of the accuracy of the religious history of Israel as given in the Old Testament; it has given new support to belief in Mosaic monotheism; and it has consolidated the historical unity of the two Testaments.

In summary, he suggests that "we can now again treat the Bible from beginning to end as an authentic document of religious history."² This is an amazing acknowledgment, coming from a man of the stature of Professor Albright. The basic thrust of his statements is, to be sure, weakened somewhat by his disavowal of what he calls an "uncritical belief in 'verbal' inspiration"; but the affirmative weight of his article is tremendous.

To suggest, for example, that the Bible stands at the center of history is to assert its perennial relevance to human life and human needs. In other words, Dr. Albright sees that in the Scriptures, historical events and religio-moral matters

² *Christian Century*; Nov. 19, 1958, p. 1330.

are inseparable. The Bible is an accurate voice in the record of man's total past.

His conclusion that estimates of the antiquity of "tool-making man" is shrinking, and that "differences between known types of fossil man have been greatly exaggerated,"³ may have far-reaching implications for our view of the origin of man as well as for his history. Dr. Albright finds no forms of fossil man without tools, without language, and without art. Time will tell what the full significance of such conclusions will be for our understanding of man.

His assertion of the general accuracy of the religious history of Israel as given in the Old Testament seems to cut the ground from beneath much of so-called scientific study in the Old Testament and of the religion of Israel. Particularly significant is the suggestion that monotheism was a quality of the religious world-view of Moses and the other early leaders of Israel. It does not greatly weaken the force of this statement when Professor Albright adds that this monotheism was 'practical' rather than philosophical. After all, the type of systematic philosophical thought for which fifth and fourth century (B. C.) Greece was famous was no necessary part of the religion of Israel.

What is extremely important is, that he feels that recent research has found nothing to discount belief in an early monotheism, nor yet in the role of the Covenant in early religious history. This latter, along with the motif of insight into the future "which shaped the attitudes of the prophets themselves,"⁴ is indispensable to our correct understanding of the prophets of Israel. The word of a scholar of the stature of Dr. Albright at these points is significant to our total understanding of the manner in which the Bible is again making a place for itself at the center of human thought.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have vastly increased our understanding of both the linguistic situation in the inter-testamental period, and the thought-world which underlay the period of early New Testament history. Here, again, Professor Albright's word is amazingly forthright; he says: "The internal evidence supposed to prove the late date of many New Testament books has vanished. There is no longer any concrete evidence for dating a single New Testament book after the seventies or eighties of the first century A. D. --though this does not mean

³ *Ibid.* , Nov. 19, 1958, p. 1329.

⁴ *Ibid.* , Nov. 19, 1958, p. 1330.

that such an early date is already proved."⁵

Perhaps the most significant fact emerging from the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls is, that the unity of the Old and New Testaments has been, as Dr. Albright says, 'consolidated.' The allegedly Greek elements in the New Testament entered it, not from the outside as innovation, but by route of Judaism which had for several centuries been influenced by it. The authors of the New Testament, identified as being all "probably or certainly Jews," wrote with the conviction that the Hebrew Bible was Holy Scripture, and that they were writing with a definite purpose of continuing its basic message.

Supplementing this work of archaeology in bringing the Bible again into a place of centrality, and perhaps drawing upon it, is the work of men calling themselves 'post-liberal' in the sense that they go beyond both the classic liberalism and the dialectical theology. It needs to be said that there is not, at present, any group of men who formally consider themselves as post-liberals. But two or three names can be mentioned in this connection, notably that of Paul Tillich and that of Nels F. S. Ferré.

The latter of these, Dr. Ferré, has in a special sense been drawn to a renewed seriousness with respect to the Scriptures. The account of his spiritual pilgrimage has been traced by Soper in his *Major Voices in American Theology*. In his youth he found it difficult to accept certain views of the inspiration of Scripture which he considered to be extreme. Later, he seems to have found the attitude of classic liberalism toward the Word to be too sterile.

His more recent thinking has led him to a 'middle way'--a way which maintains contact with some of his earlier views, but which asserts with new emphasis the inevitability of the Word for the Christian man and woman. Coming from a man who is highly regarded as a Christian spirit and a Christian gentleman, this expression is exceedingly heartening. We are pleased to share this article with the readers of *The Asbury Seminary*. (It follows this Editorial in this issue.)

Just which direction the post-liberal type of theology will take is not at this moment clear. Some of its favorite themes may well prove to be transitory. The first of these is the interpretation of the Fall of man as "The symbol for the sin which we actually find in experience, rather than a doctrine

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

which determines in advance what we shall find."⁶ It is often summed up in the words, "Every man is his own Adam." It helps little for the advocates of this view of the Fall to say that the historic Christian view represents a false estimate of man's nature in advance, or that it is essentially a 'quantitative' doctrine. Actually, if this writer sees the situation correctly, the doctrine of the Fall of man is basically qualitative in its judgment upon human nature.

The second feature of post-liberal theology which is in vogue nowadays is stated in about the following words, "Christianity has no doctrine of immortality, but only the doctrine of the Resurrection." On the surface this appears innocent; but viewed a bit more closely, it may easily be pressed into the service of universalism; for if there is nothing permanent in the individual which survives death, in some "intermediate" state, and if personality awaits the calling-forth from nothingness through a resurrection, then why should not those who are unredeemed simply either remain in nothingness, or else be reconstituted as saved?

But, we repeat, these features may not outlast the men who propose them. What will survive is, without doubt, the power of the Word of God to impress itself upon the minds and consciences of men. Slowly but surely it has done so in the face of such a weight of negatives (from the side of classic liberalism) as might have seemed totally discouraging two decades ago.

Events are again underscoring the basic message of Hebrews 4:12: "The Word of God is alive, and powerful, and sharp...." The Evangelical can derive from this promise great confidence--a confidence which he finds to be buttressed by today's events.

⁶ John C. Bennett, *Christians and the State*, p. 54.