An Examination of Some Presuppositions of Biblical Criticism

M. E. GIBBS

The following remarks are not intended as a condemnation of the work of Biblical critics, still less as a plea for a return to fundamentalism. On the contrary, the writer thoroughly appreciates the new life and interest which has been brought into Biblical studies by a sane criticism, and the spiritual gain which has followed. What is attempted here is only an examination of certain assumptions which have underlain much critical study from the first and have often distorted the conclusions of very distinguished scholars. Nor is the pointing out of these presuppositions by any means a novelty. Some of them were noticed half a century ago by Sir William Ramsay and Bishop Gore; others have been dealt with by the late Sir Frederick Kenyon.

Some Prejudices

The prejudices which have too often distorted Biblical scholarship are, first, a too exclusively literary approach. Too much importance has been attached to mere verbal points, at the expense of wider considerations. Too little attempt has often been made to answer such questions as how people in real life go about writing books, what the special conditions of book production were at the period concerned, what sort of evidence it is possible to obtain of historical facts in ancient times, and what amount of evidence is normally accepted as sufficient by secular historians. Again, until very recently, the literary critics tended to work in entire disregard of the archaeologists. There was a little excuse for this in the fact that until about thirty years ago very little archaeological evidence bore directly on the Biblical narrative and the interpretation of much of it was doubtful.

Secondly, it was a pity that Biblical criticism found its roots in the German tradition of scholarship. Valuable as the results of German scholarship were in many fields of investigation in the nineteenth century, it was constantly liable to be marred by excessive specialization and lack of common sense. The German scholar was constantly liable to spend his immense diligence and capacity for detail in maintaining a thesis which the breath of a little common sense would have shown to be absurd. A second disadvantage of this German background was the

Lutheran prejudice against the Church as a visible institution. Nowhere more than in Germany, the milch cow of the papacy where one-third of the whole country was included in the states of the Church, had the Reformation been a rebellion against organized Christianity as the late medieval world understood it. But this prejudice, which was noticed by Bishop Gore, has led to some very odd interpretations.

Two other prejudices may be noted. One is the prejudice against the possibility of supernatural action, which sometimes operates on assumptions which, if really examined and carried to their logical conclusion, would not only make nonsense of the Bible, but would make Christianity and all other religions, and even all thought, impossible. The second is the prejudice in favour of 'progress' and 'development' and the assumption that whatever is later in date must, for that reason alone, be superior.

Some Judgments

These prejudices have led to some indefensible judgments which are often unthinkingly assumed as 'the assured results of Biblical criticism'. For instance Moffat in his translation indulges in many rearrangements of text. Apart from the question whether it is fair to alter in this way the received form of ancient literature, one may ask how Moffat and those who think with him suppose these displacements to have occurred. In printed books, which are folded and bound after they are printed, such displacements are very easy. In a written codex, there is always the possibility that the binding may come loose and the book be erroneously rebound. But how could these things happen to a papyrus roll, in which the sheets were fixed together before they were written on, and where there was no binding to come loose? Would it not be better in the case of such things as a suggested rearrangement of the last discourses in St. John's Gospel, to exercise a little more patience in elucidating the significance of the existing order?

Again, take the case of the Pastoral Epistles. The one really substantial argument against their being Pauline is their language—the remarkable number of Low Greek words to be found in them and nowhere else in the New Testament. Yet the impressiveness of this argument is much reduced when we remember the admitted fact that St. Paul used an amenuensis who was not a short-hand writer; and, in a world where spectacles were not yet invented, he probably grew less and less capable, as he got older, of correcting the work of his amenuensis. Recently two sets of articles appeared by a well-known Indian bishop—one in the 'International Review of Missions' and the other in an Indian periodical. On grounds of style alone, almost any critic would adjudge them to be of different authorship; yet in fact there is no serious doubt that both are genuine, but in one case style and language have been corrected by an editor whose mother tongue is English, in the other case not.

Again, the weakness of the German school of scholarship is shown in the prevalence of circular arguments. Too often a theory has been made the norm and used to judge such a question as the authenticity of a saying of our Lord as recorded in the Gospels. For example, critics made up their minds, on the basis of St. Mark's Gospel, that our Lord kept the fact of His Messiahship a dead secret until St. Peter's confession; and then

used this alleged fact to condemn as unauthentic the conversation with the Samaritan woman in St. John's Gospel. In this connection, it is difficult to understand the stir made by 'Form Criticism'. If this simply means that the gospels as a whole and the sayings, parables and incidents they contain, were written down, not at random but with some definite purpose, and that it will help our understanding if we can discover what that purpose was, this is surely plain common sense and ought never to have been doubted. Anything more elaborate seems to be mere fantasy.

The New Testament

The German Protestant prejudice against institutional religion has two bad effects. The first is a tendency to treat the Biblical documents in isolation, as if they had just been dug up by archaeologists after centuries of oblivion, instead of having been all the time the centre of a living tradition. One result of this is a tendency to be prejudiced against the traditional view of the authorship of the Biblical books. There does really sometimes seem to be an unconscious bias in favour of thinking any other view of authorship intrinsically more probable. And yet in fact the very opposite is the case, particularly where the New Testament is concerned. They were the approved scriptures of an organized body, part of whose very reason for existence was to bear witness to the truth of certain historical facts. The acceptance by the Church of certain writings as the authentic work of certain authors is in itself a very important piece of historical evidence, and, if we feel bound to dissent from it, our grounds must be very strong indeed, and we are also bound to account for the growth of the mistaken tradition of authorship. Three examples of the working of this principle may be given. The first is the epistle to the Ephesians. A recent writer has once again thrown doubt on the Pauline authorship of this epistle. The author acknowledges that the external evidence is all on one side. Surely in this case, that ought to have been enough, and any difficulties about the internal evidence should be ascribed to failure to appreciate the many-sidedness of St. Paul's thought. St. Matthew's Gospel is a more difficult case. As it stands, it cannot be of apostolic authorship, since none of the Twelve would have been dependent on St. Mark in the way our existing Gospel evidently is. Then, why does St. Matthew's Gospel stand first of our four, with an apostle's name attached to it? The problem can be solved with a hint from Papias. What St. Matthew wrote—and at a date considerably before St. Mark—was the collection of sayings which Papias calls the logia and the existence of which critics have detected in the document Q. But this was in Aramaic and, therefore, soon became useless to a Greek-speaking Church. So somewhere in the eighties of the first century, some Greek-speaking Christian produced a new and expanded edition of St. Matthew, translated into Greek and completed with other material. This was so much more useful than the original St. Matthew that the latter ceased to be copied, and it looks as if the same fate very nearly overtook the original St. Mark too. It follows that, if we want to reconstruct Q, or the original St. Matthew, we have to include not merely those passages which are common to Matthew and Luke and not found in Mark, but every non-Markan passage in Matthew which is not demonstrably from some other source. The third example

is the Gospel according to St. John. A detailed argument would be out of place here, but it seems clear that prejudice has done much to obscure the strength of the evidence for apostolic authorship, both internal and external. Here also another element has entered into the story—the failure to grasp the Biblical view of history. Because St. John is manifestly telling his story in the light of the spiritual significance he has come to find in it through a lifetime of Christian discipleship, it is supposed that he cannot have been concerned with the accuracy of its historical setting or with correcting the chronology of St. Mark. Yet Papias suggests that that was just what he intended to do. The whole point of the Biblical attitude to history centring in the incarnation is that it is the objective historical fact that is charged with spiritual significance, and therefore accurate recording of fact is of real importance.

The Old Testament

The same principle obtains in Old Testament criticism, although, through the greater age of the documents, it needs to be applied rather differently. How did Mosaic authorship come to be ascribed to the Pentateuch, and why were the Psalms ascribed to David and wisdom literature to Solomon? The usual answer, which amounts to the assertion that the people who first made these ascriptions were such fools that they could not distinguish between a lie and the truth, simply will not do. Let us take the case of Moses and the Law. A nucleus undoubtedly was genuinely Mosaic, and everything points to that nucleus having been the Ten Commandments written on the two tablets of stone on Sinai. As Israel settled down in Palestine, each local sanctuary with its Levitical priests would possess its copy of the original law. But a mass of case law would soon grow up round the original nucleus which would not be quite uniform from sanctuary to sanctuary. It could all be considered Mosaic, because it was all an interpretation of Moses' original law, and soon the priests would become genuinely unable to distinguish the additions from the original. Later, under the influence of the prophets, a revision of the codes would occur. Much would be discovered which was really owing to Canaanite influence and it would rightly be rejected by the prophets as not representing the spirit of Moses. One such reformed code would seem to have been that now called H, representing the influence of Isaiah on the priests of the temple at Jerusalem. The Deuteronomic code, with its northern features and its insistence on worship at a single sanctuary, would be the work of refugees from the northern kingdom, impressed by the Jerusalem of Hezekiah and Isaiah and its steadfast resistance to Senacharib.

Nothing seems more perverse than such a statement as this from Miss Parmelee's widely recommended book, 'A Guide-book to the Bible':—'Probably none of the Psalms were composed by David, for the words in which they are written and the ideas they express belong to a period six hundred years and more after Israel's royal poet died'. That would bring the earliest of the Psalms down to about 360 B.C.—about the time of Ezra, a manifestly absurd statement. Yet Miss Parmelee believes that the history of David in the book of Samuel rests on an almost contemporary prose history, of which she even believes she can name the author. But a prose history of that type is a much more

sophisticated type of literature than religious lyrics like the Psalms. Of course, no serious scholar has ever claimed that David was the author of all of them, but we are surely doing violence to all probability in denying his authorship of some of them.

The literary convention which ascribes the wisdom literature to Solomon is a little more difficult to account for. But this type of literature evidently originated in Egypt, and Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter, so that his reign would be the most favourable period for Egyptian cultural influence to be felt. Solomon need not necessarily have practised this form of literary composition himself, but the argument that the luxurious polygamous king could not have composed the prudent maxims of proverbs is by no means conclusive. Dickens, the high priest of Victorian domesticity, made his own home unhappy.

Again, the inclusion in one book of Isaiah of the particular selection of prophetical utterances which we find there needs explanation. The suggestion that Isaiah in fact founded a school of prophecy, the utterances of which were naturally collected in one volume, meets the case admirably.

Of course, these arguments are not meant to deny the existence of really and deliberately pseudonymous works, both within and without the canon, particularly those Apocalypses written under the stress of the Antiochene persecution when the pseudonymity would be a necessary protection for the authors. For a similar reason the early Christians referred to Rome as Babylon.

The Prophets

Another result of the prejudice in favour of religious individualism with which the critics started is some very curious interpretations of the teaching of the prophets. It is taken for granted that the eighth and seventh century prophets denounced, not the corruption of temple worship, but temple worship in itself. Amos's phrase, 'Did ye bring unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?' has been made to carry more weight than it will bear. It has been absurdly used to suggest that the whole system of animal sacrifice was part of the corruption which the Israelite religion underwent in Canaan. It is very improbable that a tribe of pastoral nomads did not practice animal sacrifice ; and in fact the Old Testament taken as a whole suggests the much more probable view that it was a custom far older than Moses, though he no doubt regulated it. Again, the unity of the book of Ezekiel has been challenged on the grounds that the stern teacher of individual responsibility of chapter eighteen and similar passages could not also have been the seer of the vision of restored temple worship with which the book closes. Must an Old Testament prophet have been so one-ideaed? And is there really any difficulty involved here? In the early part of the book, Ezekiel sees the presence of the Lord forsaking the temple because of the corruptions of those who worship there. He finds himself called to preach to a community of refugees—of displaced persons who have been violently torn from the community life in which they had been bred and the only hope of preventing them from going all to pieces morally was to bring home to them their responsibility as individuals. But why should the necessity

of doing that have prevented Ezekiel from longing for a restored and reformed community? After all, the individual and his religious life are not something to be opposed to the community and its life. The best community is composed of the best individuals; and the individual can only attain his fullest development in a community. The people of God is one of the great themes which runs through the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments; it is a perverse interpretation which substitutes for this an imagined progress from corporate to individual religion. A similar prejudice is the sole ground for the view that our Lord did not intend to found a Church or make of the Eucharist a rite of perpetual obligation.

The prejudice against the supernatural has probably decreased in this generation, but it can still lead to some strange judgments, such as Cadoux's rejection of the evidence for the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection in his 'Life of Jesus of Nazareth' in the Pelican series. The only valid reason for this is a fixed conviction that miracles never happen.

Progress and Development

The prejudice in favour of 'progress' and 'development' is more subtle. It is quite true that there is in the Bible a progressive revelation of God in a sense which is true of no other religious system. In fact, the tendency has been all the other way. It is not altogether easy to get at what the Buddha originally taught, but it seems clear that it is very poorly represented by the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet, and scarcely receives justice even in the purer Hinayana of Burma and Ceylon. The ethical monotheism of Zoroaster seems to have been captured almost at birth by the Magian priesthood, with very different religious ideas, and never to have recovered from the experience. This phenomenon can be paralleled in the field of biological evolution, in which the best observed mutations are actually examples of degeneracy. Although we do find a progressive revelation in the Bible, that is not to say that we find nothing else, or that the revelation opens out like a growing plant with no set-backs. At an earlier point in this article we alluded to the connection of Moses with the Ten Commandments. It has been the fashion to consider them the final distillation of a long process of evolution. Does it not fit the facts and the probability better to suppose them the result of a moment of spiritual insight granted to a very great man, which were afterwards overlaid with all sorts of irrelevant detail? Of course, it is not necessary to suppose that Moses himself understood all the implications of his vision. Which of us ever does? And it is quite certain that the Israelites as a whole did not understand him. Or take the question of David's authorship of the fifty-first Psalm. There is here no difficulty about language or style, only the difficulty of believing that a man living about 1000 B.C. could have had so deep an experience of penitence. But David was, on all showing, a quite exceptionally great man, and there is no character in the whole Old Testament out of whose experience such a Psalm could so fittingly come. David was a sensual and highly emotional person; he was a great warrior, capable of craft and cruelty, as well as of warm affection and noble generosity; he was a vigorous and positive person, not a stained-glass saint. But the great penitents have always been made of such stuff; and, strange as it may

seem to some scholars, the men after God's own heart do not seem to be the colourless, blameless people, but the vigorous and positive ones. The beloved disciple was also the son of thunder. No description of our Lord Himself could have been wider of the mark than 'pale Galilean'. How should not the source of all life and all love delight most in the vital and the loving?

The Post-Critical Age

This is sometimes spoken of as the 'post-critical age'. If that means that all the critical questions raised about the Bible have been settled once and for all, that is manifestly untrue and always will be untrue. If it means that we can afford to neglect the historical truth of the Biblical record and concentrate henceforward on its spiritual message, that is surely a dangerous misunderstanding of what the revelation of God in history means. It is the history which is the revelation, the Bible is after all only its inspired record and interpretation. But if it means that we need no longer be obsessed by critical questions to such an extent that we become deaf to the message of the Bible as a whole; that we are now free to go back to the Biblical message with a quickened and enhanced understanding of its meaning, that is gloriously true.

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CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NUMBER

The Rev. Dr. J. F. Butler, M.A., Ph.D., formerly Professor of Philosophy, Madras Christian College, Tambaram.

The Rev. Dr. H. W. Gensichen, Tranquebar.

Dr. S. P. Adinarayan, Professor of Philosophy and Psychology, Madras Christian College, Tambaram.

Miss M. E. Gibbs, Professor of History, St. John's College, Agra.