MOTIVES OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP*

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A PHENOMENON commonly known to students of religious history like ourselves is the long persistence of individual actions or customs while the meaning of these actions is forgotten or reinterpreted. Frequently a cultic act established by habit is given new meaning or is continued long after the considerations which made it once seem important are obsolete.

I think it is Höffding who tells in one of his books of a Lutheran church somewhere in Northern Europe in which by an immemorial custom the worshippers walking up the aisle bow at a certain place, and pass on to their seats. The interior is plainly severe and only by accident was the origin of the custom discovered. Underneath the heavy whitewash opposite the bowing place was found in ancient fresco going back to pre-Reformation times a crude picture of the crucifixion.

It is perhaps fair that we should turn upon ourselves the kind of inquiry which we make professionally of historic religious movements, and compare the study of religious history as we carry it on in the present time with the same activity of earlier times. Harvard is in its 301st year, Union Seminary in its 101st, the neighboring Jewish Theological Seminary in its fiftieth. All of us recognize that in our preoccupation and interest in the history of certain religions and of their classic and most primitive texts we are carrying on a behavior which was observable in these institutions fifty, one hundred and three hundred years ago. Or, if we wish to stretch our imagination to a landmark a century

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further back, those of us whose interest is in the New Testament may fix our thoughts for comparison on the probable mental and religious outlook of those two men who died in 1536, Erasmus, the humanist, and Tyndal, the martyr,—the first men to produce a printed New Testament in Greek and in English respectively. Can we not contrast any concern we may have today for the Scriptures with that which we may believe was felt by the heroes of these anniversaries?

I would not attempt to compare or contrast either the methods or the results of such study now and then. There are differences, striking differences, between Biblical scholarship now and in earlier centuries. These are not hard to analyze. But more like the illustration that has been used from our own profession and more subtle is the problem of the changed presuppositions of our age-old occupations. We are used to asking, with what thought do later generations continue to observe ancient rituals or taboos? How do the very same words change their meaning as we compare the prehistoric with the historic, the primitive with the late, in the several stages of religion? Familiar to many of us are such examination questions as these:

What was the motive for sabbath keeping in primitive Semitic religion, in each of the codes of the Hebrew law, and in the age of the Tannaim?

Contrast the motives of the earliest Christian mission with those of some modern missionary that you know.

Let us ask ourselves, what is the present rationale of the time honored profession of Sacred Scripture as compared with the motives of our predecessors.

It is the more necessary to ask the question and to make it quite conscious in that the change itself has been exceedingly gradual and unintended. Revolutions of thought, no matter how complete, are easily overlooked when they occur unconsciously as the result of influences which work slowly and unperceived. These influences are of course in part the results of a different type of Biblical scholarship. But the results, too, are doubtless partly caused by the different underlying attitude to the subject. It would be a mistake to suppose that merely their own new discoveries have changed the scholars' attitude to the Bible.

Beginning with different general conceptions they have come to the Bible with questions differently posed, and the new answers have depended on the new approach. This approach is often due to factors quite outside their profession, to political and economic changes not to mention theological or ecclesiastical patterns. The best histories of Biblical scholarship have duly recognized how at every stage the scientific pursuit has been affected by the vogue of contemporary philosophy in a larger sphere.

The history of Biblical science has more than once been written. The influence of contemporary thought, the changes in method, and particularly the various results of study of various parts of Scripture are matters that have all been recorded. But in none of these books, as far as I know, nor in any special monograph, has the *motive* of Biblical study been analyzed. Here is a chapter of our past to which I would call your attention, or rather, a series of unwritten chapters extending back through the whole story of Bible reading and interpretation.

One need not remind this audience that a change of attitude to the Scriptures is not unique to our later generations, but is something that has happened time and time again from the beginning. We speak often of the canonization of the Scriptures and we do well. But what lies behind that word in any official or ecclesiastical sense is a changed presupposition with which the casual products of an earlier age come to enjoy a different regard from their readers. What the special treatment of the Bible books has done for the understanding or misunderstanding of them is a subject that would take long to summarize. It has affected even the transmission of their text, perhaps more for the better than for the worse. It meant a predetermined expectation on the part of the reverent reader. And what the reader sought he often found. He expected unity, consistency, accuracy; he expected authority, regulation and prediction. He expected timelessness, universality and finality. How far the first readers or hearers of Amos or of Jesus, Ezekiel or Paul, expected the same qualities, I do not precisely know, but I am confident that their expectation was rather different.

Let me remind you of the spirit and feeling with which much earlier study of the Scriptures was informed. I describe the attitude without criticizing it, realizing that much of it still continues today. A god now largely incommunicado had once dealt directly with men. He had spoken to the fathers through the prophets. He had revealed his whole will face to face to Moses. He had incarnated himself in Jesus of Nazareth. But the Bible was not thought of as merely a record of revelation. That is one of the stages by which we ease ourselves away from the stricter view. The Bible was the Revelation. Judaism and Protestantism both, I take it, regarded the actual text as inspired,—verbally inspired, —literatim et punctatim, as well as verbatim. This inspiration applied to the original language and to the autograph copies in that language. With some exceptions it was not extended in theory either to translations or to subsequent codices, though as a matter of fact supernatural control of translators and scribes was so naturally assumed, that versions like the Septuagint and the Vulgate were treated as though equally inspired, and standard texts whether Massoretic or Textus Receptus were treated as though they were autographs.

This attitude alone would account for most of the interest and devotion of Biblical study. The motive of a literary scholarship was recognition of the unique religious value of the books. Textual criticism had every reason then for aiming to determine as nearly as possible the original reading of every verse, the *verba ipsissima* of God, and philological acumen had every reason for the most minute study of the dead languages in which the Bible had been inspired or dictated.

I can recall George Foot Moore, who was no conniver at ignorance, explaining apparently without regret the modern trend away from Hebrew and Greek in the training of ministers. The study of these languages, he said, had been justified and required a generation or two ago on the conviction that divine revelation had been made in those tongues, and that no one whose business it was to interpret that revelation could do so successfully if he could not read it in the original. But modern liberal protestantism had abandoned that assumption. There was accordingly less need for first-hand acquaintance, which had often been in practice

a bowing acquaintance, with *pi'el* and *pu'al*, with εἰς and ἐν and all the refinements of grammar so dear to the older theologians.

Archaeology as ancillary to Bible study is experiencing a similar change of rôle. Originally I suppose the identification of Biblical scenes was inspired by reverence and piety. With sentiment and emotion pilgrims sought the sites of sacred history and biography, much as we commemorate with tablets of bronze today the sites of secular history and biography. But with the first mutterings of scepticism orthodoxy had recourse to archaeology to confirm the Bible. The discovery of the Babylonian flood tablets was first most generally hailed as proving that the Biblical flood was historical. The literary and cultural implications of the find were only an afterthought. The same apologetic value was claimed of the Egyptian store cities and indeed of nearly every discovery that could be brought into comparison with the Bible. Even today excavators and their sponsors are often motivated by a hope of confirming the Bible.

The rationale of this apologetic if analyzed is briefly this. The Bible is either all true or all false. To prove that Ur was a great city in the time of Abraham, that the four kings mentioned as his contemporaries are the names of real persons like Hammurabi, shows that Abraham himself is no myth, and that all that is said of him in the Bible deserves complete confidence. The proved accuracy of one part of a book proves the accuracy of it all, and the accuracy of one book in the Bible carries the accuracy of others. The exponents of such a view often are consistent enough to admit that a single proved inaccuracy in the Bible would invalidate it all, and in both their positive and negative totalitarianism they do not distinguish between historical fact and relig ious truth, nor of course between grades of historical probability.

For many of us today archaeology and indeed all study of ancient history has a different value. It helps us to understand rather than to defend the Bible. It provides in a much wider area than in absolutely overlapping data what I like to call "contemporary color." If it dovetails with Biblical statements well and good; but even when it does not, it enables us to recover

the life and particularly the mentality of the ancient world,— the Biblical environment in the largest sense of the term. Our research is motivated by a concern neither to validate nor to invalidate the narrative, but merely to illustrate and enrich its meaning.

In this way even lexical study has its importance. A better apprehension of the probable force of a single Greek or Hebrew word in the Bible is after all these years of study an achievement to be welcomed and acclaimed, but not as a new insight into the message of the Divine but as a clearer understanding of what a famous and significant author intended to convey. The modern scholar is modestly content to have promoted sound knowledge in this field as his colleagues are in other fields of history and literature without any sense of the unique importance of his findings.

For a more rapid and revolutionary example of changed attitude to the scriptures and one whose psychology deserves more study than it has to my knowledge received I would mention a much older process:— the retention of the Jewish Bible in the early Christian church. The latter included former disciples of the Jewish rabbis, former Jewish Hellenizers, and even Gentiles who had never heard before of Moses and the prophets. In an extraordinarily short time the Christian acceptance and use of the scriptures in Greek was an established and practically universal fact. Marcion is, I take it, not representative of an older Church without the Scripture, but the protester against what was already by 150 C.E. a *fait accompli.*

The novelty of the early Christian use is as striking as its rapidity. We are probably wrong in supposing that it all centered about Messianic prophecy or that it allegorized after the Alexandrian pattern. Hellenistic Judaism as revealed in Philo is only partially a bridge between rabbinic and Christian use of the Old Testament. While Jews then and now may well regard the Christian appropriation of the Old Testament as brazen robbery or perversion, both they and Christians must admit that it illustrates the power of new presumptions to revolutionize the treatment of the Scriptures.

I have spoken thus far of the aims of Biblical scholarship as differing with time, and changing with the passage of the years. There is also, I believe, a contrast in aims at one and the same period and even within the mind of an individual scholar. We are few of us one track minds, though our multiplicity of motive or intention is due more to variety inherited or ill-composed rather than to a well articulated breadth of aim. Even today, as all through earlier history, two principal motives (as far as conscious motivation may be predicated at all) have been at work.

Biblical scholarship has nearly always had as its end some goal of usefulness or service. A study of prefaces in works of scholars would give the clearest picture of this motive over the centuries, differently expressed at one time or another, often with the pious quotation of Hebrew or Greek texts of Scripture, but always, even today, with the hope and anticipation that the labor would result in the spiritual welfare and enlightenment of the reader. Even the most technical and remote fields of study, like textual criticism, have been inspired not merely by a reverence for the subject but by a hope that true religion might be promoted thereby.

Such ulterior ends were combined, however, with what today might seem to us a conflicting standard, the search for pure truth. Fact as an end in itself is very different from fact as an edifying phenomenon. It is remarkable that purely scientific aims have so long played an important part in our profession. Indeed their presence demands some explanation, no matter how natural they seem to us today.

Perhaps some of you had already answered for yourselves the problem of my title by saying to yourselves: The motives of Biblical scholarship are no whit different from the motives of all scholarship, motives sufficient and satisfactory in themselves, the loving, curious search for truth wherever truth should lead. You would resent the idea that you have any special or less scientific aim. Yet I fancy that even today much of the best scholarly work in our fields is combined with a strong religious, not to say apologetic, prepossession. It may not be the prepossession of the past, it may be a prepossession that is itself the result of independent and untrammeled and unorthodox scholarship, but it is a prepossession none the less. If it does not claim from the sacred

page direct and authoritative proof of religious standards, it still labors under a protecting confidence that in the end some remote spiritual utility will accrue from the minutest contribution to truth. "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

In brief, the motive of scholarship in this field is still as it has been a combination of search for pure truth and, at least frequently, an expectation of religious serviceableness. The former ideal may seem to us more conspicuous in our day, due perhaps to the growth of conscious scientific method and to the influence of secular standards in the study of other history, literature or religion. Yet it would be quite unfair to our predecessors to fail to recognize their often extraordinary anticipation of the most unbiassed processes and most objective techniques of pure scholarship . While we may gratefully acknowledge what we owe to the example and participation of scholars from other fields, we also recognize that Bible study has itself been a pioneer in thoroughness and in progressive methods of dealing with the truth. Many a teacher of the Bible must have been often surprised to find how novel to college students of the best literary and historical training are the everyday methods and standards of scholarship in our own classrooms.

If therefore we are to think of a change of underlying motive as between the older periods and our own, it cannot be described as a change from the purely apologetic to the purely scientific, since both elements both now and then have entered into the profession. It has been rather a change in consciousness accompanying the continuance of the dual aim.

For a dual aim implies occasionally at least conflict of aims or tension between them. This tension may be either conscious or unconscious. If the conflict of aims is unobserved, or if the aims are somehow assumed to be inherently harmonious, the scholar is quite otherwise situated than if he is aware of the conflict and deliberately puts, or tries to put, one aim above the other.

Many scholars have completely identified objective truth with religious value. The Bible being the inspired word of God, whatever it actually said was bound to be the ultimate truth and of supreme value to men. Hence one need not hesitate to let text criticism or lexicography or grammar take their natural course.

If the Bible said and meant so and so, what it said was the truth in every sense of the word. Thus by hypothesis the two aims of study coincide. If the result of textual and philological study involved apparent contradictions within the Scriptures, or the recording of events apparently denied by external criteria, or the promulgation of sentiments lacking in apparent rationality or morality, plenary inspiration required one to deny the evidence or assumption or standard which interfered with its own inferences. Sometimes it was the text itself which was interpreted to meet the facts of experience, with the midrashic work of the rabbis and with the allegorical work of the commentators. So unity was retained on the surface, but a secret and unacknowledged tension remained, and if we may trust modern psychology unconscious repressions are more volcanic than open doubts.

Equally satisfactory on the surface is the most naive modern view which finds no conflict between religious value and rational results of Bible study on the ground that rational results themselves belong to God and religion must be squared at every point to meet them. If the findings of scholarship upset older or cherished religious ideas, if they seem positively to interfere with religious motivation, so much the worse for the latter. The reckless method which results is prepared to leave all consequences to God, much like the news editor who when criticized for the scandalous doings reported in his paper remarked self-righteously, "What God allows to happen, why should I refuse to print?"

More often the modern scholar assumes, much like his predecessors, that truth in the non-religious sense of the objective findings of scholarship has in itself a kind of religious value. Loyalty to truth becomes his first aim, quite sincerely. But he promptly supplements the negative or prosaic or uninspiring results of his honest inquiry with some vague generalities that after all the same religious values can still be obtained in another way, or at least something else equally good.

The various methods by which the two aims have been combined and reconciled in history would make a somewhat lengthy story, too lengthy for the present occasion. It is only another testimony to the incurable desire of man to find unity and rationality everywhere.

The danger of attempting to combine pure scholarship with an edifying motive is apparent to all of us, at least in others whether of the past or of the present. The examples where presuppositions no matter how commendable have interfered with the untrammeled search for truth are familiar. A slight compensation is perhaps to be found in the fact that without the religious motive, even the partisan and controversial, much of the progress in scientific development would have been lost. Archaeology, inspired first by a desire to defend the faith as in the British support of George Smith, has enriched our knowledge of the environment of every period of Biblical history. Literary criticism inspired by controversial intentions both radical and conservative has led to results both secure and illuminating. Was not the authenticity of Philo's *De Vita Contemplativa* established by the controversies between Protestants and Catholics? If Judaism in the end gains some knowledge of its past through Christian controversy as well as through disputation among its own parties, there is some compensation for all the bias and distortion to which partisanship has subjected the truth. Indeed the religious motive at its worst has often led, though through zig-zag routes, to understandings which without that motive would never have been achieved. Not unlike the scientific process of trial and error has been the unscientific process of dogmatic assertion and defence.

If we agree that less oblique approaches to truth are desirable we do well even in the assurance of our modern age to inquire humbly into our own shortcomings. The fact that the causes vitiating our work are largely quite unrealized by us is only a partial excuse. The perversions of past scholars were rarely deliberate perversions. We are adepts in identifying and allowing for subjective prejudices in workers of the past. It ought not to be difficult to do the same with ourselves. One object of psychoanalysis is said to be auto-psycho-analysis. "Physician, heal thyself."

If the simple analysis I have made is not beneath the dignity of the presidential address of such an august body, it will not be inappropriate either for me to name briefly what seem to me the besetting sins of our present procedure:

1. One is an Athenian-like craving for something new. It is a fallacy to suppose that the new is more worth saying or hearing or reading than the old. Additions to knowledge are certainly a legitimate aim of each of us. In a field so fully worked as our field is they must perhaps be rather circumscribed. They will come more often from new evidence than from new theories. Perhaps in the history of trial and error it is probable that even the wildest fancy no matter how erroneous will somehow show new facets of truth. But new theories ought at least to be first tested in the relative retirement of scholarly discussion and exchange rather than introduced first to the general reading public in popular form and liable to the extravagant publicity of the salesmanship methods of unscrupulous American publishers. As experts we have some responsibility to help curb the morbid tastes of so many superficial lay book readers who prefer to hear from us some new guess than some old fact.

2. Another bias of our procedure is the over-ready attempt to modernize Bible times. This tendency—which I have elsewhere dealt with extensively in the case of a single Biblical figure—arises partly from taking our own mentality as a norm and partly from a desire to interpret the past for its present values. To regard ourselves, our standards, our ways of thinking, as normative for the Bible is nearly as unscientific and superstitious as to treat the Bible as normative for ourselves. I have heard of modern people that think the world is flat because the Bible says so. I know of modern scholars who almost assume that Bible characters believed in evolution because we do. Though our whole discipline tends often quite successfully to the training of the historical imagination there remain areas where the nuances of the ancient mind escape our notice because of our quite modern and contemporary presuppositions.

The modernizing is in many cases, I am persuaded, due to an even less pardonable defect, the overzealous desire to utilize our study for practical ends. Wishing to short cut the roundabout processes of knowledge we desire to find an immediate utility and applicability in the ancient documents. Our minds as in the older ays of prooftexts are more anxious to find what answer the Bible

gives to our own perplexities than to hear what seemingly useless and irrelevant information the book itself chooses to volunteer.

3. A third defect that I would mention arises not from a modernizing but from a conservative tendency. When new conceptions force us from old positions we substitute for the old positions imitations or subterfuges which are no better supported than their predecessors but which we hope are less vulnerable. The discovery of new proof leads to a reluctant retreat which we attempt to cover up by a kind of camouflage or rearguard action. The history of Biblical scholarship is marred by the too fond clinging to the debris of exploded theories. We are afraid to follow the logic of our own discoveries and insist that we are retaining the old values under a new name. The reluctance of our recession is intelligible even if it is not intelligent. Typical was the first early suggestion in Biblical criticism that Moses was the editor rather than the author of the Torah. In other books we hold on to the traditional author by the most tenuous connection rather than abandon the work to complete anonymity. Oftentimes such survivals are due not so much to religious conservatism as to an instinctive repugnance to scientific agnosticism. To paraphrase a modern phrase we prefer to guess a lot than know so little.

But in other cases we are anxious to retain the old values under new conditions. If we surrender the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures we must find, we think, a kind of inspiration that will seem to carry equal assurance. If we doubt the crassly miraculous we must invent some theory of some other way of the special intervention of God in history. If the words of Scripture cannot be assigned absolute authority we must claim for them some other peculiar or exalted merit, or some less literal and more general validity. I am not concerned so much to deny our favorable appraisals of the Bible material, as to regret that they seem to me to come from the attempt to salvage from what we have lost. They ought to come rather from the fresh, independent and original statement of what we have found.

But to return to the motives of our work. If there are two of them, the pursuit of truth and the loyalty to religion, which shall we choose? That we are dealing here with a fundamental philosophical enigma of the relation of fact and value must be evident to all of us. You will not be surprised if I beg leave not to deal exhaustively with such a problem. The cultivation of truth without fear or favor is certainly the nominal ideal of all scholarship today, reinforced by what we like to call the scientific approach to knowledge. I take it that most of us are in sympathy with it, and are horrified by the perversions and prostitutions of learning to partisan or prejudiced ends, whether these illustrations be taken from the past history of our own profession or from the modern inroads on scholarship by the extremes of political theory and control.

But are we equally aware of the responsibilities of scholarship? Since we deal in the area which we should be the first to admit has been so influential for human good and ill, are we not under special obligations to the field of spiritual life and value traditionally associated with the Old and New Testaments? Can we be indifferent to the social consequences of our career? Has the single minded pursuit of truth any limitations on its side, as serious as is the irresponsible and unscientific use of the data of history in propaganda for one's own chosen ends or standards?

Two episodes this summer not especially connected with our own profession illustrate the extremes I have spoken of. One was at the five hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the University of Heidelberg where the ideal of scholarship was definitely renounced as the aim of a great academic tradition in favor of partisan propaganda. According to the official words of the minister of Science and Education, "The old idea of science based on the sovereign right of abstract intellectual activity, * * * * the unchecked effort to reach the truth," has been forever banished.* The figure of Athena was to be replaced by the swastika. The tragedy is not so much that you or I may not

* *New York Times*, June 30th, 1936, p. 14, col. 6.

sympathize with the special party or policy in power. Even for a more congenial religious or political objective the conscienceless abandonment of honest and open-eyed quest for truth should seem to us tragic.

The other occasion was the September meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. To these expediters of progress there came from their own members a challenge which many an outsider has long been feeling. Are the men of science not responsible for the social consequences of their discovery? Some of them resent being blamed for overproduction and technological unemployment and the destructive use of scientific discoveries. "Pure science," said one of them, "has nothing to do with ethics, she recognizes no moral obligations whatsoever." But others have accepted a new responsibility for the results of their laboratory labors. Said Professor J. C. Philip, president of the chemical section, "Impelled by patriotic motives, most scientists have put themselves freely at the disposal of the state in time of need. But many are hesitating to admit that patriotism must always override considerations of humanity. Whatever be our individual attitude in this matter, it is time for chemists and scientists in general to throw their weight into the scale against the tendencies which are dragging science and civilisation down and debasing our heritage of intellectual and spiritual values."*

Here is the kind of challenge which I suppose few of us have really faced. Though our science is quite a different one, and though partisan religion is not often nowadays an excuse for holy wars or the inquisition, there is a sense in which fidelity to the strictest standards of scholarship about the Bible demands all the more from us a responsibility for constructive forces that would counterweigh any destructive, unspiritual results of our labors. No more than the inventor of poison gases in his labora-

* British Association for the Advancement of Science. *Report of the Annual Meeting*, 1936, pp. 146 and 49.

tory can the Biblical scholar remain in his study indifferent to the spiritual welfare which his researches often seem to threaten or destroy. He may be in his processes faithful to the cold standards of history and literary criticism, he must not be indifferent to moral and spiritual values and needs in contemporary life. His own work may seem irrelevant and remote, a luxury hard to justify in a practical age. Whether as irrelevant or as seemingly destructive he must realize that no less than the unimportance or actually deleterious character of other sciences his own profession carries grave responsibilities. I am not sure that we critics have fully faced our duties along these lines. Each aspect of our motives has its own dangers or defects and its own appropriate safeguards or correctives.

In the end the motives of such scholarship are bound to be various. One could scarcely think of more variant characters than the two quater-centenary figures mentioned at the beginning of this paper, — Erasmus the cool and judicial neutral, the rational and dispassionate humanist; Tyndale the passionate enthusiast, the untiring devotee of a single viewpoint. Yet both men expressed themselves in similar ways and both aimed solely at helping their contemporaries to a better knowledge of the Bible. The well known words of the English martyr about the vernacular understanding of the Scriptures are only a paraphrase of what the Dutch humanist expressed as the hope of the consequences of his labors. The same diversity of temperament prevails in our present Society.

The same general end and aim—a better knowledge and understanding of the Bible—is probably the immediate motive of all of us, often without much further thought of why we wish this result. As we pursue our labors the study of the Bible becomes an end in itself. No doubt many rabbis have quoted as the motive of their labor the command of Joshua: "Thou shalt meditate therein day and night." No further reason is quoted by the Pentateuchal writer. By us also, not so much by divine injunction as by the habit and intrinsic interest of the task, ulterior or self-conscious aims are forgotten. Under these circumstances in

our generation as before we can feel ourselves laboring in fellowship with scholars we know today of different lands and creeds and races, as well as carrying on the tasks which our predecessors in the past have passed over to us to complete. Fidelity to the best in our professional tradition, both of piety and of open-minded, honest quest for the truth, may prove in the end one of the most satisfying motives for us all.