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BIBLICAL STUDIES IN A NEW SETTING*

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AS there is a law of perspective that shapes our estimate of the present and our understanding of the past, to say nothing of our adumbrations of the future, there is also another dictum that all perspectives change, because all entities including ourselves are forever on the march. In the light of these observations, biblical studies are bound to find themselves from time to time in a new setting; and there are special reasons, as it seems to me, why it is important at this time to call attention to this aspect of our common interest.

To be sure, when it comes to the longer ranges of events, like the stellar parallaxes, geologic epochs, and the remoter ages of man, the shift of essential pattern in any one generation is negligible. On the other hand, biblical studies, though set in a framework of the past that is as fixed as history can make it, are necessarily subject to the changing configurations of all perspectives.

A glance backward will illustrate and make clear what has already happened in this respect. Serious Bible study may be said to have begun with the Psalmist, who meditated in the Law of the Lord day and night. From that point there arose the outlines of a sacred book, a growing, expanding, never quite finished book, in some sense from God, containing a revelation to the Chosen People. This essential pattern furnished the dominant setting of biblical studies from its inception until 1872. In that year, when George Smith identified in the British Museum the 11th tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic containing the Babylonian

*The Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis on December 30, 1946, at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

account of the Flood, the setting of our studies was shifted from a self-contained book or even a book with a Palestinian background to a world perspective, namely, that of the civilized world of the Ancient Near East.

The background of that setting has steadily deepened. The area of human experience involved has been vastly extended and the close up effects of archaeological research have clarified and sharpened innumerable details, until many of these now stand before us as living scenes. This whole process has gone on until that framework has become an inseparable part of biblical studies themselves, and their great transformer into more and more understandable terms of human experience.

The phenomenal rise of natural science, culminating with the Second World War has gradually but inexorably thrown biblical studies into a new perspective. The power that has brought this about involves the interplay between the forces of science and organized religion throughout the modern period. Only the main trends of this phenomenon need concern us here.

At the outset, the rise of modern research had the effect of bringing science and organized religion into a juxtaposition that at first took the form of a head on collision, which as such things go might well have proved fatal to one or both parties concerned. But inasmuch as spiritual entities are on the whole much tougher than the steel of automobiles, both participants not only survived, but neither one would admit, either then or later, that it had suffered any serious damage. Biblical studies in the meantime have on the whole been snugly anchored behind the lea shore of that stormy controversy.

Neither the history nor the present status of that issue can be of any interest to this audience except as an illustration of the fact that almost the entire sense of antithesis between science and religion has been due to a lack of any clear definition of the terms used and the primary functions of each.

However, the mutual relationship of science and religion is not as simple and detached as the preceding statement might seem to warrant. It may be said that there has never been any difficulty in defining the scope and functioning of science, since it confines itself to a study of observable phenomena and their

inter-relation. The term religion, on the other hand, is as indefinite and hazy as the etymology of the word in relation to the phenomena concerned, and very nearly meets the requirement of meaning all things to all men. Nevertheless, when it is observed functionally as an aspect of personality, which defines the sphere wherein alone it operates, it is always found to be primarily occupied with the task of preserving existing human values.

With the main scope and functions of these two basic factors in human society thus delimited, we should be in a position to assess more accurately their inter-relations. As the scientific study of phenomena results in new human potentialities, due to increasing control of nature forces, religion's effort to preserve personal values requires that it be able to transform all such new and growing powers into usable, stable, values; for unless this can be done existing values cannot be assured. The growing physical powers of the individual from infancy to manhood are a constant illustration, for unless on the whole these powers can be directed into channels of social responsibility, organized society could never arise nor civilization come into being. Religion throughout the past has furnished the bulk of that stabilizing force. Every rising generation repeats the process and every organized society in every generation runs the hazard of facing its own destruction at the hands of the uncontrolled forces within its proper self, in case religion should fail adequately to function. This statement might qualify as no more than a truism, were it not for the frightful illustrations of it that have occurred in our own time on a world scale.

Much greater proportionately is the same hazard as science unleashes more and more far-reaching and terrifying physical forces. Traditional religion, that throughout the remoter past had proved fairly adequate to meet the problem of the oncoming generations, definitely showed the effects of strain and began to fall short of its task with the coming of the industrial revolution; until today the exigencies of war have released such staggering forces that organized religion is almost completely impotent in their presence, with the result that with little doubt, man has reached the most precarious stage in his existence. For

if these super-forces cannot be transformed into stable values, civilization cannot endure.

Whatever safe anchorage biblical studies may have had in the past, secure from the strife and turmoil of a troubled world, the present forbidding prospect reveals no such haven. Their structural place in the sum of things calls for re-examination and re-appraisal. Biblical studies at their best have become biblical science. They have insisted on complete objectivity and have spurned any suggestion that they should be held responsible for results that would quicken flagging religious zeal. They have hewed to the line in seeking to determine what really happened in the past, whether relevant or irrelevant, painful or pleasant. Do the results achieved have anything to do with the life of today? Does the end product justify any comparison with the findings of natural science?

Any attempted analogy between biblical and physical science will doubtless at first appear to be fantastic. Science has for its field the physical universe. Biblical studies are confined to a single ancient volume which, when conceived as revelation, should have been clear and unmistakable to begin with. Yet as this stands, it is anything but clear as to its deeper significance, since as is now well known, its present form may only represent the results of the efforts of its latest writers and editors. Nevertheless, as traditionally held, this volume contains the most significant religious experience of mankind. And even though it can never have the precision and exactness of scientific truths, it has always been assumed that biblical studies were significant and therefore worth while. That assumption now faces a new appraisal. The former estimate rested on the general prior premise that the religion based on the Bible was a major determining factor in western civilization. Recent world events have shown clearly and unmistakably that existing Jewish-Christian sectarian forms of religion, whatever they once did, no longer play a major role in world affairs. Their influence has proved to be quite secondary, and so far as the main trends of recent world events are concerned, it is well nigh negligible.

Why that religion has failed in this particular requires no involved or subtle analysis. In the first place, sectarianism has

made impossible any effective unity or coördination of religious action, either within or beyond national boundaries. Secondly, its prescription for salvation has traditionally been focused upon the hereafter, and thus it has never had any real means of testing its own validity. It has never had a workable formula for saving personal values here and now. But should it attempt to refocus its present requirements upon this life, its credal, ritualistic and secondary moral stipulations could give no assurance of gaining the desired end. Hence if present religious achievement represents the best that may be expected to accrue from the study of the Bible, any analogy between the results of modern science and the pursuit of Biblical studies becomes not only fantastic but completely irrelevant, and the *raison d'être* of such studies is largely relegated to the scope of antiquarian inquiry concerning our religious ancestry.

What then is the warrant for Biblical studies when their traditional defense no longer holds good? What have they thus far contributed for the well being of mankind to justify their existence? And what prospect is there that any such product will ever become available for society generally? When these questions are faced and whether we like it or not, due to the course of world events, biblical studies have been maneuvered into a new setting, and by their aim to be scientific, into a closer correlation with science itself.

In spite of religious handicaps already noted, there is one point at which science and our studies stand on an equality. Both claim to seek truth in complete objectivity, without regard to consequences. But beyond this point they sharply diverge. Science has had the highly strategic advantage of reacting to a respectful and sympathetic public and of becoming gradually sensitized to the prospect of human welfare, capable of being greatly improved by scientific means. Biblical studies, on the contrary, have had the depressing handicap of finding their relevant public within the framework of organized religion, whose dominant leadership has sought no new religious truth and has been more concerned with the defense of the status quo than with any prospect of human betterment accruing from new religious insights.

Those whose biblical studies might have changed the face of society, as a rule, like the corresponding physical scientists, had no means within themselves to put their results to practical use. But unlike the scientists, the former have, for the most part, had no effective sponsors at hand ready to test the validity of their work by practical application. There was besides on the side of religion no felt need to do so, since theoretically according to venerable tradition the world was doomed to destruction in any case.

Furthermore, science by its fruits had so accustomed its public to look to it as a source of help in all sorts of problems and emergencies, that when a supreme test came, when the conflicting forces of the world were locked in mortal combat, with all available forces thrown in and when the struggle still remained indecisive, a final appeal was made to the men of science to save the day.

But when organized religion is repudiated by its own children and whole religious empires are lost at a stroke, or when — more humiliating still — the world in general passes it by and ignores it as irrelevant, no deeper resource remains to draw upon. Organized religion recognizes no authenticated persons whose clearer historical insight might be sought to restore the lost prestige of religion, so that the logical outcome of such a situation can only be expected to take the pattern of the book of Lamentations: How long O Lord wilt thou be angry? Why wilt thou not forgive?

To be sure, present day religion has not yet come to any such pass. There is, first of all, no sign of any serious misgiving, sorrow or repentance officially evident. The churches are endowed and sustained by much wealth that is tax free and hence they can be expected to endure, as they are, as long as they will be tolerated. Their active adherents, though probably a minority of the population, are not apt to fall away with any noticeable rapidity. They may quite conceivably continue to increase numerically for some time to come. These are, however, largely irrelevant factors, that do not appreciably alter the over-all somber outlook for religion as at present organized, and therefore for civilization itself. Hence we are warranted in asking the ques-

tion: What different kind of a world would we now have if the gains made by Biblical studies which bear upon practical life had been adopted, to the extent that the similar findings of science have been applied practically? But in order to make this analogy fair to both sides we need first to consider the kind of a world we should now have if no greater proportion of practical scientific discoveries had been approved to date than in the case of Biblical studies. And second we shall need to gain some idea of the state of scientific advances, had they been thus far practically ignored to the extent that Biblical studies have been. At the same time it will of course be necessary to keep in mind that in the field of science as in the Biblical realm, out of hundreds of investigations only relatively few can be expected to have any practical bearing on every day life, and even where such possibility seems warranted, much more extended investigation often proves necessary in order to gain any worthwhile practical result, and hence if the initial impetus to make the application had been wanting, nothing further might have been forthcoming.

Let us try then to picture our present world with scientific inquiry frowned upon and ignored to the extent suffered by Biblical investigations. For one thing, officially, we should conceivably still be living on a flat earth, regarded as the center of the universe. Men might, to be sure, have travelled around it and scholars generally would have little doubt about its form, but this would scarcely have gotten into the textbooks and those who openly declared its rotundity would be looked upon as radicals and as somewhat queer — if not dangerous.

The discovery of the power of steam would have been known, but without encouragement or practical support, it would have been very difficult for that knowledge to get beyond the tea-kettle stage; and with that limitation it is questionable whether the modern development and wide use of steel would have been possible, and consequently we might very well still be in the age of the ox cart and sailing ships.

The transmission of the human voice over a wire by means of electrical impulses would doubtless have been known as an interesting curiosity. But under the repression and public disapproval

at every divergence from accepted usage, could the Atlantic telephone ever have come into being?

In other words, with scientific study thus largely repressed on its practical side, how far beyond the earlier stage of a natural philosophy could we expect physical science to have progressed? And secondly, if scientists were suddenly called upon to state the practical uses of such study, is there not a high degree of probability that a considerable lack of unanimity would be found among them as to the amount and quality of their practical contributions?

With these analogies in mind we may proceed to assess the practical findings of Biblical studies.

Scholars were the first to realize that the things which have divided Christianity into increasing multitudes of sects have no real basis in the teachings of the Bible. Since it was always supposedly on this ground that such divisions were originally made, this knowledge should have been recognized as of vital importance in the presence of the crying need for the unification of Christendom. However, such knowledge has, for reasons that are quite understandable, not been palatable or welcome to Christian sectarianism, and even where sects have merged, that process has usually proceeded without reference to it or benefit from it.

Biblical scholars have long been aware that the teachings of the Nazarene give no warrant whatever for ecclesiastical organization of any kind. To be sure, there has not been complete unanimity on this point, as on many others, because the framework of ecclesiastical bodies has been rigid enough, under certain circumstances, to predetermine the results of scholarly thought. Indeed this has usually been the case, as would naturally be expected, whenever men have set out to defend the status quo, rather than to determine primarily what happened in the remote past.

These remarks, however, are intended in no sense as a condemnation of ecclesiastical organizations. These bodies have too often proved their worth in their own right and frequently their services have merited the highest praise, but their spurious and exorbitant claims of divine sanction and the authority of

Christ, like the divine right of kings have done incalculable harm to the moral fiber of Christendom as a whole. Such claims arose before the age of scientific study and have continued in spite of scholarly investigation that might have been utilized to annul their evil results.

It has long been common scholarly knowledge that the "Chosen People" concept of ancient Israel was a generic idea shared by nations quite generally at a certain stage of development. It was therefore a natural and normal phenomena in pre-exilic Israel, but its recrudescence in early Judaism, which claimed a universal ethical God, was nothing but an unconscious contradiction of terms. This concept nevertheless was taken over bodily by the Christian believers, who thereby declared themselves to be the chosen people, the true Israel, and above all God's people. A false clannishness that never had any basis in fact, and a spirit of snobbish selfrighteousness that automatically and without historical or moral warrant could divide all people into sheep and goats, have thus been injected into the most highly respected mores of the western world and been labelled with the stamp of divine approval; and all this has been done in spite of scholarly witness to the contrary.

Scholars have long since shown that the best prophetic spirit of the Old and New Testaments has set forth the concept of a truly ethical God, faith in whom presupposes a moral order of the world and requires that order to be a chief determining factor in all human affairs. This idea has never filtered through into the life of our time, where its recognition is more and more clearly seen to be essential to save the present world from threateningly increasing chaos, mainly because organized religion has on the whole always insisted upon the joint efficacy of certain ritualistic acts for eligibility to enter the ark of safety.

For over a century, and ever increasingly, ample scholarly evidence has been available to show that the Levitical Law was not something handed down from heaven to Moses, but a long, gradual elaboration and symbolization of primitive religious rites, originally designed to placate an unpredictable deity by presenting him with choice food and drink. On this basis the assumption that a purified ritualism could bring back the divine

favor to early Judaism in terms of a restored national existence is seen to be as baseless for the purpose as the earlier use of the most primitive rites. But still further no sort of ritualism could be expected to have any influence whatever upon God in a strictly moral order of the world. Nevertheless, the ritualistic capitalization of a Roman cross by early Christian leadership, under the influence and analogy of the Jewish Law, still remains a major Christian dogma, although from the above premises it could result in nothing short of the obscuration and practical denial of the ethical demands of the teachings of Christ and of their efficacy, in spite of the present desperate need of them, if man is not to perish from the earth.

Jewish and Christian scholarship has extensively agreed that Jesus of Nazareth was an historical person of humble Jewish parentage, who gave expression to thoughts at least equal to the highest ethical teachings to be found in Jewish literature. These agreements are more than sufficient to authenticate the prophetic role by which he was sometimes designated. Scholars of both faiths admit that he was a loyal son of his people, who had their highest welfare at heart. If he spoke in terms of humanity and universal principles of human conduct, and if in so doing he repudiated a narrow nationalism as perverted and dangerous, he was only following the precedent of the most notable Old Testament prophets. In all this and much more along the same line of a common scholarship there is no evident ground to assume that Jews and Christians must forever represent separate faiths, much less that they should ever find themselves in the role of oppressed or oppressor. Moreover, this humble Jewish carpenter gave expression to so many precepts and principles that are more and more clearly seen to be essential if Jewish-Christian civilization is to survive, that there should be less and less disputation over other aspects of his life, which because of a paucity of sound evidence must continue to remain matters of doubt and speculation.

The examples cited are by no means exhaustive, but at most broadly comprehensive. The kind of a world they envisage and call for is likewise sufficiently clear and unmistakable. Biblical studies have thus provided a centripetal corrective capable, if

followed, of overcoming the dangerous disintegrating tendency of modern sectarianism. They have uncovered the false claims of ecclesiastical authority that tends to transform moral leadership into a self-perpetuating religious bureaucracy, which in turn displaces or at least neutralizes the demands for ethical conduct by injecting self-imposed ecclesiastical rules.

Something in these directions has been accomplished by the delimitation of the Biblical text, through the agency of textual criticism, which represents the one solid result of Biblical studies to date.

Through historical criticism, our studies have gone far to throw into historical perspective the accumulated religious experience of the Bible, thereby revealing new and higher developments and pointing out the corresponding annulment of earlier and cruder standards. The same process also removes the grounds for self-contradiction that inevitably arise whenever religious authority appropriates a sacred past without first applying sound principles of discrimination. Such studies point the way for the elimination of that insidious and pernicious fallacy held by those religious groups who formally welcome the ethical teachings of the great prophets and profess the golden rule, and then wonder that nothing commensurate with these principles happens either among themselves or in society at large. Nothing happens because at the same time their whole theory of salvation still continues to rest upon the acceptance of theological and ritualistic requirements, which thus supersede and neutralize the claims of ethical conduct.

Biblical studies are therefore able to demonstrate that the ineffectiveness and growing impotence of organized religion to meet the needs of present day society are due primarily to its failure to make use of the practical results of scientific Bible study with the same readiness and thoroughness with which men have appropriated the practical bearings of scientific discoveries. By the acceptance of the latter over an extended period, our present world has been transformed, and finally such enormous physical power has been placed at man's disposal that upon his ability to use it for his own good or harm his fate now depends. On this analogy, had religion in the West de-

veloped normally, making use of its available moral resources as these gradually became evident, humanity need not now be faced with any such threat to its very existence. That has come at last as the price of moral delinquency in religion.

The analogy between science and biblical studies turns out to be by no means fantastic or unwarranted but entirely relevant. Science has unleashed the power that, unaided by religion, has become the direst threat ever to face mankind as a whole. Biblical studies have made available the moral dynamics capable, if accepted, of putting traditional religion in a position to transform all possible physical forces into stable social values.

This statement, however, offers no direct solution of our most pressing world problem. To prove effective, the ethical findings of biblical study should have been appropriated, as with science, when and as they came to light. The moral correctives arising from biblical study, that might have restored the prestige of religion to its rightful place, can no more be summoned on demand than could science, had most of its practical discoveries been neglected till 1940, have produced the atomic bomb when it did.

The result to date is that our world is threatened by a far greater menace than the second World War. For it is now quite certain that the former allies would have won that issue without benefit of atomic energy, which in the present stage of world organization and moral development threatens the downfall of civilization. In the post-war period, science has opened up another door leading to the abyss, by the pressure of a government subsidy totalling in this country alone \$175,000,000 or more annually, to produce secretly for the military new instrumentalities for the mass destruction of human beings. And we can be assured that elsewhere science is being similarly misused.

A part therefore of the new setting of biblical studies is a tottering, morally unstable world, wherein religion as at present organized has shown itself hopelessly inadequate to cope with the situation. Theoretically this is no more the concern of biblical students than it is that of the physical scientists. The difference is that the scientists have already sensed the danger and have become prophetically vocal with words of solemn and

anxious warning. Naturally the physical laboratories cannot be expected to produce the remedy, any more than biblical studies can tell how to improve the political machinery of world government. It is, however, only the mark of a decent instinct for self-preservation that students of the Bible should take note of the deeper moral confusion in the world situation, and at the same time of any pertinent resources within their own keeping that might be applicable.

It is evident that the task of adjusting and stabilizing the major world forces is one that nothing short of the principle of an adequate moral control for the good of all mankind can ever hope to accomplish. Whence is that moral control to come? The fact that the requirements for such an order and the demand for its realization as the only hope of man upon earth was proclaimed at the beginning of our era, and for centuries preceding in the literature of the Bible, points to the natural answer, and the only answer in sight. What has biblical study done to make available as a present resource the best moral directives of the Bible?

That study has made clear the fact that we of today have received through the Bible a double stream of religious tradition. This turns out to be the kind of thing that men everywhere have received from the past, though in the case of the Bible there is a distinction that makes its contribution unique. The one stream consists of a ritualistic-legalistic blend that deals with symbolic acts and customs, to which men are asked to conform and by conforming are supposed to be sure of gaining the divine favor. The other is made up of moral precepts, which are declared to be binding upon men, because God is moral and universal and hence nothing but moral conduct based upon the principle of righteousness between man and man can have any ultimate weight for any purpose whatever. Other religions have moral precepts, some more excellent than others, but the biblical strain is unique in demanding that this element be made regnant and universal in religion and life to the repudiation of all ritualism as a means of securing the favor of God.

The Jews embodied these two streams of tradition in the Law and the Prophets, but they never attempted to combine the

two. They put the Law first and regarded the Prophets as subsidiary to the Law, which thus actually neutralized the validity of the moral strain. Jesus of Nazareth saw the contradiction that resulted in religion and proposed to combine the two in a higher synthesis, and then went on to show what will happen when the ritualistic principle is brought into the circle of a universal morality. Of necessity ritualism cancels out and the moral principle alone remains, which may then be expressed in terms of love to God and man, or simply in the treatment of human beings by one another. No organization has undertaken to follow this prescription. Early Christian leadership accepted the validity of both strains, following Jewish precedent rather than the proposal of Jesus, and thereby perpetuating the same earlier contradiction and likewise destroying the normative significance of the moral element by excluding its universality. Such a religion could never become a true moral balance wheel for civilization, and for this reason Christianity never yet has. Civilization in the west has gone on its way more swiftly to a threatened ultimate catastrophe than has happened in any other part of the world and worse still it now threatens to take the rest of the world with it.

The ivory tower of our earlier comfortable retreat might as well have been in Hiroshima. Biblical studies in their present setting can claim no privileged aloofness from this sordid mundane sphere, nor immunity from its precariousness. Indeed they provide data that can and should profoundly affect the course of on going life, perhaps even to the extent of supplying a determining factor as to its future course. On the other hand, the Biblical scholar cannot, if he would, forsake his research to peddle his wares, any more than the scientist can be expected to abandon his laboratory for a similar purpose. Yet it is pertinent, in view of the present momentous circumstances, that the one as well as the other should emphasize joint responsibility with others for the total outcome, and that we should not be found to lag behind the scientists in seeking to mobilize those potential resources, within our rightful competence, that might vitally affect the issue.