

ARTICLE

THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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THE New Testament is an organic whole, and it should be read in the order which was intended by its creators—first the four Gospels; next the Acts of the Apostles; then the epistles of the apostle Paul with the epistles of other apostolic writers. It is true that widespread differences as to the exact contents of the Canon persisted into the fourth Christian century. But the differences, though not unimportant, are in the main subordinate. Far more striking is the general consensus as to its structure and principal contents. The creation of the Canon is to be ascribed to the pressure of controversy which, in the second century, made it necessary for the Church to define its position and to secure its connexion with its founders in the first age. The details of the process are hidden from us; the result stands out clear in the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian. Henceforward the New Testament Scriptures take their place beside the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and their authority is presupposed by theologians of all schools in the centuries which followed. 'Do not simply believe what I say,' says St. Cyril of Jerusalem to his catechumens, 'unless you receive the proof of what I tell you from the Holy Scriptures' (*Cat.* iv. 17).

The instructive history of the schools of Scriptural interpretation in the early Church and the blending of the different types of comment in the learned compilations of the Middle Ages must not detain us now. Suffice it to note that the conception of an authoritative Canon continued to be instinctively accepted. Nor was the position in this respect materially changed at the Reformation. The Christian humanists followed by the Reformers did indeed break with the mystical exegesis in which medieval piety delighted, and returned to the plain meaning of the text, but, except for some occasional outbursts of Luther, the conception of the authoritative Canon continued to rule, and in Protestant scholasticism was exalted to a position of isolated authority such as it had never held before. Down to the present day there is no Christian Church, reformed or unreformed, which does not officially recognize the authority of the Canon of the New Testament Scriptures.

Officially yes, but instinctively no longer. During the last century and a half the movement of thought and the development of learning

have slowly but surely undone the achievement of the second century. Sporadic attempts at a critical treatment of the New Testament at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century had pointed the way, but it was late in the eighteenth century and in Germany that historical criticism was first seriously and systematically applied to the documents of the New Testament. Semler's *Treatise in Free Examination of the Canon* (1771-3) and Lessing's theological manifestoes of 1777-8 mark an epoch. Like other German scholars of his day Semler had been deeply affected by the ferment of English Deism, but that controversy had on the whole been conducted in a thoroughly unhistorical temper. 'Revelation' was defended or rejected. It was seldom examined. Semler's work offered a new view of the questions in dispute, by distinguishing the Old Testament from the New and by allowing for a gradual and progressive revelation. The pioneers of the eighteenth century did not fully realize what they had undertaken. They were still haunted by the abstractions of natural theology. In spite of his deep feeling for history Lessing found it hard to bring 'necessary truths of reason' into touch with 'contingent facts of history'. Hence, too, the unreality of Semler's interpretation of the New Testament. Jesus and His Apostles spoke *κατ' οἰκονομίαν* to accommodate themselves to the prejudices of their Jewish hearers. The task of theology is to distinguish the local and temporal from the universal and eternal. The precise content of the universal and eternal residuum is, it must be confessed, meagre. Semler understood by Christianity, said F. C. Baur, 'the right of the individual declared by Christ to have his own private religion'.¹ But this weakness does not detract from the importance of Semler's work. He had taken a decisive step when he applied consistently a positive criticism to that postulate of all Christian theology as then known, namely, the Canon of Scripture, and the ground was prepared for the subsequent labours of Eichorn and Schleiermacher when, with the Romantic Movement, historical consciousness came into its own.

The history of English New Testament scholarship, like much else in English life, has been conditioned by the comparative isolation of English thought from the end of the Seven Years War until the early years of Queen Victoria's reign. No Lessing forced upon the English public the issue of the dogmatic authority of the Bible. Herbert Marsh's *Dissertation on the Origin and Composition of our First Three Canonical Gospels*, Cambridge, 1801, and his earnest commendation of Eichorn's theological works to Cambridge students must not be overlooked, but on the whole English theological opinion either failed

¹ *Die Epochen der kirchlichen Geschichtschreibung*, p. 141.

to realize what had happened beyond the Rhine or else expressly repudiated German theology. The exceptions for the most part confirm the general statement. Coleridge, who had sat at the feet of Eichorn, knew better, and he committed to paper his reflections on the Inspiration of Scripture as *The Confessions of an Enquiring Spirit*, but these were not allowed to see the light till 1840, six years after the poet's death. Connop Thirlwall's youthful indiscretion in translating Schleiermacher's St. Luke was long remembered against him. Pusey had studied oriental languages and biblical criticism at Göttingen, Bonn, and Berlin, 1825-7, and knew the drift of things, but he turned his back upon the new methods and lent his whole strength to preserving the English Church from the threat of 'rationalism'.

Towards the middle of the century the situation changed, and England awakened to the importance of German criticism in biblical as well as in classical history. Jowett and Mark Pattison took stock of the ambitious reconstruction of early Christian history which had been propounded by F. C. Baur and his pupils under the influence of the Hegelian philosophy of History. To them and to the other contributors to the once famous volume *Essays and Reviews* Germany was the home of an enlightened scholarship which promised emancipation from the barren orthodoxy of traditional Church belief and protection against the dreaded dogmatic revival which had been inaugurated by *The Tracts for the Times*.

These two forces, the Oxford Movement and the Broad Church revolt, set the stage for one of the greatest epochs in the history of the Cambridge Theological School. From 1860 to 1890 the triumvirate of Westcott, Lightfoot, and Hort played a decisive part in the religious life of England. Cambridge stood somewhat aloof from the bitter partisanship which in the middle of the nineteenth century distracted Oxford. Yet it was not unaffected by the tendencies which the Oxford controversies exhibited. The revival of the sense of corporate Church life, which was so impressively exhibited by the Oxford Movement, was characteristic of the age, and found other forms of expression. F. D. Maurice, himself a disciple of Coleridge, was penetrated with the inspiration of Fellowship in the Kingdom of Christ. The Cambridge group had felt his power. Each in his own way was a convinced Churchman, and they could all appreciate much that the Oxford Movement stood for. On the other hand they had no sympathy with the appeal to tradition as authoritative for belief.

Essays and Reviews appeared in February 1860, and quickly encountered the onslaught which it courted. Westcott was deeply moved. He was indignant with the Essayists, he was even more

indignant with their assailants. 'Of all cares', he wrote, 'almost the greatest which I have had has been *Essays and Reviews* and its opponents. The controversy is fairly turning me gray. I look on the assailants of the Essayists, from Bishops downwards, as likely to do far more harm to the Church and the truth than the Essayists.'¹ Hort, too, had been stirred. He felt more sympathy than Westcott with the policy of the Essayists, and at first refused Westcott's proposal that they should collaborate with Lightfoot in bringing out a volume to mediate between traditionalism and *Essays and Reviews*. The three scholars had already projected a comprehensive series of commentaries on the books of the New Testament, and Westcott thought it would be opportune if they anticipated their future labours by publishing a book which should indicate their general line of approach. Hort at length concurred, but the project fell through owing to Lightfoot's defection. It was perhaps as well. A pronouncement while the controversy was at its height might have prejudiced the work of the long and fruitful period that followed.

Westcott's and Hort's labours on the text were completed in 1881. The work remains the starting-point for all subsequent work on the textual criticism of the New Testament.

Lightfoot's magnificent editions of the Pauline Epistles (*Galatians*, 1865; *Philippians*, 1868; *Colossians and Philemon*, 1875) more than fulfil the promise of his famous review of Stanley's and Jowett's too hasty scholarship in *The Journal of Classical and Sacred Philology* for 1856. The general result of Lightfoot's work was to restore confidence in the historical value of the New Testament documents. His criticism of the position of the Tübingen School had indeed been anticipated by the second edition of Albrecht Ritschl's *Entstehung der Altkatholischen Kirche*, 1857, but Lightfoot's work was founded upon a thorough and independent review of the evidence which won the respect of Continental as well as British scholars.

The conservatism of Westcott's commentary on *St. John* (1882) may easily obscure for a student of to-day its high and permanent value. It was followed in 1883 by a commentary on *The Epistles of St. John*, and in 1889 by what is considered by some to be his best work—a commentary on *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Westcott's book *An Introduction to the Study of the Gospels* (1st ed. 1860; 8th ed. 1895) is far below the level of his work on the Epistles. The criticism of the Gospels was a weak point with the Cambridge school.

Hort's all too fragmentary remains on *1 Peter* (published posthumously 1898), the *Apocalypse* (1908), and *St. James* (1909) exemplify Cambridge scholarship in its perfection.

¹ *Life*, i. 215.

Lightfoot died on 21 Dec. 1889, after holding the see of Durham for ten years, and in the spring of 1890 Westcott succeeded him. It was a turning-point for Cambridge theology. The memory and the influence of those great men has persisted to our own time, but since 1890 the type of teaching which they presented has increasingly failed to meet the demands of a new age. Leadership passed to another group and another place. It is not that Cambridge theologians have been idle. During the last five and thirty years there has been a steady output of important and permanent contributions to theological learning. Let me only mention now the monumental work of a revered predecessor in the Ely Professorship, Vincent Henry Stanton, on *The Gospels as Historical Documents*. Other and equally important undertakings have maintained and still maintain the traditions of Cambridge learning. I think, however, it would be generally allowed that since the departure of Westcott our school has not quite achieved a *corporate* readjustment. Individual teachers have exercised wide influence, but no *group* of Cambridge theologians since that time has impressed itself upon the life of church and nation. For this I do not think that we or our immediate predecessors are answerable. The situation—so it seems to me—is mainly to be ascribed to a deep-seated weakness in the Westcott-Hort-Lightfoot tradition itself.

On 10 May 1890 Hort wrote to the new Bishop of Durham as follows: 'I had hoped to avoid troubling you again, but I cannot be content without a word to you on a big matter which concerns your new as much as your old work. Have you considered whether it would not be well for you to take or make some early opportunity of saying publicly what you said to the Clergy Training School gathering about the Old Testament question; better still of saying rather more, and more explicitly. . . . This last week has brought a fresh impulse. I venture to send you privately two letters from Ryle. In answer to the first. . . . I asked, Was it not better, unless challenges should be thrown down that could not be declined, to try to promote such insensible changes of doctrine, as we have had other examples of for many years past? You will see his answer. Apart from his taking such a thesis, it does seem that there is very strong reason indeed for something being done, not only to avoid showing lack of sympathy with Driver, whose mode of writing is exemplary, but also because guidance is so greatly needed for Cambridge students and for others, and this is the quarter from which a word might most reasonably be looked for. But your removal gravely changes the position. None of us who remain possesses any appreciable portion of the moral authority on a great doctrinal question,

which would undoubtedly attach to whatever you might say, . . . and secondly it is of great consequence not to do anything (without urgent reason) which might give a handle to an impression or statement that Cambridge theology was changing its character on your departure. Nothing could so strengthen Ryle's hands as a public utterance from you that would cover his ground, and nothing—I will venture to say it—would have such salutary effects as regards this subject throughout the Church.'¹ The lead was not given. Westcott answered: 'The pressure of necessary work at present would make it impossible for me to touch the question of which you write. . . . Gore is perfectly able to take care of himself. . . . My fear is that the reaction will go too far. I spoke to the Archbishop last night, and he completely agreed with me.'

It is not easy to understand how the Cambridge group contrived to leave the problems of the Old Testament, which from 1860 onwards were growing in urgency, so far out of sight. Hort wrote to Lightfoot in 1862 after reading Colenso: 'I suppose we shall all now be obliged to study the Old Testament a little more, but I fear it is nervous work for those of us who would rather *quieta non movere* in that particular matter. I cannot help fearing that we shall sooner or later be driven to take some such ground as that of Ewald and Bunsen, however little satisfied with their special criticisms. But at present I feel as if I knew nothing either way.' Hostility to the critical movement would have been impossible to them. They left it alone. To an inquiring clergyman who sought for guidance about the Old Testament in 1888 Westcott wrote: 'I know no book. No one I think who is fairly acquainted with the condition of the problems will be hasty to write. We have much to learn and the scantiest materials to teach us. Meanwhile we must be patient, and above all not pledge the Faith to a special decision on critical questions. For us the Old Testament is that of the Apostolic Age. How it came to be we will reverently seek to know. I cannot see that any conceivable result affects spiritual truth.'² This answer seems to lie open to two criticisms. First, it ignored the whole development of criticism from Reuss to Wellhausen and Robertson Smith. But there is a graver matter. Years before, Hort complained that Westcott treated Greek philosophy solely as a propaedeutic for Christianity. Westcott's attitude to the Old Testament shows the same weakness. He only regarded it in reference to the New Testament. It was not to him a subject of intrinsic importance.

The guidance so sorely needed came from elsewhere. The *Lux*

¹ *Life and Letters of F. J. A. Hort*, ii. 416 f.

² *Life*, ii. 60.

Mundi school has owed its immense influence to more than one factor. It was in close sympathy with a reigning school of philosophy, and it had a programme for the Church, but an all-important factor which in the nineties rallied the young men to the new High Church party and helped to place them in the commanding position which they occupy to-day was Gore's breach with the old Tractarians on the question of Scripture and his firm acceptance of the new outlook which Old Testament criticism had rendered inevitable.

It was essential for religion in Britain that this change should be carried through. Westcott, while he did not oppose critical investigation, and forbore to press disputed points, and would quote Origen to justify allegorical interpretation of the early chapters in Genesis, yet left the Old Testament background of history, essentially uncriticized, in possession of the field. The study of the Old Testament from within and the increasing knowledge of the ancient world from without made evacuation imperative.

Between the last decade of the nineteenth century and this present time a deep gulf is fixed. Those who, like myself, were children in the 'nineties can just remember enough to recover the atmosphere. For those who are ten years younger it is difficult to conceive of the chief preacher in the English Church and an acknowledged leader of the High Church party defending almost with his dying breath the old doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture before a large and fashionable congregation in the University pulpit at Oxford. The doctrines of *Lux Mundi* which Liddon felt to imperil the Catholic Faith have become accepted commonplaces with the now dominant party in the Anglican Church, and the religious world generally has grown accustomed to the idea that the Old Testament Scriptures do not in all cases come from the men who in the first century A.D. were believed to have written them, and that the contents of the books are not devoid of legendary and mythical elements.

However, it may be questioned whether Gore's Essay on Inspiration in *Lux Mundi* does justice to the extent of the breach in the traditional theology which his view of the Old Testament entailed. Not the least important function of the Old Testament in the traditional theology had been to provide a setting of universal history, both religious and secular, for the Incarnation and the Redemption. The historiography of the Renaissance had already in principle inflicted a mortal blow upon the Biblical scheme, but in the popular mind, especially in Great Britain, it long retained its hold. It is now supplanted by outlines of the history of mankind, and by sketches of the history of religion. In this larger whole the religion of the Bible takes its place. The full bearings of this momentous change were not, I think, fully

present to the minds of the most influential theologians of the nineteenth century. It was a large part of their work to disconnect theology and religion from obsolescent views of nature and of history. A delimitation of frontiers between science and religion was attempted, which should allow theology to view with equanimity inevitable changes. In consequence a tendency showed itself to set the religion of the prophets and the Gospel in an unnatural isolation, and to regard the historic alliance of the Gospel and Greek philosophy in the theology of the Church as a regrettable if an inevitable corruption. But the secularized history of mankind has shown itself unwilling to acquiesce in secularization. Religion is a universal element in human nature of which history must take account, and its manifestations demand scientific treatment. Science can recognize no frontiers, and there is an irresistible impulse to draw into the common field of *Religionsgeschichte* the religion of the Old and New Testaments. Thus new forces have been at work, and our attention is now engaged by a different set of questions.

This movement has been affecting for some time the study of the New Testament. We no longer assume, as the authors of *Lux Mundi* on the whole felt able to assume, that scholarship—and especially Cambridge scholarship—had established the authenticity and therewith the authority of the chief books of the New Testament. It is not merely that new positions have been secured in the criticism of the Gospels. More important is the changed setting of the work. The conclusions of literary criticism are viewed in relation to wider problems. How, we now ask, was the Judaism of the Dispersion related to the syncretic tendency of religions in the Roman Empire? How was Christianity related to each of these forces? Who were the first Gentile converts? What did they believe and practise in religion before their conversion? And how did their earlier beliefs colour their interpretation of the new message which they received? That such questions are asked at all weakens the old conception of the authority of apostolic precedent. Historical realism has carried us behind the Canon-makers and their idealization of the past—an idealization which survived for some time the abandonment of the strict conception of Canonical authority. The first Christians and their teachers, as we see them now, do not always lend themselves to the edification of a modern congregation. And a further question is raised. If it is not absurd to allow for an infiltration of pagan modes of thought into the earliest Church, how far may not this admission carry us? Is it not possible that we have been mistaken in thinking of Christianity as a distinct religion? Perhaps we shall succeed in interpreting it as a syncretism of various elements, Jewish, Greek, and Oriental, which

the study of the history of religions will enable us to identify. Those who approach Christianity from outside, when they find connexions or resemblances with non-Jewish and non-Christian systems, are tempted to adopt such a view, and even to ascribe to the apostolic missionaries the conscious aim of effecting such a syncretism. This tendency is well illustrated by a much discussed German work entitled *Pneuma Hagion* by Hans Leisegang. Leisegang's thesis is that all the references to the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit in the synoptic Gospels are importations from Hellenistic mysticism. They do not belong to the original teaching of Jesus and they do not correspond to the original beliefs of the first disciples. We must not now stay to investigate Leisegang's treatment of the Gospel texts, or to criticize his interpretation of the Old Testament references to the Spirit which provide an obvious starting-point for the Christian belief. It is his general attitude to primitive Christianity that is in question. He pictures St. Paul as at first undertaking to overcome Hellenistic mysticism by the ethical piety which originated with the historical Jesus. In this task Paul fails because mysticism has too strong a hold upon himself, and he falls back upon a compromise between the two forces. 'In his own piety', says Leisegang, 'the ethical element by far outweighs the mystical, but in the Hellenistic communities Christianity quickly encountered the same fate as the old oriental religions. The moral preachings of the Apostles were drowned in the overflowing stream of Greek mysticism.'¹ These naïve generalizations justify, I think, the conclusion that Leisegang's extensive learning in the sources for contemporary pagan religion is not balanced by an equally extensive study of the history of the early Church. But as this book is typical of a certain class of writing in Germany to-day, it is perhaps worth while to draw attention to certain considerations, which, though neither sensational nor new, seem relevant to interpretations of this kind.

There is a *prima facie* case for regarding early Christianity as a distinct and unique religion, for both adherents and opponents believed it to be so. Men are not always aware of all the forces which influence them, and we must reckon with the probability that this was so with the early Christians, but a sound criticism will assign due weight to certain controlling feelings and beliefs which, by its own testimony, were operative in the consciousness of the Apostolic Church. We may place first the loyalty which Christians felt themselves to owe to a Lord who had lived and died in Palestine, who was believed to have been raised from death, and whose sudden return in glory was eagerly looked for. There was no fixed Christology. The germs of several

¹ Op. cit., p. 2.

later theories may be found in different parts of the New Testament. But this dogmatic haziness must not be allowed to weaken our apprehension of the loyalty which Christians owed in common to Jesus Christ, God's Son. Secondly, all the apostolic writers regard themselves and the Church as standing in a direct relation to a given historical tradition. The Church was the new Israel, and it was lawful heir to the promises which had been made to the old Israel. What exactly was involved in this claim was much disputed. But no Christian in the first century, so far as we know, disputed the belief which the controversies presupposed.

These considerations are compatible with a recognition of external influences in the early Church. The question as to the nature and extent of Persian, Greek, Egyptian influences upon early Christianity, either directly, or through the medium of the Jewish Dispersion, is likely to continue to engage our attention for some time to come, and the study calls for co-operation between students of the New Testament and Judaism, and workers in the neighbouring fields of Classical and Oriental Philology. The considerations which I have adduced seem to me to make it likely that future criticism will continue to find in the Christianity of the first century a new and distinct religion with a predominantly Jewish background.

But the most impressive testimony to the unity and creative power of the first age of the Church remains to be mentioned. It is the New Testament itself. Jowett summed up the teaching of his fine *Essay on the Interpretation of Scripture* in the injunction, 'Interpret Scripture like any other book'. His words have the ring of sound sense, and few to-day will be disposed to quarrel with the maxim as he intended it. This is how he interprets it himself: 'Scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had to the mind of the prophet or Evangelist who first uttered or wrote to the hearers or readers who first received it. Another view may be easier or more familiar to us, seeming to receive a light and interest from the circumstances of our own age. But such accommodation of the text must be laid aside by the interpreter, whose business is to place himself as nearly as possible in the position of the sacred writer.'¹ But the maxim covers an ambiguity. 'Interpret Scripture', says Jowett—though his explanation shows that he might as well have said, 'Interpret Isaiah and St. John'. The implied equation of the apostolic writings with Scripture covers a momentous historical development. The New Testament is a book. It was not yet a book when St. John laid down his pen. And if to 'interpret the New Testament like any other book' means to take account of the forces which created it, we must

¹ *Essays and Dissertations on St. Paul's Epistles*, p. 48.

look to the second, not the first, Christian century. These forces may be divined from the Muratorian fragment on the Canon. The extravagances of Gnostic theosophy and Montanus' corrupt following of the ancient Christian prophecy threaten the integrity of the Church. The Church falls back upon the literary legacy of the apostolic age. Those writings, so the fragment assures us, speak with one voice. There are four Gospels and, though each has its own selection of narratives, yet they are all inspired by one guiding spirit. Paul and John each addressed letters to seven different churches, but in truth their words are addressed to the one Catholic Church dispersed throughout the world. The use of the apostolic writings in the later Church is no safe guide to us for their proper interpretation, for their true historical setting was misunderstood and obscured. Yet it is not irrelevant to our estimate of the first century that the later Church found it possible to use its literary remains as Holy Scripture. The creation of the Canon goes to show that these writings, largely occasional in origin, embodied principles of life and thought which were found to be of general application. The apostolic exhortations were not, as Hans Leisegang supposes, swept away in the flood of Hellenistic mysticism: they lived on, and their continued life is a warning to us that in our study of the apostolic Church we should have an eye, not only for its points of contact with a world in which it felt itself to be a stranger and a pilgrim, but also for those lasting experiences and ideals which enabled it to survive the disappointment of its early hope.