

## THE BIBLE AND HISTORY

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History is the diary of mankind. However imperfectly kept and however fragmentary it may be, we must depend upon it for our knowledge of the origins of races, cultures, and religions. For some nations or groups the data are ample, having been preserved in official records and in a literature that is full and representative. For other cultures only scanty artifacts and vague traditions remain to attest their achievements. Nevertheless these records are essential for an understanding of human life, for they enable one to analyze and to explain the causes and developments of the civilizations that have successively appeared and vanished, leaving their traces in the heritage which the successors have absorbed. Within the scope of any given discipline, history is the basis for conclusions for teaching.

In the theological world there has been in recent years a revolt against the historical approach. Relying on Lessing's repudiation of history as a criterion of truth on the grounds that the records are scanty, contradictory, and biased, some modern theologians have assumed the attitude that the Bible, like other books, cannot be regarded as final truth. Tillich, in a foreword to the translation of Kahler's *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*,<sup>1</sup> stated that "One emphasis in Kahler's answer is decisive for our situation; namely, the necessity to make the certainty of faith independent of the unavoidable incertitudes of historical research."

If, however, historical records are completely invalidated as acceptable criteria of truth, one has no other choice than to create some subjective criterion as a substitute. The existential view places the emphasis of truth on the decision of the immediate moment. Whatever one's prevailing judgment decides the present choice should be is truth for that person at that time; the next moment will take care of itself. Such a view inevitably results in chaos; for it permits no general concept of truth equally applicable to the moral and spiritual needs of all men, nor even within the individual life does it allow for any continuity of principle or action. In that case the Bible becomes irrelevant to the modern world. It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the philosophical ramifications of the trend in general, but rather to deal with the relation of the Bible to history.

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1. Martin Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, Trans. Carl E. Braaten. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, p. 13.

## THE RELATION OF THE BIBLE TO HISTORY

The Bible is inextricably connected with history both by its origin and by its content. Written by approximately a dozen and a half different authors over a period of probably 1500 years, and spanning the existence of the human race from creation to about A.D. 100, it is closely related to other records contemporary with it, and provides an interpretation of the events which it describes or to which it alludes.

This interpretation is mainly spiritual in its character. It has been called *Heilsgeschichte*, the history or development of salvation. To many, however, it denotes the "super-history" of Divine action, which treats factual events solely as the theater in which the significant history is taking place. This interpretation, it should be noted, depends for its validity both upon its logic and upon the actuality of the events which it seeks to interpret. If the recorded events are mythical in the sense that they never occurred, but are simply artificial fabrications to illustrate an abstract principle, they have no genuine connection with real life nor with the concrete fulfillment of the divine purpose. Hypothetical events can always be used to illustrate the meaning of a statement, but they cannot constitute the authority for that statement. The historical allusions of the Bible do not purport to be fictional illustrations; on the contrary, they claim to be actual happenings, interpreted by the prophets of God, on which the doctrinal teaching of the Bible rests.

The Bible is, then, first of all an historical record. It traces man from the creation to Abraham by a skeletal genealogy interspersed with a few significant comments on events that were crucial in his racial experience. It narrates the dealings of God with the patriarchs, and indicates the development of His redemptive purpose in the creation of the nation of Israel. By the episode of the Exodus and the developments that followed it the ethical and spiritual character of God and His discipline of His people were demonstrated. The prophets served both as the monitors of Israel's failures and progress, and also as the heralds of the new covenant which God would introduce with the coming Messiah. The New Testament announced the coming of the Messiah, presented the major facts of his biography, and chronicled the founding and growth of the early church.

By recording these events the Bible becomes an historical treatise. Its facts are comparable to and verifiable by other contemporary documents. It alludes to personalities mentioned in other sources, and sometimes tells more about them than is known elsewhere (e.g., Pontius Pilate). Insofar as its statements can be compared with other records, they have been corroborated by the evidence available. Whether directly recounting action or whether implying the existence of certain conditions by its more incidental allusions, the Bible is an unmistakable piece of written history.

## THE BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

History must be interpretive. Obviously no one document could contain all the actions that compose the situation of which it speaks. If the life of one individual were to be chronicled completely, including every motion and every utterance, the journal of one day would be too voluminous and tiresome to read. Such a mass of detail is unnecessary in any true history, for only the significant actions deserve recording; the rest are inconsequential.

What, however, determines whether an action is significant or not? No two historiographers will select identical episodes for discussion, though the general outline of a period or of a biography will be the same for all concerned. The differences will lie in the varied interests and purposes of the writers, in the materials available for their use, and in the pertinence of these materials to the objective of the history.

Because a narrative is not exhaustive of all facts related to the situation which it describes it is not necessarily untruthful or invalid. As long as all the facts pertinent to the issue under discussion are given, a correct judgment can be made. There are many things that the Bible does not tell concerning the backgrounds of the places, characters, and actions of which it speaks. In many instances these would probably be irrelevant, though they might be interesting. In other cases they may have been so familiar to the people of the time that explanation would have been superfluous. The central purpose, however, is the unfolding of God's redemptive purpose for man as it is worked out in the existence of individuals, nations, and periods. The very statement of this development involves revelation both by the description of God's acts and by the declaration of His utterances to and through His servants. The total complex of these descriptions and declarations constitutes the disclosure of Himself which God makes to men.

To state that the interpretation is the key to historical understanding does not mean that the facts are negligible. Tillich attempted to determine how Christian doctrine might be understood if non-existence of "the historical Jesus should become historically probable."<sup>2</sup> He has not been alone in attempting to divorce Christianity (in the sense of the message) from Christ. If the Jesus of history never existed, or if he is so shadowy a figure that nothing more can be asserted concerning Him than that He lived and died, how can any proper conclusions be drawn concerning the validity of the teachings ascribed to Him, or why would it be necessary to regard Christianity as anything more than a subjective dream entertained by some erratic people?

These logical consequences have been pursued by the advocates of modern theology. Bultmann is credited with saying that it is extremely

2. Tillich: *The Interpretation of History*. Trans. Rasetzki and Talmey. New York: Scribner, 1936, p. 33.

doubtful whether any genuine utterance of Jesus can be identified in the canonical Gospels: "...We have no absolute assurance that the exact words of this oldest layer [of Aramaic tradition] were really spoken by Jesus."<sup>3</sup> The entire complex of Christian theology has been ascribed to the developing church, which read back into the actions and teachings of a legendary Jesus its own teaching, value-judgments, and ritual. What this philosophy fails to explain is how the Christian movement originated. It provides neither an adequate basis for its non-historical faith, nor can it furnish a non-historical rationale for the development of that faith. It appeals to history to invalidate history—a procedure that seems illogical, to say the least.

#### THE HISTORICAL CLAIMS OF THE BIBLE

A fair treatment of the Bible as a historical document should allow it to speak for itself. How does it relate itself to history?

First of all, its initial assertion sets the tone for the entire book: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). The Bible states that history begins with God. His creative act initiated the origin of human history. The following text does not attempt a complete scientific discussion of geology and palaeontology, but summarizes the process by which the world was prepared for the advent of man and for God's dealing with him. Man's responsibility, failure, and consequent decline, together with God's redemptive purpose and quest, are simply and plainly stated.

The call of Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Law, the conquest of Palestine, the establishment of the united and divided kingdom, the Exile, the Restoration, and the life, work, and resurrection of Christ, followed by the establishment of the church comprise the main turning-points of the narrative. Each of these is related to the others as a definite link in a chain of progressive events. They are not presented as accidents of chance, but as acts of God. Without a knowledge of these the full meaning of the Gospel would not be realized. They are repeatedly emphasized in Biblical teaching, and are basic to Biblical theology.

The Bible openly affirms its connection with history. Abraham was told that in his seed (descendants) all the nations should be blessed (Gen. 12:1 ff). David was informed that "thy house and thy kingdom shall be made sure for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever" (II Sam. 7:16). Whether the promise be taken literally or figuratively, it presupposes the continuation of a dynasty in the political life of mankind that would enjoy the special favor of God. The spiritual decline of Israel is traced in the historical books and in the prophets, who predicted both the political collapse that resulted in the Exile and also the restoration that occurred under Ezra.

3. See the entire first part of his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). Pp. 14-205, and *Jesus and the Word* (trans. L. R. Smith and E. H. Lantero. New York: Scribners, 1958), pp. 13, 62.

The prophecies of Daniel involved not only the failure of Israel, but also the rise and fall of the empires that affected Israel's fortunes. Babylon, Medo-Persia, Macedonia, and Rome ruled the world in succession until the coming of the Messiah. The statements concerning each do not narrate any particulars, but they interpret the characters and meaning of these empires from the divine standpoint.

The advent of Jesus was definitely linked to the historical situation by Luke, both by the dating of the registration that took place in the reign of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1) and by the beginning of Jesus' ministry at John's baptism during the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1). Although fixed chronological references in the writings of the New Testament are scarce, there are enough to show that the events described were enacted in the regular mold of history, and not in a fictional "never-never" land. The cross-references to world events from the time of Abraham to the end of the first century after Christ indicate that the Bible deals with the experiences of men who became aware of God's purpose and of their relation to that purpose. They had a sense of mission in a real world, and believed that they had a commission to discharge in their own time as well as a destiny that transcended present achievement.

Direct statement of historical purpose occurs in some Biblical passages. Paul said that "when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them that were under the law, that they might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4). Paul distinguished two eras: the era of the law, and the era of grace. The first was characterized by spiritual servitude, the second by spiritual sonship. The former was preparatory to the latter, and progressed from immaturity to maturity.

The writer of Hebrews presents a similar concept: "For Christ entered not into a holy place made with hands, like in pattern to the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God for us; . . . but now once (for all) at the end (consummation) of the ages, hath been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:24-26). The allusion to the "consummation of the ages" indicates that he related the death of Christ and the atonement to the course of a literal history.

Jesus Himself evaluated the history of the future when He said: "And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led captive into all the nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). His words indicate that a long parenthesis in Israel's history, beginning with the destruction of Jerusalem, would finally be ended, and that the day of Gentile opportunity and supremacy would end with the restoration of Israel to power.

These major points of accord between Biblical prophecy and history indicate that there is a definite relation between the Bible and history.

They assume a realism in Biblical teaching that applies directly to mundane affairs. The Bible does not present an abstract philosophy unrelated to the hard facts of life, but it speaks to man's actual condition and offers a message that is fully relevant to it. The principles which it advocates are progressively applicable from age to age, and fit any and every era simply because they are grounded in history.

#### THE APOLOGETIC VALUE OF BIBLICAL HISTORY

The historical accuracy of a document does not prove its inspiration or its spiritual authority, but the historical inaccuracy of a document purporting to be the word of God would certainly endanger its claim. Insofar as the Bible relates to historical data, one can say that no positive historical evidence now available controverts its truth. It may contain numerous historical statements or implications that have been either misinterpreted or unconfirmed, but such historical and archaeological evidence as comes to light aids in correct interpretation or else provides direct confirmation of the Biblical data.

The Bible presents a development of Divine purpose in history, beginning with God's remonstrance with man over his first disobedience, and continuing with a chain of revelatory deeds and words down to the person of Christ, on whom the lines of historical purpose converge and through whom the final words of revelation are spoken. All that follows Him is a further elaboration of His work and words by those whom He had commissioned, and the acts that are recorded reflect the work of the Holy Spirit whom He had promised to send into the world. Through the work of the Spirit the history of the past is interpreted and applied to the present. The existential moment does not make history irrelevant. Quite to the contrary, it connects the present with the past and the future, uniting them in one sequential complex that leads toward the consummation of the purpose of God.