

A CRITIQUE OF CERTAIN UNCRITICAL ASSUMPTIONS IN MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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In the editor's introduction to a recent publication we are given insight into F. W. Maitland's religious opinions by way of his "enthusiastic response" to a letter to *The Times* in which the following viewpoint was set forth:

We teach all this [the creation, the fall, the deluge, the stories of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, etc.] at the expense of the taxpayers, not only as history, but as history of Divine inspiration, although most thinking men (including not a few dignitaries of the Church) have long ago come to the conclusion that these old legends are not to be taken as historical at all; that they are, in fact, mythology. . . . The late Sir Leslie Stephen, as good a man as ever lived, used to say that he no more objected to his children being told the story of Goliath than to their being told the story of Blunderbore; he was well content that they should read fairy stories, but he did object to their being taught fairy stories as history of Divine truth, and that belief in them as such was essential to morality!¹

Maitland's assumption—or agreement with the assumption—that Biblical materials should be regarded essentially as faith documents and not as veridical, historical sources is by no means unique to him. William H. McNeill gives no weight to the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in his attempt to explain the success of early Christianity.² He asserts that the historian cannot deal with miracle questions: They are religious, not historical, in character.

And both secularists and liberal Biblical scholars agree that one of the most powerful reasons for not teaching "fairy stories as history of Divine truth" is the so-called "assured results" of the higher criticism of Scriptural materials. The Biblical documents for the most part—the critics tell us—are not firsthand, eyewitness accounts of the events they describe but the product of later editing and redaction, such that they are no more and no less than reflections of the faith stance of their editors.³

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¹ F. W. Maitland, *Letters* (ed. P. N. R. Zutshi; London: Selden Society, 1995) 2.12.

² J. W. Montgomery, *Where Is History Going?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969) 75–99. Cf. among certain modern theologians the viewpoint that the resurrection of Christ occurred not in "ordinary history" (*Historie*) but in the realm of "religious" (or "supra-") history (*Geschichte*): *ibid.* 110 ff.

³ This viewpoint was held—religiously—by several participants (Michael Goulder, John Durant and Gerd Luedemann) in the Easter 1996 "Heart of the Matter" debate on BBC-1 television, in which I participated.

In this brief essay we wish to take issue with these critical assumptions. It is our contention that (1) miracles can—and must—be taken with historical seriousness by the historian, and that (2) the historical-critical method of dismembering Biblical texts, far from revealing the true character of Bible narratives, is simply bad historical scholarship, whether employed within or without the theological sphere.

I. MIRACLES AND THE HISTORIAN

Antony Flew well summarizes the case against treating miracles as historical events:

The basic propositions are: first, that the present relics of the past cannot be interpreted as historical evidence at all, unless we presume that the same fundamental regularities obtained then as still obtain today; second, that in trying as best he may to determine what actually happened the historian must employ as criteria all his present knowledge, or presumed knowledge, of what is probable or improbable, possible or impossible; and, third, that, since *miracle* has to be defined in terms of practical impossibility the application of these criteria inevitably precludes proof of a miracle.⁴

Flew's argument is really two arguments in disguise, and we shall take up each in turn. On the one hand, he seems to be saying that the proponent of miracles has no right to argue for them on the basis of a consistent underlying method of investigation (empirical method) since one cannot assume its absolute regularity and applicability and then use it to prove deviations from regularity. Once a miracle is granted, there would be no reason to consider empirical method as necessarily applicable without exception, so it could perfectly well be inapplicable to the investigation of the miracle claim in the first place.

But here a lamentable confusion is introduced between what may be termed formal or heuristic regularity and substantive regularity. To investigate anything of a factual nature, empirical method must be employed. It involves such formal or heuristic assumptions as the law of noncontradiction, the inferential operations of deduction and induction, and necessary commitments to the existence of the investigator and the external world.⁵ Empirical method is not provable. The justification for its use is the fact that we cannot avoid it when we investigate the world. (To prove that what we perceive with our senses is real we would have to collect and analyze data in its behalf, but we would then already be using what we are trying to prove.) One cannot emphasize too strongly that this necessary methodology does not in any way commit one to a substantively regular universe where events must always follow given patterns. Empirical method always inves-

⁴ A. Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966) 146.

⁵ See J. W. Montgomery, *Shape of the Past* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975) 141, 256–267; "Clark's Philosophy of History," *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark: A Festschrift* (ed. R. H. Nash; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968) 388.

tigates the world in the same way—by collecting and analyzing data—but there is no prior commitment to what the data must turn out to be.

Thus a team of researchers could conceivably go down the rabbit hole with Alice and empirically study even Wonderland, where Alice cried: “Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night?”⁶ Even a world of maximal miracles—where predictability would approach zero—could be investigated by empirical method, for the consistent collection and analysis of data can occur even when the data are not themselves consistent and regular. In short, whereas irregularity in basic empirical methodology would eliminate the investigation of anything, the discovery of unique, nonanalogous events by empirical method in no way vitiates its operation or renders the investigator liable to the charge of irrationality.⁷

Flew has elsewhere expressed a more potent variation on this same argument in the following terms: The defender of the miraculous is acting arbitrarily when he claims that “it is (psychologically) impossible that these particular witnesses were lying or misinformed and hence that we must accept the fact that on this occasion the (biologically) impossible occurred.”⁸ The criticism here is that the advocate of miracles must commit himself to certain aspects of substantive regularity in order to analyze the evidence for an historical miracle. He must, for example, assume that human motivations remain the same in order to argue (as I have argued) that neither the Romans, the Jewish religious leaders, nor the disciples would have stolen Jesus’ body in order to claim that Jesus was miraculously resurrected. But, we are told, such argumentation inconsistently uses regularity of experience where it serves a purpose and discards it at the point of the desired miracle, instead of there also insisting on a natural, ordinary explanation.

In reply we might begin by noting that this argument seems somewhat inappropriate for the rationalist to propose. Since he himself is committed to employ only ordinary explanations of phenomena—explanations arising from common experience—he is in a particularly poor position to suggest any abnormal explanations for any aspect of a miracle account, including the psychological motivations or responses of the persons involved. Presumably the rationalist would be the last one to appeal to a miraculous suspension of ordinary psychology so as to permit the Jewish religious leaders (for example) to have stolen the body of Christ when they knew it to be against their own best interests.

The issue lies at a deeper level than this, however, and we may be able to arrive there by posing the question in the starkest terms. If we interpret

⁶ Cf. *The Philosopher’s Alice* (ed. P. Heath; New York: St. Martin’s, 1974).

⁷ For the essential similarity between empirical method as applied to the present and empirical method as applied to past events see Montgomery, *Shape of the Past*, and *Where is History Going?*, *passim*.

⁸ A. Flew, “Miracles,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. P. Edwards; New York: Macmillan, 1967) 5.352.

or explain historical events along ordinary lines (in accord with ordinary experience) where this does not contradict the events to be interpreted, are we therefore required to conclude that unique, nonanalogous events do not occur even when ordinary observational evidence exists in their behalf? Flew demands that we answer this question in the affirmative. To use common experience of regularities at all in historical interpretation, says he, precludes all possibility of discovering a miracle, even if the use of such common experience provides the very convergence of independent probabilities for asserting that the event in question is a miracle.

Curiouser and curiouser (if we may again appeal to Alice). The fallacy in this reasoning arises from a lack of clear perception as to the proper interrelation of the general and the particular in historical investigation. In interpreting events, one's proper goal is to find the interpretation that best fits the facts. Ideally, then, one will set alternative explanations of an event against the facts themselves to make an intelligent choice. But which facts will our explanations be tested against: the immediate facts to be interpreted, or the entire, general range of human experience? Where particular experience and general experience are in accord, there is no problem. But where they conflict, the particular must be chosen over the general, for otherwise our investigations of historical particulars will be investigations in name only since the results will always reflect already-accepted general experience. Unless we are willing to suspend regular explanations at the particular points where these explanations are inappropriate to the particular data, we in principle eliminate even the possibility of discovering anything new. In effect we then limit all new (particular) knowledge to the sphere of already-accepted (general) knowledge. The proper approach is just the opposite: The particular must triumph over the general, even when the general has given us immense help in understanding the particular.

In linguistics, for example, our general knowledge of how words function in cognate languages can help us immensely when we want to discover the meaning and function of a word in a new language. In the final analysis, however, only the particular usage of the word in that language will be decisive on the question, and where general semantics or lexicography is in tension with particular usage the latter must triumph over the former. But who would say that the linguist therefore has no right to use general linguistics since he ultimately is willing to subordinate it and revise it on the basis of isolated, particular usage? He would in fact be abrogating his role as linguist if he did allow the general to swallow up the particular at the point of tension between them. Likewise, in the investigation of unique, nonanalogous events (miracles) one has every right to employ regular experience in testing out such claims but no right to destroy the uniqueness of the event by forcing it to conform to general regularities.

How does an historian properly determine what has occurred and interpret it? Admittedly he takes to a study of any particular event his fund of general, usual experience. He relies upon it wherever it serves a useful function and not because he has any eternal, metaphysical justification for doing so. But the moment the general runs into tension with the particular, the gen-

eral must yield, since (1) the historian's knowledge of the general is never complete, so he can never be sure he ought to rule out an event or an interpretation simply because it is new to him, and (2) he must always guard against obliterating the uniqueness of individual historical events by forcing them into a Procrustean bed of regular, general patterns. Only the primary-source evidence for an event can ultimately determine whether it occurred or not, and only this same evidence will establish the proper interpretation of that event.⁹

Conclusion: The responsible historian must be concerned not only with belief in miracles but also with the issue of their facticity—whether they in fact occurred, and, if they did, the tremendous implications following therefrom.

II. HIGHER CRITICISM AND THE HISTORIAN

The true source of the collapse of incarnational theology as represented by John Hick's symposium, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), was the uncritical acceptance of higher criticism in the treatment of Biblical materials.¹⁰ If the NT documents were mere reflections of their later editors and redactors—or of the faith stances of the early Church—then they could no longer serve to restrain theologians from mythical reinterpretations of the life of Christ, evacuating his earthly ministry of genuine historical content.

G. A. Wells argues that Jesus probably never existed.¹¹ He bases this extraordinary claim on the results of the liberal Biblical criticism (principally German) of the last century and a half. Such criticism is seemingly incapable of asserting that any single word attributed to Jesus in the NT was actually spoken by him. It has also denied the historicity of key creedal events such as the virgin birth. On the basis of the "assured results" of modern Biblical criticism, Wells approvingly cites respected theologians Dennis Nineham and Maurice Wiles:

What Biblical scholarship has shown is that the New Testament includes a number of "Christologies", or ways of regarding Jesus, that are incompatible. They are very clearly outlined by Dennis Nineham, who says expressly that they simply cannot be "harmonised into a single coherent picture which could then be labelled 'the primitive Christian faith'". . . . He draws two conclusions. First, "Jesus . . . cannot have given any clear and precise account or interpretation of himself. In particular, he cannot have thought and taught about himself what later orthodox attributed to him. If he had, the wide variety of

⁹ The argument in the preceding section has been further developed in J. W. Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978) 43–73.

¹⁰ J. W. Montgomery, "Why Has God Incarnate Suddenly Become Mythical?", *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology: Papers from the 30th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society* (ed. K. S. Kantzer and S. N. Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 57–65. For definitions and descriptions of the several current varieties of historical-critical method as applied to Biblical texts, and their overlapping methodologies, see *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms* (ed. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993).

¹¹ See J. W. Montgomery, "Did Jesus Exist?", *New Oxford Review* 60/4 (May 1993) 20–22; reprinted in *Christian News* (May 17, 1993), with Wells' response and Montgomery's rejoinder in *Christian News* (September 13, 1993).

views about his origins, nature and work among his devoted early followers would be quite beyond explanation". And second: "No picture of the historical Jesus has yet emerged—or ever seems likely to—which comes anywhere near commanding universal, or even general agreement."¹²

Maurice Wiles thinks that, in view of all this, Christians should no longer regard scripture as "a binding authority", and should come to see it rather as "an indispensable resource". For him, the diversity and conflict that has been with Christianity from its inception is not something wholly ill; for "if the truth by which we are to live is not authoritatively given in the past, but continually to be discovered in the present, such a process of discovery is bound to involve experimentation, with attendant error and conflict."

Wiles realises that, if his approach to scripture is accepted, the church will not be able to give definitive rulings on the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Christ, among other doctrines, in the way it has done in the past.¹³

But, it may well be asked, even if higher criticism has provided a major justification for rejecting historic Christian beliefs, does that prove the methodology unsound per se? On the one hand, from a neutral standpoint historic, creedal Christianity might in fact be false. Furthermore the method might be valid even though certain results following from its use were false: Truth must not be subjected to the evils of a pragmatic epistemology.¹⁴ Clearly the validity or invalidity of higher criticism will ultimately depend on the value ascribed to its presuppositions and to the inherent logical quality of the method itself. Let us examine each in turn.

Even those theologians who want to allow for a mild use of higher criticism in the interpretation of the Bible readily admit that the technique entails unsound presuppositions. Thus George Eldon Ladd, in his discussion of *religionsgeschichtliche Methode*, states:

This method represents the most thorough-going application of a naturalistic historicism to the study of the Bible. It assumes that biblical religion, in both the Old and New Testaments, passed through stages of growth and evolution like all ancient religions, and in this evolution was heavily influenced through interaction with its religious environment. This method involves the consistent application of the principle of analogy to biblical religion: the history and development of biblical religion must be analogous to the history and development of other ancient religions. . . . This approach stifled the study of biblical theology for an entire generation and resulted in the production of a plethora of books tracing the evolution of biblical religion. One of the most popular was Harry Emerson Fosdick's *A Guide to the Understanding of the Bible* (1938).

The method of comparative religions was motivated by certain philosophical presuppositions about the nature of history and religion, particularly the presuppositions of evolution and natural historical development. In this sense, it was anti-revelatory and anti-theological. Revelation and theology belong to the realms of philosophy and dogma, not history. The history of the Hebrew-

¹² G. A. Wells, *Belief and Make-Believe* (La Salle: Open Court, 1991) 150.

¹³ G. A. Wells, *What's in a Name?* (La Salle: Open Court, 1993) 174.

¹⁴ On the inadequacies of pragmatism see Montgomery, *Shape of the Past* 322–325.

Christian religion cannot embody absolute truth, but must be a development resulting from the religious genius of the Hebrews in interaction with their religious environment.¹⁵

From the earliest days of systematic higher criticism (the Graf-Kuenen-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis of the nineteenth century) it has been observed that the higher critics are invariably antisupernaturalists: They are constantly attempting, in a reductionistic way, to remove the supernatural from the Biblical material.¹⁶ The book of Daniel is given late dating, thereby eliminating its prophetic element. The synoptic gospels are dated after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, changing Jesus' predictions of that event into accounts written after it occurred. In general the miraculous is explained away by attributing it to later sources or later editors or the elaborations of believing communities. But we have already seen, in the first section of the present essay, that the historian has no satisfactory justification whatever for refusing to face evidence of the miraculous when sound historical testimony exists to support it.

The critics' assumption that variations in literary style can provide a reliable guide to authorship has proved false again and again. Part 2 of Goethe's *Faust* differs radically in both style and literary purpose from part 1, but the two parts were not written by two different authors. The *Merchant of Venice* contains "the loftiest poetry . . . intermingled with . . . whole scenes, baldly prosaic, devoid of rhythm, vulgar in diction"¹⁷—yet one author (Shakespeare) wrote the entire play. C. S. Lewis has well demonstrated that the presuppositions of higher criticism are hopelessly subjectivistic and its application overwhelmingly dubious even in the realms of modern and contemporary literature.¹⁸ Gerhard Maier has produced an even more systematic critique.¹⁹

As for the logic (better, illogic) of higher criticism, one must consider with utmost seriousness Humphrey Palmer's keen identification of many of the devastating flaws built into higher-critical reasoning. Here are some typical examples of Palmer's conclusions:

In the complete absence of comparative material, and the wide range of informed opinion about the methods of composition, its occasion and its purpose, a decision about what is to count as establishing a Gospel source is very difficult. . . . In the gospels, each division produces a difficult grouping. Squinting through his microscope, the critic sees only a reflection of his eye.

If we are ready to believe next to nothing about Jesus, but almost anything about the early Church, the classification into "forms" is required only to add a spice of scholarship and variety. . . . Were the first Christians adept at thinking up stories-of-Jesus to suit a situation in their Church? Form-critics do not

¹⁵ G. E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967) 196–197. For my dissatisfactions with Ladd's own approach to Biblical history see *Where Is History Going?* 114–116.

¹⁶ See *inter alia* A. H. Finn, *The Unity of the Pentateuch: An Examination of the Higher Critical Theory* (3d ed.; London: Marshall, 1928) esp. 350 ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 378.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (ed. W. Hooper; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 152–166.

¹⁹ G. Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977).

show this, but take it for granted in all their reasonings. These reasonings do, however, show how adept form-critics are at thinking up early-Church-situations to suit stories of Jesus.

Guessing at traditions behind the gospels is a fascinating occupation. For public discussion of the subject to be profitable, reasons must be given why some guesses should be preferred to others. The classification of story-forms, though interesting in itself, has not produced any new reasons of this sort.

It seems unlikely that the disciples were clever enough to invent all those world-shaking ideas *and* simple enough to attribute them all to someone else. . . . Nor can we proceed by listing as Jesus' all the revolutionary doctrines, and leaving the rest to be filled in by his disciples, for such a list may only reflect *our* idea of what is basic, seminal, or revolutionary.

Jesus presumably spoke Aramaic. The gospels appear to have been composed in Greek. We may therefore ask, for each story or doctrine, to which background it belongs. This question has turned out less simple than it looked, for there are Semitic turns of phrase in Koine Greek, and Palestine was under Greek rule until the time of the Maccabees. No one can prove that Jesus spoke no Greek. Ideas cannot, in consequence, be affiliated simply by the language in which they are expressed.

Statistical work can improve our judgments of style. They remain judgments, and so "subjective." New Testament writings are too short and specialised for judgments of style, with or without numbers, to carry much weight in decisions about authorship.²⁰

We contend that the case against higher criticism is not primarily, if at all, theological in nature. The presuppositional and logical failings of higher criticism betray a fundamental intellectual difficulty inherent in the method, whether it is applied to the Bible in particular or to historical or literary works in general.²¹ Thus the higher-critical attempt to determine authorship by literary style brought Ugaritic studies to the verge of chaos. My professor of classics at Cornell University in the 1950s observed wryly that after seventy-five years of that sort of thing in Homeric scholarship "we have finally jettisoned that approach and have concluded that if Homer didn't write the *Odyssey*, it was written by someone of the same name who lived about the same time."

III. CONCLUSION

In a recent important work twenty-five historians who are professing Christian believers endeavor to show how their faith and their scholarship

²⁰ H. Palmer, *The Logic of Gospel Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1968) 172–173, 185, 188, 190, 191, 224. Cf. (even if one has difficulty with their specific papyrological argument) C. P. Thiede and M. d'Ancona, *The Jesus Papyrus* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996) esp. 133–148.

²¹ This includes legal texts; see J. W. Montgomery, *Law and Gospel* (new ed.; Edmonton: Canadian Institute, 1995) 23–26.

interact.²² Nicole Lemaitre, in discussing “Vérité historique et vérité de foi,” notes that it is no longer possible for the intellectual simply to split the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. But how, then, in the moving words of another contributor, Alain Cabantous, to find “cette éternité de Dieu sur notre chemin d’Emmaüs, qui offre à chacun, s’il le désire, un sens pour sa vie”? The answer, surely, is to treat the Biblical materials with utmost historical seriousness—and that necessitates, we have tried to demonstrate here, both an openness to miracle and an opposition to unscholarly styles of criticism as the historian confronts God’s self-proclaimed written revelation.

²² *L'historien et la foi* (ed. J. Delumeau; Paris: Fayard, 1996). Contributors include such noted historians as Pierre Chaunu, Marc Lienhard, Francis Rapp and Bernard Vogler. I have discussed the faith of several of these scholars in “The Famous in France: Why They Believe,” *New Oxford Review* 61/8 (October, 1994) 23–25.