
Biblical Higher Criticism

An extended review of BIBLICAL HIGHER CRITICISM AND THE DEFENSE OF INFALLIBILISM IN 19TH CENTURY BRITAIN, by Nigel M de S Cameron, which is Vol 33 of Texts and Studies in Religion, published by the Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston/Queenston, 1987. It is available from Rutherford House, Edinburgh, at £29.

This book is part of the author's doctoral dissertation at New College, Edinburgh in which he provides a reasonably detailed historical account of the rise of critical theories in Britain which 'gradually overwhelmed the Conservative consensus in Britain' (p 1). Over the past 100 years or more, Protestant theology has endeavoured to respond in various ways to the conclusions and methodology of this criticism. Nigel Cameron's primary interest here lies:

'in the cleavage which first won over British scholarship to Criticism, and in the cleavage that divided the early Critics from their Conservative colleagues' (p 2). From the ESSAYS AND REVIEWS (1860) debate until the late 1880s, British Old Testament scholars were at first divided until the Critics 'effectively over-ran' (p 3) the Conservatives — a title incidentally which included in this early period Evangelicals, Tractarians and traditionalists.

The Prologue (pp 7-17) concentrates on Spinoza (1632—77) whose discussion of Scripture and methodology was one of the precursors of nineteenth-century Criticism. Chapter 2 describes the '**nineteenth-century ferment**' (pp 18-74). William Van Mildert's Bampton lectures for 1814 are 'largely expressive of the British theological consensus at the opening of the nineteenth-century' (p 28). He was a competent scholar who used his linguistic and historical skills in Old Testament study yet with a reverence befitting the study of the sacred Word of God.

While Criticism had won the day on the Continent by 1860, the victory was delayed in Britain for various reasons. Cultural isolation, a dislike of German thought and, chiefly, the New Testament Studies of the Cambridge School (Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort) 'succeeded in insulating British thought almost completely from the influence of the radical scholarship which dominated the Continental debate' (p 40). The Cambridge School used a critical methodology yet came to relatively conservative conclusions. Sadly, however, its:

'combination of the Critical method and conservative conclusions was in the long term all to the benefit of Criticism. Criticism was made to appear respectable and benign, as not tending to overthrow the fundamentals of Christian belief, but as working rather to establish them on a footing which none could deny. This in turn gave Old Testament Critics an increasing credibility in the minds of pious but open-minded thinkers...' (idem).

Harbingers of Old Testament Criticism included S T Coleridge, Thomas Arnold and R D Hampden (Bampton lecturer in 1832). The influence of the new historiography was also significant. It is, however, the ESSAYS AND REVIEWS volume of 1860 which is generally regarded 'as firing the opening salvo in the final

assault upon the traditional conception of Scripture' (p 57).

Jowett's essay in this volume dealt with the interpretation of Scripture and its influence and implications were profound. Protests, legal action and major replies by people like Burgon, Wilberforce, Thomson and Ellicott followed. But the tide turned in favour of the Critics. T & T Clark's Foreign Theological Library publishing was aimed at supporting the Conservative position yet in fact it:

'helped to spread criticism, both because many readers made their first acquaintance with it in these repudiations of it, and...because of the evident weakness of some, at least, of their arguments...' (pp 65-66).

There was also the influence of the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA* with the critical contributions, for example, of William Robertson Smith. In addition, new appointments to colleges included Critics like Archibald Duff (1877, Airedale Congregational College) and S R Driver (1882, Chair of Hebrew at Oxford) who helped to consolidate then to promote the Critical advance. By 1901, George Adam Smith could write: 'Modern criticism has won its war against the traditional theories' (p 75).

In chapter 3, Cameron describes some important **characteristics of the critical method of interpretation** in this period (pp 75-114). Basic characteristics of the historical critical method included the claim of 'disinterested study' and the argument that Holy Scripture was 'like any other book'. The 'assured results' of Criticism are referred to briefly (pp 86-91) before looking at the implications of Criticism. These implications for theology were immense, as also for preaching. Attempts were made by Critics like Cheyne and Adam Smith to apply critical principles to the devotional and homiletical use of the Bible. This third chapter closes with a preliminary examination of the controversy between Critics and Conservatives as the Critics themselves represented it.

I was particularly interested in chapter 4 which outlines the **Conservative response** to the critical thought of the later nineteenth-century:

'...they saw their task', the author affirms, 'as not simply the preservation of a particular view of the Bible...more even than that was at issue, because the Bible lay at the heart of Christianity' (p 116).

Their lines of defence as Conservatives were various. They insisted on the right to differ from the Critics whilst maintaining their own scholarly integrity. E H Dewar is representative of many Conservative scholars when he maintains:

'The critical contest is not, as is often assumed, between "scholars"...and unlearned "traditionalists" who blindly cling to the beliefs of the past...; but between scholars who have adopted the evolutionary theory of the origin of the Old Testament, and equally learned biblical scholars who refuse to accept...this "Higher Criticism".'

Conservatives attacked, too, the mystique of 'philology' and the 'all scholars agree' approach of the Critics. They also insisted that in defending the supernatural origin and nature of the Bible that they were:

'defending the prime, established fact of Christian theology against theories whose origins and whose great exponents were deeply involved with "rationalism" and anti-Christian bids' (p 122).

Bishop Ryle was one who cautioned:

'Let us not give up the great principle of plenary verbal inspiration because of apparent difficulties... We may rest assured that the difficulties which beset any other theory of inspiration are tenfold greater than any which beset our own' (idem).

In their assault on Criticism, the Conservatives stressed the inappropriate nature of the Critical starting-point as well as the devastating implications of Critical conclusions for the Bible and Christianity. The Conservatives also exposed the Critics own presuppositions, such as an anti-supernatural bias. The point of departure, however, was inspiration:

'If, for the Critics, the most evident fact about the Bible was that it was a book to be studied like any other, for the Conservatives it was that it "presents such striking differences from any book that the world has ever seen"...it was inspired; and for that reason, from the Conservative standpoint, "the authorship of the Bible, and the mode of its production, constitute the great religious question of our day"' (pp 135-6).

Chapter 5 (pp 157-178) is entitled 'Christus Comprobator'; **the appeal to Christ**. In the debate about the Old Testament, most Conservatives appealed to Christ's attitude towards the Old Testament as determinative and infallible. Their basic arguments were: Jesus Christ is infallible in his teaching, he expressed his belief in the traditional ascriptions of authorship of the Old Testament books as well as in the historicity of the Old Testament narratives. In these areas, at least, therefore, the Critical theories were mistaken. But the Critics tried to weaken this powerful argument by claiming our Lord 'accommodated' himself to his hearers; furthermore, they used the now famous 'kenosis' theory. Their conclusion was that Jesus' knowledge was limited and that his knowledge on critical questions was natural, not spiritual. Conservatives rightly insisted that the Critics' use of 'kenosis' was incorrect and opportunist. Unfortunately, as Cameron indicates:

'The failure of the Critics to answer, or indeed feel the weight of, these arguments, and the disappearance of the Christus Comprobator argument from the general theological scene, testify to its dependence on a consensus with respect to the New Testament which was already breaking up' (p 178).

Chapter 6 (pp 179-203) provides a survey of **biblical commentaries** with an exposure of some assumptions about the Bible itself which underlie both Conservative and Critical commentaries of the period.

For myself, chapter 7 was both absorbing and frightening as Nigel Cameron concentrates on an '**evangelical critic**'. William Robertson Smith, who 'as the most creative and significant Critical scholar' in nineteenth-century Britain claimed to adhere to the Westminster Confession of Faith as embraced by his Free Church of Scotland. Smith's career, legal action taken by the Free Church against Smith and his 'modern' views as well as Smith's responses are all carefully detailed in this chapter. Robertson Smith's view of Scripture is contrasted clearly with that of his illustrious teacher, James Bannerman. Sadly, Smith felt there was no alternative to Criticism and that the traditional orthodox view of Scripture was inadequate. Using such arguments as the freedom of scholarship, criticism arising from the text of

Scripture itself, the distinction between theological and literary questions, the disjunction between the personal and the propositional in revelation and faith, etc.. Smith moved significantly away from the orthodox position. In words which are remarkably relevant to our contemporary situation, Cameron concludes:

‘What is clear is that Robertson Smith succeeded in maintaining the “infallibility” of Scripture only by attenuating its sense to such a degree as to empty it of the distinctive meaning with which the theological tradition in which he stood has customarily associated it...’ (p 262).

The Conclusion: An Anatomy of Controversy (pp 263-289) provides a brief analysis of the fundamental positions taken up by Critics and Conservatives with regard to Scripture. The major difference, of course, was methodological. **‘They were divided in their starting-point and their method of approach to Biblical Study...’** (p 273). In several parts of the books, the author demonstrates that:

‘the victorious Critics had failed adequately to consider the nature of the method they were putting in the stead of the traditional and the implications with which it was laden. The resurgence in the mid-twentieth century of the lineal descendants of Burgon, Mansel, Ellicott...raises once again the question’ (p 288) of methodology.

This book is well-researched but technical and makes many demands on the reader. Two appendices on Interpreting Genesis in the light of Science and Thomas Kuhn and The Structure of Scientific Révolutions as well as an extensive bibliography add to the value of the book. Unfortunately, it is expensive! However, the book is relevant and useful for we are contending for the principles of our forefathers and here are important lessons and warnings for us all.

Eryl Davies

Historically, the Church has accepted its biblical mandate to defend the apostolic truth structures of Scripture (Acts 20:27-31). Yet now, even from within there are voices present that cast shadows of relativism and pluralism across doctrinal affirmations.

The Church was intended to disassociate itself from anyone not holding to key apostolic affirmations which protect the purity of its teaching. In particular, any dilution of the gospel due to legal or sacramental necessities (Gal 1, Phil 3) or any distortion of the truth about Christ Himself was to be eliminated (3 John). The major departures today have been in these two arenas.

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