

BOOK REVIEWS

JAMES BARR AND THE BIBLE - CRITIQUE OF A

NEW LIBERALISM

by Dr Paul Wells.

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This is the book to which Dr Wells referred in his article entitled 'Perspectives on Barr's Theology' in issue No.4 of this journal, and that article should have created an eager anticipation for this book. If that was your response to what Dr Wells wrote last year, then, to say the least, this book will not disappoint you. It will however, make demands of every reader. This is only to be expected from what is part of a doctoral research programme but careful attentiveness will be more than repaid.

The importance of this book arises from two facts. First, and most obviously, it is a book about the Bible i.e. its nature, status and meaning. The cruciality of Scripture in preserving and promoting genuine Christianity in every age needs no emphasising in this journal, and Dr Wells is fully aware of this. Secondly, and this is the distinctiveness of this book about Scripture, the subject is dealt with in a truly contemporary setting i.e. in terms of the writings of a living and influential theologian. Professor Barr has for thirty years given attention to the interpretation of the Bible and its status. As a result Dr Wells has supplied us with a theological study on the current doctrine(s) about Holy Scripture, complete with bibliographies.

Professor Barr has become known again among evangelicals for his attempted demolition job on 'Fundamentalism' (cf. the review of his book by the Editor in issue No.2 of this journal). What is not as widely known about him, however, is that in his various writings over the years Barr has criticised other approaches to the Bible. In fact, he has subjected the two major "Biblical" theological movements of the century viz. Neo-Orthodoxy and the Biblical Theology Movement (BTM hereafter) to lengthy and scholarly criti-

cism. Dr Wells presents this material.

The basis of Barr's critique of both Neo-Orthodoxy and the BTM is one and the same as his charge against 'Fundamentalism'. It is his objection to any a priori dogmatic assumption about the nature and status of the Bible being made, and what these three approaches to the Bible do have in common, in spite of the important differences between them, is that they regard the Bible as related to divine revelation. This is anathema to Barr as he regards this association as not only not borne out by exegetical study, but as being the means by which true exegesis is prevented and Scripture not allowed to "speak freely".

BARR and NEO-ORTHODOXY

Barr's evaluation of Barth and J.K.S.Reid is presented in terms of a critique of the Christological analogy. Briefly this refers to the claim that the union between the divine and human natures in the person of Christ provides us with a way of combining a regard for the "revelational" aspect or function of the Bible with a recognition of its limitations and even fallibility of its human recording. Barr rejects this on the ground that any tie-up with revelation depreciates the human element in Scripture, and prevents it from being fully regarded. Indeed Barr claims that there is only one element in Scripture viz. the human, and authority is conveyed through that. He therefore suggests a different analogy for our thinking regarding Scripture:

"the true analogy for the Scripture as the Word of God is not the unity of God and Man in the incarnation; it is the relation of the Spirit of God to the people of God" (p39)

So Barr's analogy is pneumatological-ecclesiological i.e. the Bible in the Church where the Spirit dwells and is active. This has far reaching consequences as Dr Wells indicates.

BARR and THE B.T.M. and 'FUNDAMENTALISM'

Wells gives the major part of his second chapter to a presentation of Barr's negative critique of the BTM but he also includes a reference to his "vigorous polemic" on

'Fundamentalism'. While Barr dislikes the way in which both these approaches appeal to the authority and unity of the Bible as if that were incontrovertible, he unleashes broadsides against both in terms of their hermeneutical methods. Wells summarises Barr's method as follows:

"Firstly, as an implication of the human character of the Bible, a sustained effort is made to align methods of interpretation of this text with those used presently in parallel disciplines. Biblical semantics must learn from modern linguistics; historical research must be practised without according any special privileges to this text. There is an effort here to put biblical research back in contact with other fields of learning. Secondly, there is an equally sustained effort to maintain the freedom of these methods against the entry of considerations of normativity which hamper their efficacy.(!)" (p44)

There is a very illuminating discussion here of the features of the BTM and its links with Neo-Orthodoxy supported by some important and accessible bibliographical references in the footnotes. Barr's critique is based on "the illusion of the distinctiveness of biblical language", "the distinction between Hebrew and Greek thought as used in modern Biblical theology", "the correlation of language and thought patterns", and "the problem of history" i.e. Heilsgeschichte.

With regard to 'Fundamentalism' Barr regards it as a "tradition dominated religion" in spite of all its claims and protestations to the contrary. This is what Barr has argued in 'FUNDAMENTALISM' and Wells' discussion at this point is also a comment on that book. Barr claims that a prior commitment to inerrancy is the fundamentalist's tradition. This belief is the authority not the Bible. The Bible is fitted in to the tradition by whatever method of interpretation yields the desired result. (We do well to examine our interpretation in the light of this charge.) Certainty is therefore not grounded on the Bible much less does it arise out of the Bible. Wells' introduction and use of the doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit at this point is crucial. This doctrine needs to be understood and re-habilitated today.

The stage is now set for a presentation of Barr's own treatment of Scripture. This appears in the two chapters entitled "Analysis of the Present Status of the Bible", and "Reconstruction: James Barr's Rational View of the Status of the Bible". In the first of these chapters Barr is still depicted in inter-action with the three theological approaches mentioned over their views of the Bible's authority. His attack is directed at the Revelation-Scripture associations of these views. He claims these links are assumed not proven exegetically and not even explained theologically i.e. the relation between the divine and the human especially in terms of words. For Barr, Scripture's authority is relational and hierarchical i.e. "it relates the various sources of authority to each other and orders them in their relation to us", and it is functional i.e. in terms of what impresses the reader. Barr proposes a distinction between "hard" and "soft" views of authority. A hard view regards the Bible as authoritative and generally applicable before interpretation; a soft view withholds such a recognition until such a sense is conveyed after interpretation to a reader.

From pages 159-204 Wells presents Barr's views on a number of important subjects germane to the discussion. This section is illuminating and forceful. Here Barr's views on revelation, personal and propositional; verbal inspiration; the autographs, inerrancy, the unity of the Bible and its theology are all considered, discussed and commented on. Wells sums up Barr's basic approach as follows:

"The tendency in Barr's critique is to detach the human elements of the religious tradition from the continuity with revelation and seek to explain their significance apart from a revelational model." (p159)

This quote supplies the key to the contents of the second of the chapters referred to above where Barr's views of the nature and status of the Bible are presented positively. The cardinal principle is that the Bible is human. How then can the uniqueness of the Bible be explained in a rational way in a secular anti-authoritarian world? Barr's answer is in terms of Tradition - multiplex, developing, continuing; behind, in and beyond Scripture in the Church in each age. This is where his pneumatological-

ecclesiological analogy comes in. (It is also where the ecumenical pre-occupation with Tradition and traditions vis-a-vis sola scripture looms up!)

A good introduction to this chapter is found in Dr Wells' article already referred to. In essence, Barr's position is twofold. First, the Bible points to a historical process of fully human reflection on knowledge about God already possessed and it is not even a witness to a revelation of God in events in time-space history that he might be known, let alone a revelation of God in word as well as deed for the same purpose. This process went on behind the Bible, in and between each Testament, and it goes on beyond the Bible in the Church of succeeding ages. This process of consideration and expression takes place in the context and under the influence of factors of general knowledge existing at any given time. It is fully human. Secondly, the Bible is also a classic example of how faith in the God of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth may (not should) express itself at any time. For the process of reflection goes on in a similar way outside the Bible still. Barr writes in words which could come from a Roman Catholic or an Orthodox -

"The relation of the biblical writers and traditionists to God through the Spirit is thus not basically other than that of the church today in its listening to God." (p233 - underlining mine)

Among the people of God this process is somehow - Barr leaves it quite vague - guided by the Spirit. What can safeguard this against the Roman claim for the development of dogma?

While Wells attributes to Barr as much as possible in terms of a genuine desire to let the Bible speak freely, he does not hesitate to bring some severe criticisms against his position. In conclusion he presents his own exposition of the divine-human inter-relationship in the Bible, and this strong statement is worthy of being meditated on. The subtitle of this book "Critique of a New Liberalism" indicates the nature of Barr's position. Omitting the divine one cannot end anywhere else.

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G.W.WENHAM, THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS, Hodder and Stoughton

R.K.Harrison, LEVITICUS, Inter Varsity Press

S.H.Kellogg, THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS, Klock and Klock

For a long time the preacher and student of the book of Leviticus has been severely handicapped by the paucity of commentary volumes. Bonar's somewhat fanciful work (published by the Banner of Truth) and Snaith's unsatisfactory New Century Bible commentary have stood almost alone. However, in the last year a radical change has taken place with the publication of the three volumes under review - the new edition of Kellogg's work (originally produced in 1899 as one of the 'Expositor's Bible' series and still in evidence second hand); the long-awaited book in the New International Commentary Old Testament series by Gordon Wenham and the Tyndale O.T. contribution by R.K.Harrison.

Of these, Wenham's excellent volume is undoubtedly the most useful and all-round contribution. Taking full advantage of much recent research and in an area familiar to him (Wenham did his Ph.D at Kings College, London on Deuteronomy), he leads his reader into the heart of the message of the book without resorting to the allegorical interpretations of many of the earlier commentators. Although he fudges the question of Authorship, arguing for a "mediating position" (c.p. Harrison below), there are several very valuable sections in the introduction, especially that entitled "Leviticus and the Christian" (p32-37). In this he seeks to get to grips with the message of the book for Christians, working out the hermeneutical principles involved. This is a distinct 'plus' since all too often in recent O.T. commentaries no attention is given to this and the student is left uncertain as to the relevance and meaning of the text for today. Especially in view of the freshness of his methodology a brief summary of his argument is probably useful. Wenham begins by observing the difficulties involved in the traditional threefold division of the O.T. legal material. However, he notes:

(1) that the basic principles of behaviour are essentially

the same in both testaments,

(2) that the theological setting (covenant) of the ethical imperatives is similar, viz. a) both covenants were arrangements of Divine grace; b) both involved law; c) both also involved blessing and curse.

(3) that the N.T. not only accepts the "moral law" of the O.T. but it reiterates the basic theology of that covenant of which law forms a part.

(4) that although less often quoted in the N.T. than "moral law", "civil" laws are treated as equally authoritative. Moreover, the distinction between these two types of laws is seen as artificial because of the arrangement of the material. Rather, he says, "instead of distinguishing between moral and civil laws, it would be better to say that some injunctions are broad and generally applicable to most societies, while others are more specific and directed at particular social problems of ancient Israel." These latter laws are not, however, irrelevant to us. He adds, "In this commentary the following position is assumed; the principles underlying the O.T. are valid and authoritative for the Christian, but the particular applications found in the O.T. may not be." (p35)

(5) The Decalogue, he says, "express pure principles in very broad terms without detailed application. They are not laws for judges to administer. Human judges could never enforce the tenth commandment, for example. Rather the ten commandments enshrine the religious and moral principles that should inspire and guide every aspect of Israel's national life." (p36)

(6) The Decalogue does not exhaust the moral and religious principles of the O.T., e.g. the protection of the weakest members of society is not included.

He concludes, therefore, "it is the underlying principles that should bind the Christian, not the specific applications found in the O.T. ... It is misguided to try to apply ... (a) ... law directly to our society."

As to "ceremonial" law, Wenham regards Leviticus as containing "theological models" for the N.T.'s self-under-

standing, "It was established by the same God who sent his Son to die for us; and in re-discovering the principles of O.T. worship written there, we may learn something of the way we should approach a holy God."(p37). This approach enables him to indulge in a restrained and controlled typology.

The present reviewer has been convinced for a number of years that a fresh approach is required to do justice to the legal material of the O.T. and that there is a need for a thorough Christian hermeneutic for all the O.T. laws. Wenham, developing the method of John Bright, (The authority of the O.T., Baker Book House) does seem to provide a methodology which, suitably refined, could well guide towards a resolution of these two needs.

In the main body of the commentary these principles are then applied. Each section of the text is dealt with as a whole (rather than verse by verse), an approach which helps considerably in distinguishing the wood from the trees. Usually each chapter closes with two sections which, a) relate the material to N.T. references and ideas and, b) draw out the Christian significance of the material. This is an excellent method and the book of Leviticus, so often closed to the Christian (except those interested in the sacrificial types) becomes the living word of God - so at least the reviewer found it.

By contrast, the contribution by Harrison is a little disappointing. As general editor of the NICOT he seems, properly, to have deliberately avoided apeing Wenham's work and attempted to provide a complimentary volume. Consequently, he has concentrated on verse by verse exegesis and there is a wealth of material which is supplementary to Wenham, especially on such items as food laws, leprosy, the identification of the various species of animals etc. which are all discussed in considerable detail. There is a somewhat overdone discussion of the hygienic character of the Levitical law which though interesting does not, to the reviewer's satisfaction, adequately explain its *raison d'etre*. Harrison seems uncertain of the hermeneutical principles a believer should bring to a study of Leviticus and consequently he tends only to observe obvious

(and often moralistic) analogies. As a result he tends to lose sight of the theology of the book and whole chapters tend to pass without any guidance for Christian application. There is, however, one feature which almost of itself warrants purchase of the book - a quite brilliant essay on Authorship and Date (p15-25) which comes down firmly for Mosaic authorship and provides the best short critique of liberal methodologies used in Pentateuchal study which the reviewer has ever seen.

Finally, we turn to Kellogg, a very useful contribution after the manner of the older conservative school. Taking a chapter or section at a time like Wenham, Kellogg insists (contra Bonar) that the first task of a commentator is to understand and explain what each passage meant in its original context. With balance and thoroughness he usually spends some considerable space involved in this pursuit. Allied to this is his rejection of allegorical interpretations - the "wax nose" method of interpreting which subjects the Bible to the imaginative whim of the expositor and provides no control. The effect of this is that while Kellogg indulges in extensive typology (much more so than Wenham), it is generally a legitimate deduction from the text, after the example of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Inevitably, the majority of the volume is occupied with the offerings (chapters 1-10, 16) the remainder of the book being dealt with rather superficially. Subject to the restraints of the traditional division of the O.T. legal material he tends to struggle for an application of the matter in the later chapters and in places is trivial and moralistic. Nevertheless, especially for the earlier chapters this book is a reliable and fruitful guide.

CONCLUSIONS

A review such as this has had to compare these three volumes and assess their relative value. However, while Wenham is undoubtedly the best, (unless one takes violent issue with his thoughtful and stimulating methodology) it is the reviewer's conviction that each of them have a distinct and complementary value. If you can only afford one, Wenham is your man. But if you are preaching, all three

together, with their differing strengths, provide almost everything needed for a faithful exposition of God's message to us in Leviticus.

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THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE DICTIONARY

Editors: J.D. Douglas and N. Hillier.

Publisher: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980

3 volumes, 1776 pages, £13.95 per vol.

It is no easy matter to be asked to review 1800 pages in half as many words, particularly when the book is a dictionary of more than 2000 separate articles. All one can hope to do in such a review is to give the reader some idea of the character of the work and to encourage him to examine it more carefully for himself.

THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE DICTIONARY is a revision of THE NEW BIBLE DICTIONARY which was published by IVF in 1962. The text, though updated and revised is largely unaltered: the present dictionary (as is suggested by its title) is really little more than an illustrated version of its predecessor. It is therefore in the realm of appearance and of presentation that the two works differ most. THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE DICTIONARY is printed on good quality paper and abounds in full colour illustrations. There are pictures of archaeological finds, of biblical flora and fauna and of biblical manuscripts. There are maps of the biblical world, plans of ancient cities and many helpful charts outlining biblical chronology or the family trees of Bible characters. It is strongly bound in three volumes and is therefore a lot easier to handle than its single volume predecessor. In short, it is a most attractive work and is a pleasure to use. THE NEW BIBLE DICTIONARY was a reference book which was taken down from the shelf, dusted off, and consulted when needed; THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE DICTIONARY, while remaining a valuable reference book, also invites one to browse through its pages.

But, for all the attraction of the illustrations, we are surely far more concerned with the content of the text.

The general tenor of the work is scholarly yet conservative. The article by J C Whitcomb on the book of Daniel, (largely unchanged from 1962) includes an excellent defence of the book's authenticity. In days when the old liberal views concerning the date and authorship of Daniel are being embraced by 'evangelical' theologians the uncompromising article by Dr Whitcomb is heartening and welcome. There are many other excellent articles, both old and new. As an example of the latter I can recommend R J Bauckham's article on Eschatology which replaced the earlier article by G E Ladd.

One question that might be asked concerning THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE DICTIONARY is whether the revision of the 1962 text and the replacement articles which appear in the present work represent a theological shift, and if so, in which direction? In my opinion there is some evidence of a theological shift. It is a shift away from biblical study which is pursued within the framework of a pre-established systematic theology. There is a greater desire to let each portion of Scripture speak in its own terms.

To give just one example of this: One of the main revisions in Meredith Kline's article on The Ten Commandments is the deleting of all references to the 'covenant of grace'. Kline is still just as insistent that the ten commandments are part of a covenant document by which God binds himself to his people and his people to him. Kline still believes that this covenant is founded in God's redeeming grace shown in bringing Israel out of Egypt. But he abandons the term 'covenant of grace' because this originated in a particular systematic conception of God's dispensational dealings with his people. This pre-conceived systematic notion of one, perfectly uniform, covenant of grace in Old Testament and New Testament is not particularly helpful in understanding the nature of the Sinaitic covenant. Consequently, the term 'covenant of grace' and its corresponding systematic are dropped in Kline's present article on the Ten Commandments.

The same movement away from the old 'Covenant Theology' approach to the Old Testament can be seen in the replacement of J A Motyer's article on Baptism with one by J Dunn

and the replacement of John Murray's article on Covenant with one by F C Fensham.

Some might fear that this tendency, this movement away from the interpretation of Scripture within the framework of the traditional Reformed systematic, is the first step upon the slippery slope to apostasy. This is a view which I cannot share. We are going through a time when the shape of our traditional Evangelical Theology is being vigorously re-examined and questioned. This, in itself, is no bad thing. Our desire, surely, is not simply to cling to a traditional understanding of the Bible - even if that is an evangelical tradition - but to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Scriptures. Our theology, then, cannot be static, it needs to develop and to suffer reformation that it may become more thoroughly biblical. THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE DICTIONARY may challenge some of our cherished traditional interpretations but it may also prove a most useful tool, by the aid of which we may develop a more profoundly biblical theology. Any book which thus encourages us to a more careful and detailed study of the Scriptures is to be welcomed.

Nevertheless, THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE DICTIONARY is not beyond criticism. For one thing, there is a reluctance to affirm that the Bible teaches anything definite concerning the origin of man. Whether one consults the article on Adam or that on Genesis, one finds the same verdict as that expressed by J A Thompson in his article on Creation when he writes, "The Bible is asserting that, however life came into being, God lay behind the process", it "neither affirms or denies the theory of evolution." This may be one view of the matter but it is by no means the only view. Other evangelical views ought at least to have received some acknowledgement.

More generally, the authors of this work have often avoided advocating views which would be thought beyond the pale in the world of non-evangelical biblical scholarship. In many places this has resulted in less than a militant defence of the distinctively evangelical view of the Scriptures.