

# *The Historical Approach to the Bible As Literature In College Teaching*

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**A**SSUMING that college students through their academic courses will be introduced to the sweep of human history and will become acquainted with literature, it is our thesis that biblical literature will be best understood through acquaintance with the actual human situations out of which it arose. Just as good literature reflects the historical situation out of which it comes so does acquaintance with the historical situation bring a deeper appreciation of the literature of any period.

Early in this century, Richard G. Moulton, at that time Professor of Literature in English in the University of Chicago, published his *Literary Study of the Bible*. He emphasized as of first importance the literary approach to the Bible, suggesting that mistaken historical judgments of the Bible had been formed for lack of preliminary literary analysis of the text.<sup>1</sup> I do not know to what extent his claim for the superiority of the literary approach to the Bible has been challenged. I assume that many in his day took issue with him. It is not my intention here to challenge Professor Moulton's position, but rather to present the need for the historical approach to the Bible as the means to a greater appreciation of it as literature.

Our first task is to make clear what is meant by the historical approach to the Bible. Let us begin by saying it does not mean approaching the Bible as history. Much is being said these days in support

of such an approach. With new archaeological studies and the deciphering of ancient records, many appear to be on the verge of verifying the Bible as history. Superficial attention to recent books and articles on the Bible has given unwarranted claim to the Bible as history. Titles of books and articles are sometimes misleading.

In referring to the author of Luke and Acts as *The First Christian Historian*, Martin Dibelius says that Luke was not primarily a historian but a preacher. "The whole work," so Dibelius writes, "aims not so much at letting the readers know what really happened as at helping them to understand what all this means."<sup>2</sup> Yet the title of his article would lead one to think of the author of Luke and Acts as a historian.

The work of Werner Keller, *The Bible as History*, carries this connotation in its title. However, upon reading Keller's book one does not find support for this thesis. In his preface he makes the following statement,

The opinion has been and still is widely held that the Bible is nothing but the story of man's salvation, a guarantee of the validity of their faith for Christians everywhere. At the same time it is a book about things that actually happened. Admittedly, in this sense it has limitations in that the Jewish people wrote their history in the light of their relationship to Yahweh which meant writing it from the point of view of their own guilt and expiation. Nevertheless, the events themselves are historical facts and have been recorded with an accuracy that is nothing less than startling<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Moulton, Richard G., *The Literary Study of the Bible*, Boston, D.C. Heath and Co., 1908, pp. ix-x (preface).

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<sup>2</sup> Dibelius, Martin, "The First Christian Historian," *Religion In Life*, Volume XXV. No. 2, Spring 1956, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, Werner, *The Bible as History*, New York, William Morrow, 1956, (Introduction) pp. xxiii-xxiv.

Noted scholars such as William F. Albright and Nelson Glueck have been cited in support of considering the Bible as history. In reading Albright's recently revised *From the Stone Age to Christianity* and Glueck's *Rivers in the Desert*, one finds that while they point out the historical significance of the Bible, they cannot be quoted directly in support of the Bible as history.

The historical approach to the Bible does not imply that the Bible is history. It implies rather that the Bible is a literary product of an historical people. The Bible certainly reflects a series of historical events. Certainly within both the Old and New Testaments there are portions of literature that present these events in somewhat of a chronological order. Other portions, however, make no pretence at being history nor at relating actual events in order of time. These portions have meaning only as they are placed in their historic settings and interpreted in the light of the human situations out of which they arose. Outstanding examples of this are the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Only as the words of the prophets are put in their proper historic setting do they take on their intended meaning.

The best treatment I have found of the historical approach to the Bible is by the late Clarence Tucker Graig in his book, *The Beginning of Christianity*. His introductory chapter presents very clearly the thesis of this paper. It is the contention that "only a historical approach can set forth the real genius of Christianity."<sup>4</sup>

A close parallel to that of Craig is what Harold Larrabee in his book, *Reliable Knowledge*, points out as the "Historical Pattern." As I understand Craig and Larrabee, they are very much in agreement as to the steps in the historical approach. Since Larrabee states them more precisely, I shall here give

his summary of the Historical pattern. I quote only the italicized portion of Larrabee's summary:

The historical pattern, when applied to any variety of subject-matter, may take the form of hypotheses which call for testing on three distinguishable but overlapping planes. They concern man's effort to achieve: (1) The establishing of the record of past occurrences in their actual order in time and space . . . (2) The establishing of the meanings and values of past occurrences for the people of their historical periods. . . (3) The establishing of tentative meanings and values of past occurrences, as established in (1) and (2), for ourselves and future humankind.<sup>5</sup>

Here we have three steps in the historical approach to the Bible: first is the event of history, second is the meaning given that event by those experiencing it and third is our assimilation of it. In summarizing the purpose of his book Craig closely parallels these three steps. In stating his purpose, he says:

I shall seek to trace the course of events according to the soundest historical criticism of our sources of information. But we can not stop here. We shall go on to try to understand *what these events meant* to the early Christians themselves. Their interpretations are a vital part of the events which we are investigating. Whether a reader accepts those interpretations is another matter. There are some for whom "Christian truth" is nothing but ancient superstition. There are others who find much of value in the story of Christian beginnings though they reject its central claim. These seek to employ elements from the Christian tradition in a new synthesis. The historian does not propose to control the attitude which the reader will take toward his story. For myself I believe that the most eloquent apologetic for Christian faith is its clear statement. This story is told that we may know it from the inside<sup>6</sup>

A further examination of Craig's his-

<sup>4</sup> Craig, Clarence Tucker, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Nashville Abingdon Press, 1943, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Larrabee, Harold A., *Reliable Knowledge*, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 1945, pp. 531-532.

<sup>6</sup> Craig, Clarence Tucker, *The Beginnings of Christianity*.

torical approach will help us to see what he means by the term, "inside."

There is always a difference between history "seen from the inside" and history "seen from the outside." There is a difference between history which we observe as a spectator and "Our History." "Our History" always includes what the events mean to us. The same events may not mean the same things to another who is an outsider. His interpretation may give a quite different view of the event, the view of one who did not share the same experience. My own interpretation contains bias, but it does include what the experience meant to the man who had it. It is the event interpreted from the "inside."<sup>7</sup>

A good example of what we mean by the event interpreted from the "inside" is the word of Isaiah at the time of the Assyrian threat to Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah. There are three passages in the Bible, one in II Kings 18:13-19:37, another in II Chronicles 32:1-23 and a third in Isaiah 36:1-37:38, which depict the invasion of Judah by Senacharib's armies. The first and third are almost identical, indicating that one is the copy of the other. The Chronicles account is shorter and presents a later and different interpretation than that of the other two. This event has been further verified by translations of the records left by Senacharib. Here we have an account from the outside which throws added light on the historic event and also gives an interpretation from another point of human experience. The passages in II Kings and Isaiah are likely nearer to the firsthand accounts of these events. Isaiah was involved in the historic situation and his interpretation of the event is found in his response to the messengers sent to him by King Hezekiah. The passage in Chronicles is a much later interpretation of the event looked back upon by a people who saw it from a later perspective. Senacharib's records are from one who also was involved but from a different point of view and interest than that of Isaiah.

The historical approach enables one to get at this inside interpretation. The whole problem of biblical interpretation hinges on this point. I am greatly indebted to my Old Testament Professor, the late Dr. Lindsey B. Longacre, who for some years held the Chair in Old Testament at The Iliff School of Theology. He impressed upon his students the need for finding what the Bible had to say as over against reading our own ideas into the Bible. Here again, in presenting the historical approach to the Bible, Craig has this statement to make, "No matter how timeless the books of the Bible may be in their essential message, each author wrote with the needs of a definite group of people in the first century in mind. Only as we make the sincere endeavor to put ourselves in their place can we discover what the author was trying to say."<sup>8</sup>

We are aware that Craig's reference here to "The books of the Bible" is to the New Testament and was, therefore, in its origin, addressed to the first century man. Biblical literature as a whole covers a much larger era of time and therefore a much wider range of human events.

Going on with this same emphasis, Craig says,

There has been much study of the Bible which made no such attempt to discover the meaning of the original author. On the assumption that these books were intended for our spiritual guidance, they have been approached with the objective of discovering a divine message to the reader of today. All kinds of arbitrary devices have been conceived to discover applications to contemporary experience. The number of the Beast in Revelation, 666, has been identified with the enemy of the moment; or subtle references to current events are found in verses where no one had previously suspected such a meaning. This type of Bible study may appear very exciting to the uninitiated who have no knowledge of the long history of that kind of misuse of the Bible. It seems

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

very thrilling to be told how biblical writers anticipated the morning headlines until we stop to realize that, if it were true, their words would have been meaningless to the original readers and to every previous generation.<sup>9</sup>

and, one might add, therefore lost, for unless it was relevant it never would have been preserved. To detect this relevance of the Bible message for its time and to realize its significance for the people of its day is the first step in understanding biblical literature. Otherwise the Bible becomes the sounding board for misguided religious fanatics who use it in support of their own ideas.

This "modernizing misuse of the Bible" as Craig terms it is not confined to religious fanatics. We find it not only among scientists, chronologists, psychologists, to mention only a few, but many religious scholars are also guilty of this practice. My plea here is for scholars who are willing to take the Bible for what it says. Good examples of the tendency to read ideas into the Bible are commonly found among college students. Take, for instance, the chronological problem often imposed by many into the creation story. Modern readers who accept the geological periods in the earth's development and at the same time hold a broad interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis say that the six days of creation really represented six great geological periods. But why impose the results of rather recent geological studies onto the author of one of the biblical accounts of creation? The biblical author obviously had a vital concern for the Sabbath, but what did he know or, far less, care about geological periods? Whenever anyone attempts to read back into the Bible ideas and theories that are of more recent origin, he is failing to be honest with the Bible.

As Craig says, and as many of us know,

One reason it has been difficult to shake off this modernizing misuse of

the Bible is that the first Christians themselves inherited the allegorical method of interpretation of scripture in their own reading of the Old Testament. Paul insisted, for instance, that when God commanded "you shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn" (I Cor. 9:9) it was not because he was concerned with oxen. This meant that preachers of the Gospel had a right to be supported in their work. In other words when a literal meaning of a passage did not give a satisfactory significance, another "spiritual" meaning was to be found behind it through the interpreter's ingenuity.<sup>10</sup>

This reading new meaning into old statements was not limited to the first Christians. It has been practiced so consistently that it is well nigh impossible to shake it off. Craig says of this allegorical interpretation, that, "It is the substitution of arbitrary fancy for the scientific investigation of fact. It makes of the Bible a wax nose which may be twisted at the whim of the interpreter. It does not 'read out' the meaning of a passage, but 'reads into' it what we desire to find."<sup>11</sup>

Craig goes on to say, however, "There are some passages which were originally composed as allegories. The author intended his words to be taken as metaphors. It is part of the scientific study of any document to discover when the author had an allegorical intention. In that case, to take words literally is to misinterpret the author. But the contrast should be plain between using objective literary disciplines to discover just what an author was endeavoring to say, and permitting subjective fancy to determine what we get from reading a book."<sup>12</sup>

The historical approach to the Bible will keep one ever alert to finding the historical situation out of which it arose. When a student of history sees that the same great periods of classical civilization fit into the course of biblical life

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

he begins to relate the biblical account to his total learning.

The effect of new archaeological discoveries are of historical significance but not as revolutionary as many would lead us to think. Their chief contribution is their verification of the historic events. As they help to make more clear the historic events they also shed light upon the human situations confronting biblical man. As they do this the meaning of the events related in the biblical expressions are also enriched. The interpretation of the event is the important element in biblical literature. Here we have expressed in literature the religious interpretation of life situations. It is in this literature that we find the basic concepts and beliefs of the people of Bible times. These are our primary interests in biblical study in college teaching.

It is at this point that the Bible as literature really comes into its own right. When students of literature recognize the variety of literary forms and the richness of their quality, they begin to put a new evaluation upon the Bible and their appreciation and use of it relates to their total pattern of academic pursuit.

Much of the Bible literature is highly imaginative, more akin to poetry than to prose. Richard G. Moulton did a monumental work in his book previously cited, **The Literary Study of the Bible.**

His acquaintance with literature enabled him to detect and point out the various forms of literature in the Bible. This certainly is necessary in the teaching of the Bible in college. Here again, the students' background in literature will be a great help in his appreciation of biblical literature.

In conclusion, let us restate that the purpose of this paper is to show the importance of the historical approach to the Bible as literature in college teaching. The historical approach to the Bible here presented in its three steps actually includes the Bible as literature in the second step of the historical approach. For once having established as nearly as possible the historical situation, one approaches the biblical material not primarily as history but rather as the interpretation of historical situations in terms of their religious meanings to those experiencing them. This views the biblical literature as the product of the people of its time to be understood within the structure of the thought patterns of those who first expressed it.

The third step, that of relating its meaning to our lives is not the primary purpose of Bible teaching in college. Biblical literature is more effective when left to speak for itself. As in story used to illustrate the point of the sermon, when it is well chosen it needs no further pointing out of the moral teaching, for this it carries in its own right.

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