



Reading the Bible in the American Context

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My reflection on the shape that reading the Bible has taken in this country, and how the “American experience” has shaped that reading, is hardly complete, and certainly not gospel truth. If we have learned anything from our historical studies in these last years, it is that what we know we know only in a limited way, and that whatever encounter with history we may enjoy comes to us as gift, not guaranteed through our methods. By way of a sampling from the history of American reading of the Bible—correction, from the history of American “scholarly” reading of the Bible—I will attempt to characterize what might be called the “typically American.” The characterization may limp, but if it furnishes some modicum of stimulus to another better equipped for access to reality, well and good.

INTRODUCTION

In 1968, Robert Grant of the University of Chicago wrote an essay on American New Testament study between the years 1926 and 1956. With his customary probity, Grant called his essay a “description of the American look, or of my own predispositions.” In it he heaved a sigh of relief over the passing of what he dubbed the *odium theologicum* or theological interpretation of the New Testament. Over against traces of “Lutheran-centered” theological concerns in the work of German New Testament scholars, or of the caution “that can only be called Anglican” in British work, Grant celebrated the multiplicity of outlooks and variety of results among American biblical scholars. These, wrote Grant, had not sold their birthright as critics or historians for “a pot of message.” Grant, however, saw one weakness attaching to American studies: the absence of work founded on classical philology or Graeco-Roman history, and which his father’s work and that of his teacher, A. D. Nock, served to illustrate. Deploring the denigration of von Ranke’s

“*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*” (“what actually happened”), Grant stated that we needn’t return to all the details of Ranke’s system or insist that what happened was more important than what was believed to have happened, “but without a firm grasp on knowable events and on the difference between what is knowable and what is not, we delude ourselves and therefore delude others.”¹

What appears to me to be distinctively “American” about Grant’s essay is his “predisposition” to celebrate American scholarship free of transatlantic influence, and to describe that scholarship in “historicistic” terms. Of his teacher, Arthur Darby Nock, Grant wrote: “Perhaps I should not treat my teacher...as an American; but more than half his life was spent in

this country and his influence, I believe, was greatest here.”²

No doubt, the question concerning the shape that the reading of the Bible has assumed on this continent may be answered in a hundred ways. But for this very reason, American “irritation” at dependence upon Europe and the urge to be free of it is as valid an explanation of that shape as any other. And, the irritation has ample precedent, not only within the political arena. It was of the American scholar that Emerson wrote:

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame.... We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds.³

SAMPLE ONE: THE ADVENT OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

The whole story of historical criticism’s entry into American biblical interpretation has yet to be told, but it is not true that it was introduced by persons without a care for the Christian community’s faith and confession: The Spinozas and Strausses would have to wait two to three generations before their doubles made appearance here. It was the “orthodox” who functioned as colporteurs for volumes by foreign critics. Earliest, if not first, among them was the New Haven preacher, later Hebrew professor at Andover, Moses Stuart. Roland Bainton once wrote of Stuart that he would order cases of books from abroad and nervously await their arrival, each day scanning the Yale Seminary weathervane to see if the wind was favorable for a ship’s arrival.⁴ In a volume devoted to criticism and defense of the Old Testament, Stuart wrote that the battle raging over the documentary hypothesis in Europe had at last reached America, for which reason none could decline the “contest.” Stuart challenged those who stood aloof from acquaintance with “German productions,” and fretted over such suspicious import, to “show their faith by their works.” “What I mean is,” wrote Stuart, “have we not a right to expect that they will enter into the battle which is going on, clad with the panoply of days of

¹Robert M. Grant, “American New Testament Study, 1926-1956,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968) 42-44, 48, 50.

²Ibid., 49.

³Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d.) 4.82-83.

⁴Roland Bainton, *Yale and the Ministry* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957) 92.

yore, which they regard as the only trusty armor?...It does not look well for them to shrink from the contest.”⁵

In Stuart’s time, Americans had already begun to excel in Palestine exploration. For example, the work of Edward Robinson of Union Seminary in New York, begun in 1838, was said to have surpassed all previous contributions to the geography of the Holy Land from the time of Eusebius and Jerome to the nineteenth century. Theologically Robinson was as conservative as the German “Neo-Lutheran” Ernst W. Hengstenberg, and among scholars like him concentration on archaeology would come to serve as surrogate for the new criticism. In one way or another Stuart and all his company would be viewed with jaundiced eye as contributing to

the timid, the imitative, and the tame—to the “irritation.”

Text studies, once termed the “lower criticism,” likewise gave American scholars access to territory imagined to be theologically neutral. But it was not long before such work made clear that the fall from favor of the *Textus Receptus* and of its offspring, which resulted from this work, totally eliminated neutrality from the pursuit of “lower criticism.” Bereft of manuscript support for a text to which it had once assigned the Spirit’s stimulus respecting the biblical author’s impulse to write, his use of the fitting word, and his supplying the fitting content, American Protestantism found itself embroiled in acrimonious debate regarding the nature of Scripture inspiration.

SAMPLE TWO: INERRANCY AND THE AMERICAN INVENTION

In midst of that debate, a device was invented which enabled the conservative scholar to cling to the dogma of verbal inspiration without denying the results of contemporary text criticism. The evidence is in favor of this device as an American invention, and the time of its birth can be all but pinpointed with the first issue of *The Presbyterian Review*, founded to celebrate the reunion of the two great factions of the Presbyterian Church, divided in 1837. Archibald Hodge of Princeton, and Benjamin B. Warfield of Western Theological Seminary at Allegheny, authored an article entitled “Inspiration,” and in it declared that inerrancy applied only to the original autographs of the Bible. Throughout the article, Hodge and Warfield repeatedly distinguished the “common text” from the “original autographic text,” of which no error could be asserted. They wrote:

In all the affirmations of Scripture of every kind, there is no more error in the words of the original autographs than in the thoughts they were chosen to express.⁶

Hodge and Warfield admitted to inconsistencies in the Bible, either with scientific fact, facts of history, or with other statements in the Bible itself. Such collisions, however, were to be expected in “imperfect copies of ancient writings.” Yet, candid inspection of “all the ascertained phenomena of the original text of Scripture” would indicate that the books were without error.

⁵Moses Stuart, *Critical History and Defence of the Old Testament Canon* (London: William Tegg and Co., 1849) 364-365.

⁶Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” *The Presbyterian Review* 5 (1881) 233.

Again, they insisted that

all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without any error, when the *ipsissima verba* of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense.⁷

This piece and the position it expressed was as “American” as the proverbial apple pie. On the one hand, it was realistic, realistic toward the results of current text criticism. The *Textus*

Receptus, with its English-speaking descendent, the Authorized or King James Version, was teetering toward oblivion. It was to this text—footing upon a group of eighth and ninth century Byzantine manuscripts, in process of being rendered inferior by the emergence of far older Egyptian or Alexandrian witnesses—that the Protestant “restitution” theologians of Europe had assigned verbal inerrancy. Before Hodge and Warfield had put pen to paper, Tischendorf had discovered Sinaiticus, a photographic reproduction of Alexandrinus was looming up, Tischendorf had published an edition of Bezae Claromontanus, and the Revised Version of the King James was making its way to the bookstalls. There was nothing for it but to concede the inevitable.

In evidence of this make-shift as “American,” let both European and other American conservatives be cited in evidence. Friedrich Adolf Philippi (1809-1882), member of the Hengstenberg circle, “Neo-Lutheran,” colleague of Theodosius Harnack at Dorpat, enemy of J. C. K. von Hofmann and his *Heilsgeschichte*, drew no distinction between the original autographs and their translations:

Divine Providence would...not have allowed that in the course of time these hallowed words should reach posterity in various versions, so that special revelation would again be required to recover the original, pure text. On the contrary,—God Himself has preserved verbal inspiration through the history of this text.⁸

And in this country, in response to the response to the Hodge-Warfield invention or its imitations, that is, that we do not possess the original text, the Gnesio-Lutheran Adolf Hoenecke wrote:

A really foolish objection! That one must seize upon such excuses tells much. Here inspiration is simply confused with the preservation of the inspired Scripture....We are certain of the divine preservation to such extent that God, despite human weakness and unfaithfulness in the careful preservation of the Scripture, will, in all the passages containing the doctrine of salvation, have kept pure the Scripture given by Him.⁹

But with all Hodge and Warfield’s realism or pragmatism in face of the “lower” criticism, in the last analysis their position was calculated to rapture the Bible from vulnerability. No error, they wrote, could be proved to have been

⁷Ibid., 238.

⁸Friedr. Ad. Philippi, *Kirchliche Glaubenslehre* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1883) 252-253.

⁹Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1909) 1.366. In 1891 a small group of Norwegian Lutherans met at Kenyon, Minnesota, to discuss the position to which Hodge and Warfield had given classical expression. One member of the group suggested that such a distinction between the original autographs and their extracts or copies rendered Scripture “a poor knife,” an obvious allusion to Hebrews 4:12. Cf. Roy A. Harrisville, “Interpreting the Scriptures,” *Striving For Ministry* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 132.

“aboriginal.” It was an attempt to eat one’s cake and have it too—to be free of Europe, that is, of

nineteenth-century Europe, with its liberalism and mediating theologies, but at the same time to concede what had begun in Europe and was gaining momentum here—the recovery of witnesses back of the biblical text. But with all their “irritation” and desire to get free, Hodge and Warfield still held fast to an idea which had its birth in the medieval, scholastic, pre-Reformation metaphysics of Europe, an idea that superimposed upon the Bible a notion of authority alien to it. That notion would some day come to a bad end, once the recovery of text witnesses indicated, if not a single provenance, then centers of manuscript production in surprising proximity to each other, thus a text as near the “aboriginals” as human science could manage, a text with differences, inconsistencies, discrepancies.

SAMPLE THREE: THE MALAISE OF THE SIXTIES

Not since the first decades of this century had so many Americans flocked to the universities of Europe as in the '40s. From south to north, from Basel with Cullmann and his alumneum to Marburg with Bultmann, the Heidelberg of von Rad and the Göttingen of Jeremias between, Americans could be seen pestering the *Akademisches Auslandsamt*, pleading with landladies for rooms, forced to reacquaintance with their legs or the velocipede, straining in auditoria and aulae for words once heard in high school German or over a summer at the Goethe Institut in “*Grundstufe Eins.*” E. L. Mascall’s “Hark, the herald angels sing: ‘Bultmann is the latest thing!’” was intended to bury, not to praise “Herr Luther’s lumpish son,” but could only concede the Marburger’s refusal to stay dead: “Hark, the herald angels sing: ‘Bultmann shot us on the wing!’”¹⁰

When the visitors returned home, they unleashed a flood of articles, essays, monographs, monograph series, journals, texts, and volumes on the intricacies and vagaries of the European discussion, and commenced projects, convocations, and seminars spanning the continent. In evidence of the quality of these projects, the reader is referred to James M. Robinson’s introductory essays to the series entitled *New Frontiers In Theology*, published by Harper and Row in the '60s. Those essays display a mastery of European biblical-theological scholarship unexcelled even by Europeans.

But a malaise had set in, particularly among the students of Bultmann. The old master, equipped with his axiom that there can be no talk of God which is not at the same time talk of human existence, had refused to speak of God in objectifying fashion. If Barth believed he could speak in such fashion, could even describe what God could or might do but had not yet done, and on the basis of what he had done already, he (Barth) was no less a contributor to the malaise, since he rejected the entire hermeneutical enterprise, intended to set the stage for an encounter with transcendence in intelligible speech.

Where to turn? At Chicago grew recollection of an earlier generation, puzzled by Alfred North Whitehead’s *Religion in the Making*, and securing the services of Henry Nelson Wieman for its interpretation. Apart from extensive similarities

¹⁰E. L. Mascall, “Christmas With the Demythologizers,” *Pi In The High* (London: The Faith Press, 1959) 49.

which he shared with Bultmann and Heidegger, Whitehead, conceivably, could speak of God without reducing the conversation to anthropology. Long after *Process and Reality, Adventures*

of *Ideas*, the *Dialogues*, or *Science and the Modern World* had disappeared from the required reading lists of philosophy departments in this country, “process thought” gained ascendance in its schools of divinity.

The malaise was begotten by Bultmann, and for the Chicagoans, at least, it was lifted by Whitehead, “the last Victorian gentleman,” at the tender age of sixty-three called from England to Harvard’s philosophy department, and whose concept of the “general interconnectedness of things, which transforms the manifoldness of the many into the unity of the one,” had Plato’s idea of the “receptacle” for its father. The move from Bultmann to Whitehead could hardly be described as eschewing what Emerson had called “the sere remains of foreign harvests,” but for all that it was “typically American.”

SAMPLE FOUR: THE “DEREGULATION” OF BIBLICAL STUDIES

In his review of American New Testament studies from 1926 onward, Grant hailed the interdenominational, university-related divinity school as an “American invention.” From it, a “multiplicity of outlooks and a variety of results” have resulted. Thus, American biblical studies, free of the trammels of established religion, promise freedom from the *odium theologicum*. Two years ago, at a meeting of the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, a Yale scholar delivered a paper on the similarity between the terms used by Paul in his Thessalonian correspondence and those of the ancient Greek moralists, thus demonstrating the apostle’s acquaintance with the psychagogic traditions of the period.¹¹ In response to the suggestion that it was rather Paul’s Jewish heritage that informed his practice, the essayist stated that someone more knowledgeable respecting Jewish material was needed to reply. In answer to the question as to what biblical-theological inferences might be drawn from his study, the American scholar gave no answer beyond stating that Paul was not a Greek philosopher. From Grant’s perspective, the paper was a success. It was American; it avoided emphasis upon theological significance, that “feeding on pods.” Such avoidance appears characteristic of American research, as witness the articles in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*.

Obviously, steering clear of biblical-theological conclusions never found favor with a Barth or a Bultmann, and of such activity Adolf Schlatter once wrote that it was amazingly archaic to speak of historical investigation of the New Testament which strives only to perceive what has happened. That, wrote Schlatter, can only be explained by the isolation of the academician who is like a painter, adorning the walls of his house with frescoes while flames are destroying the roof.¹²

Nor does denying theological significance free the historian of metaphysical presuppositions. As one modern thinker attempted to show, if richness in individual phenomena is what marks historical life as such; if it is this that gives value and

¹¹The paper was later published: A. J. Malherbe, “‘Pastoral Care’ in the Thessalonian Church,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990) 375-391.

¹²Adolf Schlatter, “Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments und die Dogmatik,” *Zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments und zur Dogmatik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1969) 211.

sense to history, then history has meaning in itself—one grand, cosmic, metaphysical presupposition.¹³ What Grant writes of “the passage of time,” of “the real men whose real actions

constitute the stuff of history,” of “the concrete actuality of the ancient historians,” to say nothing of his irritation at the “denigration” of von Ranke, who linked his own finite and limited knowledge to a Spirit to whom all things are known in their perfection—at least suggests the spectre of an idealism lurking beneath praise for all this sober, common sense research, an idealism, moreover, birthed in Europe.

Time does not permit to tell of F. C. Porter’s dependence upon the ancient and anonymous “Longinus,” upon Coleridge, Wordsworth, Bishop Lowth, and Matthew Arnold, or of Benjamin Bacon’s great debt to Ferdinand Christian Baur, and thus to Hegel—all cited by Grant in evidence of a sober, common sense, American treatment free of extremes. Not even the “American invention” of interdenominational schools of divinity linked to universities, and the resultant “deregulation” of biblical studies, can claim originality. What was more proximate to the typically American, if such there be, was the abstracting of the discipline of theology from the remainder of the academic enterprise in the establishment of denominational theological seminaries. These institutions, would for a time enjoy independence from Europe—if by no other means than a cultural gap.

EPILOGUE: THE “TYPICALLY AMERICAN” AND THE EMBATTLED HISTORIANS

Geographically, at least middle western historians have the advantage in the debate over the question of our continuity or discontinuity with Europe. They are a more distant target of Atlantic or New England influence. Years ago, in a book entitled *The Genius of American Politics*, Daniel Boorstin, then professor of American history at the University of Chicago, accented American discontinuity with Europe. He wrote that in contrast to the Europeans who since the 1800s have embraced the notion that humanity’s condition can be improved by remodeling its institutions after some colossal image, Americans have lived by the axiom that institutions “are organisms which grow out of the soil in which they are rooted and out of the tradition from which they have sprung.”¹⁴ Boorstin spoke Robert Grant’s language. Nine years later, David Noble, historian at the University of Minnesota, in effect wrote that devotion to the uniqueness of the American experiment actually reflected allegiance to notions first applied to America by Europeans; further, that such allegiance among American historians rendered them incapable of participating in the American project. Noble wrote:

Our historians, until World War II, proclaimed that Europe was history and America was nature because the Old World had institutions and traditions and the New World had none. Now, however, as our commonsense experience forces us to admit that we live in a highly complex urban-industrial society, historians like Daniel Boorstin who still defend the idea of a national covenant must persuade us that while this complexity of institutions and traditions exists, it does not signify that we have broken the oath of our Puritan ancestors.¹⁵

¹³Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975) 185-199.

¹⁴Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953) 6-7.

¹⁵David W. Noble, *Historians Against History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1965) 176-177.

“the slowness with which American scholars have tended to accept all the hypotheses that elsewhere are often regarded as self-evident truths,”¹⁶ and notions of America’s continuity with Europe, despite the demurrers betrayed in commitments of one kind or another, this contest may well be what is “typically American.” And the uniqueness of American biblical scholarship, like that of American historiography, may consist simply and solely in the discussion of the degree or extent to which it is dependent upon or independent of Europe. A De Tocqueville-like description of biblical study in America might read that at no time has it “displayed the same blind confidence in the value and absolute truth of any theory” as has characterized European scholarship, but at the same time would have to admit that whatever that study reaped were the fruits of the long “revolution in Europe.”

In a recent article in *The Christian Century*, the author states that theorizing about religion based on the European experience fails to capture the American religious experience. He then contrasts the wedding of modernity and religion in America, its “willingness to start over,” with the nostalgia for a religious past characteristic of Europe. The author concedes that American modernity has its drawbacks, principally in ignoring “the historical particularity of our condition.”¹⁷ What the author does not say, and what comprises the burden of this essay, is that attention to that very particularity requires identifying what is “typically American” as the debate concerning what is “typically American.”

¹⁶Grant, “American New Testament Study, 1926-1956,” 43.

¹⁷R. Stephen Warner, “Starting Over: Reflections on American Religion,” *The Christian Century* 108 (1990) 812-813.