

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF GOD'S WORD

Bible Study Since Vatican II

MARK O'BRIEN OP

CATHOLIC ATTITUDES to the Bible have changed markedly since Vatican II. We have rediscovered the Old Testament and its world, somewhat neglected in the Catholic world after the Reformation. Many of us have done courses on the Bible in one form or another. We are more aware of the ancient Near East from which the Bible emerged and appreciative of the differences between then and now. A lot of this change is due to the new approaches to Bible Study promoted by the Vatican II document on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*). Chief among these has been what is called 'historical-critical analysis', as outlined by my colleague Mark Kenney SM. This form of Bible study, as well the others that Mark outlines, has exercised and continues to exercise a profound impact on how we understand the Bible and its claim to be the Word of God. To illustrate this I would like to comment on the following five areas of change.

1. The change from seeing the Bible as history to studying the history of the Bible (its evolution)

2. The change from studying the Old Testament as a prelude to the New Testament to studying the Old Testament in its own right—the relationship between the testaments.

3. The change from imagining the world of the Bible as a special 'inspired' world to a world more like ours: a world in which people of faith searched and prayed, made discoveries, made mistakes, disagreed, revised their views, and passed them on for others to ponder. This change has implications for the way we

understand the Bible as 'inspired'.

4. The change from seeing the Bible as unified and harmonious to seeing the Bible as a complex of competing theologies

5. The change from seeing the Bible as the imposition of thought to seeing it more as an invitation to think, an ongoing dialogue between text and reader: the Bible as unfinished business.

Comment

1. It would be fair to say that, until the advent of historical-critical analysis, most of us accepted at face value the Bible's statements about who wrote what and when things happened. This attitude, let us call it 'uncritical', began to change under the impact of critical analysis, itself a development of modern western theories of education and research. Catholics had the good fortune to find that a lot of the hard work of historical-critical analysis had already been done by our Protestant brethren who took the lead in developing this approach in the 18th and 19th centuries. We owe them a mighty vote of thanks. Historical-critical study of the Bible sought to understand how ancient peoples thought, lived and wrote via a careful analysis of the texts they produced. It found there was more to the text than initially meets the eye.

For example, the Pentateuch is now thought to have been written many centuries after the events and characters it describes

and by many hands. Moses' hand was almost certainly not among them.

More recent study of biblical narrative has helped us appreciate the artistic and creative skill of ancient Israelite storytellers. Texts are now seen as the product of sophisticated storytellers, theologians and scribes who utilised old material and created new material to celebrate their tradition, to entertain, to instruct, to proclaim and to record. The Bible is not history as we understand the term: in fact there is no book in the Old Testament that Jewish tradition calls history. The three parts of the Hebrew Bible are called Torah, Prophets and the Writings. Historical-critical scholarship seeks to reconstruct the history of the text in order to reconstruct the history of the people who produced the text. The text of the Old Testament is the one major artefact from ancient Israel and provides the primary source for such reconstructions; archaeological and other sources provide fragmentary information and are often not easy to correlate with the biblical text.

Hypotheses abound, as one would expect, but this is the very stuff of historical-critical analysis in which the term 'critical' is paramount. As with other scientific methods that strive to be objective, a hypothesis about the composition of a book such as Isaiah is put up for critical scrutiny and, if necessary, replaced by a better and more enduring hypothesis. It is a fascinating, engaging, and sometimes frustrating process but it has changed the way people perceive the Old Testament.

It is generally accepted that a somewhat similar process of composition took place, over a much shorter time-span, with the New Testament. A critical consideration of the differences between the four Gospels indicates that here too we are not dealing with history in our sense of the term. They are appropriately called 'Gospels' or 'Good News', not history.

2. Those early Christian scholars whom we honour with the title 'fathers of the church' needed to show how the new arrival on the

Mark O'Brien is a member of the Australian Province of the Dominican Order. He taught Old Testament for many years at Yarra Theological Union in the Melbourne College of Divinity. He now lectures at the Catholic Institute of Sydney.

scene, Christianity and its 'Word'—the emerging New Testament, related to the established claimant to the title of 'Word of God'—the Hebrew Bible or, in our terms, the Old Testament. They did a brilliant job but one unfortunate outcome was that the Old Testament tended to be swamped by a deluge of Christian themes that the fathers believed lay 'hidden' beneath the surface of the Old Testament text. This was the 'other', 'allegorical', or real meaning of the text.

Christians believe that the Old Testament points to Christ as the fulfilment of its promises but there is a need to balance this conviction with another one; namely, that the Old Testament was and remains God's word to Israel in an Israelite context. One can see how this side of the equation drew the attention of historical-critical study of the Bible, partly as a reaction to an overworked 'allegorical' exegesis. The historical approach argues that unless one first seeks to understand the Old Testament and New Testament within their historical contexts, one is likely to distort their respective meanings. It hardly needs to be added that this historical understanding of how texts and their language should be studied is at odds with those who believe that the 'inspired' Word speaks immediately to each reader in his or her own language and historical context. In this view, there is no need to try and bridge the historical and cultural divide between our world and the biblical world.

3. We believe the Bible is an inspired text, that is, it derives in some mysterious way from God. This means that its human agents, the

ones who produced the inspired text, were also inspired. As the Latin original of the word 'inspiration' implies, the Spirit of God 'breathes into the sacred authors', guiding their words and guaranteeing their authenticity. Inspiration is a faith claim; it cannot be proved. A favoured model of inspiration in the Jewish-Christian tradition has of course been the prophet. The image of a lone figure (usually male) striding across the landscape to confront someone with the 'Word of God' is a powerful one. It is an image of one 'set apart', as it were in a special realm.

The findings of historical scholarship outlined earlier pose a considerable challenge to this model of inspiration. Given that biblical texts, including prophetic books, underwent a long period of gestation that involved the careful, laborious work of many people who were at times at odds with each other, where does inspiration begin and end and how many forms does it take? It seems that a group of rabbis vigorously debating a point of law can be just as inspired as the lone prophet; that a scribe laboriously copying a manuscript can be just as inspired as a highly trained theologian. And what of the people of Israel? If they hadn't preserved the prophet's preaching or the book that bears his name, we would presumably not have the book. One might reply that the power of the prophet's inspiration overrides any role of the people, but this is a very 'top-down' view of inspiration. There is evidence in prophetic books that the people's criticism of the prophets had, at times, quite an impact on their preaching (cf. Deuteronomy 18:21-22 where the people are instructed about judging between true and false prophecy). In this context it is also worth noting that the transmission of the biblical text down through the centuries has resulted in scribal errors and omissions. Much ancient and modern scholarly effort has gone into 'reconstructing' what are believed to be the most accurate versions of the Old Testament and New Testament. Inspired work indeed!

4. Both Old Testament and New Testament

proclaim faith in the one God. In our creed we proclaim our faith in the one holy catholic and apostolic church. The church is always concerned to preserve the unity of the body of Christ. Given that these claims are based in some way on the Bible, it can come as something of a shock when a biblical student in the post-Vatican II world is confronted by evidence of the variety of theologies in the Bible, and how they are at times in tension or competing with one another. As with the relationship between Old Testament and New Testament mentioned earlier, this aspect of modern critical scholarship generates a lot of debate. Has this scholarship been infected by the disease of 'relativism' and 'pluralism', as some maintain, or has it discovered something about the Bible that may be of great value for the church?

To give a few examples: the portrait of Jesus in the Synoptics differs significantly from that in John; Paul's theology of the law seems at odds with Jesus' statements in the Synoptics, particularly Matthew; there are various theologies of creation in the Old Testament, two within the first three chapters of Genesis; some law texts are at odds with one another, and there is evidence of fierce debate in post-exilic texts about Israel's relationship to foreigners (cf. Isaiah 56:1-8 with Nehemiah 13). Lastly, there is the well-known difference between mainstream wisdom thinking (e.g., Proverbs) and the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.

Some believe that the variety can all be encompassed within a broad concept of unity; others fear that the individuality of the differing theologies may be sacrificed on the altar of unity. Some Jewish scholars express surprise at Christians' search for the centre or essence of the Old Testament or the Torah. Is this driven, they ask, by the centrality of Jesus in the New Testament? This is an important, ecumenical, debate but given human nature, one wonders about its outcome. If there is consensus, has unity won at the expense of plurality; if there is no consensus, has plurality won at the expense of unity?

5. The fifth point flows in a way from the preceding one. The basic case for a plurality of theologies in the Bible is, I believe, strong. But, this does not mean the Bible is merely a collection of disparate pieces; rather it offers a variety of angles on its abiding concern, God and our relationship to God, and does not claim to have said it all or resolved all the questions. In fact, the Bible, by pondering the mystery of God, raises more questions than it provides answers. In this sense, I think one can rightly say that it is more an invitation or challenge to think than the imposition of thought. Rather like Jesus' parables, which often end with the challenge 'listen, anyone who has ears to hear'.

The notion of the Bible as unfinished business blends well with both the Jewish notion of the oral Torah and the Catholic notion of Scripture and Tradition. In these views, the Bible is a distillation of the larger tradition that continues on in the community of believers. The Gospel of John states in 20:30 that Jesus did many other things not recorded in the text but the text has been written so that readers may believe. Also, the authors of biblical texts knew that they were people of faith seeking understanding—like ourselves. One might say they were inspired to produce the biblical text that we readers are inspired to interpret and proclaim within the context of an ongoing, dynamic tradition. We can never claim to have completed this task or commission.

These are some of the changing perceptions of the Bible that have either entered the Catholic Church's thinking or have developed in it since the Council. As you can see, a lot of it has been driven by the modern western world's fascination, even obsession, with history. Has it all been good news for the Church? No doubt this question will elicit a variety of responses, depending on one's faith stance and familiarity with what has been happening in biblical scholarship. Sometimes, the unfamiliar can appear threatening.

I would like to conclude by outlining briefly some areas where I believe the changes have not been particularly good news and where much work still needs to be done.

First, salvation history. This hypothesis claims that the Bible tells how the history of humanity, of Israel, and the church, has unfolded according to God's saving plan and will continue to do so. It is a faith claim expressed in ways that do not conform to modern criteria of history writing. It is, by definition, a different (faith) view of the past to a secular, scientific, one. The thesis catches the dynamic nature of the biblical narrative but has been criticised for trying to restore history to the agenda via the back door, so to speak, and for neglecting the importance of creation theology in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament.

Second, historical-critical analysis has been accused of fragmenting the biblical text in its desire to reconstruct the history of the text. One can end up with a Bible of fragments, like the fragments from an archaeological dig. Frustrated by the plethora of hypotheses, many scholars have called for a return to the study of the present text. It is a timely call, but alas, this 'discourse oriented' or 'synchronic analysis' ends up generating as many hypotheses as 'source oriented' or 'diachronic analysis'! Different readers read the present text different ways—the unavoidable subjective factor.

Advocacy exegesis, such as feminist or post-colonial exegesis, tackles the subjective factor and explores how it can be integrated into a critical reading of the text. A subjective factor affecting this paper is its western bias and its omission of ways of reading the text in the Eastern church, in the emerging churches of Asia and Africa, in Judaism, etc. Are all these *ways* of reading the Bible getting in the way of *reading* the Bible? Is there a right way of reading the Bible? Perhaps one thing that all forms of reading a text have in common is that, in order to understand *what* is being communicated, one needs to pay attention to the *way* it is communicated (the relationship between content and form).

Last, there is the relationship between faith and fact. Given the long-standing conviction that our faith is grounded in historical events, how do we respond to the challenge of histori-

cal analysis that concludes much of the biblical text is not history and we cannot recover the raw event on which the text may be based? Or even more challenging, that biblical stories are often highly ideological (theological) and massage the facts in favour of the ideology. If a student emulated this alleged practice of biblical authors for a CIS essay in church history, it would not pass.

As a quick response, one can point out how the (inspired) faith of biblical authors meant that their primary concern was not to provide a transcript of events but to proclaim the significance of their faith. In striving to do this they stretched the limitations of human literary forms and ideas to their limit, and sometimes beyond their limit. One can no longer neatly separate the person from the words about that person. One can confirm that there was a Jew called Jesus by checking with extra-biblical

references, but the portraits of Jesus in the Gospels is profoundly shaped by a faith conviction about his identity and significance. And these, we believe, the evangelists were inspired to create. Similarly, it is a historical fact Israel existed. That Israel is the chosen people of God is a faith proclamation of Old Testament texts.