

***INSPIRATION AND CRITICISM: THE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRISIS***

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I

Van Austin Harvey, in his discussion of the nature of history and its implications for the Christian faith, has remarked that 'the entire history of Christian theology may be regarded as the history of Biblical interpretation. This is especially true', he adds, 'of Protestant theology, because it has been characterized from the outset by appeal to the Bible as the sole norm of faith and practice (*sola scriptura*). It is just for this reason that Biblical criticism poses such a fateful problem for the Protestant community.'¹

And a fateful problem it has proved to be. The intellectual character of modern evangelicalism has, for better or worse, been decisively shaped by the nineteenth-century debates about the handling of the Bible. Moreover, arguably the most significant debate current within the evangelical movement today is that which has focussed upon the word 'inerrancy', in effect a re-opening of the debate of a century ago between those believers who essentially accepted what they called 'Criticism', and those who sought to repudiate it.² The 'rejectionist' character of most evangelical

1. Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: 1966) 19.
2. The words *critical* and *conservative*, and their cognates, are used in this discussion in a special way when beginning with an upper case C, to indicate the two parties to the nineteenth-century debate. This largely accords with their own usage. Thus 'Conservatives' were those who on general (often dogmatic) grounds saw 'Criticism' as inimical to Biblical authority, while 'Critics' desired a fundamental shift in the way in which interpretation was carried on. The 'Conservatives' came to conservative views on given *critical* issues, as of

thought since then, though it has had its problems in the coherent statement of an alternative position, is evident - from, for example, the assumptions which have been allowed to undergird the policy of publishers such as IVP. And the influence of American evangelicalism of the Princeton-Westminster type on recent developments in Britain has re-affirmed this posture as, at least, the 'majority report' of the post-war movement.

We shall confine our comments to the British scene, which differed of course from debates on the Continent and in North America, but in form and period rather than content. We shall begin by taking some soundings in the doctrine of Scripture which was the orthodox and traditional in the first part of the century, and which, indeed, until long after the Essays and Reviews debate began to shake the foundations, remained the consensus doctrine. We then proceed to a suggested analysis of the debate which has implications for more recent discussion.

II

The nineteenth century opened with British Christianity little ruffled by the debates about Biblical Criticism in which continental scholars were already engaged. Generally speaking, little was known of them. There was no lack of awareness of the challenges that had been levelled at orthodoxy during the Deist controversy of the century preceding, but only comfort could result from the knowledge that such challenges had come from outside the pale of faith, and had been kept there. Within Christendom - high and low, established and dissenting, evangelical and moderate - a remarkable consensus was maintained. Like every consensus, it lived with occasional exceptions; but a consensus it

course did 'Critics' in some cases. Plainly there are points at which making distinctions of this sort and defining them engages us in the debate itself, and there are inevitably occasions on which either upper or lower case could be used. It should be added that terms like 'orthodox' and 'traditional' are intended to be labels that mark out one opinion from another, and nothing more.

was.³ Among the varieties of Christian belief manifest in the churches, G. S. Faber's description of the settled attitude to Scripture as that of 'a kind of prescriptive veneration'⁴ would have been noted as entirely unexceptional.

Yet hand in hand with this veneration went an awareness - at least, among the best educated - that, though 'prescriptive', it could not be unthinking. Deism had exposed Scripture to attack, and it had proved necessary to defend it. The fact that defence had proved and remained necessary we find evident in the context in which Faber's comment is to be found: his Hampton lectures for 1801, on *A View of the Mosaical Records, with respect to the Connection with Profane Antiquity, their Internal Credibility, and their Connection with Christianity*. 'The argument', as J. Hunt has it, in his tedious but informative text-book of nineteenth-century religion, 'proceeded on the alternative that if the Pentateuch is not infallible there is no revelation'.⁵ Faber's general approach to Scripture was thoroughly representative of the thought of his day.

3. W. B. Glover (*Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* [London: 1954] 9) writes: 'England and Scotland really constituted a single religious public of remarkable homogeneity. Particularly in regard to higher criticism denominational and party lines meant little or nothing; even the Anglo-Catholics were not distinguishable as a group from the general body of English religious opinion on critical issues.'
4. G. S. Faber, *Horae Mosaicae* (Oxford: 1801) (Bampton lectures) 10, 11. Which is not to say that there was no disagreement as to the nature of inspiration, its mode, or its precise effects. See J. H. Pratt (ed.), *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders. Notes of the Discussions of the Eclectic Society, London, During the years 1798-1814* (London: 1856, reprinted Edinburgh: 1978) 152-154. The agreement was that the canon of sacred Scripture was infallible. So, summing up the 'middle view' which *denied* the superintendence of the very wording of Scripture, J. Davies states: 'The ideas, and the words so far as to prevent the writer's delivering anything inconsistent with truth', are superintended (Pratt, *Evangelical Leaders* 154).
5. J. Hunt, *Religious Thought in England in the Nineteenth Century* (London: 1896) 41.

This may be illustrated by a further set of Bampton lectures. William Van Mildert, Regius Professor of Divinity and later Bishop of Durham, was elected Bampton Lecturer in 1814, and chose as his theme *An Inquiry into the General Principles of Scripture-Interpretation*. Van Mildert has been seen, with justification, as - his learning excepted - a typical churchman of his day. Hunt epitomises him thus: 'The Bishop was essentially a prudent Churchman, his progress never exceeding that of the whole ecclesiastical body'⁶-in his view of Scripture, as in other matters. In the eighteenth century the orthodox (as opposed to the Deistic) conception of the Bible had been the traditional one. John Locke, writing in 1703, had said 'It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error for its matter';⁷ and C. J. Abbey and J. H. Overton, surveying the century that followed upon Locke's majestic declaration, conclude that 'the doctrine of unerring literal inspiration was almost everywhere held in its strictest form'.⁸ Bernard Reardon, writing of the early nineteenth century, finds that the infallibilist conception was 'the doctrine all but unanimously held by Christians in this country at the time'.⁹ And V. F. Storr sets the scene for the nineteenth-century ferment thus: the 'chief obstacle' to Critical theories in Britain was

the traditional view of the Bible as a volume inspired throughout from cover to cover, whose statements, whether they related to science, or history, or religion, were to be accepted without questioning. The Bible was treated as something apart from other writings. Its various books were

6. Hunt, *Religious Thought* 39.
7. Locke, 'Letter to Rev. R. King, Aug. 25th. 1703', Works (1801 ed.), Vol. X, 304, cited J. E. Carpenter, *The Bible in the Nineteenth Century* (London: 1903) 7.
8. C. J. Abbey and J. H. Overton, *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century* (London: 1878), Vol. I, 560, cited Carpenter, *Bible* 7n.
9. B. M. G. Reardon, *From Coleridge to Gore. A Century of Religious Thought in Britain* (London: 1971) 83.

regarded as being all on the same level of inspiration, and as having proceeded under a divine superintendence, which protected them from any material error. Even a man of such large mind as Van Mildert could write that in the Bible 'it is impossible even to imagine a failure either in judgment or in integrity'.¹⁰

The bishop 'of such a large mind', a High Churchman of the old school, spoke for his generation when he wrote that, in theology,

the authenticity, authority, and truth [of the Bible] are assumed as axioms or postulates, on which the whole inquiry is founded. It is presumed also, that truth, and truth only, can issue from this Divine source of knowledge: for, as contrary positions in human science cannot be received as such, so it is impossible that contrary doctrines in theology should have any real foundation in Holy Writ.¹¹

The presupposition of theological discussion is an infallible Bible. And in the matter of interpretation:

if the Scriptures themselves have a peculiar and extraordinary character impressed upon them, which takes them out of the class of ordinary writings, that character, whatever it is, ought unquestionably to form the basis of [the theologian's] judgment respecting the matters which they contain.¹²

This statement is of considerable significance. Scripture differs from all other objects of investigation in that 'it emanates immediately from the Fountain of infinite wisdom', while sharing the 'channel

10. V. F. Storr, *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century, 1800-1860* (London: 1913) 177.
11. W. Van Mildert, *An Enquiry into the General Principles of Scripture-Interpretation* (Oxford: 1815) (Bampton lectures) 11.
12. *Ibid.* 21.

of human instruction' with the rest of man's literary material - so that we 'must nevertheless examine it as it is delivered to us, clothed in the language of men',¹³ and therefore 'subject to the general rules of human composition'.¹⁴ Van Mildert adds:

The deference due to it as a Divine production does not interfere with this province of human learning; it only exacts submission with respect to the subject-matter of the revelation, to *which the critical investigation is entirely subordinate*.¹⁵

It is therefore not proper to 'set up human Reason as the supreme Arbiter in matters of faith'.¹⁶

Here (since we are contending not with declared unbelievers, but with those who profess to receive the Christian Religion as a divine revelation) the question seems to lie between what reason can make known to us on religious subjects without revelation, and what revelation has actually taught us:- whether the former be so clear and perfect in its conceptions, as justly to claim an ascendancy over the latter, or whether it ought to acknowledge its inferiority with respect to its means and sources of information?¹⁷

Reason, it is acknowledged, is a gift of God of great value. But, Van Mildert asks, why did God give also revelation, if reason alone were sufficient for man's knowledge of God? Further, reason is now 'in a deteriorated state' and therefore 'no longer sufficient, by itself, to secure us against error'.¹⁸ Van Mildert concludes that, in consequence, 'it must be the province of reason, with respect to the subject-matter of what is revealed, to submit, not to dictate; to receive the commandment, not to prescribe the law'.¹⁸ Furthermore,

13. Van Mildert, *Enquiry* 21

14. *Ibid.* 22.

15. *Ibid.* Emphasis ours,

16. *Ibid.* 77.

17, *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.* 78.

19. *Ibid.* 79.

very much that we find in Scripture contains matters about which the unaided reason could tell us nothing; 'they can only be received upon the credit of the Sacred Oracles'.²⁰ The ultimate question of authority is raised. In religious matters either we have an authority, or we have no certain knowledge at all. The 'capricious standard of every man's corrupt or fallible judgment' becomes our authority. And the question remains, 'if. . . our reason might be allowed to overrule the written Word, where could we cast anchor in the depths of moral and metaphysical speculation?'²¹ Where, indeed? It is therefore a 'dangerous position' to suggest that 'the authority of Scripture must bend to that of reason', and so it has proved down the history of the Church.²² The function of the reason is strictly limited: 'to satisfy itself of the genuineness of the text and its Divine authority, and then so to interpret the doctrine that Scripture shall not be made to contradict itself.'²³ And again:

Its powers of simple apprehension, of judgment, of argumentation and of arrangement and combination of the several parts of the subject are continually called forth, in proving the genuineness of the text, or the authenticity of the Canon of Scripture, and in digesting the matter diffused through the Sacred Volume into a compact and coherent body of truth.²⁴

There is ample work here for the reason in 'solving doubts', 'removing difficulties', 'clearing up ambiguities', 'reconciling what seems to be at variance' and 'illustrating by human science what it nevertheless receives as grounded upon Divine testimony'. 'This is the legitimate province of man's reason, when engaged in the service of Revealed Religion.' The error arises when 'instead of the interpreter, it assumes the character of an arbiter and judge'.²⁵

20. Van Mildert, *Enquiry* 80

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.* 84.

24. *Ibid.* 122.

25. *Ibid.*

More than once the lecturer turns his attention to the incipient historical criticism of his day. On one occasion he sets out well the kind of position that was to be much defended in the century to follow. Very great care, he says, is to be used, 'in comparing sacred with profane history, and in employing the one for the elucidation of the other'.²⁶ Historical scepticism is 'never so misplaced as when sitting in judgment on these Divine Oracles', since their 'credit nothing may be allowed to impeach, but irreconcilable contradiction to facts and authorities established upon testimony the most indubitable, nay, which it is impossible to set aside'.

Does this imply a readiness to consider Critical objections upon their merits? One may hardly think so. Van Mildert continues: 'To an investigation whether they really exhibit any such contradiction, we may confidently challenge inquiry.'²⁷ Since 'the general evidence of their authenticity and of their Divine inspiration stands unshaken', Critical comment may be considered but 'wanton surmise or irreverent suspicion'.²⁸ The early and (particularly in Britain) fragmentary nature of critical discussion left Van Mildert without obligation to comment further or explain whether in practical terms he might be persuaded by a given piece of evidence that a passage in Scripture was in error. Indeed, such a question is seen to be anachronistic when considered in the light of the degree of confidence which the consensus of early nineteenth-century opinion permitted a learned bishop. 'Whatever difficulties might present themselves respecting detached parts of this Divine system' of revelation are 'to be obviated'²⁹ not from reason or any other sources, but 'upon reasoning from Scripture itself, the prime source of intelligence respecting the matters of which it treats'.³⁰ For, 'if we acknowledge' its inspiration, 'it is impossible even to imagine a failure, either in judgment or in integrity' within the sacred volume³¹

26. Van Mildert, *Enquiry* 160.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.* 160, 161.

29. *Ibid.* 178,

30. *Ibid.* 179.

31. *Ibid.* 190.

We must confine ourselves to one further and brief example from the early part of the century, which bespeaks the extraordinarily fixed character of the orthodox consensus. Even R. D. Hampden, the controversial Bampton lecturer of 1832, formally acknowledged an infallible Bible. 'It follows', he wrote, from inspiration, 'that whatever is recorded in those books is indisputably true'.³² That is to say:

Any fact, therefore, that is found expressly written in the Bible, must be regarded, by virtue of its sole and primary existence there, to be ascertained with an evidence to which no further proof can add reality.³³

This position may be characterised as *ex hypothesi infallibilism*. Hardly any dissented from it, and the influx of new and unsettling thinking served only to buttress and make yet more firm the received tradition. The trickle of fresh influences via men such as Marsh and Thirlwall, and the ultimately enormous impact of Coleridge's repudiation of infallibilism, had no widespread effect on the understanding of the Bible until the fateful publication in 1860 of *Essays and Reviews* set a torch to the dry timber. The Essayists and Reviewers, though, were not only Critical in their understanding of Scripture, they were liberal and widely recognised as unorthodox in their theology as a whole, and the readiness with which they could be dubbed *septem contra Christum* ensured the rejection for the time being of their Critical approach to Scripture (such that even Thirlwall joined in the condemnation of the volume by the entire bench of bishops). It was to be the 'believing Criticism' of fifteen and twenty years later, which sought to combine the repudiation of infallibilism with piety and the willing acceptance of (often evangelical) Protestantism, that began to undermine the Conservative apologetic which had customarily linked Criticism with unbelief. Yet *Essays and Reviews* - and, more particularly, the apologetic material which it called forth - had familiarised the clergy and the

32. R. D. Hampden, *The Scholastic Philosophy considered in its Relation to Christian Theology* (Oxford: 1833) (Bampton lectures) 356.

33. *Ibid.* 370, 371.

reading public with the currents of Continental thought, and prepared a soil in which pious Criticism could take root. The Robertson Smith affair, coming to a climax twenty-one years later in the blaze of half a decade of publicity, seemed to set the seal of the evangelical Free Church of Scotland upon 'devout Criticism'; and in 1889 the Principal of Pusey House added the blessing of the new generation of High Churchmen to the match. A revolution had been brought to birth.

But what, precisely, was the Critical method? It is not easy to say. Everyone spoke of it, scholars increasingly argued for it and, in diminishing numbers, denounced it. We may epitomise it in Benjamin Jowett's famous phrase 'like any other book', as the study of Scripture according to the canons of general literary and historical interpretation. But two questions immediately arise. First, what are those canons? Are they capable of definition, or merely of description and example? Secondly, and more important, did the Critics really seek to study Scripture in *precisely* the same manner in which profane literature and history were studied? Even if we may assume, in answer to our first question, that for all its difficulty of definition a concept of historical criticism had truly evolved in general scholarship, our second question may not be so readily answered. That is evident from the literature, which is singularly lacking in extended methodological discussions of how the tools of secular critical history may be made to apply to the Christian revelation. What discussion there is, we find to be couched in generalities. While most scholars acknowledge that, in practice, the 'any other book' principle requires some qualification, nowhere do we find a sustained attempt to tease out precisely what qualifications would enable critical history to make sense of the revelation of God with its undeniable supernatural relations. Had the Cambridge School not succeeded in building a hedge about the New Testament, so successfully indeed that S. R. Driver and Robertson Smith and the others all recognised it as part of the Critical landscape, the 'believing Critics' might have had to face this question more abruptly. As it happened, when the hedge was finally torn down, the first generation of Critics had passed away, and for the new generation the tradition of Criticism had so established itself as to have removed this fundamental question from active consideration.

The response of those who adhered to the traditional view of Scripture was to endeavour to re-assert it in the face of the Critical method and conclusions. At first, Criticism could be largely dismissed as the fruit of German 'infidelity'. But as, gradually, the younger generation of British scholars was won over, something more than dismissal became necessary.

The Conservatives were forced to move from treating the matter, in the context of positive exposition of their concept of the nature of Scripture (such as the work of William Lee), as an objection requiring response, to coming to grips with Critical writings and debating before the eyes of the Church which was the more faithful and the more credible way of treating the Bible. They mirrored the Critics themselves in their combination of a concern for method and a failure to pursue that concern to its logical issue. What united them was their commitment to the truthfulness of all that the Bible stated, a truthfulness extending to the history as well as the religious and spiritual matter of the books. They had - and generally admitted they had - come to this conclusion upon dogmatic grounds, but they sought nonetheless to engage the Critics on issues of Higher Criticism in such a fashion that they inevitably took on the appearance of 'critics' themselves. It is plain that, while initially they took up critical issues *ad hominem*, seeking to turn the Critics' guns upon themselves, increasingly they came to admit in practice that the Critical arguments demanded answers on their merits. What began as apologetics was gradually transformed, for many, into hermeneutics, and the dogmatic arguments and warrants for infallibilism were gently abandoned in favour of vigorous critical arguments for a conservative stance on particular issues. This metamorphosis went almost undetected until, by the end of the century, the remaining Conservatives found themselves marooned in a new consensus in which appeal to dogmatic considerations had no longer any avail in the world of Old Testament scholarship, and in which the arguments for individual conservative positions no longer carried any weight.

One particular argument remained, for a while, an exception. It was the one substantial argument of the Conservatives which, even in the opening decades of the twentieth century, Critics felt they must answer, however briefly. This argument was the appeal to Christ.

Resting as it did upon the testimony of the Gospel records to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, it had an influence on the pious proponents of Criticism much greater than the other arguments of a dogmatic nature. In particular, it was grounded in the conservative consensus prevailing in New Testament scholarship in Britain, and had the effect of seeking to append conservative opinions on questions of Old Testament scholarship to conservative views of the New Testament. When these latter views were swept away - as they were abruptly with the passing of the influence of the Cambridge Trio - the *Christus Comprobator*³⁴ argument, although still in theory tenable, was immensely weakened. For, while it was still possible to press the case for a Christology in which Jesus could not have erred, the more radical Gospel criticism had overthrown the traditional picture of the historical Jesus as the kind of man who was likely to have had access to supernatural knowledge. That is to say, a more sceptical approach to narratives such as those of the temptation, the transfiguration and the resurrection at once destroyed the image of a Christ who might be expected to speak reliably about the authorship of Psalm 110. That, more than its effect in undermining faith in the reliability of particular sayings attributed to Jesus, led the developments in New Testament criticism to put the appeal to Christ out of court.

For all their demands for a 'new' and 'better' and 'truer' criticism, the Conservatives' use of historical critical arguments both evidenced and further advanced the growing credibility of the Critical case. Their demand for the employment of a special hermeneutic in the interpretation of Scripture required the existence of a special community in which assent could be given to its method and its conclusions. But later nineteenth-century British Christianity was not such a community. The Conservatives themselves were divided between Evangelicals and High Churchmen, and as the 1880's passed constituted only one element within even these groupings. It was increasingly felt that interpretative devices that

34. The title of a book by Bishop C. J. Ellicott which gave the argument its definitive statement: *Christus Comprobator; or, the Testimony of Christ to the Old Testament* (London: n.d.[1891]),

harmonised discrepancies and moralised upon barbarities might be credible still to the pious and the traditional, but they were patently not so to the increasingly secular and increasingly educated and independent-minded late-Victorian public, the young in particular.

Nevertheless, the point of departure for both Critics and Conservatives, and the uniting factor in their respective diversities, was methodological. They were divided in their starting-point and their method of approach to Biblical study, and although they devoted much energy to argument about their conclusions, their respective interpretative approaches profoundly influenced their results. Two figures who bestrode the stage early in the drama, neither of them in fact an Old Testament scholar, well set forth the approach to Scripture of the two schools: Benjamin Jowett and John William Burgon. Jowett's famous essay 'On the Interpretation of Scripture' in *Essays and Reviews* was a declaration of academic freedom from tradition and dogma in the study of Scripture. The only significance of the doctrine of inspiration would emerge from the unfettered study of the Bible 'as any other book'. Burgon's Oxford University Sermons, published as *Inspiration and Interpretation*, took the form of a vigorous and almost immediate rejoinder. For him, the Bible must be studied 'as no other book', since both the teaching of Scripture itself and the dogma of the Church grant us a presupposition in favour of the infallibility of all that Scripture contains. Burgon is perhaps best remembered as the opponent, later in life, of Westcott and Hort's textual criticism; but his notion of infallibility had room for textual tradition. The originals (and, for practical purposes, our copies of them) are inspired, and, in consequence, without error. The only proper study of them will assume that fact as given, before it moves to examine them in detail.

So whereas, for Jowett, an apparent moral error or historical inaccuracy is to be taken *prima facie*, for Burgon it is impossible that any such appearance should accord with reality. Harmony and moral explanation are not so much possible as logically necessary, whether or not the interpreter may hazard them credibly because, *ex hypothesi*, the documents with which he deals do not err. Leading Conservative scholars acknowledged this difference in method while devoting their best efforts to *ad hominem* refutation of their opponents. The Critics

concentrated upon arguing their interpretation of the data from the text, leaving the presuppositional issue to resolve itself.

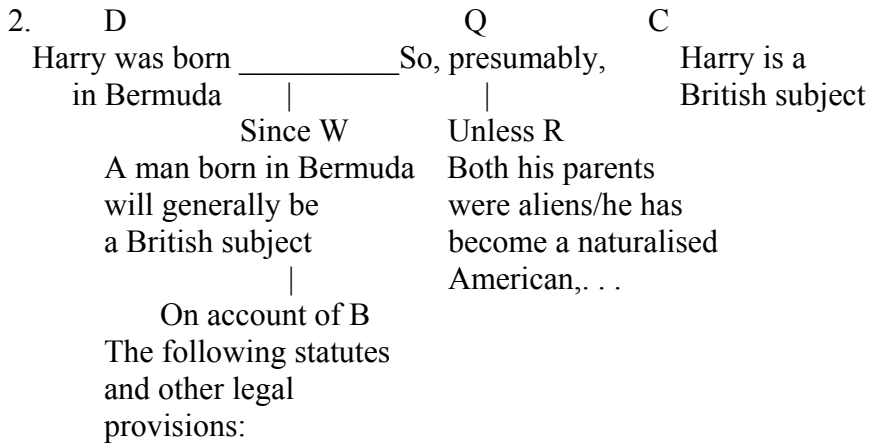
We see, then, that the conflict was principally a conflict of method. With some diffuseness and ambiguity on both sides, the Critics sought to allow that critical history which had proved so successful in reconstructing the classical histories to re-structure also the biblical, and to interpret it to the mind of nineteenth-century scholarship; whereas Conservative scholars deemed this method essentially inappropriate, and therefore its results mistaken, since the canon of Scripture is an unique volume, the work of divine inspiration, and consequently attested as an infallible record of all it contains. We turn now to some further analysis of this divergence in approach.

III

Stephen Toulmin, in his study *The Uses of Argument*,³⁵ has developed what he terms a 'candid' way of laying out arguments that reveals the manner in which they are employed, especially in jurisprudence and analogous disciplines, to establish and defend a position in the face of contrary opinion. His analysis has the advantage over conventional syllogisms that it does justice to the complex fashion in which arguments are used - that is, the different roles which they might be called upon to play in building up a case. This analysis is of some relevance to our subject, since the complex character of the cases which Critics and Conservatives sought to make for their rival positions closely resembles the pleadings of counsel. Toulmin's method has itself been taken up by a number of others, notably D. H. Kelsey in his *Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*,³⁶ where an attempt is made to analyse the different ways in which theologians make their appeal to Scripture to justify their theological proposals. Toulmin explains the function of the 'candid' analysis in these terms: 'to make clear the functions of the

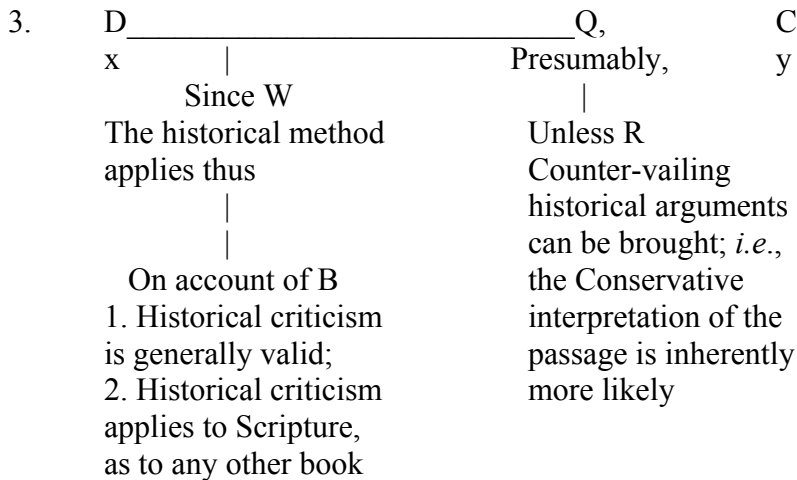
35. S. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1958).

36. D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: 1975); also in, e.g., Harvey, *Historian* 49ff.



By means of this analysis we may compare the contrary methods adopted by Conservative and Critical scholars.

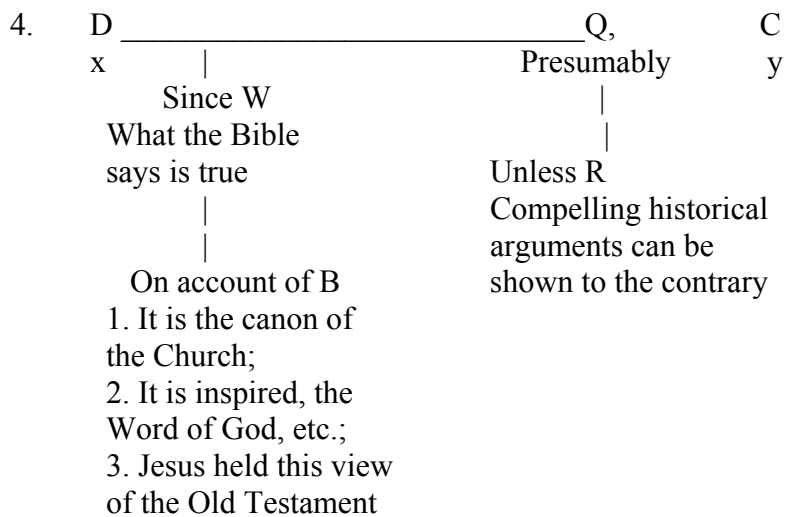
The characteristic Critical argument begins with the text of Scripture. It moves, assuming first that the methods of historical critical scholarship are generally valid, and, secondly, that they are applicable to Scripture, to conclusions that, because of the nature of the method, are only to a greater or lesser degree probable, but which may be challenged only upon grounds arising out of historical criticism itself. *Viz:*



Here x represents some phenomena culled from the text of Scripture, such as apparent contradictions and discrepancies, and y the inference drawn from them that the narrative is, say, composite in a particular fashion.

Of course, such an analysis simplifies the complexities of scholarly debate, but it may be suggested that it nonetheless does justice to the anatomy of the Critical argument. Though it could be expressed differently, that would not affect the result of our discussion. The methods of historical criticism are applied to the text of Scripture, on the assumption that the Bible must be studied like other books. Conclusions are qualified, but only as generally required in historical study. Only a contrary argument itself resting on the framework of critical history as understood by the Critics will challenge the claim that C follows from D.

The contrast with the Conservative position becomes clear when we lay out a typical Conservative argument similarly. *Viz.*:



Here x represents the Biblical narrative, and y the inference that - notwithstanding what may be considered apparent discrepancies - this account gives a unified and accurate report of something which took place as described.

A number of points emerge from this analysis. For one thing, Conservative scholarship was, to some degree, prepared to acknowledge the validity of historical argument, but not as the warrant, for its reading of the text. It consigned it to a possible condition of Rebuttal. The theme is to be found, explicitly or not, in most of the Conservative writings of the period. There is a preparedness, in principle, to come to terms with Critical argument; Critical points should be met and considered on their merits. But any historical or literary disputation lives in uneasy tension with the dogmatic position on the basis of which conservative

stances on critical questions are adopted. That is to say, discussion of the arguments of the Critics is taken up with apologetic intent, not as interpretation *per se*. There is therefore an ambivalence in Conservative scholarship which reveals itself in the argument we have laid out: the Warrant called in justification of the move from Data to Claim is *dogmatic* in nature, while there are acknowledged to be possible *historical-critical* conditions of Rebuttal. In any given scholar, or any given work, the degree to which these last are admitted purely *ad hominem* is not easy to determine. Earlier writers particularly, confident still of the triumph of the traditional view, have no intention to revise it and no expectation that evidence could be produced which would force them so to do. Later Conservatives are sometimes more sanguine of the likely outcome of the debate, and many keenly appreciate the need to maintain the the credibility of their dogmatic position, in the face of Criticism, on non-dogmatic grounds.

Increasingly, scholars of traditional leaning who were anxious to maintain the confidence of lay opinion came to adopt historical rather than dogmatic warrants for their positions, and to attempt thereby the defence of conservative views on particular questions. In the field of the New Testament, this course had early been taken by the Cambridge Trio who maintained an exceedingly conservative stance while repudiating dogmatic warrants and employing historical-critical arguments which they claimed stood on their merits. So J. B. Mozley can write of B. F. Westcott, who repudiated the dogmatic claim, that his commentary on John was 'entirely conservative. There is no kind of envisaging of the possibility that the evangelist may not always be giving the *ipsissima verba* of Christ.'³⁹ In the field of the Old Testament it was later and more cautiously that the principle of Criticism was taken on board with the fervent hope that the substance of Critical results would soon be overthrown. As it happened, so soon as scholars began to 'answer' the Critics accepting the validity of arguments from historical criticism they discovered that they had opened their dogmatic position to critical rebuttal; and they began to abandon it. As Van A. Harvey comments, in order to 'enter the lists of the debate and to attempt to

39. J. B. Mozley, *Some Tendencies in British Theology from the Publication of Lux Mundi to the Present Day* (London: 1951) 250.

vindicate the truth of the sacred narrative',

it was necessary to pay a costly price: it was necessary to accept the general canons and criteria of just those one desired to refute. One had, so to speak, to step onto the ground that the critics occupied. This was fatal to the traditionalist's cause, because he could no longer appeal to the eye of faith or to any special warrants. The arguments had to stand or fall on their own merits.⁴⁰

It cannot be denied that such was the long-term fruit of the Conservative apologetic. But on the other hand, from the point of view of their opponents, the Conservative scholars appeared all along to be unreasonably rejecting reasonable arguments. It was only in the long term that, for those individuals who finally changed their minds and for the scholarly consensus as a whole, the possibility of rebuttal of the dogmatic stance was realised. The question arises to what degree Conservatives were open to evidence that went against their case, and how it was that they so differently assessed the evidence before them.

The key to the confidence and stability of Conservatism lay in the manner in which Conservative scholars evaluated *prima facie* rebuttals arising out of historical and literary criticism.

Their tacit acceptance of the possibility that compelling historical arguments might destroy their dogma could co-exist with confidence in that dogma (and not come, with the Critics, under the ban of historical probabilism), because they weighed each and every Critical challenge against its implications for their total conception of the authority of the Bible and their religious use of it, and, consequently, their faith as a whole. Every challenge to infallibilism they regarded as potentially undermining the ground of all Christian truth; and, in consequence, while *logically* it could possibly be a valid challenge, *practically* it was impossible that they should find it so to be. The example of Dean Burgon presents perhaps the most explicit case of this type of argumentation which the

40. Harvey, *Historian* 105, 106.

debate produced.⁴¹ Conservative scholars did not all have the perception to grasp this point of method, but their practice accorded with it. Burgon's argument is that every statement of Scripture must be weighed as the statement of a trusted friend. When a statement is found that is difficult to believe (*e.g.*, one on which historical criticism has cast doubt), the course of action the believer must take is to ask his friend two questions: Is he in earnest?, and Is he certain?. If the answer to both questions is affirmative, what hangs in the balance is no longer the believer's acceptance of an unlikely story, but his trust in his friend. Either he will believe the explanation which his friend offers, or he will not. Any logically possible explanation is more likely than that his friend should lie. If he disbelieves it, it is not an isolated matter of disbelief, it is the end of his friendship. That is not to say that he will never countenance a challenge to what his friend says, but it explains how the possibility of such a challenge may co-exist with the most complete trust in the veracity of the friend's statements. Every challenge is weighed, on its merits indeed, but the merits in this case include the background of the whole friendship; in particular, the experienced fact of the friend's veracity. Error in Scripture can be logically possible, but practically impossible. For a Conservative such as Burgon, the infallibility of Scripture is wholly interconnected with the nature of the Christian religion. In respect of dogma, he believes that the whole structure of Christian truth hangs upon the reliability of every statement of

41. It could of course be argued that because Burgon (like Jowett) was neither an Old Testament scholar nor a participant in the debates over 'believing Criticism' of fifteen and twenty years later he cannot be taken as representative of anything. Yet having read the confusing and often confused Conservative apologists of later decades one turns to him to find a refreshing clarity of thought. Burgon was deeply expressive of the mind of the Conservatism which followed him, even though that mind was often only barely self-conscious. *Cf.* Alfred Cave's little book, *The Battle of the Standpoints* (London: 1890), written when the battle was effectively lost, and yet-despite its title, as Glover has pointed out - failing to grasp that the fundamental division was one of 'standpoint', *i.e.*, methodological. For some further discussion of Burgon's position, see the author's

Scripture; and, in respect of practice, that the authority of each ethical injunction rests upon the authority of every one. Because Scripture is the rule of his faith and his life, any challenge to any part of it is a challenge to the whole of his Christian conviction. He finds the concept of error to be both religiously and intellectually threatening at a fundamental level. So while he will admit that error is formally possible - 'people's friends do lie, so my friend might' - it is, practically, impossible: 'It is inconceivable that my friend should lie'. To put it another way, for Burgon a challenge to the infallibility of Scripture is formally identical with a challenge to any other of its fundamental religious beliefs. It is possible that such a challenge might rest upon good grounds. It is possible, moreover, that such a challenge (justified or not) might be found convincing. But it will not be dispassionately assessed, because from the standpoint of faith it is a challenge to faith. It has implications for faith which constitute its acceptance no mere matter of an excess of positive over negative evidence. A challenge to faith must be weighty enough to overthrow faith as a whole.⁴²

'Dean Burgon and the Bible: an eminent Victorian and the problem of Inspiration', *Themelios* 7 (1982) 16-20, One participant in the later debates, C. H. Waller, Principal of the London College of Divinity, reflected on Burgon's contribution in these terms. *The Essays and Reviews* seemed to question the foundations of everything. The majority of orthodox preachers to whom we listened . . . seemed like men recently aroused from a sound slumber by a shower of stones . . . Only one man in Oxford appeared to understand the exact position, and how to hold his ground' (*The Authoritative Inspiration of Holy Scripture* [London: 1887] 7, 8).

42. This matter has, of course, been much discussed, and was perhaps most powerfully put by A. Flew in his question 'What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?' (*New Essays in Philosophical Theology* [ed. by Flew and MacIntyre, London: 1955] 99.) 'It often seems', he earlier remarks, 'to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding "there wasn't a God after all"

Burton's candid statement of the question was not, perhaps, typical. Others did not articulate what they

42. Cont.

or "God does not really love us then" (*New Essays* 98). Flew's intention is to argue that since religious assertions are unfalsifiable in any conceivable set of circumstances, they are not really 'assertions' at all.

It is neither appropriate nor necessary for us to discuss this fundamental question at any length, since we are not trying to justify religious belief in general, but rather to show the place of the Conservative view of Scripture in Conservative religion, and the way in which Conservatives saw defence of infallibilism as analogous with defence of other elements of the Faith. But it is illuminating to refer to Basil Mitchell's answer to Flew, since it sheds its own light on the dynamic of Christian apologetic in the face of difficult evidence.

Mitchell writes: 'The theologian surely would not deny that the fact of pain counts against the assertion that God loves men. This very incompatibility generates the most intractable of theological problems - the problem of evil. So the theologian does recognize the fact of pain as counting against the Christian doctrine, but it is true that he will not allow it - or anything - to count decisively against it; for he is committed by his faith to trust in God. His attitude is not that of the detached observer, but of the believer' (*New Essays* 103). Mitchell then sets up an analogy which, interestingly, has much in common with Burton's analogy of the Bible and his friend. In an occupied country a member of the resistance meets a stranger who tells him and convinces him that he is actually in command of the resistance forces. 'The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.' After that there is never again a private meeting, and the stranger is seen sometimes helping the partisans and sometimes helping the occupying power. 'Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say "Well, what *would* he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?"' Mitchell continues: 'The partisan of the parable does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition, "The Stranger is on our side". This is because he has committed himself to trust the Stranger. But he of course

were doing in such terms, though their practice of the principle is evident. As a popular statement of the principles of the Conservative defence of Scripture, Burgon's was unsurpassed. But three years before, preceding by two years the bursting of the *Essays and Reviews* shell on the theology of England, H. L. Mansel had given powerful intellectual formulation to the principle in his classic defence of the traditional

42. Cont.

recognizes that the Stranger's ambiguous behaviour does count against what he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of his faith.' The question is how long, and in the face of what evidence, he can uphold this position, 'without its becoming just silly' (104). It is of the nature of faith that it cannot be merely provisional, while, on the other hand, it cannot be merely a 'vacuous formula . . . to which experience makes no difference'. 'Do I want to say that the partisan's belief about the Stranger is, in any sense, an explanation? I think I do. It explains and makes sense of the Stranger's behaviour: it helps to explain also the resistance movement in the context of which he appears. In each case it differs from the interpretation which the others put upon the same facts ' (105). There is an *irreducible circularity in the position of the religious man*, and whatever may be the conditions of falsification of his beliefs (and in practical terms they must exist, since people do change and abandon religious beliefs), Mitchell comments that one cannot say 'in advance' what they will be. In terms of his parable, 'it will depend on the nature of the impression created by the Stranger in the first place. It will depend, too, on the manner in which he takes the Stranger's behaviour. If he blandly dismisses it as of no consequence, as having no bearing upon his belief, it will be assumed that he is thoughtless or insane ... In that case he would be like the religious man who says blandly of a terrible disaster "It is God's will". No, he will only be regarded as sane and reasonable in his belief, if he experiences in himself the full force of the conflict' (104, 105, emphasis ours.)

position, *The Limits of Religious Thought*, the Bampton lectures for 1858.⁴³

It is not necessary to embark here upon a full discussion of Mansel's thought, its context and its influence. It is set against the background of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy of the conditioned, and indeed represents Mansel's attempt to work through in theology Hamilton's philosophical principles. Though intended as a major work of apologetic for the traditional position, one chief effect of Mansel's thesis was to prepare the ground for the incipient agnosticism of the following decades.⁴⁴ But insofar as Mansel's essential argument is relevant to our discussion, we may regard it as explicating one of the fundamentals of Conservative thought.

Mansel set out to develop the notion that of itself the reason of man is not sufficient to attain to 'a knowledge of the Infinite', that is, God, so that revelation is necessary for any and all religious knowledge. Moreover it is 'irrational' to expect matters pertaining to God to be capable of being fully understood by man,⁴⁵

Where there is ground for believing that certain attributes may coexist in some manner inconceivable by us, the belief may indeed be called reasonable, as resting on sufficient grounds; but the object in which we believe is not an object of reason, but of faith,⁴⁶

Thus,

the fact that the Infinite is . . . universally incomprehensible, at once removes the corresponding object from that class of logical contradictions which we regard as impossible in fact as well as

43. H. L. Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought* (London: 1858, 18594) (Bampton lectures).

44. E.g., B. V. Lightman, *Henry Longueville Mansel and the Genesis of Victorian Agnosticism*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1978.

45. Mansel, *Limits* xxxi.

46. *Ibid.* xxxiii.

inconceivable in thought. To detect such contradictions it is necessary that we should have a distinct conception of both the repugnant members. Where no such conception exists, the object may be above reason, but it is not opposed to it: we may be warranted in believing the fact of its existence, though we may be unable to comprehend the mode.⁴⁷

Mansel proceeds to apply this principle to Scripture, as is evident from the text cited at the head of the first lecture: 'Ye shall not add unto the word which I shall command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it' (Dt. 4:2). He advances to the crux of the argument:

Many a man who rejects isolated portions of Christian doctrine, on the ground that they are repugnant to his reason, would hesitate to avow broadly and unconditionally that reason is the supreme arbiter of all religious truth; though at the same time he would find it hard to point out any particular in which the position of reason, in relation to the truths which he still retains, differs from that which it occupies in relation to those which he rejects.⁴⁸

The man who claims that his reason prevents his acceptance of any one element of revealed religion, or who accepts elements of it on the ground that they are reasonable, has unleashed a method which may lead to 'the overthrow of Christianity itself', for the exaltation of man's reason in principle overthrows all revelation.⁴⁹

Rationalism, if it retains any portion of revealed truth as such, does so, not in consequence, but in defiance of, its fundamental principle. It does so by virtually declaring that it will follow reason up to a certain point, and no further; though the conclusions which lie beyond that point are guaranteed by precisely the same evidence as those which fall short of it.⁵⁰

47. Mansel, *Limits* xxxiv.

48. *Ibid.* 1.

49. *Ibid.* 8.

50. *Ibid.* 10, 11.

By contrast, the 'right use of Reason in religious questions . . . is not to be found in the contents of that religion, but in its evidences'.⁵¹ Once the evidences are established and accepted as sufficient, the religion and its revelation must be accepted as a whole. Contrary allegations then take on a distinctive character:

The objections urged against a religion are not like the weights in a scale, which retain their full value, even when outweighed by the other side: - on the contrary, they become absolutely worthless, as soon as we are convinced that there is superior evidence to prove that the religion is true . . . In a matter of which we are so ignorant and so liable to be deceived, the objection which fails to prove everything proves nothing: from him that hath not, is taken away even that which he seemeth to have. And on the other hand, an objection which really proves anything proves everything. If the teaching of Christ is in any one thing not the teaching of God, it is in all things the teaching of man: its doctrines are subject to all the imperfections inseparable from man's sinfulness and ignorance. . . .⁵²

Many who would shrink with horror from the idea of rejecting Christ altogether, will yet speak and act as if they were at liberty to set up for themselves an eclectic Christianity.⁵³

The ground of acceptance of Christian religion in its every detail is that it is contained in the Bible, and what the Bible says, in turn, in every detail, 'must be unconditionally received, not as reasonable, nor as unreasonable, but as scriptural'.⁵⁴

Once convinced of the truth of the Christian religion, therefore, the believer must accept it all. It is not reasonable, but, on the contrary, essentially irrational, to seek an 'eclectic Christianity', for so to do is to overthrow the authority of revelation and substitute for it the authority of the believing subject, an incompetent authority. Difficulties within the revelation must be approached in faith, recognising that the whole religion is at stake in any one of them.

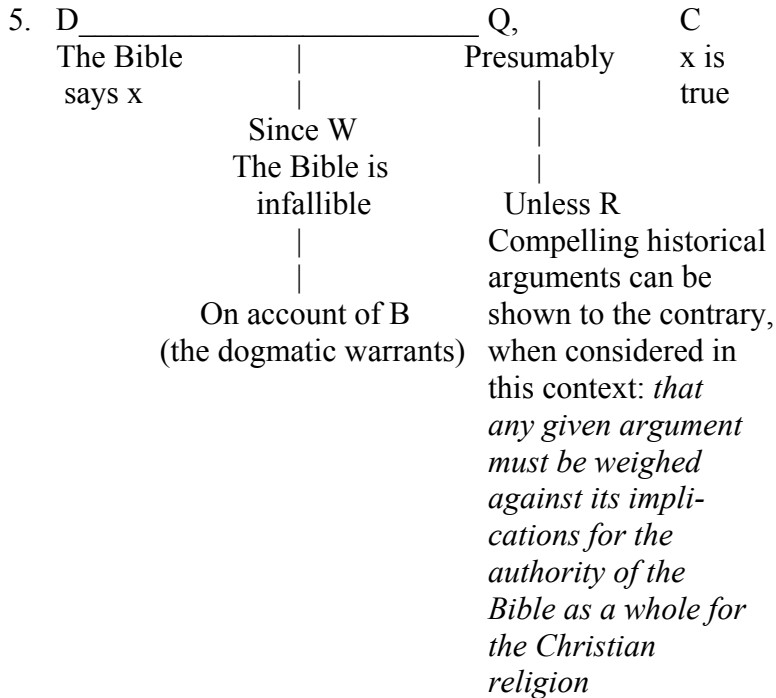
51. Mansel, *Limits* 152.

52. *Ibid.* 161.

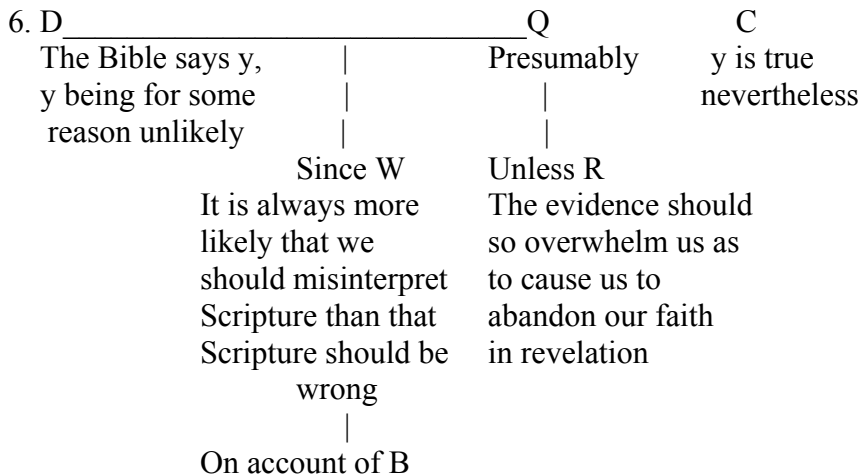
53. *Ibid.* 162.

54. *Ibid.* 118.

We may express this analytically as follows:



Or more precisely, thus:



All our knowledge of God comes from Scripture and from Scripture alone, so a challenge to the veracity of any part of Scripture is a challenge to the authority of the whole, setting in jeopardy every other element of the revelation.

The believer, that is to say, considers, in the words of Gerhard Ebeling, that the Bible is 'a special *historia sacra* or *scriptura sacra* in the ontological sense as a self-evident intellectual presupposition influencing his method of research'.⁵⁵ It worries him that one proven error might disprove his faith no more than it worried the Ptolemaic astronomer that one observation might destroy his system. For like any sophisticated intellectual system, infallibilism is able to deal with seeming contrary evidence without setting aside its 'self-evident intellectual presupposition'. It emerges from this that the abandonment of infallibilism, like the Copernican revolution, was no simple set of logical steps arising out of new discovery. It was an intellectual earthquake, both for the individuals who experienced it and for the theological community.⁵⁶

We see, then, how Mansel undergirds the Conservative defence of Scripture by expounding a concept of the role of revelation and its status which was in essence assumed by all who took up arms to defend infallibility in his generation and the one which followed. The possibility of rebuttal - increasingly admitted by the Conservatives as the debate progressed - on the grounds of historical criticism, was held side by side with the conviction, on dogmatic grounds, that every challenge to infallibility must either carry sufficient weight to overthrow the whole principle of Biblical authority, or it must fail. An argument, therefore, which to a Critic appeared unanswerable, could be given an answer which, to the Critic, appeared implausible; but, to the Conservative, such an answer was necessarily - and reasonably - more plausible than that his whole system of understanding Scripture as authority should collapse.

55. G. Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Eng. tr.) (London: 1963) 47.

56. A clear parallel presents itself between such an account of the debates about criticism and the theoretical understanding of intellectual change adumbrated by T. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: 1962) and elsewhere. It must await development on another occasion.

IV

We have ranged wide over the field of nineteenth-century debate. It remains to attempt a perspective on these momentous developments. One of the difficulties of any such assessment is that this story is, of course, a chapter in our own autobiography as scholarly defenders of what we take as our own tradition. Another is that, plainly, evangelicals today have not resolved those questions which lie beneath the surface of the Criticism debate, about the relations of dogmatic and historical warrants and the role of the critical reason in interpreting the Scripture. One must therefore proceed with some care.

The nineteenth-century crisis broke upon a consensus doctrine which evangelicals shared with all mainstream 'Christians': that Holy Scripture was, *ex hypothesi*, infallible. As this *ex hypothesi infallibilism* came under pressure during the first part of the century, there was loosed on its opponents a mounting torrent of apologetic. With the broader dissemination of Continental Critical ideas in the middle of the century it was felt to be increasingly necessary to respond *ad hominem*, on the merits of the Critical case, and to this end, for example, the T. and T. Clark Foreign Theological Library was started in 1846, making available German Conservative works to the British public.

Imperceptibly, as the debate progressed, the ground occupied by the Conservatives shifted. While, generally, they continued to believe the Bible to be infallible, they began to acknowledge the validity *in themselves* of the historical criteria which the Critics took to be absolute. The middle position to which this took the Conservatives was still infallibilism (in that they still believed the Bible to be infallible), but it was infallibilism-on-the-merits, *de facto*. This was substantially the position early taken up by Westcott and his colleagues in the field of the New Testament, and had the effect of largely removing the New Testament from the debate about Criticism and Scripture until that debate had been largely resolved. Dogmatic warrants had been laid aside, and, *de facto*, its infallibility apparently preserved.

Willis B. Glover and others have pointed to the example of the New Testament developments as providing a major incentive to the Conservatives to seek a reversal in the Old Testament field along similar lines, without benefit of dogma.⁵⁷ This is the source of the calls for a 'truer' and 'better' Criticism which increasingly took the place of denunciations of Criticism as such during the later years of debate. It was, of course, to no avail. Julius Wellhausen did not go the way of F. C. Baur. But - operating with other factors - it enticed the Conservatives sufficiently on to the ground of historical argument as to make their defeat inevitable. Without their dogmatic warrants they could never regain an infallible Bible, even should they have been rewarded with reversals on particular issues for the dominant German school. By re-stating infallibilism as somehow the fruit of historical study rather than its presupposition they adopted a strategy which proved itself to be fatally flawed,

The end was swift. While in 1880 the Conservatives were still the major party, ten years or so later, through death and desertion, they were merely a rump. It is little wonder that when the new century began there were few evangelicals with a generally Conservative stance on Scripture, or that the tale of their achievements during the years which followed was as David Wright found it to be in his recent survey.⁵⁸ In contrast to the Germans before them and, especially, the Americans after, British Conservatives never succeeded in initiating a school of Biblical scholarship which could operate under fire without constant re-appraisal and concession, and maintain its logic as a fruit of dogmatic reflection.

The *de facto infallibilism* of those who sought to defend the high view of Scripture on the merits of the historical critical case soon yielded to a position which was not infallibilism at all, and it is not in doubt that the positions of even the firmer evangelicals of the early years of this century were substantially removed from the orthodox consensus of the middle of the

57. W. B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists*, *passim*.

58. D. F. Wright, 'Soundings in the Doctrine of Scripture in British Evangelicalism in the First Half of the Twentieth Century', *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980) 87-106.

last. The more recent revival of the older position of W. Lee and J. Bannerman via Old Princeton and its tradition represents the re-establishment of something which was all but extinguished in scholarly circles in this country.

It is perhaps in keeping with this decline in its concern for dogmatic questions that the British evangelical movement gave birth to a Tyndale Fellowship for *Biblical Research*,⁵⁹ whereas the need for Conservative Biblical research becomes evident, of course, only after dogmatic reflection, and the disastrous last decades of the nineteenth century lacked not Conservative Biblical scholars but dogmaticians who could set a dogmatic context for Biblical studies, and provide their colleagues with a *raison d'être* for Conservatism. For it was not reversals on particular critical questions that led to the abandonment by British scholars generally of confidence in the infallibility of Holy Scripture. Infallibilism is a system which - rightly, not wrongly - can cope with any challenge if its defenders will but refrain from dismantling it themselves in a misguided apologetic strategy. What led to the break-up of the infallibilist consensus in nineteenth-century Britain was a loss of confidence in its dogmatic warrants. The result was an attempt to hold them in tandem with warrants historical and critical, which latter imperceptibly took over in the Conservatives' self-understanding. The way was paved for their abandonment of the position they had set out to defend. For there was not then, any more than there is now, a cogency in maintaining Conservative views of this or that passage of Scripture or issue in biblical debate, without prior commitment to a position which must be described as 'dogmatic' rather than 'historical' or 'critical'. Or so, at least, the nineteenth-century débâcle may be considered to suggest.⁶⁰

59. The recent addition to the name (now the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research) may prove ultimately to be of great significance, but the fact that the Tyndale Lectures in 'theology' are 'Biblical' or 'Historical' further illustrates the thesis of this paper.
60. This paper is partly culled from the author's *Criticism in Controversy. Conservative Biblical Interpretation and Higher Criticism in Nineteenth-Century Britain: a Study in a Conflict of Method*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1981.