

THE NEW CHURCH AND  
CURRENT OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

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Old Testament scholarship is a diverse and changing field, with a history all its own. It is not a unit that can be pinned down precisely with a few words. In a sense, its beginnings are ancient, for contradictions in the letter of Scripture were pointed out even in early Christian times. Scholars worried about the size of certain numbers, and inconsistency in them. But it was a Frenchman, Astruc, in the late eighteenth century, whose observations on the Divine names began the modern story. Then, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a German named Julius Wellhausen brought to bear on the Old Testament, a systematic Hegelian philosophy, and reconstructed a history of Israel with basic differences from that presented by the literal sense itself. It was his work, presented in detail and with compelling intellect, that shook the Christian churches, and is the source of much of the doubt that remains concerning the role of Biblical scholarship in religion.

Much has happened since that time. At first, Wellhausen's conclusions won wide acceptance in the scholarly world. But to continue the story to the present time, I should like to use the words of a British scholar, a sound and judicious man, H. H. Rowley. These words are selected from his introduction to *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (Oxford, 1951).

. . . during the first World War, there was a broad agreement amongst the scholars of the world on a large number of questions concerning [the Bible]. . . Towards the text of the Old Testament, as represented by the Massoretic Hebrew, there was a rooted suspicion, and commentators vied with each other in the ingenuity with which it was emended. . . On questions of the date and authorship of the books of the Old Testament there was also wide agreement. Individual scholars might be found who differed more or less. . . Yet all of these differences affected details only, and not the broad picture. . . There was scant interest in the theology of the Old Testament, because the very term implied a unity that was felt to be wholly lacking.

Today the whole scene is changed. . . Many of the conclusions that seemed most sure have been challenged, and there is now a greater variety of view on many questions than has been known for a long time. . . This does not mean, however, that scholars have turned their backs on the

work of their predecessors, and repudiated them and all their ways. . . . There has been progress, rather than revolution in this field of study.

In general, it may be said that there has been a tendency towards more conservative views on many questions than were common. . . . These more conservative views are not shared by all scholars, though they are widespread. . . . They are hailed sometimes as evidence of the failure of critical scholarship, and as the justification of the older conservatism. . . . This is quite inaccurate and misleading. For they are reached by the critical method, and must be accounted among its fruits.

This, then is the picture of current Old Testament scholarship which you may have in mind. Its outstanding features are diversity of opinion, a general tendency toward greater conservatism, and a wholehearted defense of the validity of critical method itself. The way in which the present situation has been reached is not entirely clear. It is too early to be writing the history of what has happened in our own time. But one factor may be mentioned. As critical method was accepted by church scholars, it was gradually changed. The deeper theological presuppositions had their effect. In some measure, this has brought about both the conservatism and the diversity; and even the defense of critical method may possibly be related to the fact that such method has been found serviceable to the theology of many churches.

The New Church is in a special position in regard to Biblical scholarship. The Writings have much to say not only about the spiritual sense of the Word, but also about its literal sense. In broad generalization, we may distinguish three main possible lines of approach to the relationship between New Church doctrine and Old Testament scholarship. First, it may be held that Swedenborg deals with spiritual matters only, and scholarship with external matters only, so that both are right, and there is no conflict. Second, it may be held that Swedenborg's treatment of the literal sense reflects his own times, and has been superseded, although his teaching concerning spiritual things remains valid. Third, it may be held that Swedenborg's statements concerning the literal sense are fact, while current scientific conclusions are hypothesis.

It must first be stated that there is, in fact, an area of overlap between the Writings and Old Testament scholarship, and that there is conflict. To illustrate this, one needs look no farther than the first chapter of Genesis. Swedenborg refers to this as taken verbatim from the Ancient Word (S. 103). To scholarship, however, it is in its present form the product of priestly thought

during or after the exile. Swedenborg's affirmation is integral to his theology, and cannot be termed a reflection of the science of his day. The scholarly view rests firmly on widely-held critical principles. The disagreement is deep and basic; it cannot honestly be avoided or even minimized.

The only way to choose between the two points of view is to examine the premises underlying each. These will be the source of the differences in details. The most conspicuous feature of Swedenborg's teaching concerning the Word is that the Word is utterly unique. It is the link between the Lord and this earth; on it the existence of this earth depends. It is unique in style, containing a spiritual sense even in the least particulars. And in keeping with its unique nature, it was given by the Lord to men by unique means, that is, dictation.

To the Biblical scholar, however, the Bible cannot be so made an exception to normal rules of analysis. One may not take as a scientific premise the assertion that this book is essentially unique, or that it was written in unique fashion. Further, there often enters into scholarly thinking a view of man as making gradual spiritual progress, at least during historical times, out of pagan polytheism into Old Testament monotheism. Such a view is bound to color one's idea of what Moses or Abraham might have said or thought. Both the inability to affirm the uniqueness of the Word and the overall view of the history of man into which it must be fitted have their inevitable effect upon the conclusions which a scholar will draw.

It is worth noting at this point that Swedenborg's claims for the uniqueness of the Word are not mere assertions. They are given a rational basis as integral parts of a whole theological structure. If one removes this teaching of the uniqueness of the Word, the essential link between God and man is removed. Further, this uniqueness is demonstrated in the extensive treatment of Genesis, Exodus, and Revelation. But for these very reasons it is not easy to present the New Church view of Scripture adequately to anyone who is not familiar with the premises on which it rests. To rely on blunt assertion is to abandon the method of the Writings themselves; but we rarely have the time to present a "demonstration at length."

Yet surely, New Church people should, with their unmatched resources, have the ability to lead others toward a more profound

understanding of the nature and meaning of the Word. With this end in view, then, the remainder of the present essay will be devoted to an admittedly random survey of features of our present situation. What are some of our opportunities? What are some of the possible pitfalls? What are our needs, and what are our assets?

Certain basic things are virtually axiomatic, but deserve to be called to mind as a framework for further discussion. Our prime asset is the Writings, with their immense breadth and depth and ever-present balance.

Our prime need is to become embodiments of these truths, of their breadth and depth and balance. Intellectually, this means avoiding both underemphasis and overemphasis on any given point. More profoundly, it means wedding a constant charity to a just discernment in our dealings with all, whether they agree or disagree with us.

With this in mind, let us proceed to some relatively specific consideration of the New Church in contact with Biblical scholarship.

The importance of presuppositions or premises has already been mentioned, and this one central matter stands out above all the rest as the source of all difference and similarity. For we know that all a man's thoughts stem ultimately from his idea of God, and take their essential quality from that idea. Nowhere is this more evident than in avowedly religious matters in general; and in Biblical study, even in the scholarly world, it is more often evident than it is recognized. For the scholar who tries to reconstruct definite historical events behind the Biblical accounts will inevitably use as a guide his own notions as to how God acts. These notions will stem, in turn, from his knowledge of how God has acted toward him, in his own personal experience. If he has witnessed nothing which he considers a miracle, then Biblical miracles will be inherently improbable. Presumably, he will not feel the need of proving this point. Statements concerning dictation of Scripture will be distasteful to many people simply because they find no such phenomenon in their own experience, or find no reason for such a phenomenon.

The first step in any hypothetical discussion with a scholar, then, is to agree on this basic fact which applies to us all: namely that ultimate belief has played and continues to play a decisive role

in Biblical study. Without such agreement, further discussion is likely to be fruitless.

In regard to this point we have a possible (if somewhat dangerous) ally in the growing recognition of mind-matter phenomena, and in the breakdown of mechanistic theories of causation in all the sciences. The whole question of what is possible on this earth is beginning to be opened for reconsideration, and we may be able to gain a hearing from time to time for the point of view that belief in miracles, for instance, helps to make miracles possible. Certainly, it is increasingly possible to point out the perils of imposing our own canons of scientific logic upon Biblical events. This is something which scholars themselves seek to avoid. If we can make observations that it is being done, we will be heard.

In this regard, we need as always to be faithful to the balance and sanity of the Writings. Present-day thinking is justly skeptical of the notion that God can do anything, however irrational, or that His ways toward men are utterly incomprehensible to men. The New Church alone can demonstrate the Divine order underlying the miraculous, and particularly the Divine concern for the salvation of men that is evidenced therein. We need to present miracles, not as arbitrary, but as Divinely purposeful.

As a specific example, we might take the question of dictation as a means of revelation. We could easily abuse this, making it essentially irrational. Such a position the Writings avoid. Dictation takes place according to law, using such things as are in the memory of the human agent (H. 256). Further, the very nature of the Word as the containant of the internal senses is the rational justification for the use of this means. It is not arbitrary, but is for the sake of the salvation of men, where errors or inaccuracies would be cumulatively disastrous. This framework of dictation is vitally important, for we must at all costs avoid the suspension of rational thought which is too commonly associated with belief in direct Divine intervention in the affairs of men. This is particularly important in dealing with people who have disciplined minds.

In connection with this consideration of the means of giving the Word, it should be noted that most Christian scholars have not abandoned the notion of an inspired Scripture. In their opinion and belief, God *has* acted, but always in perfect accord with natural law, so that scientific principles may validly be

applied to the Bible. The weakness of this view is not in a denial of Divine inspiration, but in the narrow view that identifies Divine law with natural order as we ordinarily perceive it. In our belief in a Divine order, we have sufficient common ground with scholarship to provide a basis for discussion, provided this common ground is mutually recognized. We can take advantage of this situation by embodying the balanced rationality of the Writings.

In brief, we must not allow current Biblical scholarship to drive us into the fundamentalist fold, to lead us to elevate Divine omnipotence above Divine order or Divine love. It is quite true that the Writings affirm the historical accuracy of the Biblical narratives from Genesis 12 on (cf. A. 2607), but they also, on occasion, point out contradictions in the literal sense (A 90252, cf. S. 51). And even the explicit affirmations of historical accuracy ought not to be magnified out of proportion. Number 1468 of the *Arcana*, for example, in reference to a statement of Abram to Sarai in Genesis 12:11, says,

It is historically true that Abram so said to his wife, when journeying into Egypt; but as before said, all the historicals of the Word are representative, and all the words are significative. No other historicals are recorded in the Word, and in no other order, and no other words are used to express them, than such as in the internal sense may express these arcana.

The emphasis here is a faithful reflection of that of the Writings in general. Historical accuracy is not the prime purpose or criterion of Scripture. It is present, but the spiritual sense governs. It is this emphasis that we need to preserve, not for the sake of intellectual popularity, but in order to be true to the Writings.

This brings us to another matter of importance, the presentation to others of the spiritual sense. The New Church has always had to defend itself against charges of allegorizing Scripture. It has not been easy to find a vocabulary which describes the nature of the spiritual sense in a manner adequate to us and at the same time clear to the person not personally familiar with the Writings.

The Writings themselves point to Scriptural evidence for the existence of the spiritual sense (A. 66, 1540, to Psalm 78 and Luke 24:27 regarding which cf. Rev. John King's article in the *Messenger* of March 1, 1961). There is overwhelming evidence in the writings of the early Christian church that non-literal interpretation of the Old Testament was considered perfectly legitimate.

The whole substance of the Epistle to the Hebrews might be cited here, where there is a parallel between the Exodus and delivery from sin. The headings to the chapters of Old Testament books in the King James Version contain many references to Christ.

All this is not, of course, unknown to modern scholarship, and what is known as "typology" is recognized as a permissible, if somewhat risky, method of Bible study. Roughly defined, typology is the seeing of certain principles underlying a narrated event, and equating them with principles manifest in current events, so that the first event is a "type" or analogue to the later one, and the later one fulfills and gives clearer meaning to the prior. A quotation from *Essays on Typology* by G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe may be of interest.

It was the immense task of the early Christian preachers and teachers . . . to establish a relationship of prophecy to fulfillment, type to antitype, image to reality between the events of Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension, and the familiar pattern of Old Testament religious thought, grounded in the more ancient historical series of Creation, the Exodus, Sinai and the Covenant, the Davidic Kingdom, and the insights of the great prophets into their significance and their implications. . . . This task had to be carried out. . . . It was necessary to the Christian understanding of the Gospel, and all the indications show that it was a process initiated by Christ himself.

This presents an argument that most of us have heard for the spiritual sense. But it is not to be thought that this is in full agreement with New Church teaching. There is in scholarly typology no notion that the Old Testament was actually written in order to embody the inner life of the Lord, no hint of the organic nature of spiritual-natural correspondences; nor is there any suggestion that typology can be carried into least particulars. Yet there is enough common ground to stand on; there is a chance to make ourselves clear, a particularly valuable chance to present our view of the spiritual sense without being open to the charge of allegory.

The differences are considerable. They involve the Lord's foreknowledge and His providence in least things, which are surely basic teachings. Nonetheless, we may expect a hearing, since correspondences are essentially reasonable. They are not arbitrary, and they do not abolish the literal sense. The internal sense is consecutive, and takes account of context. All these

things need to be pointed out. Above all, the internal sense residing in the letter has extraordinary power to illumine our souls; to let us see ourselves in the Lord's light, to cut through our confusions. Ultimately, it is our own living of the Word which will make us able to present it to others.

One final matter may be mentioned in passing, before concluding, namely that of the textual criticism of the Old Testament. Recent years have brought to light almost an abundance of manuscripts from the early centuries of the Christian era and before. They have shown that while the traditional Hebrew text is basically faithful to extant traditions from before the Lord's time, there were then differences of varying importance. Particularly in the books of Samuel, in Jeremiah, and in Daniel, there are some substantial differences. We cannot treat this lightly or arbitrarily. Our church needs to take account of this, possibly by investigating the spiritual signification of actual variations, at least by offering a rational framework within which the phenomenon of text variation is understandable theologically. This we owe to ourselves as well as to others.

To summarize: Biblical scholarship has been changing during the last generation, in a direction which is mainly favorable to the New Church. We cannot claim to be vindicated by scholarship, or say that the premises of Biblical criticism have been abandoned. Yet there are points of contact emerging, through which we may be able to lead toward a fuller knowledge, a more profound understanding of Scripture. The prime necessity for us is to live our doctrines, to write the Book of Life in our hearts. This is the end to which the Word was given, and we will not understand the Word unless we embrace it. In this way only can we truly understand it, and convey its meaning to our fellow men.

#### COMMENTS ON THE ADDRESS

##### *Abridged from Tape Recording*

It has been a marvelous experience to hear this calm, rational, logical description of what could be a very frenzied battleground. The great illusion that the Bible critics are basing their opinions on something that is absolutely established, if we believe it because of insufficient investigation or lack of understanding of the na-

ture of proof, could make us very nervous about those opinions. The ideas that what the Bible says is not true conflict with things we have cherished ever since we were children, and we feel that they may be supported by incontrovertibly proved facts. But Mr. Dole has made it very clear that the Bible critics themselves base their *facts* on certain *opinions* they have! There is no unprejudiced Bible scholar; there will never be an unprejudiced translation of the Old Testament or the New Testament; because, whether people recognize it or not, they have such things as their idea of God that make them see what they want to see and believe what they want to believe.

Let me use a mundane example: Do you think Commander Shepard really did take that flight? You saw it on television, but what did you see? A few scenes that were easy to stage. And then they said that the film of his being brought aboard the carrier was destroyed accidentally! What do you suppose is behind all that?

This is the type of argument that was presented just a few weeks ago about Yuri Gagarin by people who did not want to believe that he did what he did. There is ample evidence on either side of either question, and on either question anyone has a right, that no one can take away from him, to believe it if he wants to believe it, and to doubt it if he wants to doubt it.

What is proved incontrovertibly is such a small amount of stuff, none of which is important, that it is hardly worth thinking about. There are important ideas that we cherish for what might be called "no good reason"; we believe them because we believe them. Most of our knowledge is based on such things, and it is not wrong that it should be.

Mr. Dole has taken up this general subject in a field where it is terribly important. The idea that Bible study can be based on "facts" is itself a kind of religion. The "facts," on which we have the impression the Bible critics are basing their ideas, are sometimes not really there. There is no real threat to the truth from any side. There may be a threat to our understanding of it, but if we are as calm and rational as the speaker recommends that we be, we will be prepared to adjust our opinions when we find that they are wrong. But our faith can rest firmly on what we believe to be true. We believe without proof that what we now think is true will turn out to be true; that, as more evidence

comes in, there will be more support for what we believe. We cannot be too inflexible about it, but we must keep in mind the teaching about the negative and affirmative principles:

There are . . . two principles; one of which leads to all folly and insanity, and the other to all intelligence and wisdom. The former principle is to deny all things, or to say in the heart that we cannot believe them until we are convinced by what we can apprehend, or perceive by the senses; this is the principle that leads to all folly and insanity, and is to be called the negative principle. The other principle is to affirm the things which are of doctrine from the Word, or to think and believe within ourselves that they are true because the Lord has said them; this is the principle that leads to all intelligence and wisdom, and is to be called the affirmative principle. (AC 2568: 4)

The thing that we must continue to think about all our lives is why it is that we believe the Lord has said these things. We need to examine the evidence along those lines. Our speaker has given us a good outline of what our approach should be.

KENNETH ROSE

I have had to do a great deal of studying in higher criticism myself, and know something of its terrors. As the speaker pointed out, however, the higher critics do differ from each other considerably, and that is one of our greatest comforts. I remember having to learn the contents of the so-called "Document Q"—a document written by an unknown author, on which most of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were based. I had to learn it cold, but six months later there was no "Document Q"; it no longer exists. The critics do differ, and they do change, but the critics have things to say which we must pay attention to.

To me one of the best answers to the critics is a very simple answer: that a God who is powerful enough to reveal Himself is powerful enough to preserve His revelation. An illustration is found in the Writings in connection with the Pauline epistles, which have not the internal sense and are therefore not part of the Word of God. Why are they included in the Bible? The Lord foresaw that the Christian church would fall; He foresaw that the epistles would appeal to Christianity more than do the Gospels; He therefore provided that the Pauline epistles be included in the canon of the New Testament in order that the falsities of fallen Christianity might be based on that which does not have the internal sense. For if they were based on that which has

the internal sense, violence would be done to heaven itself (see S.D. 4824). That to me is a beautiful illustration of the idea that the Lord has not only given this revelation, but has also preserved it from the beginning, so that the Word, as it is now revealed in the Writings, will have from beginning to end the continuous internal sense.

ORMOND DEC. ODHNER

There are rumors at times that the Bible is to be discredited because of some discovery or other. The Dead Sea scrolls at one point were supposed to have proved, not only that the Bible had not been preserved rightly, but that its inspiration was impossible to determine because there were too many manuscripts, differing from each other. The simple point of view that a New Church man must take is that the Lord has preserved that text which contains an internal sense. We know that the Writings do accredit the Word as having a spiritual sense; it has to be the spiritual sense of something definite. The various schools, from Wellhausen down, have differed in their interpretations of what the text should be, how it came about, and when it was written. The real question is whether there is a text that contains the internal sense that Swedenborg was commissioned to reveal. We can find opinions to confirm any doubts or difficulties, but if we wait just a year for the panic to subside about each newly discovered manuscript, and use our common sense, we will find that what seemed to confirm some doubt is actually a confirmation of the truth the Writings have been speaking of all along. The Dead Sea scrolls now are realized to represent above all the marvelous way in which the Massoretic text, which is the printed Hebrew Bible of today, has been preserved, with hardly any changes of account!

Let us not argue about when it was written. It *was* written, and probably by the mode in which most people write, by gradual accretion of the elements about which they write. I believe with Wellhausen that there were two records of the creation story in Genesis, and that they may have come down through two different tribes. But the story as finally written in the Ancient Church actually does tell the story of a spiritual reformation and a celestial regeneration of mankind. The Noah story may have had two

sources. One can separate out certain verses that use the word *El* for God, and another set of verses using *Y'howah*, and make a fair story out of each. But what does it matter, after all? The Word was written so that it should have an internal sense, and that sense is the purpose of it.

They now have the book of Isaiah cut up into not only two parts, but four or five. The first part is up to the 39th chapter; it describes things from the point of view of one who has not experienced the fall of Jerusalem. In the others, Jerusalem is lying in ruins, but God is giving great new promises and new hopes. Supposing there were two authors—does it matter? I think it matters not a whit! The Lord refers to the Psalms as David's, but some of them were not written by David. In Mark 1:2 there is a reference to a prophecy under the name of one prophet when it was written by another! But in those days scrolls were written in such a way that a scroll might begin "The Words of Isaiah the Prophet" and then continue with other prophetic writings appended. I do not know whether it was done in this case; I leave that to the critics, if they like to do that sort of thing. But the spiritual sense in these books, and in the whole Word, is continuous as constructed, and as Swedenborg received it, and as he saw its spiritual meaning.

HUGO L. J. ODHNER

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## PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES

*Mathematicians and Philosophy.* Why is it that many philosophers were mathematicians also? One recalls many of them easily—Pythagoras, desCartes, Leibnitz, Kant, Russel—and many others who if not mathematicians used mathematical arguments—Aristotle, Plato—or others whose writings presume to depend upon the strictest arguments of mathematics or logic—Spinoza, Hegel—or those who, although not mathematicians, as philosophers struck out against mathematicians with reasonings solid enough to indirectly affect the course of mathematics itself—Berkeley—or those who if not philosophers applied mathematics to nature in such a manner as to influence the course of philosophy—Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Einstein, Heizenberg, Schroedinger.