

TIME-BOUNDNESS of Scriptures-1

We are told by many today that the Bible is "time-bound" and that we must accept this as a way out of our modern dilemmas. If Scripture is "time-bound" what ought to be our attitude to it? Other sources must be listened to in order to come to an understanding of God's Word for today. It is being suggested that we listen to Marx, Freud, sociologists such as Erich Fromm, C.. Wright Mills, and to non-Christian religions as well. In all these various forms of non-Christian humanism and comparative religions we are supposed to be able to discover pointers to the Truth as revealed by the Triune God (cf. pp. 15, 24 ff. Dr. K. Strijd: Ruimte, Richting, Gestalte, Enkele Gedachten over Functionele Dogmatiek.)

The effects of this view of Christ and the Scriptures are felt in modern theologians' attitudes towards the miraculous and the demonic. Many theologians cannot accept the miraculous in the Bible. The Biblical data are considered to be in disagreement with the reality of science as the Bible presupposes a supernatural metaphysical world that basically can neither be recognized nor embraced by modern man. Ben Smillie explained in an article entitled: *Why Fundamentalists Are Wrong* that all who accept the infallibility and authority of the Bible "try to make Jesus in His lifetime a divine all knowing superman rather than a Jew of the first century. The argument that Jesus had some occult and divine vision is to deny the Incarnation. The Word became a flesh and blood person, not a divine all-knowing being wearing a human SantaClaus costume" (p. 20 *The United Church Observer*. May 15, 1967).

What does one do about the miracles in the Bible? They don't need to be accepted as true. Miracles are "time-bound." In ancient times people thought mythologically, and thus miracles are aids to faith but have no content as such. The view is that in the New Testament times wonderworks were common. "In Greece the god Asclepius was credited with endless feats of healing, and the inscriptions discovered in the ruins of the Asclepieion at Athens or of the temple of Epidaurus in Argolis gave long lists of marvelous cures. The wonderworks attributed to Apollonius of Tyana (born about 4 B.C.) by Philostratus, his biographer, are so strikingly like those attributed to Jesus, that the similarity was once widely ascribed to conscious intent, but now is understood to be the reflection of an all but universal way of thinking. As for Palestine, both the Talmud and Midrash describe typical miracles performed by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai and his disciples, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, magicians like Elymas." With a statement like this the miraculous in the New Testament is neatly explained away. The demonic does not fare any better in the hands of the modern theologian. Since Jesus was "time-bound" He was just accepting the current beliefs of His day as far as the demonic is concerned. It is alleged that our Lord simply adapted Himself to the existence of the devils as described by the evangelists and to then current beliefs. Our Lord was just mistaken, like His contemporaries, when it came to science, Old Testament, angels or devils.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The current discussion on the "time-boundness" of Scripture is not so new. To believe that only now the light has dawned and deep theological insights and understanding have been gained is the height of folly and arrogance. Humility is still a virtue! History has much to teach us. "There are those who think that the new age is so very new that nothing that approved itself to past ages can conceivably be valid now There are old things which ought to remain in the new age; and many of things both good and bad, which the new age regards as new are really as old as the hills." These words by J. Gresham Machen were written many years ago, but they still carry a valid message for today. In our twentieth century it has become quite fashionable to commit spiritual adultery, leave the Scriptures, and flirt with every new philosophy that appears on the scene.

The term "the time-boundness" of Scripture can be traced to the Enlightenment (Rationalism) of the 18th century. The age of Enlightenment was the beginning in a sense of the attack upon the authority of the Bible for it put philosophy and human thought in a position of authority. Man had become of age and his own lord and master. Only what is reasonable can be true.

A theologian at the university of Jena Heinrich E.G. Paulus (1761-1848) believed that a Christian was not obligated to believe in miracles. His salvation, according to him, didn't depend on this teaching. Of course he could not avoid the fact that the gospels portray miracles as factual truth, as having happened in time and space. He thought however, that the evangelists spoke about miracles because they couldn't see them, with their limited knowledge, as natural events. The only miracle this theologian accepted as true was the supernatural birth of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Paulus, the enlightened theologian, could not believe in miracles, and therefore he wanted to explain them away. Through the insights of people like Paulus, many of the teachings about Jesus Christ that had been with the church for nearly 1800 years were now being lost. New dimensions were added by Karl August Hase (1800-1890) who wrote a book about Jesus in 1829. In his treatment of the miracles he follows the theologian Paulus. But he goes a step further by showing how much Jesus in his life and thought were deeply rooted in the culture and life of his Jewish contemporaries. Jesus is neither above nor beyond time. Only later does Jesus liberate Himself from His "time-boundness" and environment. (cf. pp. 34ff. Gunter Speicher. *Maar Doden Kunnen Ze Hem Niet. Op Zoek Naar De Historische Jesus.*)

Adolph Harnack (1851-1930), often acknowledged as the greatest Protestant historian of the late 19th century, in his work (*Das Wesen des Christentums* (The English title of the book by this Berlin professor is, *What is Christianity?*)) expressed a relatively extreme form of liberalism. Harnack warns that we should not get too bothered about such matters as miracles, or belief in demons or the second coming Jesus Christ. These events and teachings are only part of the framework in which the gospel is presented; they are not essentially connected with the gospel but merely belong to the age in which they were written. The essential gospel is entirely independent of all these things. As a result Harnack eliminated much that is essential to the Christian faith.

The symbol of liberalism on the North American continent in the early part of this century was Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969). His numerous books, radio broadcasts and the many articles which found their way into the *Reader's Digest* influenced many. His most devastating book was *The Modern Use of the Bible*. Through this work he managed to alienate many conservatives within Protestantism. Fosdick asserted that he "did not have to believe anything simply because it was in the Bible. How stunning that conclusion was, it is not easy for an educated mind to understand" (p. 52. H.E. Fosdick. *The Living of These Days*.) In the tradition of older liberalism, he viewed Scripture as "time-bound." His views on vital doctrines of Scripture leave not a shadow of a doubt where his sympathies were. He said about the virgin birth: "It was the Greek world in which virgin births were a common way of explaining universal personalities" (p. 159 H.E. Fosdick. *The Man From Nazareth*.) He had but contempt for the miraculous in Scripture. "To suppose that a man in order to be a loyal and devout disciple of our Lord in the twentieth century A.D. must think that God in the ninth century B.C. miraculously sent bears to eat unruly children or made an axe head swim seems to me dangerously ridiculous. Folk who insist on that kind of literal inerrancy in ancient documents are not Fundamentalists at all: they are incidentals" (p. 163 H.E. Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible*.)

The discussion on the "time-boundness" of Scripture has a rather lengthy history. Its concept is rooted in various theological and philosophical trends. Today this same topic has its departure in existentialism. The name to mention here is of course Rudolf Bultmann (1884-). This brilliant New Testament scholar has become famous for his "demythologizing" of the miraculous content of the New Testament. He scorns all philosophy as culture bound and transitory, but nonetheless exempts existentialism, as his theology is strongly influenced by Heidegger. Bultmann wanted to accommodate Christianity to the modern scientific mind but has not succeeded. He has been more successful, however, in diverting theologians from Biblical Christianity than he has won scientists to Christ. His influence has led to the emptying of many pews. Why go to church if there is not much to be believed?

Are we in tune with Scripture when we call it "time-bound?" To answer this question we should deal with Christ's and the apostles' view of the Bible. When you read the New Testament you discover that the same Old Testament which has been so roughly handled by many moderns is the same book from which Christ and the apostles quoted with authority. Furthermore, the miraculous and the demonic in the New Testament are considered to be factual truths. The miracles happened in space and time.

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November, 1974