

Fundamentalism versus Tradition

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Fundamentalism clearly is some kind of literalism, especially in biblical interpretation, a literalism sustained (for what are taken to be religious reasons) in the face of liberal and critical reconstructions and reinterpretations of the text. In fact, of course, the critical reconstructions are often undertaken for equally religious motives. Fundamentalism expresses and exploits the worries of believers; the residually Christian popular audience takes the passion-play literalism of Zeffirelli's television film with the same uncommitted tolerance as the modernist musicals "Godspell" and "Jesus Christ Superstar". Fundamentalism is widely influential among some theologians too. From the time of the Modernist crisis to the run-up to Vatican II, the Biblical Commission and the Holy Office imposed something very like fundamentalism on Catholic biblical studies. Professor Barr's book does not study such phenomena in detail, he is concerned with a Protestant fundamentalism of a more systematic kind, self-designated as conservative evangelicalism.¹ But there is enough of a family likeness between the fundamentalisms for Barr's critique to be serviceable in coming to terms with the recent past of Catholic biblical work, dead but not yet entirely prone.

There are three marks of the fundamentalism Barr has between his sights: the inerrancy of Scripture as an article of faith and necessary test of the orthodoxy of otherwise acceptable Protestantisms; sharp hostility to modern theology and biblical criticism; and exclusion of those who fail the inerrancy test from the ranks of true Christians. (p 1) Rightly, one begins to suspect that Barr has little sympathy for his subject, regarding it as a mistake in theology and a resistance to known critical truths. Barr has no hope of persuading fundamentalists to change their minds, though he does hope to help students make theirs up in more intelligent and deliberate fashion. More revealing is his other avowed purpose in writing, which is to counter the negative pressure of fundamentalism upon theology and biblical study, the evasion tactics and over-reactions to which biblical scholars are driven. (pp 9-10) It would have been helpful, if seemingly less modest, if Barr had declared his own position at this early point. He wishes, in fact, to combine

¹ *Fundamentalism* by James Barr. SCM London 1977. £3.95

a moderate conservatism in detailed biblical findings with a theological liberalism that implicitly claims its own continuity with "the older faith of the church":

"We have said all along that conservative opinion on matters of history, authorship of books, authenticity of sayings ascribed to Jesus, and so on is not necessarily fundamentalistic: there can be a legitimate conservative case on all these grounds that is quite distinct from a fundamentalist case depending on a full belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. On many points I would consider myself to take a conservative position of just this kind." (p 157)

"In any case, whatever our judgment on the question about the relation of divine and human in the person of Christ, we have seen ample reason to discount the claims of orthodoxy made by fundamentalists in a whole series of other matters, and the whole assertion of orthodoxy can be dismissed. I do not argue this, however, in order to suggest that conservative evangelicalism can be or should be criticised by others on the grounds that it is unorthodox or heretical. Obviously one could not so argue unless one was prepared oneself to take orthodoxy as the ideal and the measuring-staff, and I am not."
(p 172)

Between the lines of that last statement I read off Barr's determination to have his orthodoxy and to eat it: orthodoxy is to remain as an object to beat fundamentalists with; orthodoxy is to be grist to the molars of modern theology. Now I should prefer, on the whole, to state my position in precisely opposed fashion: to have my Robinsonian trajectories in the tradition before the Bible, expressed in the Bible, and shooting on through the tradition of the church; but also to recognise the plurality and only partial overlapping of directions, even within the New Testament, and the development of later heretical misnavigations. I wonder only what real and detailed differences it would make. Barr's biffing of the orthodoxy of fundamentalism is, however, typical of his methods of argument and refutation. His is a very controversial book, full of *argumentum ad hominem* and swingeing counter-statement not always later qualified. An examination of some examples of this may open up a way into the questions with which the book deals.

First, then, let us look at Barr's chapter on miracles and the supernatural. For conservatives belief in miracles and supernatural interventions makes it possible to give great historical value to a stratum in the gospel containing miracles and to attribute Isaiah 40-55 to Isaiah of Jerusalem. Barr counters such a position with the declaration that while most critical scholars believe in the more important miracles and the resurrection of Jesus, "It is not

clear, however, that this belief of ours can be incorporated within, or regarded as part of, the historical and literary task of explaining the origins of the various biblical books.” (p 236) This is surely an overstatement. Confronted with a theory that (i) miracles don't happen and (ii) any stratum including miracles must therefore take time to develop, or with a theory that collections of miracles belong to a Hellenistic stratum in which Jesus is portrayed as a *theios aner* (Hellenistic “divine man” and wonderworker), a mere willingness not to rule out miracles *a priori* would open up further possibilities simply in terms of sources and dates. But of course they are only a part of the task: if Jesus is not risen and the claim that he is stems from a mere deceit on the part of his original disciples, our picture of the gospels is surely transformed, and our assessment of the personality and suggestibility of Paul totally changed. Either belief in the resurrection or simple agnosticism must imply the incorporation of the possibility of miracle into the historical and literary account.

Again, Barr can see no way of including an element of supernatural prediction into his account of biblical prophecy and is therefore led to make some distinctly odd remarks about the normality of biblical persons and the theologically insignificant standing of prediction.

“The historical-critical approach to the dating and source-criticism of books has been one that establishes a detailed network of normal human relations connecting the various books, their authors and the circumstances in which they are thought to have lived.” (p 237)

“ . . . what the prophet or speaker could have understood or surmised as a normal human person in his own historical situation. . . .” (p 256)

“One has to consider how many of them [predictions] are better classed as warnings, as judgments, as promises, and as indications of the will of God. It would be easy to argue that the category of prediction is a non-biblical category. . . .” (p 255)

I do not wish to suggest that Paul of Tarsus was deranged, but when he writes “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” and lists himself last and least of the witnesses of the risen Lord in 1 Cor. 9 and 15, I must take him to be writing of an abnormal, if intelligible, experience. And to say that Jesus's own experience of God and of the action of God was abnormal and altogether exceptional is merely to expose the inadequacies of ordinary language. Nor can I understand how warnings and promises divinely grounded, as Jesus surely wished to claim, about what God was assuredly about to do, “Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power,” can possibly be said to be non-predictive, or not pre-

dictive save in theologically rather insignificant fashion. A Christian exegete must be both historian and believer. As historian he will be concerned with understanding the kingdom sayings both in the context of first century Jewish apocalyptic and in the uniqueness of Jesus's own proclamation; as believer he will want to affirm the divine grounding, which is not at all the same thing as claiming that the material contents of the prediction are so clearly trans-normal that they must have been supernaturally inserted into the mind of Jesus. Of course we are still faced with the problem of an apocalyptically intelligible proclamation that is both believed to be divinely grounded and, so far as compelling evidences go, apparently unfulfilled. But that is just what the battles of thoroughgoing, realised, inaugurated, demythologized eschatologies, as also theologies of hope and liberation theologies, have all been about.

Perhaps it is time for a clearer example of a Barr *argumentum ad hominem*, and again from the chapter on miracles. Professor Barr is ironically gleeful over the solemn conservative recitals and rejections of the more pedantic and foolish liberal explainings-away of the gospel text: Jesus walked on the shore, not on the sea; the angels of the resurrection were people in white clothes. But then Barr becomes more serious, and resentful of conservative thefts of liberals' clothing:

“. . . they welcome those rationalisations that make the event historically true but explain it as a natural event, God doing no more than to arrange a favourable concatenation of natural forces. This is fully intelligible, because we have seen throughout this study that their main interest is in securing an interpretation which, whatever its modes and presuppositions, will agree with the idea that the Bible is inerrant. A reduced and rationalised miracle, such as these interpretations give us, may be some sort of a weak and watery miracle, but it is no longer the God of the Bible.” (p 248)

Thus does the God of the Bible strike down believers in inerrancy!

When it suits his argument Barr has a very sweeping way with redaction criticism and with the sayings of Jesus tradition:

“But the intention of Matthew, Mark or Luke, according to the argument itself, is not to reproduce the words that Jesus spoke. All words in the Bible are expressions of their author's intentions: that tells us nothing, for their intentions could have been to invent a likely story, to embellish a legend, or anything. The mention of an Aramaic original is also entirely irrelevant. All this could mean would be that Jesus spoke a sentence in Aramaic, and that either Matthew, or Mark and Luke, or all three, misunderstood its meaning, and therefore stated it wrongly in Greek.” (p 59)

One might write that off as over-enthusiastic “biffing” of E. J.

Young, but a later passage suggests that Professor Barr may sometimes prove the more unfair the more he is himself uncertain. At p. 335 he returns to the question of the sayings of Jesus and remarks:

“There will now probably never be sayings of which we can say with certainty that Jesus of Nazareth actually spoke these words. . . .”

Despite the “probably” it looks as if Professor Barr is down off the fence and into the sceptics’ paddock. But the next sentence has him scrambling half-way back up:

“Or, at least, even those who personally take a more conservative line in these points will always do so in an atmosphere in which the positions just stated will still be present and active.”

At this later point in his argument Barr is concerned with an overlap between fundamentalists and other church members, the idea that:-

“the final guarantees of faith rest upon accurate historical narrations”, (p 334)

In the great tradition the final guarantee of faith is the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, while it is in the nature of history that historical narrations can be shown to be accurate only through external, contingent evidences and probabilities. Where the Jesus’s sayings tradition is concerned the “certainty” we ought to be arguing about is one that might be found in a body of sayings spoken in Aramaic and handed on in associated groups of religious communities in terms of their own needs and preoccupations, and translated into Greek in the only communities that have left us authorised records. It is possible to screen the sayings for distortions and additions using, e.g. N. Perrin’s triple criteria of dissimilarity, coherence, and multiple attestation (*Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, London 1967, pp 39-47). Such a process discloses a “certainty” beset with uncertainties, and the more ordinary church members learn about historical method the better for their theology. But as a piece of clarification Barr’s sweeping negative, with its misleading atomisation of the sayings, is distinctly unhelpful.

Perhaps what needs to be said most firmly here, in this area where history and theology necessarily overlap, is that some kind of historical finding could point most firmly in a direction away from faith; if, for example, D.H. Lawrence’s driven fancy of a Jesus happily restored from his wounds and living “for ever”, i.e. just long enough to give them time to ride off into the sunset, were fine, we would be faced with a moving story, but, whatever else, not with the Christian one. Historical evidences, and the Christian response to them, may be fairly plastic, but they cannot in simple honesty become infinitely so: otherwise we lay ourselves rightly open to that *Irrisio infidelium* of which St. Thomas speaks

(S. Th. I 32 c.) If nothing is to count against Christian faith, then it is a faith without intellectual content. But, in fact, as an incarnational religion with its boots stuck most firmly into the muddy earth—or perhaps one should say into a totally (divinely?) empty hole in the ground—such an indifference to history and its imperatives is for ever closed off to Christians. This is surely not fundamentalism, (and I think conceivably Professor Barr and myself might just be in agreement here), but the question about whether Christian faith is about anything at all.

The question about fundamentalism, and perhaps in the end of all Bible interpretation, comes down to the relationship between Bible, Church and Tradition. Here Professor Barr's thought is complex, as is the triple relationship he is considering. He acutely notes the tremendous part played by (fundamentalist) tradition in allegedly purely biblical fundamentalist circles, (p 11). More centrally, we must both allow the Bible to challenge and criticise our partial and fragmented traditions, (p 107):

“The question is whether within the life of the community room is made for the questioning of the tradition by the Bible.” and also consider critically Biblical doctrine within the community of the Church:

“[The words of Scripture] would be subject to the faults of human passions, defects and sins, and even taken as doctrine, where this is possible (for much of the Bible is not doctrine at all), they would not be final and infallible but would have to be considered and evaluated, respectfully, but also critically, by the community of the church.” (p 288)

Now there is a programme and a half! It will surely need to be followed out both in our particular fragmentary communities but also in the ecumenical world of biblical scholarship, and more fundamentally again, in the ecumenical great Church in so far as she exists.