

Is the Bible still Scripture?

by H Dan Beeby

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There is very little doubt that contemporary culture is in a state of disintegration. One of the acknowledged causes of social, political and religious deterioration is the absence of a commonly owned and valued narrative around which people can gather, and which gives society meaning and cohesion. Here, Dan Beeby introduces a Bible Society sponsored programme for the Recovery of Scripture, which seeks to place the biblical narrative at the heart of a renewed Church and society. It involves mission to the Church, to our own minds, and to the academic community, as a foundation to our engagement with the prevailing culture.

Asked which one of fifty books had most influenced them, fifty thousand readers of the Folio Society gave pride of place to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The Bible, in between *Don Quixote* and *Madam Bovary*, came in at number thirty five. Ironically, rejected by many as legend and myth, the Bible lost out to fable, fantasy and fiction. From being the Book of books around which Europe was fashioned, it now ranks below *The Wind in the Willows* and *Cold Comfort Farm*.

Questions

We should be grateful for such shocks. But after the shock treatment must come serious probing and questioning. What has happened to our culture which was once shaped by the story of the

Book? What will happen to the Church? And what is the future of Bible Society, which exists not only to distribute Bibles, but also enable the Church, through the use of the Bible, to engage in mission to contemporary culture?

Truth?

Much recent biblical scholarship takes it for granted that the Bible is one Scripture among many, and is not to be privileged above the *Koran* or the Hindu and Buddhist Scriptures. Similarly, church members often say that the Bible is true for them – or for the Church – with the clear implication that it is not uniquely so for *everyone* and for all time because God made it so, but that their own beliefs – or the Church's beliefs – constitute its truth. The teaching of

biblical studies in the universities in the last two hundred years has been done, not within the faith of the Church's creeds, but within the presuppositions and assumptions that have governed academia since the eighteenth century. Consequently, preachers have been trained within a view of reason which says "if you believe, you will not understand" and then ordained to proclaim "unless you believe, you will not understand". This is just one symptom of the crisis in which the Western Church finds itself.

Cohesion or Confusion?

For more than a thousand years, Europe's world-view was the world-view of the Bible. Consequently, we questioned the

world in the light of the Bible. The Bible was a unity, centred on Jesus Christ, and was true for the whole of life, not just the so-called "religious" elements. Today, we live in a different world-view which questions the Bible in the light of the culture, questions its unity, its authority and Jesus Christ as its centre, and squeezes its influence into a shrinking area for the shrinking minority who choose to attend church on Sunday. From a cohesive culture which acknowledged Scripture as the source of objective, public truth, we have moved to a confused culture which is apathetic, cynical or even hostile to the Bible's world-view. If the Bibles which Bible Society is distributing are being de-scripturised in the light of our modern and post-modern culture, then there is a word to all Bible agencies, and if so, is that word "mission"?

Mission

From the very beginning, the British and Foreign Bible Society has had close links with mission. It was founded at a time when many British-based missions were born, and it has lived in close relationship with mission ever since it translated, produced and distributed the Bibles which were foundational to the work of the missionaries. The missions needed the Society, and the Society existed for mission. The links were very strong, but they were built on the assumption that the Bible was Holy Scripture. A Bible that was mere literary classic or ancient religious history would have no value for mission; and countless devoted Christians would not have translated, produced and distributed classic literature and history for its own sake. This all took place within Christendom, of course. Now Christendom is dead, and we live in a culture that is under girded by wealth creation and the material well-being of the individual. If the assumptions of Christendom are universally questioned and doubted, it is right that Bible Society's links with mission must take a new and decisive course. To the links of history, sympathy and motivation there must be added the

new and essential links of theology and mission. If the Bible is to become Holy Scripture once more and recognised as a source of public truth, not just in church, but also in the market place, then the Bible Society must undertake a new mission to recover Scripture.

An Agenda

In recognising the present cultural climate, Bible Society has redefined its mission, with a particular emphasis on enabling the Church to become orientated for mission, and to recover the Scriptures as truth for the public life of society. This does not replace evangelism to the individual and evangelization of social institutions and structures; it is to make the task more possible as the Bible is engaged with by those who form policies and shape values in the political and educational arena, and by those engaged in the arts and the media.

This mission must be to our own minds, that have so absorbed the prevailing world-view that we are hardly aware of it. It must equally be a mission to the Church, which is in danger of witnessing the disappearance of Scripture amongst the claims and counter claims of post-modernity. And it must be a mission to culture, as we strive to recover the biblical narrative as the foundation for society's renewal. ■



We welcome letters, articles and feedback for inclusion in future editions. These may be sent to the Revd Dr Martin Robinson at the address below.

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