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A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE HIGHER CRITICISM AS IT AFFECTS
FAITH AND SPIRITUAL LIFE :*

A DIALOGUE.¹

LET us suppose that a young man, a clergyman's son, who has just taken a first class in Theology at Oxford, and proposes presently to seek Holy Orders, has come home for a short visit before taking up practical work. His white-haired father, dear and reverend, receives him with a warmth of welcome in which a touch of anxiety can be traced. On the morning after his arrival he calls him into his study, draws up a chair for him on the other side of the fire, and begins the conversation.

"I have been wishing for a long time to have a talk with you about matters which have been causing me some anxiety. Till your examination was over, I did not like to disturb your mind. But the present seems an opportune moment. I have gathered from the books on your shelves, and from other indications, that you have given a good deal of attention to what is called the 'Higher Criticism.'"

"Yes, that is quite true. It was impossible to avoid it."

"I have seen somewhere an attempt to explain the use of the term, but I have forgotten it. Would you tell me again what the point of the epithet is?"

"It is not a very happily chosen term. But it is natural enough. The scientific study of literature, like all other departments of study, has, of course, in recent years been more and more specialized. Accordingly textual criticism, which asks what is the nearest approach to the words written in the original MS. of any writing under consideration, came to be distinguished from that other branch of criticism which asks what is the date, authorship, origin and mode of com-

¹ A paper read before the Christian Conference at Liverpool, March 23, 1905.

position of the document, the first being called the Lower and the latter the Higher Criticism."

"There is then no assumption of superiority in the title?"

"Certainly not, though it must be admitted that some writers have adopted an unwarrantable tone of superiority."

"Then, Dr. Pusey was a Higher Critic as well as Dr. Driver his successor, for each of them have written about the date and authorship of Daniel."

"Certainly."

"How is it, then, that those who think with Dr. Driver are called critics, while those who agree with Dr. Pusey are dubbed conservatives, or traditionalists?"

"Perhaps that is partly the fault of the latter. It has been perceived that, all unconsciously to themselves, they have not, with fresh minds, sought to discover the truth, but, assuming tradition to be truth, have sought facts to support tradition."

"I have heard it said that the latest hypothesis has a similar effect upon its author, who manipulates and selects his facts to fit his theory."

"That is often quite true, but it must be remembered that this only holds good of the author of the theory. It is everybody else's interest to find out a better if he can. So the free play of critical inquiry furnishes a corrective, which tradition lacks."

"Well, my son, I cannot pretend to have followed the details of the critical discussions. My duties leave me little leisure for such work. But I am, I confess, gravely concerned about the unsettling tendency of the views which seem to be more and more widely accepted. These attacks upon the Bible pain me to the heart. I cannot indeed understand how you, my son, brought up as you have been to reverence the Bible as God's word, can in any way countenance them."

“ Oh, father, I assure you that you are mistaken, if you suppose anything of the kind. *My* teachers, at any rate, do not ‘ attack ’ the Bible ; they only seek to overthrow a tradition about the Bible, which in their view completely misrepresents the truth. All their conclusions result from observing and weighing Biblical facts. The principal works on which students rely are built up out of a mass of references, each one of which denotes a Biblical fact. The facts may or may not be rightly interpreted, but they are there in the Bible, and are not the subjective product of a lively imagination.”

“ That is all very well, my son ; these conclusions may not be *intended* as attacks upon the Bible ; but they completely upset the ideas about the Scriptures which I and my older friends have held all our lives, and which we have proved in very varied experiences to hold good. You cannot deny that.”

“ No, father, I cannot honestly say that I have not found it very unsettling to have to adjust the ideas in which I was brought up to the beliefs I have been led to form since I came up to the University. But I would suggest to you that any discovery of serious error in widespread religious beliefs must be unsettling, and that the only fair thing to do is to see whether the newer views, if accepted as true, will in the long run help or hinder the spiritual life.”

“ That, my son, will, I fear, be easily answered. You must admit that in Germany and Holland, where these critical views have had longer time to make their tendencies felt, the evaporation of definite dogmatic belief has proceeded almost to the vanishing point. ‘ Fiat experimentum in corpore vili.’ Why not be content with the ravages of this plague among foreigners, and set to work to stamp it out at home. The correspondence in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Standard* and *Daily Mail*, the *Clarion* publications, and the

output of the Rationalist Press Association, show clearly enough what ammunition the foes of faith can find in critical storehouses."

"I must of course admit that many critics are radically heterodox, and sit very loose to all forms of dogma. But I am far from admitting that this is a necessary consequence of adopting the side of the moderns in questions of literary criticism. It is indeed one of the triumphs of recent critical work that it has much more successfully than ever before disengaged the discussion of literary and historical questions from the problems of theology and philosophy which are closely connected with them, and lend them their absorbing interest. Strauss made his key first, and then forced it into the lock of the Gospel problem. Schmiedel at least does his best to take a wax mould of the wards before making his key, though in his case, too, we may be permitted to think that a deeper and wider knowledge of the varieties of Christian experience might have enabled him to construct a master key that would open more doors than will yield to his pitiful formula. I admit, then, that many critics have made shipwreck of the ancient faith. I deny that criticism need affect any substantial verity of the Christian creed."

"It is easy enough, my son, to make sweeping assertions such as that. But I should like to hear you justify them in detail. I assure you I shall be most thankful if you can relieve my mind of some of its anxiety."

"My dear father, it will be a real happiness to me, if I may try to show you step by step as best I can how I have endeavoured to keep the core and marrow of all that I learned from you, even while I have made many changes in the things that are not central or vital. Where would you like me to begin?"

"I think, before taking up any particular part of the Bible, I should like to hear how much you leave of the idea

of revelation. It has been my joy and comfort in reading the Bible to believe that here I have, pure and unalloyed, the utterance of God to man. But modern critical commentaries ignore any such Divine prompting and deal with nothing but the workings of the human mind. Do you no longer find the Word of God in the Bible? Has God never revealed Himself?"

"Thank you, father, for suggesting this line of thought. Loss and gain, are, as usual, found together; but I am confident the gain is the greater. For devotional use there is a certain loss in not being able to take all Bible words as the direct words of Almighty God. But is it not also a great relief not to be obliged to take them all as in the same sense inspired? The most old-fashioned and simple-minded Christian has some sort of solvent for those parts of the Bible which are on the face of them least edifying. To us it seems fairest and simplest to judge the lowest, on the one hand by comparison with the highest, and on the other hand in relation to the ideas and surroundings, of the authors. May I use an illustration? Do you remember that telegram you sent me the other day about my coming home?"

"Yes, I remember it quite well."

"I never told you, but that telegram gave me quite a shock. I could not understand it, as long as I rested satisfied with the message as being for certain the exact expression of your mind. Then I noticed that it was not signed, and guessed that you had told the coachman to wire a message you had given him verbally. Next I remembered that the operators sometimes make mistakes. Presently I made out what it was you must have meant. By analogy it is really a relief, on the whole, to be set free to work through any outer husk of passing opinion or personal error to the inner kernel of the Divine impulse at the back of the words."

“ But if you once give up the plain meaning as the Divinely intended one, what guarantee have you that you can improve upon it ? ”

“ None, but our faith in the guidance of the Spirit of truth, and here is where we contend that the Higher Criticism helps faith, while the traditional view, held narrowly, might stifle it. The inspiration of Bible words is often so sharply marked off from any enlightenment the Spirit now gives to the Church, that we latter-day Christians are put in a position of conspicuous inferiority to those of an earlier day. We claim that, however unworthily we may use the gift, the Spirit of truth is given still, that men may still reckon upon having ‘ the mind of Christ,’ and ‘ an unction from the Holy One ’ to know all things that we need to know.”

“ Taking, then, the Old Testament, what part of it should you say is least affected in its value by the Higher Criticism ? ”

“ I should say, certainly, the Psalms.”

“ But surely the old view that many, if not most, of the Psalms were by David is ruthlessly assailed by critics ? ”

“ Most certainly that is the case. If there are still cautious men who hesitate to say that we possess no Psalms written by David, even moderate critics are prepared to admit that it is impossible to establish the Davidic authorship of a single Psalm. A pious opinion may be left, but no more. But I would urge that the Psalms only stand out in their true light as the crowning glory of Hebrew religion when they are no longer mainly ascribed to a person or an age whose experience they transcend at so many points. More than that, I would go so far as to say that no one who values the Psalms aright ought to be seriously disturbed about any critical verdict upon the Old Testament. If the religion of the Psalmists is not a genuine experience, if these songs of Zion do not spring from hearts made bright and strong by a real and trustworthy revelation of God, then there is no

God, and religion is always and everywhere an empty dream. But if the contrary be true, if, as Dean Church's *Advent Lectures* and his *Discipline of the Christian Character*, or Mr. Prothero's *Psalms in Human Life*,¹ prove, the Psalms have sounded deep notes of spiritual truth, which have rung true right down the ages, then we have in them far more than the exceptional flights of an elect soul,—they are the seal of the development of the Hebrew spirit. That which culminated in the religion of the Psalms must itself have been a Divine process. We may have to let our notions about the nature of that process and the order of its stages be turned upside down ; but only the God of the spirits of all flesh could have led His creatures up to that level of reverent communion and affectionate intimacy of knowledge."

"Thank you, my son. That is a happy suggestion of the Psalter as a meeting point of agreement. I may not follow you as to the late date of the Psalms, but I see that, to a reverent mind they must consecrate the whole history of which they are the finest flower. But what you have put so well does nothing to heal the hurt done by criticism to other parts of the Bible. For example, if the prophets were more often wrong than right, and when they were right were never wholly right, is not a large part of their value for faith destroyed ? "

"I do not think so. The mere fact of correct prediction is, in the Old Testament itself, discounted as not a sure test of inspiration. But it is not correct to say that criticism disproves the predictive element in prophecy. The striking article on Prophecy in the *Encyclopedia Biblica* makes full room for a large element of Divine foresight as granted to

¹ Mr Prothero traces 511 allusions to passages in 136 Psalms as having proved their power to speak to the heart, the witnesses being mainly persons with names well known in history.

the Hebrew prophets. What criticism does is to display the prophets as firmly rooted in the soil of the national life, bearing fruit which is closely conditioned by the needs and circumstances of their time. In days when the doctrine of a future life had not yet begun to shed a light on man's path for Israelite believers, the eternal purposes of God could only find clothing in speech under the forms of the time. So in interpreting the prophets we no longer anxiously scan their oracles and visions, as though they contained a cryptic map of universal history, but we lovingly trace in their rough and fragmentary sketches of Divine things the truths God should later flash forth in their unity in Christ."

"I will not delay over the prophets. I must confess that in much of the discussions carried on about the fulfilment of prophecy I can see little more than solemn trifling, and find nothing to help. But perhaps it is the historical contents of the Old Testament which suffer most from what I am inclined still to call the assaults of criticism. If mythical and legendary material abounds, if divergent and even contradictory representations of the same events are to be found scattered freely over the historical works, if whole books like Joshua and Chronicles are declared to be the merest falsification, euphemistically termed idealization of history, what value does all this amalgam retain?"

"To your question, father, it is not easy to give a short answer. But the result is not really so disconcerting as it seems. In the first place, even if in any story we can no longer think that we have a precise narrative of objective fact, yet we have, what may be even more valuable, a reflection of the author's time. An author writes what he takes interest in himself, and what will interest his readers. If certain institutions of his own time were regarded as Mosaic or Davidic, and the existing narratives did not duly describe them, there were writers who, apparently without a prick

of self-reproach, were prepared to re-write the records. In the Priest's Code this was done for the age of Moses, and the Chronicler carried the principle out for the later periods."

"But truth is truth, my son, and a lie is a lie, and the end will not justify the means. Surely, here there is all loss and no gain."

"I still think not. Is it not a considerable relief, in connexion with the trivial details of sacrificial ceremony, to be able to interpret the formula, 'and the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, speak unto Aaron and say,' in a less rigid sense than the words at first imply? But there are two other remarks I should like to make about the histories. The first is, that the main outlines of the history of Israel are now so far settled that we can feel a new confidence in using them as a basis for a reconstruction of the course of religious development. The second is, that truth of edification is not the same as truth of history. Shakespeare may convey a truer picture of history than many a Dryasdust annalist, and Scott's novels, for all their anachronisms, may better call out the historical sense than the most up-to-date copier of MSS. We may never be able to prove that the narratives of the patriarchs are biographies of actual individuals, who lived at the indicated times and places; but no one can ever disprove the moral power and spiritual truth of those precious lesson stories for our children."

"Again I cannot say that I am convinced, but it interests me deeply to see how you have found means by which the Old Testament retains its place as a book of Divine inspiration. But what about the New Testament? I tremble to think what will happen if these ideas are transferred from the Old to the New Testament. Yet I have seen quoted judgments about the Gospels which would seem to leave us without a foothold of solid ground in the quicksand of discredited tradition. I fear not for myself, for I know whom

I have believed, but I cannot but fear for those who only know after the flesh.”

“To the New Testament, my dear father, I turn, but without fear. If we can never doubt that bread nourishes, whatever changes of opinion analytical chemists may go through as to its composition, so those who have been brought up in such a home as yours can never doubt that the New Testament is rich in truth to feed man’s spirit, or believe that its writers were all wrong about the Lord of love, whose spirit burned so brightly within them.”

“What then do you make of the confident assertions of the untrustworthiness of the Gospels ? ”

“I would reply that every year it is becoming harder to differ from the verdict upon Christ which is expressed in the earliest writings of the New Testament, the Epistles of St. Paul. There stands his witness, all the stronger because unquestioned. The matters on which men differed then, the validity of the law, the need of circumcision, we are all agreed about. The matters about which doubt is threatened with us, the supremacy and Divine nature of Jesus, and the worth and necessity of the atonement, were accepted as beyond controversy.”

“But about the historical truth of the incidents, and the accuracy of the reports of the words, what can you say ? ”

“There, too, a sense of security is coming back into the minds of students. The peculiarities of the Marcan tradition, and the very awkwardness of the setting of many of the words of Jesus, convey an irresistible impression of substantial trustworthiness. Whether legend has been here and there at work, heightening the miraculous, or multiplying miracles, is a question men will probably feel at liberty to differ about. But the Christ shines out clearer than ever. We may not be sure whether the old man himself or a younger friend wrote down the recollections of the beloved

disciple in the Fourth Gospel, and we may think that, by accident or intention, the light of present experience has made explicit much that in the days of discipleship, times of ignorance as they might be called, had been hidden ; yet in Wales plain people have been proving that it was by no empty figures of speech that the Master was called the world's Bread, and its Light, Door and Shepherd, the Resurrection of the Dying, the True Vine, Man's Supreme Way, the Living Truth, the True Life. The book was to prove to its readers that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and still, as we read, that purpose is fulfilled."

"Thank you for your filial frankness, my son. You will not expect your old father to accept your point of view at his time of life. I have lived long enough to see that things are not so simple as I once believed them to be. I no longer attach quite the same importance to verbal agreement in matters of religion ; and I cannot expect that views like yours, deliberately adopted and reasonably expressed, will be hastily abandoned. But I come now to the last, and, I will confess, the gravest cause for my anxiety for you. I fear lest the critical temper and attitude may unduly occupy your mind, and that the devotional side of religion may be by comparison neglected. Tell me, have you not found that critical studies and conclusions have hindered prayer and interfered with that meditative study of Holy Scripture which alone can unlock its deepest treasures ? "

"Yes, I am afraid that is true. But I do not see that the abuse of the thing is to be made an argument against its use. And perhaps those who have suffered in this way have not been altogether to blame. We have again and again been chilled and put off by being made to see that we were looked on as heretics, and as out of place in devotional gatherings."

"That may partly be true. But I very much trust that

you will allow nothing to obscure the *primary* importance of the grand old simplicities in which we are agreed. We must have another talk another day. I should like to hear how you think this change of view about the Bible is going to affect the practical work of the Church. Let us now just bare our hearts before the God of the Bible and ask Him once more for a fuller gift of that Spirit of whom you spoke so reverently and hopefully just now."

And so with prayer the colloquy broke up.

GEORGE HARFORD.