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The Bible As Revelation

THE SPIRITUAL ISSUE

THE REV. A. M. STIBBS, M.A.

EVANGELICALS are divided on the Biblical issue. This issue has split our ranks. (So "Ignoramus" truly asserted in the *Church Gazette* of February last). Nor is such a result anything but inevitable as long as our differences of attitude to the Bible are so radical. For to some the Bible is absolutely unique and from above—God-given; while to others it is only outstanding and from beneath—man-wrought. To some it is, and makes ours, an indispensable revelation, without which men cannot see the truth about God; it provides a final standard or court of appeal, by which all claims to have found the truth can and must be judged. To others it is rather the product of the spiritual discernment of men of old, a discernment which by the same Spirit men to-day may not only equal but even supersede; so that a man enlightened by the Divine Spirit may so discern fresh or fuller truth as to be able rightly to criticize and even to discard parts of Scripture. To some the Bible is special God-given revelation. Its words are, like its Author, the same yesterday, to-day and for ever. It is the appointed medium through which all men of every age may hear the authentic voice of the Divine Spirit. To others the Bible is, however greatly inspired, still a product of men, something historical, the work of a particular age, which like all human thoughts or deeds cannot in every part win the same credence or reverence from every subsequent generation. The Spirit of God may have to say to men now other, if not better, things than were written aforetime.

These different views cannot both be right. They are not merely complementary aspects of a larger whole just waiting to be united. Rather, as experience has proved, they will not mix. Nor is there hope of vital unity among us until we are afresh agreed in the conviction that the Bible, which is history, is like the Incarnation absolutely

unique history, because it is also and first of all special God-given revelation. For just as sinful men have been reconciled to God by the one perfect God-given sacrifice, offered once for all for ever, so spiritually blind and misguided men have been enlightened by a written word, equally God-given, and once for all delivered to the saints. It cannot therefore be anything less than unbelief and presumption to question or to try to add to the sufficiency of either. Consequently, those who would in effect take from or add to the canon and authority of Scripture are not simply exhibiting a spirit of praiseworthy enquiry; they are tampering with essential foundations. Such action cannot but be viewed by many with serious misgiving. With what result is all too obvious. Confidence is undermined. Men who ought to be leaders are no longer wholeheartedly trusted and followed. Financial support is withdrawn from evangelical societies. There are suspicion and division in the camp. Groups become occupied in self-defence against one another instead of in united advance against the common foe. Opportunities for aggressive evangelical witness are lost. It is surely time, therefore, that we faced the situation afresh, not for further mutual criticism, but in order to renew among us an all-absorbing loyalty, which is both true to our Lord Himself, and adequate to reunite us in active co-operation in His service.

Obviously the Bible is historical. It is both a product and a record of history, a book or collection of writings written like other books by men and about men. Its various authors were each and all of them men of their own particular age and environment. Much of its contents is a record of events, a description of things that have happened. Simply as a historical record the Bible is worthy of a place in any library. It is a history book.

But the Bible is no ordinary history. It has, again quite obviously, special and unique characteristics. Its writers suggest, and their record implies, that the history they report has been ordered by God to further ends beyond the immediate ones common to all happenings in time and circumstance. Further, the facts recorded have been specially selected and presented to fulfil a higher purpose than that of providing information and understanding concerning events and people of the past. The object of this record is rather to give the reader moral instruction and spiritual

enlightenment. The record is history ; but it is more, it is prophecy, it is revelation.

There is inevitably a fundamental difference between history viewed wholly as history and history viewed primarily as revelation. In the latter case, what matters most is not the facts themselves but their prophetic interpretation, the deeper meaning read into them by spiritual insight. This insight was the distinguishing characteristic of the prophet or seer. The words of the prophets of the Old Testament make it plain that they could not but speak because of what they had seen. They were aware that their understanding was the consequence of Divine unveiling. They spake the word of the Lord that they saw. They were even aware at times that the word, which they could not but speak, contained more of truth and revelation than they themselves could penetrate and fathom. They were more sure of the truth and of the Divine origin of the vision than they were of their own power to understand it ; but proclaimed and written down it must be. Nor are there lacking in the New Testament confirming indications that in the light of the fuller revelation given through the coming of Christ, and by the outpouring of the Spirit, many words of the Old Testament were seen to have a significance beyond anything comprehended before. The words of the prophets mean more to believers in Christ than they did or could mean to the prophets themselves or to the men of their own age ; not unto themselves but unto us did they minister (I Peter i. 10-12).

Perhaps the most remarkable illustration of the difference between words regarded as history and words interpreted as revelation is to be found in the utterance of Caiaphas—his only utterance recorded in the New Testament. To his fellows of the Sanhedrin he said, " It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not " (John xi. 50). In their historical setting the meaning of these words is obvious enough. They were a counsel of political expediency. It was better, as Caiaphas saw it, to make Jesus a scapegoat and sacrifice one life, than risk a popular Messianic rising. That could only call forth drastic Roman intervention, and then the priestly aristocracy, to which Caiaphas belonged, would be the first to suffer. But his words were thought worthy of a place in

the Gospel record for an entirely different reason. The evangelist interpreted them prophetically. To him they were revelation—a revelation all the more remarkable because it was so completely hidden from the mind of the man who uttered the words. "This he said not of himself : but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation" (John xi. 51). The high priest had a unique yearly office, which only he could fulfil. It was his responsibility on the day of atonement to enter alone into the most holy place, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the errors of the people (Heb. ix. 7). And it was none other than he, who fulfilling his office in a way far beyond his knowing, gave counsel to the Jews that in this year, the year when all types were fulfilled, it was expedient that a man—not an animal victim—die for the people (John xviii. 14). He put his hand, as it were, on the Sacrifice which was to take away sin and procure salvation. And these words of his are in the holy Scriptures not because of their importance as history, but because of their significance as revelation.

Other illustrations are not far to seek. As a historical figure, a man of his age and environment, Melchizedek was possibly a person of little or no significance. No ordinary writer of world history would think him worthy of mention. His significance in Scripture is wholly due to features which are apparently arbitrary or incidental. His name happened to mean king of righteousness. He happened to be king of Salem ; and Salem means peace. He also happened to combine in his person the offices of king and priest—a combination not found in Judaism. Also the very brevity of the mention made of him in Genesis left him without record of his birth or death. He simply appears as one living and in office. In all these features the inspired writers see revelation. The Messiah is a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. For Melchizedek in figure or as revelation is "made like unto the Son of God" (Heb. vii. 1-4). He has no beginning nor end, he follows none, he is superseded by none, he abideth a priest continually ; he is a priest upon his throne ; he is first king of righteousness and then king of peace. Melchizedek, therefore, has his place in the Old Testament story, and is still worthy of study by the Christian, not primarily as history but as revelation, not for his own

sake but as illustrating the office and work of Jesus the Son of God.

Again, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul deals at length with the practical question of eating meat offered to idols. As history this was then a current issue in the Corinthian Church. To many who now read the words, the problem as history is no longer a present one. It provides a study from which the reader is completely detached. It does not concern him personally. But as revelation the chapters (1 Cor. viii-x) in which Paul deals with this question illustrate the practical application of guiding principles, by which Christians ought always to determine their conduct. It is this use of the Scriptures as revelation, rather than the reading of them as mere history, which gives them their abiding value. An understanding of the historical setting of their first composition is not unimportant ; but a prayerful desire to apprehend, and a devout determination to apply, the underlying spiritual principles are much more important. It is to enable us to learn not merely historical facts but spiritual and moral truth that, by Divine ordering and grace, the Scriptures have been written and the illuminating Spirit given.

True devotional approach to the history of the Bible will therefore make more of its moral or spiritual significance than of its immediate historical features and circumstances. Not that an understanding of the latter can be disregarded ; but it becomes subservient to the apprehension of the former, and not an end in itself. Further, such approach is impossible without due recognition of the place of analogy in giving instruction. The use of figure, type and parable is an effective because concrete method of making meaning plain ; and it is certainly made more effective when the illustration chosen is itself fact and not fiction. The use of such a method of teaching was freely and widely adopted by our Lord Himself. The first reason justifying the method is the inherent correspondence between the governing principles of God's work in nature and God's doing in grace. And the second reason is that in realms outside man's direct knowledge the use of allegory or figure is the most effective way of conveying to men that limited measure of understanding which alone is possible to them. The ascended Lord seated at God's right hand is difficult to

visualize as concrete history in time and space. But as revelation no better expression of the truth about Christ's present position and relationship to God is available to finite minds. We darken understanding when in fancied superiority of judgment we discard such figurative language as obsolete.

There is need, therefore, of a return to reverent appreciation, and positive interpretation of Scriptural "figures of the true," and foreshadowings of the truth. For their function in giving insight into the fulness of truth is easily impaired by historical criticism, just as the reflection of the heavens seen in a pool disappears from view when the surface of the water is disturbed: or just as a telescope ceases to give men a vision of things far distant and otherwise out of sight, when people are turned aside to investigate when and how and by whom the telescope was made.

Allegorical interpretation and reasoning from analogy may, of course, all too easily be overdone. Alone they would prove nothing; therefore, justification for each particular case must be found elsewhere in Scripture and not in the allegory or analogy itself. But, when their use is legitimate, they do help and illumine understanding as nothing else can. And more, there is a use of them which is consecrated and authorized by the New Testament writers. Our teaching, therefore, ceases to be apostolic, and even becomes anti-apostolic, if by criticism of Old Testament passages we undermine the force of New Testament references to them. By this we prevent present-day readers from seeing Christ's person and work illustrated in Old Testament figures, and foreshadowed in Old Testament prophecies. For example, supposing we doubt and question the historicity or Divine origin of Numbers xxi. According to this chapter the people, bitten by snakes, were told by God's command to look at a serpent of brass; and those who looked lived. If we discredit the story, we have only made it the more difficult for ourselves and for those we teach to see any value or meaning in the words, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John iii. 14). Yet these words are attributed to our Lord Himself; and were certainly accepted by the evangelist and by the early Church as an explanation of the

purpose of Christ's death. The story of Numbers xxi. should still be of value to the Christian not so much as history, but rather as revelation, as a figure of the true. Yet how few preachers to-day ever proclaim from this analogy that "there is life for a look at the Crucified One."

Not that one wants to encourage excessive allegorical interpretation, but only to secure a full and balanced use of every portion and manner of the Divine speaking in the prophets. Unquestionably, in our study of Bible stories, the chief interest should be not in fanciful theoretical interpretation, but in practical moral application. This we see illustrated forcibly in Nathan's "Thou art the man," or in our Lord's "Go and do thou likewise." Without the frequent reiteration of this moral emphasis there is danger lest some become so absorbed in, and satisfied with, interpreting the pictures of Scripture that they neglect to practise its precepts.

There is yet another common way in which modern critical approach to the Bible has largely detracted attention from the revelation and the helps to spiritual understanding to be found in the Scriptures. Students have become absorbed in a professed attempt to get nearer to the history, by investigating origins and authenticity. Increase in historical understanding has been pursued to the neglect of spiritual apprehension. For example, the endless pursuit of a solution to the Synoptic problem may be a fascinating task for academical research; spiritually it has proved itself virtually a blind alley. By going inside the focus registered by the inspired writers in an attempt to get nearer to the original history, spiritual vision of the revelation given in the Gospels has been blurred and distorted. Our supposed quest of the Jesus of history has impaired our ability to see in all its fulness in the Gospels the God-given revelation of the Christ, the Son of God. We have handled the first three Gospels with too much criticism and too little faith. We have studied them too much by the limited natural sight of the scholar, and too little by the indispensable spiritual insight of the believer. We have studied them with too much self-confidence and too little reverence.

This tendency and deficiency in modern Biblical scholarship are shown still more outstandingly in the widespread failure to appreciate the Fourth Gospel. For this Gospel is

admittedly more revelation than history. It is still history ; and yet it is history written by one who cannot but bring out and make plain the revelation which he has seen in the history. For example, he records words of Jesus spoken when He cleansed the temple, " Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." That is history ; it is what was actually said at the time. The evangelist adds, " He spake of the temple of his body. When therefore He was raised from the dead his disciples remembered that He spake this ; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had said." That is revelation ; it is what convinced disciples afterwards saw in the words by faith. Things recorded in this Gospel are written not just to give information about the historical facts but to promote faith in the revealed Person. Such is the climax of its own record. Doubting Thomas was offered the sight and touch of the historical facts—the print of the nails in the hands, the pierced side. He responded in worship as one who had received a revelation. Thomas answered and said, " My Lord and my God." From henceforth he was a believer. These things in the Fourth Gospel are written that we may share his belief—that is, that we " might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we might have life through His name." The true reader of this Gospel, the reader who realizes the object of the writer, is the man who rises from its study not merely conscious that he has learnt history, but overwhelmingly aware that he has received revelation, and in awe and worship acknowledging it. This is the object for which all Scripture was written.

How then, do we approach and use the Bible ? That is the spiritual issue on which so much depends. Christian believers down through the centuries have unquestionably regarded Scripture as primarily conveying revelation rather than as merely recording history. The Bible has been to them the sufficient and authoritative medium through which the Spirit gives knowledge of God in Christ and insight into the fulness of truth. But are we letting the Bible be the same to us ? For such a conviction about the character and purpose of the Bible, once it is firmly established and given its proper place, cannot but affect one's whole approach to its study. The man with this conviction is prepared to find

that parts of Scripture, which may by modern scholarship be judged of inferior value and of little import as history, may as revelation afford to the diligent seeker light and insight obtainable nowhere else. He believes with Paul that the things written aforetime were written for our learning and that rightly used they can bring us comfort and hope. He therefore approaches them as a humble disciple expecting to be taught ; not as a self-confident critic, ready to pass judgment.

It is here that the roads divide. For once a passage of Scripture has been depreciatingly criticized as history, it is not easy or even possible for most men sincerely to turn to it as something capable as revelation of proving itself profitable for instruction in righteousness. One interest inhibits the other. The inevitable law operates, To him that hath, more is given : from him that hath not is taken away that which he seems to have. The Scriptures do not enlighten the critical, any more than our Lord's parables enlightened the unfriendly or the merely curious. They see, but they do not understand.

In our approach to Scripture, therefore, we have to decide which interest is to predominate, and to direct the study we pursue. There are, for instance, many events of which there are more than one account in Scripture. How are we to approach these different narratives ? The critical historian is easily induced to set one against the other, to make much of their differences, and even to insist on their inconsistencies, thus forcing the conclusion that they are, at least in some particulars, mutually exclusive, and that they cannot both be true. But if both narratives are equally accepted as inspired and written for our learning, surely the reverent disciple ought to adopt an entirely different attitude. It is for him to approach the narrative with a mind prepared to accept both, and expecting to obtain a fuller meaning from the two together, and so to gain more understanding than can be obtained from either alone. Architects' drawings commonly give an elevation as well as a plan. As illustrated by a stereoscope, bifocal vision enables men to see things in perspective. In the same way, duplicate narratives in the Bible are meant to help understanding and increase insight ; not to provide material for setting Scripture against itself. There are parts of the Bible which, as a result of critical

scholarship, are now only heard by many as a discord : whereas rightly directed scholarship and teaching ought to help Christian believers to hear in such passages not only the dominant air, but also the richness and balance of a larger harmony. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." That is the crux—the spiritual issue.

It is this humble, reverent, believing attitude to Scripture, the attitude of the submissive disciple, of the expectant and willing learner, which has been so largely undermined in our day. As hearers and readers of the Word we sit too much in the seat of the unresponsive if not of the critical. There is need for us all to practise in much fuller measure, and to encourage in others, a devout use of the Bible with a view to practical spiritual profit. It was the faith and experience of the Reformers that the Scriptures could be used by any and every seeking soul as a personal means of grace, as the God-appointed medium for realized fellowship with God in the Spirit. "The Scriptures were for them a personal rather than a dogmatic revelation." "To them the chief function of Scripture was to bring Jesus Christ near us." It is this use of the Scriptures that is not encouraged and practised as once it was ; and in place of which the tendency is to reintroduce (supposedly to our help, but actually to our peril) the so-called altar and the priest. The quest for God cannot be suppressed. But it is a tragedy indeed, if, in this erstwhile land of the Book, men and women, and still more children, are no longer taught to find God and to learn His ways in and through that Book.

The attitude of the Church of England to the Bible is plainly expressed in the Thirty-nine Articles, particularly, of course, in Article VI. The Holy Scriptures are there declared to be sufficient, and to contain all things necessary to salvation. They set the limits as well as the norm of Christian doctrine. "Whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of the Faith." But it is not enough to give solemn formal assent to such a declaration. What is needed is a renewed positive loyalty to this conviction both in personal discipleship and in public ministry. It is not enough to be inspired by a vague inherited Christian sentiment. It is still less satisfactory to preach such sentimental idealism, and to imagine that we

are thereby propagating the Gospel. What is needed is a renewed appeal to, and exposition of, Scriptural truth and Scriptural standards. The imagined leading of the Spirit may only result in departure from the highway of truth and life unless it comes through, or is plainly confirmed by, the teaching of Scripture. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word it is because there is no light in them."

This is the established experience and traditional conviction of the Church. The Bible is the sufficient and final authority in all matters of doctrine, the unquestioned rule of faith and of practice. But too many of us have ceased fully to regard it, or continually to use it, as such. We do not go as we ought to the Bible for our guidance. We do not let the voice of the Spirit through Scripture settle things in our hearts or in our assemblies. We pay more heed to what this Committee "finds," or that Professor thinks, than to what the Bible says. We are not united as we ought to be because we have ceased to let the inspired word of Divine revelation be the final arbiter of our differences and the practical guide book of our counsels. We hear little of what the Spirit saith to the Churches, because we listen so little for His voice in the one place where it can most certainly be heard—in the Scriptures.

It is not that we are not often reading from the Bible. What is at fault is the spirit in which we approach its study or hear its message. The word, if it is to save our souls, needs to be received with meekness and responded to obediently. We have acquired too much of the detached mind of students, whose satisfaction is found in knowing all about it. What we need is a revival of the devotion of whole-hearted disciples, who have left all to follow Christ; and for whom His word is law. In fact, we cannot be true disciples, nor can we know the truth and be freed from our misconceptions and our bondage, unless we abide in His Word (John viii. 31, 32.)

Further, we ought frankly to face up to the Bible's own claims for itself. These claims ought to be neither evaded nor exaggerated but humbly accepted. For such submissive acceptance of the Bible's own self-authentication is fundamental to its right use. It is the indispensable test and evidence of our sincere acceptance of Scripture as the rule

of faith. There is surely no practical honesty in our professed readiness to accept the ruling of Scripture on other matters equally outside man's natural powers fully to investigate and decide, unless we are equally and indeed first of all ready to accept the testimony of Scripture concerning its own character. It is an inevitable characteristic of the supreme authority that it must be self-authenticating. Its word is the last word : the final and decisive word. Writings which make such claims for themselves as the Scriptures do must either themselves be a sufficient and final authority, or else their statements on other matters ought to be rejected as equally presumptuous. There is no middle ground for those faced, as we are, with the practical question whether as Evangelicals we will once again let Scripture be our final court of appeal in all matters of faith and practice.

There is need, then, for us to set ourselves, and to encourage and help others, not merely or primarily to turn to the Bible with trained natural powers and intellectual equipment to discover its literary origins and to evaluate and criticize its history as history ; but rather to go to it in a spirit of faith in God, believing that by His providence and through the activity of the inspiring Spirit, it has been written and preserved for our practical moral instruction ; to go to it expecting that through it the ever-present Spirit will make known to the humble and diligent seeker the character and ways of God ; to go to it praying that in and through the Book (though it is largely a book of past history) we may see and hear for ourselves the word of present revelation.

It is on such a basis, the constraining bond of a positive, practical, spiritual loyalty to the authority of Scripture (rather than by any fresh attempt to penetrate the unknowable in order to produce a more widely acceptable theory of inspiration) that there is hope of fresh union and corporate advance among Evangelicals. We shall act together, with respect for each other's scruples, and with confidence in each other's motives, when we are each and all persuaded that the one common rule of faith and practice, the rule by which, according to the light given us now or hereafter, we shall abide, is the word of God written. The relinquishing of one-sided prejudices, when it becomes necessary as indeed it must, will then no longer be a reluctant, unconvinced yielding to men of different mind, but instead a glad and

humble surrender to the compulsion of revealed truth ; that is, to the compulsion of God's Spirit ; that is, to God Himself.

For there remaineth yet much more light to break forth from God's Word. But, if we are to enjoy and benefit from its illumination, we must be as those who look for the light. We must be wholeheartedly prepared to examine ourselves by it, and then to walk in it ; otherwise, we shall be as the scribes of old, who, having the key of knowledge, entered not in themselves and hindered from entering the many who, granted a little guidance, would gladly have entered. For unquestionably with the open Book in our hands we have the key to the situation. The question is how are we using it ? May God give us the grace so to use the key of knowledge, that we ourselves, and leading multitudes after us, may enter in and follow on to know the Lord through the Holy Scriptures ! For they are still able to make us " wise unto salvation." But only " through faith which is in Christ Jesus." We can only enter in by faith, not by sight. We need, therefore, to read and to preach the Word in faith. For without faith the Bible ceases to be revelation ; without faith it is impossible to please God.

LIVING RELIGIONS AND A WORLD FAITH.

Hibbert Lectures by William Ernest Hocking.
(George Allen & Unwin.) 10s. net.

In this series of lectures the varied emphasis of the great world religions are discussed, and the reason for their emergence. Opinions are expressed on missionary method and approach : the evangelistic aggression of Christian missions is admired in some aspects but discountenanced as a policy, an attempt to discover common factors in religious experience without regard to divergent theological positions being preferred. In his final conclusions the lecturer bases his hope of an ultimate world faith on the acceptance by all of " the Christ symbol " which " as a privilege will draw all men, as a threat never." There are helpful thoughts concerning a sympathetic approach to adherents of other faiths ; but Dr. Hocking's evident disregard of the heart of the Christian message, the necessity of regeneration, his failure to point out the total lack of redemptive power in any other " world faith," or to expose the evils connected with some of these religions (the treatment of women, the caste system, temple immorality, priestcraft), leave the reader in an atmosphere of the kind of vague liberalism which has sapped the fervour and stolen the power of many a modern missionary.

NORMAN GRUBB.