

## The New Method of Studying the Bible.

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### I.

1. THE first popular exposition and vindication of the new method of study of the Old Testament which the late Professor Davidson had been quietly practising for years, and which has since so rapidly been securing acceptance among Christian scholars, was given by Professor W. Robertson Smith in his volume, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, which contains the lectures that in the previous winter (January and February 1881) he had delivered in Edinburgh and Glasgow in defence of himself, after he had been forbidden by the Free Church Assembly to exercise his functions in the College in Aberdeen. This movement was still more widely advertised by the controversy which resulted from the recognition of the legitimacy of the methods of the Higher Criticism, and the acceptance of some of its conclusions as altogether consistent with the Church's doctrine of Inspiration in the volume *Lux Mundi*. That the writer of the article, in which this concession was made, is now Bishop Gore, is evidence that the panic in the Church of England soon subsided. The failure of the attempt to condemn Professor George Adam Smith for his book, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*, in the United Free Church Assembly, also shows how rapid has been the change in public opinion on these questions in the two decades which separate this later from that earlier plea for the historical study of the Old Testament.

The books written from the traditional standpoint against the Higher Criticism will not, it may be confidently predicted, effect much to arrest the steady progress of this movement.

2. The Tübingen School of New Testament criticism raised a ripple only on academic waters. But the new method in application to the New Testament did not attract general attention till the publication of *The Historical New Testament* by Dr. Moffat in 1901, exactly twenty years after the appearance of *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*. It is true that for many years the late Professor Bruce had been familiarizing his students

with a way of handling the Gospels especially, which took no account of traditional prejudices; and that Professor Dods had in his writings been bold enough to deny the inerrancy of the New Testament writings, for which theological offences both were dealt with by the supreme court of their Church; yet the method and what it involved had not been fully put before the public until this book appeared. In the same year as Dr. Moffat's book appeared Dr. Percy Gardner's *A Historic View of the New Testament*, which further defines this method. The results of the method, as applied to Christianity, have been made widely known by the translation of a German work, Hamack's *What is Christianity?* Thus the application of the method has advanced from the Old Testament to the New Testament literature, and at last even to the determination of the contents of the Christian faith.

### II.

In each of these works the method is discussed, and we may now attempt to gather together what is of greatest importance in the statements of the writers, so as to determine as exactly and as adequately as we can what its distinctive features are. 1. The name *Higher Criticism*, which is often given to the movement in reproach, as though the epithet 'higher' were a claim of superiority, instead of being only a convenient way of distinguishing textual from literary criticism, suggests the first element in the method. According to Dr. Gardner, the first of 'the three ways of thought which have passed from physical to historic studies' is 'criticism of authorities';<sup>1</sup> for historic study shows how untrustworthy ancient histories generally are; 'in place of external fact of history, we have in the last resort psychological fact as to what was believed to have taken place,'<sup>2</sup> and thus the historian must try to discover what did take place from what was believed to have taken place. What this process of criticism of authorities involves is more fully stated by Dr. Moffat. 'Take

<sup>1</sup> *A Historic View of the New Testament*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

any writing as a historical document in this light, and three elements have to be adjusted: (a) the directly retrospective reference of the book to the period of which ostensibly it treats; (b) the semi-retrospective reference, which it implicitly contains, to changes in the social and inward situation of things between that period and the date of the book's composition, along with (c) the contemporary reference of the writing—always indistinct, but often of supreme value,—which helps to expose its own surroundings, authorship, and nature. The last named is the starting-point of historical research.<sup>1</sup> How far-reaching are the issues involved in this principle one instance will show. 'The conception of Jesus,' says Moffatt, 'in the Gospels represented not only the historical likeness so far as its traits were preserved in the primitive evangelical tradition, but also the religious interests of the age in which and for which these narratives were originally drawn up.'<sup>2</sup> It depends on the way in which this principle is applied, whether the Gospels will be recognized as 'substantially historical, or as present doctrine which has decked itself out as past history, as early record, or as late interpretation.

2. The second element in the method is what may be called *historical construction*. Dr. Moffatt states that a 'subsidiary object' of his book is 'the need of seeing and setting the New Testament writings in vital connexion with one another and with the main currents of contemporary thought and history.'<sup>3</sup> Dr. Gardner gives the reason for this constant endeavour to connect all historical events with their varied conditions. 'Historic studies take over from physical 'the acceptance of evolution.'<sup>4</sup> But, while the historian recognizes an evolution in history as in nature, he must insist on the operation, without exaggerating the influence on human affairs of 'a great force, which is not, so far as we can judge, evolutionary, and the law of which is very hard to trace—the force of personality and character.'<sup>5</sup> To this qualification Professor W. Robertson Smith adds another. The recognition of historical connexion does not involve any denial of 'the proofs of God's working among His people of old.' For 'it was no blind chance, and no mere human wisdom, that shaped the growth of Israel's religion, and finally stamped

it in these forms, now so strange to us, which preserved the living seed of the divine word till the fulness of the time when He was manifested who transformed the religion of Israel into a religion for all mankind.'<sup>6</sup> Evolution may be regarded as the divine mode in Revelation as it has been so acknowledged in Creation. Of course, if the attempt is made to state evolution in history, as Herbert Spencer does, in terms of matter and motion, human personality and divine providence alike will be excluded as factors in the process; but this is not a necessary result of the historical method.

3. To *literary criticism* and *historical construction* there is added as the third element in the method *scientific comparison*, the motive of which Dr. Gardner describes in the phrase 'reverence for observed fact.' 'When we come to a gap in past history,' he says, 'or to a part of it which has been blurred by too vivid emotion, and obscured by practical purpose, we look about us to find in the present world, or in the better recorded phases of the past, some similar and parallel groups of phenomena.' The justification for this course is this. 'The comparative method assumes that the events in the human world do not happen at random, but are subject to law, though historic law is far less hard and rigid than that observable in the realm of nature.'<sup>7</sup> This principle may be used to exclude the supernatural and the miraculous from history, and it has been so used; but the qualification in the last clause of the statement just quoted may be insisted on. There is uniformity in human affairs, but no such absolute uniformity as to exclude the freedom either of God or of man.

4. Although the historical method has been discussed in reference to the Holy Scriptures, yet these three features of it, *literary criticism*, *historical construction*, and *scientific comparison*, are characteristic of it, wherever it may be applied. To define more closely the application of the method to the Holy Scriptures, the epithet 'religious' is usually added, at least in Germany, where the methodological questions receive much more attention than they do in Britain. What this qualification means may be indicated in a sentence from Reischle. 'The Israelitish and the Christian religion should be explored and expounded in connexion

<sup>1</sup> Moffatt's *The Historical New Testament*, pp. 3, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, viii.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 11.

with the surrounding religions, but at the same time also, everywhere, when possible, the religious system should be traced back to personal religious life.<sup>1</sup> In other words, *comparative religion* and *religious psychology* are to be used in the historical study of these religions. The demand is becoming very urgent in Germany, that Christianity shall not receive exceptional treatment; but shall be treated exactly in the same way as all other religions. It is to 'be subjected to a strictly historical view in accordance with the fundamental principles of *criticism, analogy, and correlativity*' (these being the terms used to describe the three features of the method which have been already discussed). Emphasis may now be laid on two points. Not

<sup>1</sup> *Theologie und Religionsgeschichte*, p. 12.

only are the Israelitish and Christian religions to be compared with other religions, so that the characteristics of religion may be detected and exhibited in them, but, wherever possible, the connexion there may be between them and other religions is to be traced. To give one instance, the Christian sacraments and the Greek mysteries are not only to be compared, but, if possible, to be connected. Religion is not treated as merely a superstition; but doctrine and ritual and polity in each religion are to be traced back to their roots in personal experience, for religion is to be regarded as primarily life.

(To be continued.)

## Recent Foreign Theology.

### Athanasius de Virginitate.<sup>1</sup>

THIS little book, apart from its merits as a particular inquiry into the authenticity of one writing, might be taken as a specimen of what criticism is and ought to be, both in its lower and higher forms. Textual criticism might be illustrated from the thorough way in which the author has exhausted the sources from which the ascertainment of the text could be won, and the scientific use he makes of the sources when he has found them. As to the higher criticism, it is instructive to watch the procedure of the author as he tries to place this tract in its proper historical setting. It is an illustrative example of the necessity and the success of criticism.

What is the text of this tract, *De Virginitate*? is the first question asked and answered by the author, and answered in the most thorough manner. Then we have the text as determined by the author, as the result of his investigation. Then arise the questions of the origin and character of the tract. These questions are answered in five particulars. A luminous exposition of the contents and char-

acter of the tract is followed by a description of its spiritual relationship with the conceptions and with the atmosphere of Egyptian asceticism. He is able to place the teaching of the tract in its place in the evolution of the ascetic life of the Egyptians. For he finds other writings, some of which are less developed, and others more developed; and from a comparison he is able to find a *locus* for the tract. It might be interesting to follow him in detail here, but space forbids. Then the question is asked and answered, 'What are the relations of life presupposed in the tract?' Then an inquiry into the literary relations leads up to a discussion as to the author. The author is Athanasius, and a good case is made for the Athanasian authorship; and if the case is good it will reopen the question of the relationship of Athanasius to asceticism. Finally, the significance of the tract for our knowledge of the history of the Christian life is discussed, and to very good purpose. An Index, containing references to all citations from the Old and New Testaments, and from the Fathers, follows, and greatly facilitates the use of the book. It is an admirable bit of work, and is worthy of the highest praise.

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<sup>1</sup> *Δόγμα Σωτηρίας: Πρὸς τὴν Παρθένον (De Virginitate), Eine Echte Schrift des Athanasius.* Von Lic. Eduard von der Goltz, Privatdozent an der Universität Berlin. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung, 1905. M. 5.