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The Limits of Biblical Criticism.¹

BY THE VERY REV. HENRY WACE, D.D.

THE question I am asked to discuss is that of "The Limits of Biblical Criticism," and the first observation to be made is that in one sense there can be no limits to Biblical criticism. Criticism is simply the application of reason to alleged facts or statements. That is a process which is an imperative duty in relation to all subjects; and the more important the subject, the more imperative is it that this duty should be discharged. The Bible and the Christian revelation are the most momentous of all subjects, and the welfare of mankind, here and hereafter, is more dependent upon a true judgment in respect to them than upon any other matter in the world; and consequently it was inevitable and right that, from the very commencement of the Christian Church, they should have been subjected, both by believers and by unbelievers, to an unsparing and unremitting criticism. There never has been any time in the history of the Church, except perhaps the two or three centuries of confusion after the barbarian invasions, when this was not done. Criticism of the faith was, for instance, never more severe and penetrating than in the Middle Ages, though its results were then controlled by authority; and the Reformation, of course, was not only due to the fresh study of the Bible, but to the unreserved criticism which men like Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin exercised both upon the Bible itself and upon the teaching of the Church. It seems necessary to insist upon this point, at the outset, in order to obviate the prejudice, too often raised by the advocates of modern critical views, that those who oppose them shrink from criticism, or from such results as may have been really established by it. The sort of superior virtue which some spokesmen of modern criticism assume, as though they were representing the cause of truth and freedom against opponents who shrink

¹ A Paper read at the Manchester Church Congress, October, 1908.

from light, is as irrelevant as it is impertinent. The issue in this branch of learning lies between scholars who are alike eager to recognize truth when they see it, and equally forward to use all the resources of reason and criticism in ascertaining it.

In what sense, then, can there be limits to Biblical criticism? I suppose what was intended was that there are limits within which its methods and conclusions must be comprised, if they are to be compatible with the position of Christian men or Christian ministers or Christian professors; and the question is, At what point or boundary, if any, do the critical contentions we hear around us come into conflict with settled principles of Christian truth? If that be the question, it is one which it behoves us to be extremely cautious in answering; for the history of theology shows examples, in age after age, of hasty assumptions that some new view was inconsistent with Christianity which has subsequently been found to be perfectly in harmony with it. Accordingly it is not without the gravest reluctance that I feel forced to the conviction that there are critical conclusions urged upon us at the present day, and urged as settled results in centres of authority, which are in themselves quite incompatible with a continued belief in the Christian revelation, as it has been held by the Church from the Apostles to our own time. I beg it may not be supposed to be for a moment implied in this statement that any particular persons who hold such conclusions are not themselves earnest believers in the Christian faith. As someone has said that no plummet has ever touched the bottom of human gullibility, so it is a happy truth that no measure has ever yet gauged the possibilities of human inconsistency; and life would be impossible were it not for the fortunate capacity of all classes of mankind—divines, scholars, professors, politicians, and women, for instance—for being cheerfully and confidently illogical. But, none the less, logic remains, and asserts itself in the long run; and though individuals may be capable of an assured conviction that white is not incompatible with black, the common sense of mankind sooner or later corrects the

illusion. It is, therefore, in an entirely impersonal sense that I feel bound to urge that there are limits beyond which critical processes and conclusions cannot be pushed without undermining the indispensable foundations of the Christian faith.

Of course, the question of the supernatural birth of our Lord is one instance in point ; and the proposal which has been made, that men should be admitted to the Christian ministry who do not cordially accept that truth, seems to me incompatible with elementary fidelity to the trust confided to those who are the guardians of the faith. But though this error is to a large extent founded on Biblical criticism, it is probably not, in the main, to such particular questions as these that the subject before us was intended to refer, and the chief point on which I would insist relates to the current controversy respecting the Old Testament. That point is, that critical conclusions which allege that the account given in the Bible of the history of the Jewish people and of the course of the Divine revelation is radically erroneous, is inadmissible on Christian principles, and incompatible with the maintenance of the Christian faith. It has now become imperative for us to recognize that this is the broad—and, as the Americans say, “square”—issue which is raised by what I fear must be called, at present, the dominant school of criticism—especially, alas ! at our Universities, and under which the minds of the ablest of our younger clergy are trained. It was stated, for instance, without reserve in the papers which were read at the Pan-Anglican Congress. The general character of these new views was sufficiently expressed in Dr. Burney's Pan-Anglican paper on “The Writers of the Old Testament.” It is the view, he says, “that, broadly speaking, the prophetic period of Israel's religious development is anterior to the legalistic period” ; and accordingly the Book of Deuteronomy is taken “as representing the stage next subsequent to the work of the eighth-century prophets, since its promulgation took place in 621 B.C., though as to the precise date of its composition we have no information.” Now, “broadly speaking,” this is evidently in

direct contradiction with the view expressed in the Jewish Scriptures, and in the Book of Deuteronomy itself. That Book alleges throughout, in the most positive and reiterated expressions, that it represents the stage of Divine revelation to the Jews in the days of Moses, as that revelation proceeded from the mouth of Moses himself. Let it be observed that this broad contradiction is quite independent of questions respecting the authorship of the Book of Deuteronomy. To maintain that the Book as it stands did not proceed from the hand of Moses himself is one thing; and no one doubts that the close of it, at all events, is from a later hand. It would involve no contradiction to the broad representation of Israel's religious life, which it contains, to regard it as the summary recapitulation, by a later hand, of the substance of the teaching of Moses. That would leave its substantial truth unaffected. But the contention which is involved in the current theory is inconsistent with its substantial truth. The teaching of the Book of Deuteronomy is, according to this view, wrongly assigned to the Mosaic age. Moses is allowed—actually allowed—at least by Dr. Burney—for he is a rather retrograde critic in this particular—to have “invested his presentation of the Deity with certain definite moral characteristics”; but it is maintained that it was not till after the eighth-century prophets that the stage represented by Deuteronomy as a whole could have been reached. I have quoted one writer for the sake of definiteness; but the contrast and contradiction on which I am insisting have been notorious since the publication, some twelve years ago, of the masterly and unanswered book of Professor James Robertson, of Glasgow—the book of which no less a critic than Dillmann said that it hit the nail on the head—contrasting the representation of the religious history of Israel by modern critics on the one hand, and by the Scriptural writers on the other. According to later critics, the Pentateuch projects erroneously into the past the views of a later age; and similarly the latest commentator on the Book of Genesis in this country tells us that it gives us very little which can be regarded as historically true respecting Moses and Aaron, but throws

invaluable light upon the views of those who wrote it many centuries later.

It is to be observed, in fact, that since the time of Wellhausen Biblical criticism has altered its character, and an imaginary historical criticism has superseded purely literary criticism. Previously criticism was mainly concerned with questions of authorship and composition ; and the greater part of this, even if exaggerated and sometimes mischievous, did not touch the main truth of the Scriptures. Whether P and J and E and D, or a score of P's and J's and E's and D's, and one or two or half a dozen of redactors, combined to make the Pentateuch what it is, is a question quite independent of its substantial historical truth. As the Bishop of Bristol has observed, the fact that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a compilation of successive generations which has been much modified in the course of time, does not materially impair its substantial trustworthiness. The question whether the second part of the Book of Isaiah is to be assigned not to him, but to an unknown Exilic prophet, does not exclude an admission of its having prophetic character and authority. Whatever view we may take of such questions, they are as legitimate as critical inquiries respecting the authorship of the last verses of St. Mark or of the Second Epistle of St. Peter. But Wellhausen succeeded in the attempt—which had been ineffectually made by Reuss Graf, and others before him—to subordinate this purely literary criticism to a constructive historic criticism, which, in Dillmann's expressive phrase, turned everything topsy-turvy (*Alles auf den Kopf stellte*). The Scriptures make the revelation of God in Deuteronomy the beginning of Israel's religious life as a nation ; the new critical school places it near the end. In other words, they charge the authors of the Scripture with a false representation of the facts.

Now before pressing this consideration home to its last stage I must venture to say that we might at least be spared the unreality—I had almost said the mockery—of attempting to treat as inspired the books which thus misled both the Jewish and the Christian world for 2,000 years. If there is one attribute

above any other ascribed to the Spirit of God by our Lord and His Apostles, it is that He is the Spirit of Truth; and books which are not true in their broad meaning, which convey, and were intended to convey, and which have succeeded for more than 2,000 years in conveying, alike to those for whom they were written and to successive generations, a false conception of the order of God's education of His people, books which deliberately laid a false foundation for the religion of the Jews—the religion in which our Lord and His Apostles lived and worshipped—such books must, indeed, have been inspired by some extraordinary genius, but certainly not by the Spirit of Truth. Scholars in their studies may satisfy themselves with fancies about varying standards of "literary integrity," as the phrase goes; but if the clergy have to tell the common people that the books of the Pentateuch are not to be trusted for a substantially true account of the Mosaic age, can you expect them to accept those Scriptures as the Word of God? If your missionaries have to meet the Mohammedans with the admission at the outset that the statements of the Scriptural historians cannot be treated as generally historical, can you expect them to accept them as superior to the Koran, which they believe to be true? For the common sense of mankind in general, you would have cut the ground from under the inspiration of the Scriptures, and consequently from under the authority of the Christian revelation, when you have proclaimed that, "broadly speaking," the account they give of God's ways, and God's government and education of His people, is an erroneous one.

But it is necessary to go farther, and to bear in mind that beyond question the Scriptural representations of the course of Divine revelation to the Jewish people were held without modification by the Apostles themselves and by our Lord. I am not now quoting either Him or them on a mere question of authorship; but one passage alone in the New Testament—St. Stephen's speech—is enough to show that the Scriptural representation of the Jewish history was unanimously accepted in his day by men full of the Holy Spirit, like him and the

Apostles, as well as by the Jews at large. But if so, and if, as it necessarily follows, the Apostles were under an illusion as to God's actions and words to the fathers of their nation, do you think it will long be possible to maintain their authority as inspired teachers respecting His present methods and His future purposes? Some scholars and theologians, by that strange inconsistency of which I have spoken, may contrive to hold simultaneously, in distinct compartments of thought, the two conceptions. But to the world at large, when you have destroyed the trustworthiness of the Scriptures to which the Saviour and His Apostles appealed, and on which they relied, their authority as inspired teachers will be gone. I am thankful to feel that such views are as incompatible with sound historical criticism as with theological truth, and that they are opposed, in Germany as well as in this country, by Oriental scholars of the highest authority. Views cannot be regarded as scientifically established which have been, and are, rejected by such scholars as Dillmann, Kittel, Hommel, and Robertson. It is to be borne in mind that the Pentateuch, even if written in the time of Ezra, unless a deliberate fraud, is at least a witness to what the most learned class in the Jewish nation believed respecting the history of their forefathers, and that its statements were accepted without demur by their contemporaries. We are required, therefore, by this new view, to believe that the whole Jewish nation were deluded respecting the history of their forefathers at a period not much further removed from them, in the year 444, than the Norman Conquest from our own time. I say, with a new emphasis, *Credat Judæus*. No; let us welcome criticism and prosecute it to the utmost. Let us be indulgent to it, even in its extravagances—mischievous though they may to some extent be—for the sake of the supreme advantage of maintaining the utmost freedom of discussion. Let the imagination of critics run riot, if they please, in contradicting their own maxim of treating the Bible as any other book—let them, if they please, treat it as no other book ever has been treated, or ever will be treated—so long as the treatment is confined to matters of form

and authorship. But when it comes to denying the substantial truth of the Scripture record—then, for Christians at all events, the time has come for exclaiming: “Hitherto shalt thou go, but no farther; and here shall thy proud words be stayed.”



Revival Memories: The Early Days of Church Missions.

BY THE REV. CANON W. HAY M. H. AITKEN, M.A.

THE Mission Movement in the Church of England was no doubt greatly stimulated by the visit of the American Evangelists in 1873, but it is well to bear in mind that it had been inaugurated some four years earlier by the great “Twelve Days’ Mission” in London. Indeed, though that was the first united effort to which the name “mission” was given, it was far from being the first thing of the kind ever attempted in connection with our Church. The student of the history of the Evangelical school in the Church of England can hardly fail to be surprised at the fact that, while the teaching of Wesley and Whitfield was reproduced during the nineteenth century in many churches throughout the land, the evangelizing methods which Wesley had used with such effect, and which had done so much for Wesleyan Methodism, do not seem to have been adopted. The “penitent meeting,” which always followed the sermon of the Methodist revivalist, does not seem to have been made use of by the Evangelical leaders who did such good work in the first fifty years of last century.

These good men seem to have trusted mainly to their preaching of the Gospel on the Sundays, and probably to house-to-house visitation, with which they, no doubt, followed up the impressions made in the pulpit, for the results which so abundantly accompanied their ministry. Perhaps it was their Calvinistic bias that inclined them to imitate the methods of Whitfield rather than those of Wesley. No doubt many of the