

ARTICLE IX.

THE BIBLE IN THE CONDITIONS CREATED BY
MODERN SCHOLARSHIP.

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THE time has come when we may believe that the state of things for which the late Professor Robertson Smith pleaded is realized; biblical discussion can now be "kept free from rancor and derisive utterance." Less than twenty years have passed since his deposition, and his own city and university of Aberdeen are uniting to honor his memory. The change has resulted from two different impulses. Men have come to see that the real controversy is not, as has been supposed, between new views and traditionalism. That is a conflict which could never long prevail. It is rather, as has been frequently pointed out, between new views and deeply rooted spiritual experience, which, as the foremost of all spiritual possessions and possessed anteriorly to the new views, is often firmly and strenuously arrayed against them. This is a contest which should not exist, as religious experience is never the monopoly of those who hold any given intellectual view. Men's minds are often greatly distressed when called to adjust themselves to the results of new lines of investigation into the history and contents of the Bible; but soon discovery of the real nature of their distress tends to alleviate it. The spiritual experience reasserts itself, and in time the new truth, if it proves true, is comfortably accepted.

The scientific point of view has also ceased to be unfamiliar. Every one knows that there is such a thing as modern scholarship. In science, it appears in the new

chemistry and the new physics, which already have made antiquated the text-books, if not the learning, of a decade or two ago; in philosophy, where we have both new methods and new data, and where the experimental laboratory has become as important a feature as the quiet meditation of the study; in history, where the adoption of new principles has made it necessary to rewrite a large part of the history of the world, relegating to the past the stories of wars and military chiefs, to give room for studies of intellectual and social movements; in economics, where the great text-books of Bentham, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill are superseded by a new series from the pens of men who are still living.

This new scholarship has of necessity created new conditions. It applies to every department of human thought. No area, however traditional or however sacred, can be cantoned off and shut out from its influence. No reverent Christian would for a moment wish that the Bible should be so treated. It is the best product of the intellect, human or divine, and has had an influence upon the development of human thought which will always maintain for it the first place, and make it central in human progress.

When we ask, What are these new conditions? two present themselves as being the most important and the most easily recognized,—the universality of law, and the prevalence of the method of development.

The scientific development of this century received its impulse when Auguste Comte classified the sciences in an ascending series, in which physics, for example, depends upon mathematics, and chemistry upon physics, and biology upon chemistry, and the science of man upon a reference to the conditions of all existence below him, thus applying natural law to man, and laying the foundations for Herbert Spencer's scheme of the philosophy of the universe. Darwin's investigations, whatever may be thought

of his particular views, confirm the general principle. Faraday and Clerk Maxwell extended it into the stellar heavens; and the late German physicist Heinrich Hertz confirmed Maxwell's mathematical formulæ by the physical demonstration of the oneness of light and electricity, removing the last possibility of question as to the unity of the physical universe in its widest extent, and the identity of the laws that govern it. The unity of the divine method in the realm that we know, is strong presumption of the same method in the realm that lies beyond. In other words the presumption is that the special revelation of God which we find in his word, will move along the same lines as the revelation of himself which he has made in the universe.

In regard to the method of development, it is quite conceivable that the Creator should produce perfected forms at the beginning. But he has not seen fit to do so. The earth has been slowly prepared for men through long geologic periods, and by the gradual work of the forces instituted for the purpose. The horse, the dog, and the pigeon, no less than the rose and the chrysanthemum, are what they are to-day, in their perfection and beauty, only as the result of slow processes of growth in which man has been a worker together with God. The Anglo-Saxon race as an advanced form of humanity, adapted for the newer problems of the unfolding of the kingdom of God on the earth, is no less a product of the centuries; and man himself comes under the same law of development. Our larger knowledge, completer mastery over the forces of nature, and finer personal development, so far as these things characterize the best life of to-day, mark a stage in the growth which we believe will end only when man is found in the bosom of God.

The rapidity and the extent of the movement of thought are marked by the fact that Humboldt's "Cosmos," which

was a summary of scientific knowledge as it existed a half-century ago, contains no slightest reference to either the doctrine of the conservation of force or the doctrine of evolution, which are now fundamental and universal in science.

The Bible, therefore, is to be considered under these conditions, and it is not to be wondered at if a necessity appears for changing the ancient definitions, and for re-adjusting, perhaps to a large extent, the views we have held as to the method of its production and the interpretation of its contents.

But at this point it is important to recognize that the question concerns the particular book which we have in our hands, and not the materials out of which it was made. Whatever may be our views as to the method by which the rose or the pigeon or the horse or the dog was produced, the thing itself, in its beauty and perfection, is ours to enjoy. The historian may cover wide ground in tracing for us the line of Aryan development, but the Anglo-Saxon is what he is, regardless of the theories that may be held as to the ancient Greeks, the Hindus, or the Pelasgians. We are undisturbed in our gratitude to God for the wife of our bosom, however the scientific man may urge that the first woman was the bride of a long-tailed monkey. We are not to be deprived of the Bible men love in their homes, the book which has fashioned the centuries and been the companion and inspiration of multitudes, whatever views may be advanced as to its history. The Old Testament as we have it since before the time of Christ, and the New Testament since the close of the first century after Christ, have remained practically unchanged. These books, and not the materials that enter into their composition, are the Bible of the Christian and of the world. Here we have the work of men who, in whatever age they lived, or whatever their number or their names, if they are to be judged

by their work, have the right to be held inspired. So much at least is beyond dispute or the possibility of contradiction.

But it is to be recognized that this book has had a history. It used to be supposed that it came complete from the hand of God. We all have been more or less influenced by the pictures of our childhood, in which the tables of the law were represented as descending from supernatural hands into the arms of the kneeling and expectant Moses on the mountain. The Talmud declares that the complete book of the law was handed to Moses by God, and the only dispute is whether God delivered the whole to Moses at once or by volumes. But as a matter of fact, if the claim were made to-day that the Bible did come in this way, it would be at once suspicious. This is the claim of the Book of Mormon. God works nowhere after that manner, and he does not vary his method. Everywhere there is one law, everywhere there is development, because God is wise as he is loving, and has no reason to change a method he has once adopted.

Professor Robertson of the University of Glasgow has given us this illustration: To understand the modern orthodox Jew, with his history and his habits, we must needs go back to the days of the formation of the Talmud. So soon as we arrive there, we find that we must go further, to the days of Ezra and his cotemporaries; and there again we discover that we not only stand at the beginning of a long course of development, but also that we are at the end of a long anterior course. The Jew of to-day is the embodiment of a process which itself originated in remote antiquity. So, to understand the Christian church, we must go back to the New Testament. Once there, we find that these writings are saturated with the phraseology and the thought of the Old Testament, of which in a large sense they are the product.

At this point we are confronted by the Higher Criticism.

Some disturbance is created by the name. It is unreasonable to waste time upon the propriety of the term, or to get excited over the implied superiority. It should be recognized simply as the peculiar and technical appellation of a criticism which shall be limited to the question of the origin and the structure of the writings themselves.

The distinguishing feature of its testimony is its emphasis upon the doctrine of development, and its shifting the central point of ancient history from Moses on Sinai to what Darmesteter calls the "choir of the prophets." This is not so revolutionary a statement as at first appears, as, on the one hand, the activity of the prophets presupposes the stage of Mosaism, regarded as an historical movement, introducing an element of law as a working factor in Israel's life; and, on the other hand, Moses himself is the most distinguished figure in that long line of inspired men who appeared at the turning-points of Hebrew history, as representatives and exponents of a higher religion than that of their contemporaries. It is simply a question of the relative time and importance of various forces, the existence of which in the life of Israel is admitted by all. There is no question of the fact that earlier documents were extensively wrought into the Scriptures as we now have them, whenever they received their final shape. There is also no question that the Bible is a record of a real and continuous revelation of God, his mind, his character, his moral requirements, his disciplinary dealings with mankind. Believing students in all ages, whatever the limits of their critical knowledge or exegetical methods, have approached and used the Scriptures from this standpoint. And no group in any age can claim a monopoly of reverence or of faith. Furthermore we have here the record not only of the processes by which God is lifting man to himself, but also of that more remarkable method in which God has adapted himself to men, condescending to their

weaknesses, and bringing both himself and his revelation down to the level of their need. We recall the saying of Wellhausen, that the religion of the Old Testament did not so much make men partakers in the divine life, as it made God a partaker in the life of man.

In the presence of these processes we are prepared to believe that the divine action will inevitably transcend the range of our experience, and possibly contradict our first impressions as to the method of revelation. As Ottley has said, in the Bampton Lectures of 1897, "If the love of God be love indeed, it will not be deterred from self-manifestation; it will break down barriers; it will adapt itself to the actual situation; it will use the available material, the instruments ready to hand. There will be no limit to the range of divine condescension, except that imposed by the law of holiness.

"What lacks then of perfection fit for God
But just the instance which the tale supplies
Of love without a limit? So His strength,
So His intelligence; let love be so,
Unlimited in its self-sacrifice.
Then is the tale true, and God shines complete."

We ask, then, What do we know of the age before the prophets? Very much indeed. So much, that the knowledge of our fathers was as nothing. In our own time the spade of the explorer, coupled with the intelligence of the interpreter, has given to us the details of the social and business life, of the art, the science, and the literature of Egypt of the time of Moses, and of far earlier ages in Assyria, to be compared for completeness with what we have, for example, of England in the time of the Normans. They have pushed back the confines of history three or four thousand years, and leave us standing upon the borders of what was already an advanced civilization, with art, and literature, and a developed society which awaken our wonder as to its possible origin and story.

We are asked, Are the tales of creation and the deluge, the story of Abraham and of Joseph, legends or myths? And the answer comes, The men who wrote these books, in whatever age they lived, were neither ignorant men nor fools. They possessed the literature of their times, and were free to use that literature, as all great authors have done. It shall be ours to sift their material, and critically to interpret both their methods and their results. The story of the Creation and of the Fall existed in earliest times in various forms, and the story of the Deluge is almost, if not quite, as universal as the race. Comparing, for example, with the account in the Old Testament, the account of the Flood in the great Izdubar Epic translated in 1872 by Mr. George Smith from the brick in the British Museum from the great library of Asurbanipal, we see, as we do in the Assyrian tales of the Creation and the Fall, that the inspired writers have given us the narratives in their purest form. In their hands, stripped of the mass of superimposed material gathered in transmission, spiritualized where they were grossly material, they have passed from romance into reality, from legend into history, as they are made the sufficient record of "the beginnings" so far as they concern God's subsequent dealings with men, and the authentic vehicle of a progressive revelation.

This great movement which we call the Hebrew and the Christian history, has been sustained by truth and not by fiction. It has been the unfolding and expansion of the deepest and most permanent principles in the life of man, and in the revelation of God as given to man. Within what channels that revelation has run, and what materials it has taken up into itself, and by what processes it has been assimilated by man, are questions of investigation, not to be determined in advance; and they are questions for the scholar, in the pursuit of which the widest liberty is to be allowed, in the settled conviction that it

will in no sense diminish, but rather vastly increase, the value which the writings have for the church and for Christians ourselves. It is still too soon for any man to dogmatize about them.

As truth has small value until it is presented to us embodied in a life, so the teachings which form the contents of the Scriptures could never have won their place in human thought, except they were originally embodied in men who believed them and lived them. Whatever the names of these men, and in whatever age they lived, the writings themselves witness that there was an Abraham, a Moses, a Samuel, a David, as there were the prophets.

It is not too strong to assert, with Schultz, that "we cannot in point of fact picture to ourselves the rise of the Hebrew religion in any other way than the Hebrew story does, when it represents God as entering into converse and communion with primitive man, in modes suited to his present capacity." As Ottley puts it in the *Bampton Lectures*, "The whole subsequent course of revelation tends to confirm the idea, that, at some point in early Hebrew history, there actually took place such an event as we believe the call of Abraham to have been, a self-manifestation of Almighty God, and a vocation addressed to a particular man, on whose response to the divine call the future development of the redemptive movement was allowed to depend."¹

"Nothing," says Kittel, "is less likely to arise spontaneously out of the depths of a people's life than those new creations which make epochs in the history of religion and morals. They slumber there, but they do not come to the surface until a single spirit, of whom they have taken entire possession, finds them in himself, grasps them, understands and proclaims them, and thus becomes the religious and moral hero, the prophet of his people. The mere

¹ *Aspects of the Old Testament* (Longmans), p. 114.

name Moses would do nothing. If legend had created the bearer of that name, another must have actually filled his place."¹

The late Professor Dillmann of Berlin left this testimony: "The books of Moses admit of no explanation except on the supposition of a preparatory, pure type of religion, such as, according to Genesis, belonged to those fathers; and such a higher form of religion, of necessity, presupposed personal agents or standard-bearers." These personal agents, extending in long array from the beginning of human history to the attendants of our Lord, are the witnesses and the transmitters of the divine revelation which discloses an unchanging love, which from the foundation of the world has purposed to win men to salvation. And the Bible as the work of their hands becomes the revealer both of the divine righteousness and of the divine love through which man is slowly lifted above himself, and prepared for the place for which in the counsels of eternity he was planned, the foremost of the creatures of God, the son in his Father's house.

So we are relieved, once and for all, from the old task of reconciling the Scriptures with geology and chronology and all the varying stages of human, progressive learning. We do not expect instruction as to the physical universe from the word of God. The Scripture supplies no short cuts for the human intellect. In all ages, man has been under the necessity of attaining wisdom by his own efforts. And he has long since learned that, in the nature of things, his apprehension of truth and the service he can make of it largely depend upon the pains he is forced to take in acquiring it. Within the realm within which his intellectual powers may hope to attain knowledge, he has no warrant to expect supernatural aid. The Bible exists for another purpose. In it we hear God making an ap-

¹ *History of the Hebrews* (Williams & Norgate), Vol. i. p. 240.

peal to beings capable of moral response; not coming as a schoolmaster to teach them what they may learn for themselves. In it, as in that later revelation of himself, Jesus of Nazareth, we see the mystery of the two elements, the human and the divine, intermingled and yet distinct, self-limited, if you will, but everywhere so really limited as to witness that it is not only a revelation made to man, but a revelation made by the divine grace through the agency of man, that God may be recognized as not far from every one of us. In it, as in Jesus again, we have the self-witnessing revelation, of which the supreme evidence is the answer of the heart to the truth made manifest from God. As men believe in Jesus Christ because God through Jesus Christ speaks directly to the soul, and the soul, recognizing his voice, surrenders to him; so men hear the voice of God in the Bible, and surrender themselves, not to the Bible, nor to the voice, but to God himself, whom henceforth they know and love. Thus the Scriptures are seen, in their form and history, to lead up to the revelation of Jesus Christ, as well as to foretell him and to prepare the way for him. In character and substance they have something of identity with the supreme revelation which in the fullness of time God made of himself in his Son. The Old Testament in its entirety becomes Messianic in this larger and nobler sense, and those who have come to know Jesus of Nazareth learn to search the Scriptures, because, as he said, they discover that they are they which in all parts testify of him. An inspired Bible does not mean a book free from a large admixture of the human, but a book perfectly adapted to fulfil the function it was intended to discharge,—to reveal God to man, and above all to perpetuate the knowledge of the glory of God as it shines in the face of Jesus Christ. That in the face of the freest investigation and the most searching criticism it does this adequately, who will question?