

THE GERMAN ATTITUDE TO THE BIBLE

THE REVEREND W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.
WYCLIFFE COLLEGE, TORONTO

No theological question has been given greater prominence through the war than that of the Bible. Before the war commenced in 1914, German thought and German teaching were widely accepted, especially in connection with the Old Testament. There is scarcely a Theological Seminary, a College, or a University in any English-speaking country where German teaching on the Old Testament was not perhaps the dominant and almost universally believed attitude. And even in connection with the New Testament, things were moving in the same direction.

Of course there were some people who, long before the war, did not follow this line. They did not think that German teaching on the Bible was everything that was said about it. They were, however, regarded as obscurantist, narrow, prejudiced, impossible, and guilty of that most terrible of modern sins—the sin of being unscholarly. And yet there is no doubt that the tendency of German thought in connection with the Bible for the last century, or thereabouts, has all been in one direction—that of questioning and often attacking its authority as the Word of God.

Now there can be no doubt that if we take the Bible—to use a modern phrase—at its face value, it claims to be a revelation from God. Without at this moment considering whether this claim is true, we may just take it as it stands. Nobody can read, for instance, Heb. i. 1, 2, without seeing that the Bible does claim for itself that it is a revelation from God. “God who at sundry times, and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the Fathers by the Prophets”—there is a claim for the Old Testament—“hath in these last days spoken to us by his Son.” And so the question is just this, “Has the war done anything to shake our confidence in this claim?” Or, if we like to

put it so, "Has anything emanated from Germany, or elsewhere, during the last century to give us ground for believing that the claim of the Bible is unwarranted?"

Let us consider some six points on which the Bible stands to-day, as it ever has stood, and will continue to stand.

I. THE UNITY OF THE BIBLE

We hardly realize that the Bible is not a book, but a library. It is interesting to remember that the word "Bible," though it is now applied to one Book, comes from a Greek term meaning "the books" — "*ta biblia*." And when we see an edition of the Bible in various volumes, with one volume to Genesis, another to Exodus, and right on through the Bible, we begin to realize that it is a library, not merely one book. Yet, notwithstanding all these sixty-six books, differing in time, circumstances, authorship, and character, there is a unity running through from Genesis to Revelation.

It is said on good authority that every piece of rope in the British Navy has a red thread running through it, so that if anyone helps himself to any of it, he and others may know that he has broken the eighth commandment. Wherever that rope is cut, the red thread can be seen. In the same way there is a red thread running through the Bible; and wherever we examine it, we see indications of that thread — the unity running from Genesis to Revelation. Now there is no other book in the world of which this can be said. Consider that there are something like thirty-six hundred years between Genesis and Revelation, and at least thirty-six different authors; and yet from Genesis to Revelation there is a oneness running through all.

It is a familiar story, but is worth repeating. Dr. A. J. Gordon, of Boston, on one occasion, was in his study with some of his children, and he gave them a puzzle, one of those made of different-sized pieces of wood. He went out and came back unexpectedly, when to his surprise he found the puzzle completed, and he said to the children, "How

is it you did it so soon?" "We saw the picture of a man on the back, and this helped us to know where the pieces were to go." And so, as it has often been pointed out, there is a picture of a man, the man Christ Jesus, anticipated in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New, and this gives unity to the Book.

Now this unity stands as one of the unique features of the Bible that nothing in scholarship, or war, or anything else can destroy. The force of it can be fittingly stated in the words of a great English Methodist theologian, Dr. W. B. Pope:—

"The unity of Scripture is a very strong credential in its favor as professing to be from God. It is one great vision, and its interpretation one: beginning and ending with the same Paradise, with thousands of years of redeeming history between. That the New Testament as fulfillment should so perfectly correspond with the Old Testament as prophecy is in itself the most wonderful phenomenon in literature: it is evidence as near demonstration as needs be of the intervention of a Divine Hand. The Redeemer made manifest in the later Scripture answers face to face, and feature for feature, to the Form predicted in the older Scripture. One idea runs through the whole: the kingdom of God set up or restored in His Incarnate Son. To this idea authors of various ages and of various races contribute in a harmony which never could be the result of accident or mere coincidence. Only the Divine Power could have made so many men of different lands concert, yet without concerting, such a scheme of literature. If they had not asserted their inspiration of God, that hypothesis would have had to be invented to account for the facts and phenomena of their writings. But they have asserted it: the claim is bound up with every page of the Word they have left behind them."

II. THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE BIBLE

The Bible was written by Jews, who were in many respects one of the most narrow of peoples. It was written in the East, and the East is as different from the West as any two parts of the human race can be. And yet it is equally applicable to us in the West to-day. It is for all; it is suited to every place.

We are told by those who know, that one of the most difficult things in the world is to translate from one language to another. A little while ago I found a delightful French poem written by a Belgian French poet; and, on reproducing it in an article, I suggested to some English writers that they should translate it. They did, but they almost entirely lost the flavor, the aroma of that exquisite little poem. The same is true of renderings from English into other languages. It would be interesting to see what the Chinese would make of one of Shakespeare's plays, or what they would do with "To be, or not to be" or some other well-known passage. How much of Shakespeare would be left?

And yet the Bible is the most marvelous Book in the world in this respect, that it loses least of any book in translation. The Bible Societies have well over six hundred translations, either into languages or dialects; and, notwithstanding all these in different parts of the earth, the essential teaching of the Bible is preserved intact in all the renderings from the Hebrew and Greek into other languages or dialects. This is the universality of the Bible. Here again we can only account for it by the fact that it is supernatural, that it comes from God.

III. THE REALITY OF THE BIBLE

There are many things about the Bible that prove its reality. For our present purpose, let us take two. Its reality is seen in the predictions of the Old Testament. Now, of course, there are a good many more things in prophecy than prediction, but we must never forget that the primary idea of prophecy in the Old Testament is foretelling the future. Among other things, we notice in Amos v. 27 a prediction that the northern kingdom of Israel should go into captivity. When those words were uttered by the prophet, there was not a hint of trouble, everything was prosperous, and Jeroboam II. was on the throne, perhaps the greatest and most powerful king of Israel. And yet with everything bright and materially

satisfactory, the prophet said, "You are going to be taken into captivity beyond Damascus"; and we know that that took place. This is a case of absolute prediction.

Take another case. In Isa. xxxix. 6, 7, the prophet Isaiah went to Hezekiah, and when he found that the king had shown his treasures to the Babylonians, he said, "Your people shall be taken into captivity to Babylon." Now Babylon at that time, by comparison with Assyria, had no power; and yet it is not to Assyria, but to Babylon, that Isaiah predicts the captivity; and we know it took place a hundred and fifty years after Isaiah's time. I have been interested to see what commentators have made of these words, because here is a case of prediction; and one of the best known and most important of modern commentators, when he tried to explain it, said it was a statement of "poetic truth"—whatever that means.

For the reality of the New Testament, only one point can now be mentioned—the portrait of Jesus Christ. It is worth recalling that the great literary geniuses of the ages have never attempted to depict a perfect character. We do not find a perfect character attempted in any of the masterpieces from Homer downwards. Yet four men, called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, give us the record of a perfect character. They were not literary geniuses at all, and one or two of them were quite ordinary men; but, nevertheless, for nearly two thousand years we have had a perfect character depicted by them, which has been the admiration of the centuries.

How are we to account for it? It "takes a Jesus to invent a Jesus," as someone has said; and if these ordinary men invented the character of Jesus, then (to use a familiar argument) we are in the presence of a miracle far greater than any our Lord ever wrought.

IV. THE VITALITY OF THE BIBLE

In Heb. iv. 12 we read that the Word of God is living, and in 1 Peter i. 23 that it is a living seed. This is because it comes from the living God, and one of the most striking

things about the Bible is the way in which it provides for the living needs of living people to-day. In some respects this is the most satisfying evidence of Christianity — the way in which the Bible, as a living Book, provides for the needs of people who are alive.

Some of the things told by workers during the war read almost like chapters from the Acts of the Apostles. There have been hundreds of incidents during the last four years — testimonies to the Bible in connection with human needs, and without doubt we shall find in them a fresh and forceful proof of the truth of Christianity.

V. THE SINGULARITY OF THE BIBLE

By the singularity of the Bible is meant its claim to be the only, the exclusive way of salvation.

For the first two or three hundred years Christianity suffered persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. This was because it claimed to dispossess every other religious system, and to be the only religion in the world. If the Christian people had gone to the Emperor, and others in authority, and said, "This is a new religion; we want you to allow it to come with the others and be put in your Pantheon," they would have been ready to allow Christianity to appear as one of the number. But that was not the way of the Gospel. It said, in effect, "No, this is the only religion. The others are not religions." Persecution then came upon Christianity, because it was intolerant — in the right sense of the word, the only way in which anyone has a right to be intolerant with the intolerance of truth.

So it is now with regard to missionary propaganda. When we go to the foreign field, we claim that Christianity will do for mankind what no other religion can do. Yet there are people who say that one religion is as good as another, especially to those who are brought up in it. But why do they say this about religion and not about anything else? Is it not right for us to give people the very best that we have? What about medical science?

Are we content to accept the science of (say) a hundred years ago, if we find to-day that science is better? Are we never to introduce new lines of sanitation in heathen lands, although we have something far better and more likely to save life than they have or are likely to have? Are we not to give them the very best in any other walk of life?

And therefore, with regard to Christianity, we maintain that it is the best of all religions. We do not for a moment despise, so far as they are true, any other systems of religion; but we say that every other system is an aspiration of man after God, and Christianity is a revelation of God to man. The others start with man and try to get to God. Christianity starts from God and comes down to man.

VI. THE FINALITY OF THE BIBLE

The Bible has now been before the world for nearly two thousand years in its complete form, and yet it has said the last word on some of the greatest things in life. We find in the Bible the last word about salvation from sin, the last word about holiness, the last word about the future life. And, as others have often pointed out, while we outgrow the teaching of other men, we never outgrow the teaching of Jesus Christ and His Apostles.

Not only so, we have had great systems of philosophy and morality during the last thousand or fifteen hundred years, great theories, great books, and great ideas; but there is not a single new moral fact, not a single new ethical idea, in any one of these great systems that we cannot find in this Book. How is it that, with all the great teachers of these centuries, nothing new has been propounded beyond what is found in this Book?

Now these are the six things: the Unity, the Universality, the Reality, the Vitality, the Singularity, and the Finality of the Bible. And the supreme point is this: the real question in connection with the Bible is not literary or even historical; it is spiritual.

The fundamental issue is whether the Bible is a supernatural Book. The tendency in Germany for the last hundred years has been to deny this. We are told again and again that we are to read the Bible like any other book. This sounds attractive, but it may be questioned whether it is correct. A truer way to put it is, that we should read the Bible like any other book making the same claim. The Bible claims to be from God. Let us read it like any other book that makes the same claim, and then see what the result will be. Or, if we prefer to state the case in this way, let us first read it like any other book, and then read it as unlike every other book; and when we do both, there will be no doubt in our minds that the Bible makes a claim to be supernatural.

The fact is, and this is the point to consider, there is something in the Bible that we cannot analyze by ordinary human methods. Just as we cannot analyze life, so there is that in the Bible which we cannot analyze. We can perhaps analyze it into its historical and its literary and other parts, but there is still something we cannot analyze, and that is the supernatural element. This is beyond anything we have in the finest critical school.

In view of all that we know now, it is vital and important to observe that the German intellect is not the superior thing which we were taught before the war. All the things that are important in ordinary life have been invented outside of Germany. Steamships, railroads, the telegraph, electricity, the telephone, wireless telegraph, and even the aeroplane and the submarine—not one of these was invented in Germany. In a very interesting pamphlet "The History of the Submarine," it says that for three hundred years attempts were made to perfect what we now know as the submarine. The remarkable thing is that we cannot trace anything worthy of the name among the Germans in connection with this invention. Not only so, but when they used a model of a submarine a few years ago, they only adopted someone else's, and he was a Spaniard,

a Spanish architect who had a French model. All the German U-boats have been built on a French model.

This means that the German intellect is not creative, but adaptive. Now if this is the case in regard to ordinary everyday life, why should we think the German intellect is superior in regard to the Bible? The fact is the German intellect lacks insight—the very thing required for a proper knowledge of the Bible. See how the German intellect lacked insight in regard to the war—first of all, England would not fight; secondly, France could be defeated at once, and then they could turn to Russia; thirdly, America would not come in; fourthly, America could be easily involved with Mexico and Japan. If this is the case in regard to politics, a thousandfold more is it the case in regard to the Bible, which needs spiritual insight as well as intellectual acumen. One of our British jurists, Sir Frederick Pollock, writing on the events of the last four years, uttered some words which are worthy of being remembered: “The Germans will go down in history as the people who foresaw everything except that which actually happened.” If, therefore, these things are true in regard to earthly matters, we have no right to believe that things are otherwise in regard to that which is the most important of all—the Bible. There is nothing more impressive during the four years of the war than the German lack of insight into character.

We are not afraid of scholarship. The only thing we have a right to be afraid of is that which denies God and the supernatural. There are three kinds of criticism, and when we get the three together there is no need to be afraid. There is what is called the Lower Criticism, the criticism of the text, Hebrew and Greek. Then comes the Higher Criticism, the knowledge of history and literature, and date and place, circumstance and character, and so on. And there is what has been sometimes called the Highest Criticism, the criticism suggested by Isa. lxvi. 2, “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.” When we get these

together, we can "criticize" the Bible as much as we like, because, as we go on criticizing, we find that will happen which is written in Heb. iv. 13. In the Greek of that passage it tells us the Bible is the "critic" of us. It is the only place in the Bible where the word is used. And when the Bible criticizes us, we begin to understand the Bible as never before, and perhaps we shall be led to criticize it less.

It is therefore necessary to put in a plea for the greatest possible independence in connection with Bible study. Up to the time of the war, all the ideas of critical scholars came from Germany, some adopted and others adapted. Let us hope that day is past. It ought to be. At any rate, younger men and women, as they study these subjects, should determine to be independent, look at these things for themselves, and see that they face all the facts and factors and draw their conclusions only when everything has been considered. There need be no doubt whatever as to the result, if a man will look at all the elements of the situation and not simply those that he may have had set before him in a very partial way.

A secular newspaper well said a little while ago: "For forty years the Germans have been reading philosophy, and have forgotten to read the Bible. That is a great blunder — the greatest blunder a nation ever made." There are many people who know very much about the Bible, but do not know the Bible itself. There are students who could sit for an examination and tell all about the literary questions connected with the Fourth Gospel, the external and the internal evidences for believing that it came from the Apostle John, but they could not do the same for the contents of the Gospel. We know a great deal about the Bible. Let us see that we know more of the Bible itself. Let us think our way through a book, and be able to know exactly where this is or where that is. Let us know what Mark contains, how it differs from Matthew, know what John contains, know what Acts contains, know what Romans contains. Let us not only have a few pet texts, like

John iii. 16, or John v. 24, or John xiv. 1, but let us also master John for ourselves. Let us master Romans, with its keyword "righteousness"; and so with regard to all the other books in one way or another.

If we get to know what the books contain, then we shall have one of the greatest safeguards against erroneous criticism and one of the greatest helps towards true criticism. The trouble is that, when we do not fill our minds with the Bible, we are liable to have them filled with other things. As someone said about the Germans in connection with things spiritual: "The criticism of the Gospels rendered the German mind incapable of the faith, and into the vacuum of a rejected Christianity there rushed this resurgence of the national spirit."

We must therefore study the Bible, master its contents, believe it, obey it; and then we shall come to the conclusion that "Thy word is true from the beginning"; "Thy word is very pure; therefore thy servant loveth it."