

## THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE.

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IT is generally agreed amongst Evangelical Churchmen that their attitude towards the Bible is distinct from that which characterizes the Modernist school of thought; and that the distinction may fairly be expressed by saying that Evangelicals accept the teaching of the Thirty-Nine Articles heartily and without reservation, giving them broadly that same Evangelical interpretation which was originally intended.

It is the object of this paper briefly to inquire into the nature of the Authority of the Bible as declared in the Church of England formularies, and then to apply it to certain present and practical considerations.

I. (a) At the outset it is of importance to observe that whatever meaning be given to such phrases as "God's Word written," or "Holy Writ," the qualities implied in them are predicated of the Bible as a whole, and not to any part or portion of its content.

There is a phrase in current use that the Bible *is* not the Word of God, but *contains* the Word of God. Such a distinction is entirely contrary to the teaching of the Church of England formularies. There is not the slightest hint in them of a division of the Bible into two parts, one of which may be regarded as gems of revealed truth, and the other as a casket in which they are contained. It is invariably treated as *the Word of God*, and not as a record of certain words of God. There is nowhere any suggestion that even the words of Christ are to be regarded as a superior standard by which the truth or value of the remainder is to be judged. On the contrary, the final authority of Holy Scripture over the counsels of men, even over General Councils of the Church, is clearly regarded as inherent in the Scripture as a whole; and lest any should contend upon the basis of one portion of Scripture alone, the internal harmony and consistency of the various parts of Holy Scripture is the subject of special and explicit declarations.

What Bishop Pearson wrote about belief in the Creed well expresses the attitude of the Church of England to the Scriptures in which the truths of the Creed are revealed: "To believe therefore as the word stands in front of the Creed, and not only so, but is diffused through every article and proposition of it, is to assent to the whole and every part of it, as to a certain and infallible truth revealed by God (who by reason of His infinite knowledge cannot be deceived, and by reason of His transcendent holiness cannot deceive), and delivered to us in the writings of the blessed apostles and prophets, immediately inspired, moved and acted by God" (*Pearson on the Creed*, p. 16).

This treatment of Scripture as a whole is based upon the teaching of the Fathers, and upon the attitude of our Lord and His Apostles to the Old Testament. In 2 Timothy iii. 15, however that verse be

best translated into English, St. Paul attributes the predicate *θεοπνευστος* to every Scripture, and by common consent he had the Old Testament in mind in so doing. Moreover, to quote the words of Professor Swete :—

“ Though it is only in 2 Timothy that inspiration is directly ascribed to the Old Testament Scriptures, there can be no doubt that belief in this inspiration was shared by all the leaders of the Apostolic Church, who quote the Old Testament as a final authority or as the Word of God. The same attitude seems to be attributed to our Lord in more than one of His arguments with the Jews, and in the direct teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. . . . *It is written* is His final justification of courses of action, the ground on which He bases principles.”

With regard to the New Testament, Professor Swete says :—

“ The traditional belief in the inspiration of the New Testament finds its justification in the promises of Divine assistance made by our Lord to the Apostles and their company, and the special gifts of the Spirit possessed by the Apostolic Age. If the first age was specially guided by the Spirit into a knowledge of essential truth, its writings have rightly been gathered by the Church into a sacred canon ” (*The Holy Spirit in the New Testament*, pp. 330, 389).

Those who decline to apply the title the Word of God to the whole Bible do so for theoretical rather than for practical purposes. They would be the last to admit that special Divine authority attached to all those parts of the Old Testament introduced by such expressions as, “ Thus saith the Lord,” or to offer any practical division of the Bible into its authoritative and unauthoritative portions. It is unnecessary to labour the point further, for it is really unquestionable that when in the Church of England formularies the Bible is spoken of as the Word of God, that expression is attributed to it as a whole.

(b) The nature of the authority attributed to the Bible in the Articles is undoubtedly Divine. They place it above human traditions which have no force of obligation unless they can be proved by Holy Writ ; it is placed above the authority of General Councils, since they are not all, though they should be, governed by the Spirit and Word of God ; it is superior to the Church itself, which may not decree anything contrary to it nor enforce anything essential apart from its authority.

In the days of the Reformation it was asked, and the same question is being asked by Modernists to-day : How can Divine authority reside in a book ? Is not every book by its nature finite in its contents, bound up with the thought expression of its own age, and altogether a dead and not a living thing ?

To which the answer given is that contained in the Creed and in the Scriptures themselves, that the Holy Spirit is, in the last analysis, the author of Holy Scripture, and also its Interpreter. To quote Bishop Pearson again, the law given to Moses was “ not a mortal word to die with him, but living oracles to be in force

when he was dead, and oblige the people to a belief, when his rod had ceased to broach the rocks and divide the seas" (*op. cit.*, pp. 14, 15).

When Stephen spoke of the "living oracles," he was using an expression not applicable to secular history; and according to the teaching of the Church of England the living and timeless nature of Scripture is due to its authorship by the Holy Spirit, Who is not a dead but a living Person, and is the Interpreter of His own book to every individual and every age of the Church. In the Homily on Holy Scripture it is taught that it is plentifully sufficient "for all ages and for all degrees and sorts of men"; and that for its understanding, as Chrysostom said, human and worldly wisdom and science are not required, "but the revelation of the Holy Ghost, Who inspireth the true meaning unto them that with humility and diligence do search therefore."

Just as the doctrine of the Atonement is at once rendered inconsistent and nugatory if the Divinity of Christ be left out of count, so it is essential to the Protestant view of Scripture to bear in mind the work of the Divine Spirit.

His office, as Pearson points out, is first general and external by the deliverance of the revelation in the inspired Scriptures, and then individual and internal by moving the heart to assent to that which is propounded in the Word of God.

From this follows the Prayer Book doctrine that neither can Holy Scripture contradict itself, nor can it be contradicted by any man or body of men who speak under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

II. (a) Such being the teaching of the Church of England, how can it be applied to the problems raised by modern criticism, and to the practical end of promoting belief in Christ and holiness of life? For it should never be forgotten that God gave the Bible not to be the possession of scholars, but to be the lamp of life to common men; not to be a storehouse of arguments, but to be a rule of faith and conduct.

It has ever been the glory of Evangelicals to urge men to put their trust for salvation not in themselves, nor in their human teachers, but in the plain promises and statements of the Word of God.

And it is worth noting that its practical authority over the minds of men is directly proportionate to the confidence which they place in its precepts. Those who speak depreciatingly of the Old Testament should reflect that where confidence is shaken, authority is diminished, and the souls of men are injured.

There is not anything in the Church's doctrine of the supremacy of Scripture to hinder a reasonable and reverent historical criticism; but on the contrary, modern criticism stands in urgent need of the Evangelical faith in the Bible as the Word of God to make it not only more reverent but more reasonable.

The real difficulty does not turn upon questions of literal or symbolical interpretation, nor is it necessarily bound up with the

absolute accuracy of every genealogy or group of numbers to be found in the Bible. Such difficulties have been discussed since the earliest ages of the Church, and they have presented no obstacle to faith in the Bible as God's written Word, which Hooker describes as "with absolute perfection framed" and as possessing "no defect."

But the real issue is raised by that view of the Old Testament which was propounded by the rationalists De Wette and Wellhausen, and adopted by a majority of modern theological professors, which turns the history of Israel upside down. The article upon Israel in Hastings' one-volume *Bible Dictionary* gives a moderate exposition of this theory. After dividing the sources of Old Testament history into the three groups of narratives—(1) embodying tribal traditions; (2) reflecting the traditions of certain local shrines, and (3) a miscellany of legendary and mythical survivals, it proceeds to give an account of the history of Israel from which all miracle and Divine intervention is eliminated, its occurrence being attributed to primitive ignorance, and to give a description of the origin and early development of Israel which differs *toto cælo* from that given in the Pentateuch.

There is a twofold difficulty in reconciling such a view of the Old Testament with faith in it as the Word of God. In the first place it does violence to Pearson's statement that God is too wise to be deceived and too good to deceive us. The historical books unquestionably represent as real occurrences the plagues of Egypt, the institution of the Passover, and the giving of the Law from Sinai, and the plain man cannot easily bring himself to believe that God is the author of a book which, according to such criticism, not only misrepresents His actions, but even distorts His character.

The second difficulty consists in the fact that our Lord and His Apostles by common consent accepted these narratives as substantially true. It is hard to deny that Christ believed in a Jehovah who judged Sodom and Gomorrah for their sin by a physical visitation, and in one who saved believing Israelites when they lifted up their eyes to the brazen serpent.

Therefore, when we are asked with moral indignation whether we can believe that the Law of Moses proceeded from the inspiration of God, or whether He sanctioned the slaughter of the Amalekites, we are confronted by the fact that our Master believed in this Jehovah and taught His disciples to believe in Him, and we are loath to set up our standard of moral judgment as superior to His.

If the Graf-Wellhausen documentary theory and the closely connected non-miraculous character of Old Testament history rested upon the solid ground of external archæological evidence, we should be compelled to revise our view of the Old Testament as the Word of God, and our official position in the Church, but fortunately the exact contrary is the case, many eminent archæologists being strongly opposed to the critical theories.

But upon whichever side the truth may lie, the width of the

gulf that separates the two sides cannot be denied. Those who accept the narratives of the Old Testament as substantially true, and as truly representing the actions and character of God, stand in this matter where our Lord and His Apostles stood, and where the Church of England by her formularies stands, and unhesitatingly affirm the Old Testament, its partial and dispensational character notwithstanding, to be the Word of God. But it is not surprising that those who regard its narratives as historically impossible, and its picture of Jehovah as cruel and immoral, should be unready to give it this title, and should seek some relief from the acceptance of articles of religion with which they cannot reconcile their critical views.

(b) The question of the relation between the authority of the Bible and the Divinity of our Lord is crucial. It is not a question, as so often stated, of the limitations of our Lord's humanity. The question is of His truthfulness. Just as in the sphere of conduct we hold Him to be free from sin, whether or not He was liable to sin; so here the question is not whether or not He was liable to error, but whether in His recorded teaching He fell into error.

There are those who claim that they regard Him as absolutely infallible as a moral and spiritual leader, but that He did not possess more scientific knowledge than the people of His day. But the question of His knowledge of science is entirely beside the point, for He seldom even remotely referred to any scientific question, and it is easily shown that He never made a scientific mistake. The real question is, whether or not He was mistaken in His views and teaching regarding the Old Testament, and the God of the Old Testament.

The New Testament gives a clear picture of the thought and teaching both of our Lord and His Apostles with regard to the Old Testament. Broadly speaking, He accepted its narratives as historical, He believed in the Jehovah whose very deeds and words it described, He regarded as binding the moral commandments of the Law, and He saw around Him the fulfilment of predictions in which He recognized the sure prescience of God.

According to the dominant school of criticism He was in all these matters misled by the current notions of His own time.

Canon Liddon held that one proved error in any matter would be fatal to our Lord's authority; what then remains of His authority if on none of these points His teaching can be trusted? It requires more than ordinary mental agility to say that such vital matters as the character of God and the validity of the Messianic predictions lie outside the moral and spiritual sphere. But, even if the difficulties just mentioned could be avoided, such a distinction between moral and intellectual spheres is psychologically unsound, and can only end in the abandonment of all reliance upon His authority in all matters that concern the human intellect. And, let it be repeated, authority rests upon confidence, which is its correlative term. If we accept the authority of Christ we must be prepared to accept as true all that He can be fairly

shown to have taught and believed concerning Holy Scripture and its contents.

(c) The principle of authority must not be used unreasonably to bind our consciences with that ceremonial law which was fulfilled and done away with in Christ, nor to wrest or misapply apostolic injunctions of a confessedly temporary character, nor to build a weighty doctrine upon the doubtful interpretation of a single text. Nor does the attachment of the highest authority to the Bible as the Word of God place any bar in the way of the reverent study of textual or historical criticism, but rather supplies it with added stimulus.

But, rightly used to determine doctrine, the authority of the Bible is the very *raison d'être* of the Evangelical school of thought, which arose and gained its name from its habit of deriving all Christian doctrine from the written revelation of God, and not from Church tradition nor from unaided human reason. And here it was the true successor of the Reformation, not only in its principle of the divine authority and sufficiency of Scripture, but also in the doctrines which it derived therefrom.

Whence come such characteristically evangelical doctrines as the fallen condition of man, the depravity of the human will, and justification by faith alone through the propitiation set forth in Christ Jesus? Whence do we learn that these doctrines never will be popular to the natural man, but can only be accepted by the operation of the Spirit upon the heart?

We believe these things because we accept the Gospel message, and the Bible as God's written Word. When we see the vicarious nature of the Atonement written broadly over the pages of the New Testament, and proclaimed and predicted and illustrated by an enormous wealth of Old Testament teaching in covenant and type and prophecy, then the Evangelical is bound to accept it because of the authority inherent in the written Word. He cannot and dare not write it down as Judaism or Paulinism, nor need he wait to know what the modern world thinks about it.

It is true that such a doctrine makes a wonderful appeal to reason, when that reason is illuminated and humbled and guided by the Holy Spirit; but the highest reason consists in the acceptance of God's truth, as the most sensible scholar accepts his teacher's judgment rather than his own.

More particularly in the doctrine of future things, whether in this world or the next, we hold and must hold, that the Bible, as the Word of God, alone can give us sure and certain knowledge. The Evangelical views of the second coming of Christ, of future judgment, and of Heaven and Hell, the preaching of which are so greatly needed in this generation, rest upon the Bible as their only and sufficient authority.

Since, therefore, Evangelical doctrine is simply Bible doctrine, since we differ crucially from the Modernist in believing that the views of God and the world taught there are not the outworn intellectual garments of a bygone age, but are the revelation of God to

His Church for all time, until the return of Christ shall usher in a new age. Evangelicalism stands or falls with the authority of that Bible upon which its creed is based and from which its spirit is derived.

In conduct as well as in faith this is true. The Bible is our missionary handbook and our code of philanthropy. If the Bible loses its authority the warnings of God lose their terrors and the promises of God lose their comfort. If the Bible loses its authority, assurance of salvation will have to be placed in human works or human feelings. Without the Bible as the authoritative Word of God to this age, as to every age, it would be impossible to build up that saintliness of life and that practical holiness for which such gatherings as the Keswick Convention stand, and which is a true mark of Evangelicalism.

Finally, the authority of the Bible, being derived from the Divine Spirit of God, Who speaks in all its pages, let us in all consideration of its authority, as well as in its daily study, seek His illumination that we may see it as He made it, and use it as He intended.

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## THE EVANGELICAL MESSAGE: THE BIBLE— ITS INTERPRETATION.

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FROM what has been already said this morning it is clear that, as we attempt to interpret and to understand the unique library of which the Bible consists, we must use every effort to make our study worthy of its object. This means that our work must be begun, continued and ended in sincere devotion to Truth, and under the direction and ruling of the Spirit of God. We shall consciously depend upon the comfort of the Holy Ghost. Not that this is necessary only in the study of Holy Scripture. It is indispensable in all study. Every educational establishment should begin the day's work with prayer, as every human being should, whatever his day's work may be. We shall also constantly endeavour to preserve a single eye for Truth. It has been said<sup>1</sup> that the Roman Church manifests every Christian grace with the single exception of veracity. There are many, especially in the Universities, who are to-day watching the Anglican Communion not without anxiety with regard to the same virtue. We must be entirely loyal to the truth as we see it. Not that we shall see it all. We shall not be able to explain everything in the Bible. But it is not open to us to acquiesce in explanations which appear to us to be unreasonable.

<sup>1</sup> As Mr. A. E. J. Rawlinson has recently reminded us, *Studies in Historical Christianity*, p. 100.