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*CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN ENGLISH
EXEGESIS.*

COMMENTATORS in various ages have taken widely different views of the duties which are required of them; for they have had to satisfy expectations which are altered from time to time, and they have been influenced by shifting opinions about the books which they desire to explain. They have been necessarily moulded by the spirit of their own epoch, by its current theology and by its intellectual limitations. Hence have arisen the divergences between the methods of different expositors, in spite of the universal habit of plagiarism and repetition, which, alike in theology and exegesis, has tended for centuries to stereotype unchallenged errors. There has been indeed in the history of exegesis a continuous advance of the tide, in spite of occasional retrocession of the waves; and it has not been in vain that so many noble intellects have devoted long years to the study of the sacred books. Their toil has accumulated a mass of valuable materials into the treasury of religious thought. When we study a great modern commentary we are indeed heirs of all the ages. The Masorets laboured to preserve the integrity of the Hebrew text. The Fathers concentrated their best powers upon the task of explaining Scripture. Origen has meditated for us; Augustine has crystallized many subtle aspects of truth into brilliant expressions; the school of Antioch has bequeathed to us the fruits of its integrity and straightforwardness; the Schoolmen have mapped out with precisest definition every province of theology; the Mystics have turned upon the sacred page the light of their spiritual intuition; Nicolas of

Lyra revived the literal sense, by breaking the drowsy spell of a baseless tradition ; the Reformers lent us the aid of their deep piety and masculine genius ; the post-Reformation age, though paralysed by its confession-worship and Protestant scholasticism, rifled every storehouse of illustration which was then available ; Cocceius firmly grasped the conception of a progressive revelation ; Grotius and Le Clerc added complete independence of spirit to their vigorous learning. Everything which has been achieved by men so manifold and so diverse in their gifts as Theodore of Mopsuestia, Jerome, Chrysostom, Gregory, Bede, Bernard, Rupert of Deutz, Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Bengel—or by the specializing erudition of such men as Lightfoot, Schöttgen, Wettstein, Selden, Bochart, the Buxtorfs, and very many other labourers—all this, and much more that cannot now be mentioned, is at the free disposal of the modern commentator. Whatever tends to spiritual edification is furnished for him in boundless profusion in the writings of whole schools and generations of previous divines. He may avail himself both of the full illumination of necessary learning, and of the innumerable sidelights which so many centuries of research and ingenuity have brought to bear upon his sacred theme.

It does not therefore imply any overweening vanity in the greatness of our own age, if we say that perhaps at no previous period of history were men so favourably circumstanced for the acquisition of sound information and true understanding of the meaning of Scripture. Never was biblical knowledge more constantly increased or more widely diffused. Our living scholars may bear comparison with the ablest of their predecessors ; but even if they were dwarfs they stand upon the shoulders of giants, and even if they were personally inadequate they can draw upon inexhaustible materials. In all respects—unless it be in the

diminution of leisure caused by the strain and pressure of modern life—they stand on the same level of endowments with those who wrote in former ages, and they can fix their own starting point at the goal of their fathers.

For these reasons the science of exegesis has in the last half century made unwonted strides, and has produced works which future ages will not willingly let die. It is intended that other writers, in future pages of THE EX-POSITOR, should deal with the characteristics of separate commentators. I am therefore precluded from dwelling on individual merits, but I am invited to point out some of our general gains. I do not undertake the presumptuous task of attempting to review all the exegesis of the last fifty years. To do this would require larger space, wider knowledge, and greater ability than I can command. But I may perhaps be able to indicate some distinct elements of progress which ought to make us deeply thankful for the past, and to inspire a hopeful courage for the future.

1. It is no small gain that the true province of exegesis is beginning to be better understood and more rigidly defined. It has in consequence gained greatly in precision of aim. In many of the commentaries which are now consigned to dusty shelves we are encumbered and fatigued by masses of irrelevance. Let the reader turn to any of these old commentaries which were based on the "fourfold sense," and he will see the narcotising spell exercised by that fantastic hypothesis, and by the fatal facility of expansion, digression, and sheer imagination to which it inevitably led. A large mass of the folio pages, densely crowded with homiletics under the heads of allegory, anagogy, and the *moralis sensus*, would be at once swept aside as useless and unpertinent by any living exegete. Our modern students are not forced to wade through the interminable verbosity of the thirteen folio volumes of Tostatus the

"Stupor mundi, qui scibile discutit omne,"

or the measureless prolixity of the professor who lectured for forty years on Isaiah, and had never got beyond the first chapter. It is now well understood that the task of the expositor is not to make each text a theme for endless discussions. His main object is to discover the exact and primary meaning of the sacred writer, and to set it forth in such a manner as shall best enable the student to apprehend and profit by its original intention.

2. And this being so, we must count the attention which is bestowed upon *the text* as a boon of the first importance. An *apparatus criticus*—or at any rate the best results which such an *apparatus* can furnish—is now regarded as indispensable for any important commentary, though for many centuries the Septuagint or the Vulgate, with all their errors and corruptions, were regarded as sufficient for textual purposes. Even Erasmus had to work with only sixteen MSS. of secondary importance; modern scholars can refer to 1,760, of which some are of primary value. Great as is the debt we owe to the toil of Erasmus, Ximenes, Stephens, Walton, Fell, Mill, Bentley, Griesbach, and others, how much has been done since their day! Even during the present reign, Lachmann's New Testament appeared in 1842 and 1850, Tischendorf's in 1859, Tregelles' account of the printed text in 1854. A closer and closer approximation to the original apostolic autographs in the New Testament has been achieved by the labours of Dr. Scrivener, Canon Westcott, Professor Hort, and their fellow workers. Keen study and unwearied toil have been bestowed, not only on the collation, classification, and estimation of MSS., but also on the consultation of lectionaries, on the evidence furnished by ancient versions, and on the numerous quotations in the Greek and Latin Fathers. The materials thus accumulated become practically exhaustive. As yet the text of the Old Testament has not received the same microscopic attention, partly because the results must

be less immediately important, partly because the text was for ages so carefully preserved, and there is a complete dearth of very ancient manuscripts. There are no complete MSS. of the Old Testament which are *certainly* older than the tenth century; most of those which have been hitherto available belong to the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. But in the last century much was achieved by the labours of Walton, Houbigant, Kennicott, De Rossi, and others. Considerable study has been devoted in recent times to the Septuagint by scholars like Frankl, and it is well known that Dr. Hatch has been long at work upon a dictionary of the Septuagint, which cannot fail to be of extreme importance even for the Hebrew text. The Talmud, the Targums, the Midrashim, and the works of eminent Masorets have all been translated or are in course of translation by living scholars. It is probable that before another fifty years have passed there may be numerous contributions to this department of biblical research. We seem indefinitely distant from the days when the learned Puritan John Owen declared that it savoured of atheism to suppose that the text of the Bible had not been miraculously preserved from every error.

3. But a purer text would be comparatively valueless unless there had been a proportionate advance in the scholarship requisite for its interpretation. A volume might be written on the curious mistakes which occur in the writings of the Fathers and Schoolmen, from their general and almost inevitable ignorance of the original languages of Scripture. Of the Fathers, how many were acquainted with Hebrew? To mention only the greatest of them, Origen's acquaintance with Hebrew was far from being critical; and though St. Jerome could speak Hebrew, and deserves high credit for the extreme trouble which he took to acquire it, yet even he can hardly be said to know it in the same critical sense as not a few living scholars. St.

Augustine knew nothing or next to nothing of Hebrew, and confesses that he could never command the patience to master even Greek. Among the Schoolmen, the very greatest of them all, St. Thomas Aquinas, knew comparatively little of either language, and is sometimes curiously misled by the Latin text. Down to the end of the fifteenth century Nicolas of Lyra († 1340) seems to have been almost the only great commentator—except some stray Jewish convert like the reactionary Paul of Burgos († 1435), or Perez of Valencia († 1492)—who even attempted to study the Old Testament in the original. It may be urged in their defence that they were unable to estimate the importance of doing so, and, further, that there were no available grammars and dictionaries and very few Jewish teachers whom they would have liked to seek. But ever since the days of Reuchlin the facilities for acquiring Hebrew have been constantly multiplying, and the language now forms part of the curriculum at the universities and theological colleges. Far greater are the strides made by Greek scholarship in England since the days of Bentley. St. Chrysostom wields the Greek language with all the power of a consummate orator; yet it is hardly too much to say that there are some of the finer niceties of Greek scholarship which have been better appreciated by modern theologians, who have thus been able to give a truer explanation of the intended meaning than even Chrysostom himself. Philology too, which is a science still in its infancy—has aided and enriched our modern scholarship. At no previous period has classical Greek been more thoroughly mastered, or the special peculiarities of the Hellenistic dialect been more generally and accurately understood.

4. If it be the chief function of exegesis to make known the exact meaning of the sacred writers, we may point to the Revised Version as one of the most invaluable of commentaries. When a revision of the Bible was proposed by

Mr. Heywood in the House of Commons, the opinion of most of the bishops was against him ; but in 1862 Bishop Ellicott, to whom English exegesis owes a great debt of gratitude, declared that the Authorized Version contained misconceptions, inaccuracies, errors, and obscurities, which it was vain for a timid and popular obstruction to deny. We may regret that the revisers were not always entirely courageous, not always perfectly consistent ; that not unfrequently they have put the best and truest renderings in the margin, as in Gen. xxvii. 39, xlix. 10 ; that they have not ventured to emphasise the difference between *διάβολος* and *δαιμόνια* ; and that other necessary changes have been postponed :—yet the English nation is under deep obligation to them. Take the writings of St. John and St. Paul alone, and consider how much we have gained by the observance of distinctions in the Revised Version and the abandonment of half a dozen different renderings for one and the same word. For instance, in the Authorized Version of 1611, “abide,” “remain,” “dwell,” “tarry,” “continue,” “being present,” are all used for St. John’s one *μένειν*, and five different words for St. Paul’s one *καταργέω*, and five to represent *μαρτυρία*. In the opposite direction we had *one* word only for twelve words meaning “destruction,” and one for seven meaning “child.” In the Revelation how much we gain by the rescue from obliteration of the distinctive words *θρόνος* and *θρόνοι*, of *στέφανος* and *διάδημα*, above all, of *θηρία* and *ζῶα* ! Vividness and accuracy have been restored to the meaning of the sacred writers in multitudes of instances by paying attention to their use and omission of the article, and by the accurate rendering of their profoundly significant tenses. Never before had the great mass of the people so easy a means of knowing what the Apostles and Evangelists really said, as that which has now been placed in their hands by the best efforts of the best of our living scholars and divines. Who can estimate

even the theological importance of the changes necessarily introduced into the rendering of such passages as Matt. vi. 13, vii. 19; Mark vii. 19; John x. 16, xiii. 10; Rom. iii. 25, xii. 6; 1 Cor. xi. 17; Gal. ii. 16; Eph. iv. 32; Phil. ii. 6; Col. ii. 23; Jas. ii. 14; 1 Tim. vi. 10; 2 Tim. ii. 26, iii. 16, iv. 14; Heb. i. 1; Jude 22, and many more? And in the Old Testament, is it not a gain of the highest kind to have got rid of the errors which obscured Exod. xxxiv. 33; Deut. xxxiii. 6; Isa. xviii. 2, xxi. 7, xxx. 7; Dan. vii. 9, and passage after passage of the Psalms of David? Let any one read the wholly unintelligible rendering of the Authorized Version in Isa. vi. 13 or ix. 1-5 (the lesson for Christmas Day), and observe the difference made by the correction of the old errors. The Revised Version, which prejudice has anathematized, and at which ignorance has jeered, will, I feel confident, be received by future generations as one of the best practical commentaries furnished by students of Scripture to the Church and to the world.

5. And recent exegetes have not been content with the accurate mastery of the sacred languages. They have felt that neither genius nor intuition can supply the lack of varied as well as solid learning. It is a curiously characteristic fact, that, whereas even the great Theodore of Mopsuestia not only never troubled himself to learn Hebrew, or even to consult the Peshito, two of our bishops—not to speak of other commentators—have not only learnt Syriac, but have even learnt Æthiopic, solely with the view of being able to appreciate the variations of reading suggested or confirmed by the Æthiopic versions. Nor have these researches been confined to language. The study of the Talmud involves that extreme difficulty which wrung a groan from the laborious Lightfoot. Yet in spite of his pathetic complaint of the obscurity and compression of Talmudic Hebrew, a few English scholars have of late years learned to read it in the original. For many years

commentators were mostly content to utilize the heterogeneous and miscellaneous collections of Lightfoot, Schöttgen, Meuschen, Eisenmenger, Wagenseil, Surenhuys, and other foreign scholars. These have long been felt to be insufficient. It is now comparatively easy to obtain some knowledge of the "Sea of the Talmud" and of Talmudic writings, for within the last decade large parts of the Talmud have been translated into French by Mons. Schwab and his *collaborateurs*, and many passages have been rendered into English by Mr. P. J. Hershon. The Midrashim have been published in German by Wünsche, and the Masorah is being edited by Dr. Ginsburg. Few commentators would now be content to annotate a book of either the Old or New Testament without ascertaining, at least from secondary sources, the opinion of the Rabbis upon disputed passages. And the sources of information which must be taken into account multiply upon us. What modern interpreter could now adequately deal with any one of the historic books of the Old and New Testament without making himself acquainted with the recent identification of sites and archæological discoveries which have been brought to light by explorations in Palestine, and Egypt, and beyond the Jordan? Who could dream of commenting upon the Pentateuch, the Prophets, Ezra, and Nehemiah, without acquainting himself with the labours of Egyptologists, and the facts which we have learnt from the exhumation and deciphering of ancient monuments? Who would think himself adequately equipped as an exponent of the Epistles without learning something at least of the general *data* of sacred thought among the nations as it has been examined in the light of comparative religion?

6. Again, the advantages of diligence, of wide learning, and of accurate scholarship might still be neutralized if our expositors were content with the servile following of traditional opinion and traditional methods. But it is one of

our elements of progress that they have learnt to exercise with fearless judgment a noble independence, in the conviction that nothing is so sacred as truth, and that "truth is invulnerable as the sunbeam." They have shown this sacred impartiality even when they are treating of burning questions. Silently they have abandoned the old mechanical views of inspiration which ignored the human element. Those views were borrowed from Greek philosophy through Philo. Montanism spread the belief in ecstatic inspiration, in which the faculties of the recipient were simply obliterated. No careful observer can miss the fresh and comparatively modern methods of treatment which, for the first time, have enabled us to understand the real value and significance of such books as Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Where there are real difficulties to be met, as in the case of the composite character of the book of Genesis, the date of Daniel, the unity of Isaiah, the true significance of Jonah, and the relation of certain chapters in Ezekiel to one great section of the book of Leviticus, the reader will be sure to find in any good modern commentary the means of forming for himself a fair and unbiassed judgment. The question of the genuineness of the fourth Gospel is one of the deepest importance for Christian theology, yet in the latest and best commentary the arguments of those who impugn it are stated with perfect fairness, and instead of being met with futile denunciation are refuted with patient skill. Without in any way understating or slurring over the difficulties of those who reject the apostolic authorship of "the spiritual Gospel," recent exegesis has, by the closest and keenest analysis, proved that there is in its favour both external and internal evidence of unanswerable force. This patient and fearless confronting of adverse reasoning has been rewarded by the recent discovery of further external evidence which proves such important facts as the references to the fourth Gospel

by the early Basilidians, the use of it by Tatian in his *Diatessaron*, and the existence even as early as the second century of an established variation in the text.¹

Take again the questions which have arisen about the pastoral Epistles. The critics of the Tübingen school have put forth their whole strength to demonstrate the spuriousness of these Epistles. English scholarship has thoroughly tested their arguments, and while admitting the deficiency of historical confirmation for St. Paul's release from his first imprisonment, have shown by internal evidence alone the all but demonstrable certainty of that fact. Take, again, the very recent controversy about the Second Epistle of Peter. It has always been admitted that the evidences for the genuineness of that epistle were weaker than those for any other book of the New Testament, and that the weakness of external evidence was hardly compensated by the treatise itself, which abounds in formidable internal difficulties in its phraseology, its allusions, and its relation to the Epistle of St. Jude. These difficulties were immensely enhanced in every candid mind when Dr. Edwin Abbott called attention to the fact of startling resemblances between phrases of the epistle and two remarkable sections in the writings of Josephus. The question has not yet been threshed out. The opinions of some as to the complete genuineness—not of course as to the canonicity—of the Epistle have once more been seriously shaken; while others have embarked on ingenious if not finally convincing lines of defence. The fact however remains—and in this fact lies one of our best guarantees for the ultimate discovery of the truth—that the question has been discussed purely on its own merits, and without any reference to natural prejudice or ancient tradition. We have learnt to recognise, not only that Nature is a book of God, and

¹ John i. 18, *μονογενὴς Θεός*. See on this reading the masterly monograph of Dr. Hort, *Two Dissertations*. (Camb., 1876.)

Science His exegete, but also that History is a book of God, and that it teaches the essential duty of progress. It is the nature of truth to broaden and brighten more and more to the perfect day. "Nor is it at all improbable," wrote Bishop Butler, "that a book which has been so long in the possession of mankind should contain many truths as yet undiscovered." The western hemisphere was unknown for ages, and hence, as Goodwin infers, "well may it be conceived not only that some, but many truths, yea, and those of main concernment and importance, may be yet unborne." "I am persuaded," said John Robinson to the departing Pilgrim Fathers, "that the Lord hath yet more truth and light to break forth from His holy word."

7. The unbiassed fairness which has thus dealt with entire books has been applied with results no less beneficial to special texts and paragraphs. No dread of outcry or abuse has prevented English scholars from stating, or English revisers from accepting, the force of overwhelming evidence in their treatment of such passages of the *Textus Receptus* as Jud. xviii. 30, Job xix. 23, Ps. viii. 5, Hag. ii. 7, Zech. xiii. 6, Mark xvi. 9-20, John viii. 1-11, 1 John v. 7; or in omitting the confession in Acts viii. 37 or Matt. xiii. 21, or the word *νηστεία* in Mark ix. 29, 1 Col. vii. 5. No multiplication of patristic or scholastic authority for an erroneous interpretation has prevented them from setting aside that meaning where it was obviously based on untenable principles. It is impossible to furnish lengthy proofs or illustrations in a brief and general paper, but I may instance three texts, which in past ages have been misinterpreted, to the fatal injury of exegesis itself. Origen, who was the practical inventor of the *triplex* (which was afterwards subdivided into the *quadruplex*) *intelligentia*, referred for confirmation to Prov. xxii. 22, where the doubtful reading שלשים is rendered by the LXX. *καὶ σὺ δὲ ἀπογραψαὶ αὐτὰ τρισσῶς*, and in the Vulgate *Ecce descripsi*

tibi tripliciter. It would be difficult to find a parallel for a more amazingly impossible and exorbitantly expanded inference, founded on a more completely misinterpreted fragment of a text.

Again, Father after Father, Schoolman after Schoolman quotes and reiterates *ad nauseam* the fragment of a verse (2 Cor. iii. 6), "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," to maintain the necessity and duty of their so called "spiritual" interpretation. Yet no shadow of any such meaning is consistent with the context. The letter killeth *what*? The letter killeth *whom*? Is *all* literal interpretation supposed to be thus murderous? If so, how is it ever permissible? Some, at least, of our most recent commentators have seen the true meaning to be that "the law—the written enactment—judicially puts to death" (comp. Rom. viii. 8-13), whereas the Spirit quickeneth, or makes alive, because the Spirit raises us from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. I turn, for instance, to Canon Evans, in the *Speaker's Commentary*, and find the clear, decisive remark, "There is no justification whatever for the application (of 'letter') so often made, to literal as opposed to spiritual interpretation of the gospel."

Again, in almost every age, and especially amid the furious debates of the post-Reformation epoch, one of the rules of interpretation was, that every one was to interpret "according to the proportion of faith" (Rom. xii. 6); and this mistranslation was further misinterpreted into an assertion that *analogia fidei* was the same thing as *analogia scripturæ*, while the *fides* was always identified with one of the endless formulæ of the prevailing symbololatriy. Alike the Greek and the usage of words absolutely forbid any such interpretation, and the Revised Version now correctly renders the phrase, "let us prophesy according to the proportion of *our* faith." Here again I turn to the *Speaker's Commentary*,

and find that Archdeacon Gifford both gives the true explanation, "that the prophets should utter neither more nor less than the revelation received *by the measure of their faith*, without exaggeration, display, or self-seeking," and also a repudiation of the incessantly repeated errors: "the rule of faith," "the general analogy of revealed truth," and all similar renderings which make *faith* mean "that which is to be believed," are, he says, unsuited to the context, and otherwise untenable. Thus three erroneous, or at any rate immensely overstrained and misapplied, lines of exegesis, which have reigned for generations on the supposed authority of three isolated phrases, are set aside or greatly limited, alike by the scholarship and the exposition of living students.

8. Another reason for this advance is that now, more than at any previous period, it has become habitual with us to abandon the old *atomistic* method, which, in defiance of Scripture itself, treated Scripture as a congeries of separate supernatural utterances homogeneously inspired and spiritually equipollent. Every "text" of Scripture is now happily interpreted in relation to the book in which it occurs, and the entire passage of which it forms a part. The resultant gain has been incalculable. In every good modern commentary careful attention is now given to all that falls under the head of "introduction," which the ancient expositors have almost wholly neglected. It may be said with truth that subordinate and accidental minutiae sometimes receive a disproportionate attention, and that the "introduction" to a sacred book now gives us a mass of geographical and historical information which can hardly be regarded as essential, since it may have been quite unknown to and without any influence upon the sacred writer himself. Yet I will mention, by way of illustration, two books of capital importance, which for their true interpretation have largely depended upon

the circumstances under which they were written. One is the Epistle to the Galatians, the other is the Apocalypse. It is not too much to say, that if the Epistle to the Galatians comes home to us with all the incomparable force of its original meaning, this is largely due to the full knowledge which we now possess of the events which called it forth. It was always full of eternal lessons, yet much of its historic purpose was inevitably missed, when even such a thinker as St. Thomas Aquinas was content to work it into his scheme of the Pauline epistles as a sort of appendix to the treatment of grace as it is in the sacraments. On this subject all are now agreed. Such is not as yet the case with the Apocalypse. Many English exegetes, with that intense conservatism which has been a not wholly useless or dishonourable characteristic of English theology, still cling to what I cannot but hold to be the mistake of St. Irenæus—or, at any rate, a mistaken apprehension of his meaning—as regards the date at which that book was written. I venture to think that another generation will have fully accepted its origin in the reign of Vespasian, and will have found the clue to many of its symbols in the events of the Neronian persecution and the epoch which immediately succeeded it. Those who have adopted this view are no longer confronted with the stupendous difficulty of believing, on most inadequate and disputable evidence, that the Apocalypse was written *after* the gospel and the first epistle. So then the book ceases to be a sphinx, propounding an insoluble enigma as she lies at the closing door of revelation. From being the most perplexing book of Scripture, the Apocalypse becomes to them, in its main outline, one of the easiest to understand, and the tumultuous power and grandeur of it come home to them with tenfold power, as they hear in it “the thundering reverberation of a mighty spirit struck with the plectrum of indignation,” when he had witnessed the

wild beast from the sea of nations rioting in the slaughter of the saints of God.

9. As a conspicuous example of the benefit which has resulted from what I may call the *contextual* study of Scripture by modern exegetes, I will point to another of St. John's writings, the first epistle, which is so deeply important as the epilogue and enforcement of the truths set forth in the gospel, and as being in all probability the last utterance of apostolic inspiration. Even by commentators of first-rate endowments, the style of St. John was long treated as a sort of *arena sine calce*. They were unable to understand its method, to estimate aright its abstract terms, or to unravel the difficulty of its causal connexions. Practically they treated it as though it were like the style of Seneca, which, in a lucid moment, the Emperor Caligula compared to the motions of a dancer, who recedes as often as he advances, and makes no real progress. Even Augustine has no more to say of this epistle than "Locutus est multa, et prope omnia de caritate"; and Calvin had so little mastered its plan as to make the strangely inadequate remark, "Sparsim docendo et exhortando varius est." In this age, perhaps for the first time, thanks to the labours of such workers as Haupt and Professor Westcott, the fruitful hint originally given by Joachim Oporinus has been worked out. We are beginning to see that the indescribable charm of those "brief quivering sentences" is not purchased at the expense of the most rigid and logical cohesion. So far from being, as had been implied, one of the most loosely constructed books of Scripture, we can now see that it not only has a most definite and concentrated purpose, but that this purpose is worked out with consummate care and with the most distinct articulation of reasoning. Let any one read a number of commentaries on such a paragraph as 1 John i. 6-10. In none of them, down to very recent times, is any real attempt made to appreciate

the deep *distinctions* of meaning which lie in the three clauses—

Ver. 6: “*If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in the darkness*”;

Ver. 8: “*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves*”;

Ver. 10: “*If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar*”;

—with the clauses which follow them, and state the opposite conditions. Then let him turn to the best modern commentary, the result of many years of deep thought, and he will see in those clauses no aimless tautology, or mere varied reiteration, but the warning against three wholly different types of the falsity which causes men to ignore the reality of sin, to deceive themselves as to their responsibility for sin, and to proclaim their own personal immunity from sin, and so to miss the possibility of fellowship with God.

10. Again, we may be thankful to modern English exegesis for its decisive clearness. Bengel showed us the high advantage of lucid terseness over tedious prolixity. Down to very recent times there was a distinct danger that commentaries would degenerate into the *variorum* character, forming a chaos of untenable guesses, like *Poli Synopsis*, and many similar compilations, in which it is impossible to see the wood for the trees. Gratitude is due to the late Dean Alford for faithful labours, which gave a strong impulse to the study of the New Testament; but among his many merits every one must have felt the disadvantage which is caused by his incessant refutations of idle hypotheses which did not deserve to be perpetuated. There are said to be at least four hundred and thirty interpretations of Gal. iii. 20, of which at least four hundred and twenty-nine must be more or less wrong, and of which all but two or three may be entirely swept aside and left to oblivion. The passage is not insoluble, and when studied with its

entire context can scarcely even be regarded as one of special difficulty. In the English commentaries which will at once occur to every student as the best, the one interpretation now generally regarded as final is given without any ambiguity, and we are not put off with the irritating *vel aliter* or *aliter dici potest*, which so constantly meet us in the comments of earlier days. The late learned Bishop of Lincoln—whom all men honoured, but whose commentaries, apart from their classical learning and incidental merits, belong to the past rather than to the present stage of exegesis—quoted a passage from an English divine expressive of his own predilection for the style of exposition which sometimes gave two or more good, but mutually exclusive, meanings to the same text, provided only that they tended to edification. Such a method might be admissible, if we suppose that the sacred writers expressed themselves in constant *amphibologiae*. But unless we reject the most wise and suggestive maxim of the Rabbis, that “the law speaks in the tongue of the sons of men,” we may assume that prophets and apostles wrote, like all other human beings, with the desire to be understood, and understood in one distinct sense. Their words indeed may admit of rich and many-sided *applications*; they may have a wide-reaching significance; in this respect, as in all others, they may far surpass the utterances of man’s unenlightened genius: it is nevertheless certain from the nature of things that their words must have had one clear meaning for their contemporaries; and it is (I repeat) the duty of the interpreter to find out, and to the best of his power to set forth, first of all, the one plain, primary, literal, historical, contextual meaning which the writer intended to convey to his immediate readers. This is what the reader expects of the commentator; and when he has discharged this duty he may extravagate as much as he thinks desirable. But exegesis is one thing, and inferential theology, with “its

ever widening spiral *ergo*," is quite another. We may well rejoice that this truth is now fully recognised.

11. I will mention but one more characteristic of modern English exegesis; namely, its width of range, and the interest of its literary and other illustrations. Some of our best commentaries thus become so brightly human and attractive, that they allure thousands of unaccustomed students to study for themselves the word of God. In such books, for instance, as those of the Bishop of Durham on the Epistles, the incidental lights are numberless, and there is not a relevant point of language, history, or archæology which does not receive a treatment as exhaustive in its way as that given to questions of theology. Or if we turn to the commentaries written by the Bishop of Derry and Dean Plumptre, we find them constantly brightened by illustrations from the entire range of modern literature, in prose and verse. If the labours of Wettstein derive additional value from the many parallels which he was the first to adduce from the stores of classical literature, there is no reason why the thoughts and allusions of the sacred writers should not with due moderation and strict relevancy be illustrated by "the thoughts that breathe and words that burn" in the great works of modern thinkers. Provided that the license be not extravagantly assumed, we may say—

"From art, from nature, from the schools,
Let random influences glance,
Like light in many a shivered lance
That breaks about the dappled pools."

Other and better qualified writers will, as I have already said, present to the readers of THE EXPOSITOR a more special and detailed examination of the merits and, if need be, the defects of particular exegetes. But if I have been justified in maintaining that our best modern specimens of interpretation have been thus characterized by directness of aim,

terseness, attention to the text, accurate scholarship, the removal of ancient errors of translation, varied learning, independent judgment, the study of the context, the study of books in their entirety, decisive clearness, and attractive interest, then we may say, with thankfulness and a sense of encouragement, that an age which has been so prolific of discoveries in all other branches of science has not been untrue to its opportunities and obligations in the domain of scriptural interpretation.

F. W. FARRAR.

THE USE OF MYTHIC PHRASES BY THE OLD
TESTAMENT WRITERS.

I. ON Ps. xxii. 3.

IN the present series of *THE EXPOSITOR* (vol. i., p. 319, cf. p. 400) I have endorsed the once heretical theory that the Old Testament writers love to pick the wayside flowers of popular mythic imagery; and truly Delitzsch,¹ no less than Kuenen, has cordially acknowledged this to be a proved fact. The servants of the highest Truth may have so interwoven these earthly growths with blooms of another clime that for a long time they were unrecognised by the common eye, but now that our sight has been strengthened by the criticism of other literatures, we should be dull indeed to disregard them, and now that our conception of providential guidance has been widened, we should be equally dull to be offended at them. "We are not distressed"—it

¹ See many passages in Delitzsch's *Psalms* and *Genesis* (see e.g. notes on Gen. i. 10 and vi. 2 in new edition); also the article, "Are there Myths in the Holy Scriptures?" by Dr. Franz Delitzsch, in *The Independent*, New York, Aug. 20th, 1885.