

*BACON AS AN INTERPRETER OF HOLY
SCRIPTURE.*¹

WHAT is it which forms the necessary equipment for one who should adequately set forth the meaning of Holy Scripture? First, it is clear that there must be that harmony between the interpreter and his subject matter which can only be found in the spiritually minded. Secondly, he must have ever at hand a quick intellectual discernment, the power of perceiving what is and what is not of real significance, and so of setting forth the truth broadly and luminously. Thirdly, there is the needful equipment of the scholar; the knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek languages in the different stages of their development, the faculty of differentiation between shades of meaning in word and phrase as employed by the same or by various writers. Now while the first is a necessary condition to such exposition, it will be perceived that neither the second nor third is in the same degree indispensable. The commentary of a spiritually minded scholar may be good, that which issues from a devout and philosophic mind may be even great. Bishop Wordsworth, of Lincoln, who was at once a fine scholar and a man of the deepest religious temper, thus produced good work in the exposition of Holy Scripture. The late Mr. Spurgeon, without, as the present writer believes, the slightest knowledge of Hebrew, published a volume on the Psalter, to which many a scholar has found himself indebted. Still for epoch-making commentaries one must look to authors with the threefold endowment—to Bengel, to Keil and Delitzsch, to Godet, and happily to our own Lightfoot, Westcott, and Samuel Cox.

There may seem a touch of grotesqueness in bringing together the names of C. H. Spurgeon and Francis Bacon,

¹ The references to the Essays are taken from Prof. Morley's edition.

yet for the present purpose there are points of comparison and contrast between the two which are not irrelevant to pursue. For while Bacon stoutly preferred Latin as the language of the communication of his thoughts, both were possessed of a strong and nervous use of English, and each was less careful of the form than of the force of what they had to say. Both plainly were inexhaustible note-takers, and drew from a plentiful store of what was ready to their hands, but while Spurgeon's life-work in sermons or in commentaries was deliberately and wholly the exposition of Scripture, Bacon's interpretations were casual, accidental, and merely illustrative. Both were wanting in scholastic equipment. Spurgeon wholly so; Bacon, as will be seen, partially, for he seems quite indifferent as to the source or accuracy of his Scriptural quotations. Despite, however, of these divergencies, there is to be discerned a common element of interpretation, a strange, yet not unexpected, likeness of thought as the sturdy Nonconformist of the 19th century, or the great philosopher of the 16th, addresses himself to unfold a text. For both were religious men: Spurgeon wholly so with deficiencies in culture and even vulgarities of manner; Bacon really so, yet with awful failure in morals until near his end. And both were men of force and action. The work of one may seem to have passed away with his life. Bacon's life-work is imperishable. Had the philosopher fully addressed himself to theology, it is not too much to surmise that the unique position of the Laws of the Ecclesiastical Polity in our English divinity would have been challenged, and our later debt to Professor Mozley would be less than it is. There is only a single treatise of Bacon in which there is any direct treatment of religion, and he would probably have strenuously disclaimed for himself the position of an exegete of Scripture. That he knew the Bible well is evident; it is not, however, likely that he could have produced a first-rate

or even a formal commentary on any of its parts. His references to the text are often incidental and merely allusive, but they are always telling. His method of quotation and explication would scarcely satisfy a student who looks at his work from the standpoint of modern criticism.¹ But acumen is there, and force is there, and his interpretations, if read in that Latin form in which Bacon doubtless would have preferred us to read them, show a remarkable resemblance to the notes of that prince among commentators—Bengel, of the next century. Bacon's critical apparatus was nil. All the evidence points to his ignorance of Hebrew, and to a lack of adequate acquaintance with the New Testament in Greek. He may not, indeed, have pursued the study of the latter language after his precocious childhood at the University. As a student his heart was in the Latin tongue, and out of its abundance he spoke. One might almost say he thought in it.

As far as his essays are concerned, which the ordinary reader will, not without reason, regard as the fairest fruitage of his thought, quotations from Greek authors are by comparison rare, but there is scarcely a paragraph which does not reveal his ripe knowledge of Latin literature. He presses, yet without constraint or affectation, into the service of his ideas, Horace and Virgil, Ovid and Juvenal, Cicero, Tacitus and Livy, Seneca, and Augustine of a later age. But intimacies with these masters, as with a whole host of lesser Latin authors, could furnish no equipment for the exact commentator of Scripture. He had to fall back upon his own master mind, and it scarcely ever failed him. Others might conceive the meaning of the several words of a text better than he, it was Bacon's supreme genius to fasten upon the context. He seems to know by intuition the sense of a passage because he had already

¹ Students of the *Essays* will bear in mind that Bacon's quotations from the Scriptures are mostly through the Vulgate.

grasped its necessary conditions and circumstances. Justice, therefore, can never be done to Bacon by the pedantry of scholarship. It will for ever judge him in this regard from a false point of view. Bacon himself almost anticipated such a criticism. Men, he declares, in many a recurrent phrase, are lost about words, whereas they should look at things. Whenever Bacon turns to Scripture his thoughts are real, vivid, luminous, it is facts and certainties with which his readers are face to face before he has done with them. Had he been a preacher, his method and his force would have been like that exhibited in the *Contemplations* of Bishop Hall. Bacon's greatness is the more remarkable herein because he is not a divine. Rays fall from him when he never meant to shine.

To cover the whole field of Baconian literature in order to estimate the worth of the great English thinker as an interpreter of Scripture would be a large and difficult task, requiring a volume for its adequate treatment, and one impossible for the writer of this article. A humbler effort is, however, feasible within its limits. Bacon's *Essays* are familiar to every one with a rudimentary acquaintance with the English language, they have, indeed, helped in their measure to form it. Here is found the thought of Bacon at its ripest and richest. As a fragment of our national literature it would scarcely fail to answer to the test of frequent quotation to-day, for there is no writer so frequently quoted, or so often without acknowledgment. Countless treatises to-day, articles, essays, what not, owe their best to what Bacon has already expressed better three hundred years ago. His ideas, his suggestions, are native and original, but they are so fertile and cover so wide an area that they can be appropriated with small chance of detection except by the few. Happily Bacon as an interpreter of Scripture is spared this fate. A modern divine is impressed, startled, even convinced, by his bold and authoritative inferences.

But it requires the genius of a Bacon to follow out his view of the significance of a passage. There lies the text, and there his comment, fearless, abrupt, rugged, full of force and fire; but force and fire alike fail in hands that borrow them.

The Scriptural quotations in the Essays of Bacon are less than a hundred in number. Some essays lack any such quotation, others are more fertile in them, but the subject matter of any given essay is a precarious guide to their presence or absence. The essay "on Unity in Religion" has indeed more Scriptural references than any other, but they are formally disclaimed in the essay in which they might have been looked for—that "of Prophecies." The quotations are, as a matter of fact, as Bacon might have expressed it, "made on hazard." Now Scripture gave him his point; now, it is not indeavour to say, he gave point to Scripture. But it is plain that Bacon did not quote Scripture as on the same level with Pagan writings. It is always a reverent handling to which he submits it, and when comment or illustration follows, or, as in many cases, precedes, Bacon's genius, the genius now of an interpreter, is seen at its highest, and his genius rises to the touch of that which is no less than inspiration.

It is of interest to note the immediate sources from which Bacon draws his Scriptural quotations. As might be expected from his passion for aphorisms, it is the Sapiential books which mainly attract him in the Old Testament. The references to the book of Proverbs are frequent. Here the quotations fit into the Essays, both in form and sentiment, with a striking harmony. The Prophets are rarely quoted, still more rarely the Psalms. For the rest, it is not so much a quotation of text as of incident or event in the life of Israel, or of an individual member of the chosen people, which is made ever clearer by some felicitous exposition. In the New Testament by far the largest number

of references is made to the four Gospels. Quotations are made, but with no great freedom, from the Pauline Epistles. There is no direct citation either of the Acts or of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Less use is made than might have been anticipated from Bacon, of the Epistle of St. James. The gnomic form of that letter, its insistence upon practical morality, its strong and nervous sentences, must have appealed to Bacon, but St. James is only quoted three times; yet had Bacon been armed and ready for the enterprise, how he would have dwarfed all other commentators on that Epistle!

The skilful employment of these quotations is worthy also of special notice. The way in which they are interwoven into the texture of the Essays is never the same. This variety is itself a mark of genius. A clumsier writer would bring in quotation and comment, even if appropriate, with a monotonous and dreary sameness. Not so with Bacon: the formula is never constant, the only thing that is constant is the happy surprise it is sure to bring to the intelligent reader. Thus sometimes the germinant thought lies in Scriptural text, and the comment follows like thunder after lightning. At other times the thought is Bacon's own, and the text follows, making a conclusion which for the devout student is indisputable, irresistible. At other times the idea and the Scripture are so subtly blended that it seems as if they could not be put asunder. As an interpreter of Scripture Bacon may have his superiors; in its apt quotation he stands absolutely unrivalled.

Let him, however, speak for himself.

How far-reaching is that suggestion of his on the prime ethical contrast between the two covenants!

“The virtue of prosperity is temperance; the virtue of adversity is fortitude, which in morals is the more heroic virtue. Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New, which carrieth the

greater benediction, and the clearer revelation of God's favour. And the pencil of the Holy Ghost hath laboured more in describing the afflictions of Job than the felicities of Solomon." ¹

There is as much conveyed in those lines as in some entire essays on Christian Ethics to-day. With like sagacity Bacon regards the two extremes of over zeal and indifference in relation to Unity in Religion: ²

"Both these extremes are to be avoided, which will be done if the league of Christians, penned by our Saviour Himself, were in the two cross clauses thereof soundly and plainly expounded. 'He that is not with us is against us'; and again, 'He that is not against us is with us.' That is, if the points fundamental and of substance in religion were truly discerned and distinguished from points not merely of faith, but of opinion, order, or good intention."

Bacon anticipates the verdict that must be passed upon such an exposition. It is enough praise to say that it is sound and plain.

Later on in the same essay there is a fine illustration drawn by the philosopher as to false peaces or unities in religion. "There be two," he says, "the one, when the peace is grounded but upon an implicit ignorance (for all colours will agree in the dark); the other, when it is pieced up upon a direct admission of contraries in fundamental points. For truth and falsehood in such things are like the iron and clay in the toes of Nebuchadnezzar's image: they may cleave, but they will not incorporate."

For more direct interpretation the following instances may be given:

In the essay "of Revenge," ³ he declares that "in taking it a man is but even with his enemy, but in passing it over he is superior, for it is a prince's part to pardon. And

¹ Essay No. V. "on Adversity."

² Essay No. III.

³ Essay No. IV.

Solomon, I am sure, saith, 'It is the glory of a man to pass by an offence.' That which is past is gone, and irrevocable, and wise men have enough to do with things present and things to come; therefore they do but trifle with themselves that labour in past matters."

Later on, after quoting as "desperate" the saying that we are commanded to forgive our enemies, but nowhere to forgive our friends, Bacon declares that "the spirit of Job was in a better tune. 'Shall we,' saith he, 'take good at God's hands, and not be content to take evil also?' And so, of friends, in a proportion." What a depth of significance in this comment of seven words!

That Bacon always remains suggestive, even when he is scarcely critical, may be noted in a passage in the essay "of Usury,"¹ where he quotes thus from S. Matthew xix. 8:

"I say this only, that usury is a *concessum propter durtiem cordis*, for since there must be borrowing and lending, and men are so hard of heart as they will not lend freely, usury must be permitted."

Or again, in reference to Atheism,² quoting from the fourteenth Psalm: "The Scripture saith, 'The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.' It is not said, 'The fool hath thought in his heart.' So as, he rather saith it by rote to himself, as that he would have, than that he can thoroughly believe it or be persuaded of it. For none deny that there is a God, but those for whom it maketh that there were no God. It appeareth in nothing more that atheism is rather in the lip than in the heart of man, than by this, that atheists will ever be talking of that their opinion, as if they fainted in it, within themselves, and would be glad to be strengthened by the consent of others."

Surely Bishop Butler must have owed something to this masterly comment on the sarcasm of the Psalmist.

¹ Essay XLI.

² Essay XVI.

Mark the sagacity of his observation upon Proverbs xviii. 11, in the essay "of Riches":¹ "You will say they may be of use to buy men out of dangers or troubles. As Solomon saith, 'Riches are as a stronghold in the imagination of the rich man.' But this is excellently expressed that it is in imagination and not always in fact, for certainly great riches have sold more men than they have bought out."

Or, again, in the same essay,—

"Of great riches there is no real use except it be in distribution, the rest is but conceit. So saith Solomon,² 'Where much is, there are many to consume it, and what hath the owner but the sight of it with his eyes?' The personal fruition in any man cannot reach to feel great riches. There is a custody of them or a power of dole and donative of them, or a fame of them, but no solid use to the owner."

To interpret the Proverbs so Bacon must have shared somewhat the experiences as well as the wisdom of the writer.

In the essay "of Goodness and Goodness of Nature"³ he quotes S. Matthew v. 45 in order to enforce the expediency of conferring benefits upon others with due discrimination of need and circumstances:

"The example of God teacheth the lesson truly: 'He sendeth his rain and maketh his sun to shine upon the just and unjust'; but he doth not rain wealth, nor shine honour and virtues upon men equally. Common benefits are to be communicate with all, but peculiar benefits with choice."

Later on in the same essay,—

"'Sell all thou hast, and give it to the poor, and follow Me.'⁴ But sell not all thou hast, except thou come and follow Me, that is, except thou have a vocation, wherein

¹ Essay No. XXXIV.

² Prov. xxviii. 20.

³ Essay No. XIII.

⁴ S. Mark x. 21.

thou mayest do as much good with little means as with great; for otherwise in feeding the streams thou driest the fountain."

How keen and subtle is Bacon's reference in the essay "of Envy" ¹ to Genesis iv. 5!

"Near kinsfolk, and fellows in office, and those that have been bred together, are more apt to envy their equals when they are raised; for it doth upbraid unto them their own fortunes, and pointeth at them, and cometh oftener into their remembrance, and incurreth likewise more into the note of others. And envy now redoubleth from speech and fame. Cain's envy was the more vile and malignant towards his brother Abel, because when his sacrifice was better accepted, there was nobody to look on."

The suggestion is the outcome of the training of no school but that of life and experience.

A like perspicacity is shown in the passage with which this Essay on Envy closes:

"It is also the vilest affection and most depraved; for which cause it is the proper attribute of the devil, who is called 'the envious man, that soweth tares among the wheat by night.' As it always cometh to pass that envy worketh subtilty and in the dark, and to the prejudice of good things such as is the wheat."

A few more instances must conclude this sketch of Bacon's power as an interpreter of Scripture.

In the essay "of Judicature," ² he declares of Judges, that "above all things 'integrity is their portion and proper virtue.' 'Cursed' (saith the law) 'is he that removeth the landmark.' ³ The mislayer of a mere stone is to blame; but it is the unjust judge that is the capital remover of landmarks when he defineth amiss of lands and property. One foul sentence doth more hurt than many foul ex-

¹ Essay No. IX.

² Essay No. LVI.

³ Deut. xxvii. 17.

amples: for these do but corrupt the stream, the other corrupteth the fountain.' So saith Solomon, 'Fons turbatus, et vena corrupta est justus cadens in causâ suâ coram adversario.'¹ . . . A judge ought to prepare his way to a just sentence as God useth to prepare his way by raising valleys, and taking down hills;² so when there appeareth on either side an high hand, violent prosecutions, cunning advantages taken, combination, great power, great counsel, then is the virtue of a judge seen to make inequality equal that he may plant his judgment as upon even ground."

"'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer."³

So runs the famous introduction to the *Essays* of 1625. Bacon may or may not be right in his estimate of the Procurator's attitude. It is the converse of this which any way represents that of the philosopher. He was for ever asking the same question, asking it with a deep seriousness, and *staying* until facts and certainties should give him, and others like-minded, an answer. If one looks to his contribution to literature or to philosophy, Pope's epigram upon him seems as shallow as it is cruel. The debt, however, which students of Holy Scripture owe to him for such interpretations of it as have been illustrated by these few examples has never been adequately acknowledged. At least he bids scholars mind things more than words, and remembers that the discovery of truth may be lost while they are balancing grammatical niceties. All cannot possess Bacon's "piercingness and delicacy of observation," as they study and expound the meaning of Holy Writ, but all can imitate his indomitable industry, his directness, and his passion for verities.

"Then he went on till he came to the house of the In-

¹ Prov. xxv. 26.

² Isa. xl. 3-5.

³ S. John xviii. 38.

terpreter, when he knocked over and over. Then said the Interpreter unto Christian, 'Come in, I will show thee what will be profitable unto thee.' Then Christian saw the picture of a very grave person hung up against the wall. It had eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books in its hands, the law of truth upon its lips."

The immortal author of the *Pilgrim's Progress* would not have so framed Francis Bacon, yet is the portrait true of his fine spiritual foresight, his real knowledge of the Bible, and the force as well as the rule of his interpretations.

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