

*THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE LIGHT OF
TO-DAY.*¹

THE subject on which I propose to speak to-night is "The Old Testament in the Light of To-day." The subject is a wide one, and there are aspects of it on which naturally I can only touch in passing, or which I may even have to pass by altogether; but it seemed to me to be one which would embrace points of view which might be suitably considered upon an occasion which suggested rather naturally a comparison of the present with the past. We are standing at the end of a century which has been marked, almost more than any other, by a great intellectual awakening, and which certainly more than any other has been fruitful in great discoveries. Sciences which a hundred years ago were practically non-existent have now arrived at a vigorous and independent manhood; the observation of nature in all its departments has been pursued with indefatigable industry and skill, and lines of investigation, once unworked, have been opened up, and have been found often to conduct to startling and unexpected results. And the methods which in all these studies have been productive of solid results have been these—the systematic and all-sided observation of facts, the shrinking from no labour or pains to solve a difficulty or account for what was not fully understood, the bringing to bear upon a new subject whatever light or illustration might be available from other quarters, the endeavour to correlate, and subsume under general laws, the new facts discovered. Advance conducted upon lines such as these has been most marked throughout the century. It may have been most conspicuous and brilliant in the physical sciences and in the great mechanical arts based upon them; but it has been not less real in many other branches of knowledge, in language, in history, in

¹ An address delivered in connection with the Jubilee of New College, Hampstead, on Wednesday, November 7th, 1900.

archæology, in anthropology. How much, in all these departments of knowledge, is known now, which a century ago was unknown, and even unsuspected! How much more familiar are we now, for instance, not only with the languages, but also with the habits, and institutions, and art of the Greeks and Romans! How many dark points in their history and antiquities have been cleared up by the numerous inscriptions that have been found and published during recent years! Even since these last lines were written news has arrived of remarkable discoveries at Cnossus, in Crete, which promise in some respects to revolutionize former ideas of the early character and history of Greek civilization. On these and other subjects we owe our enlarged knowledge, partly to the discovery of new materials, partly to the application to old materials of more exact and systematic methods of inquiry. The facts of nature lay before our forefathers as fully as they lie before ourselves; yet how strangely they failed to elicit from them the secrets hidden within them! The great masterpieces of Greek literature were all familiar to the scholars of the sixteenth century, and yet some of the most serious blots on the Authorized Version of the New Testament are due to the translators' ignorance of some quite elementary principles of Greek syntax! But the same spirit of scientific study and research which has inspired new life into so many other departments of knowledge, and even in some instances created them altogether, has also pervaded Biblical and Oriental learning; and there is hardly any branch of these subjects, whether language, or literature, or antiquities, or history, in which the stimulus of the nineteenth century has not made itself felt, and in which improved methods of investigation have not conducted to new and important results.

I may assume on the part of those who hear me a general familiarity with the new light in which, to those who do

not refuse to open their eyes, the Old Testament appears to-day. The historical books are now seen to be not, as was once supposed, the works (for instance) of Moses, or Joshua, or Samuel. They are seen to present a multiplicity of phenomena which cannot be accounted for, or reasonably explained, except upon the supposition that they came into existence gradually; that they are compiled out of the writings of distinct and independent authors, characterized by different styles and representing different points of view, which were combined together and otherwise adjusted, till they finally assumed their present form. The various documents thus brought to light reveal, further, such mutual differences that in many cases they can no longer be held to be the work of contemporary writers, or to spring, as used to be thought, from a single generation: in the Pentateuch, especially, the groups of laws contained in the different strata of narrative differ in such a way that they can only be supposed to have been codified at widely different periods of the national life, to the history and literature of which they correspond, and the principles dominant in which they accurately reflect. Three well-defined stages in literature, legislation, and history thus disclose themselves. Nor is this all. Archæology and anthropology, two sciences which fifty years ago were completely in their infancy, come to our aid, and cast upon the Biblical history illuminative side-lights. Some progress had indeed been made fifty years ago in unravelling from the hieroglyphics the history and antiquities of ancient Egypt; but the cuneiform records of Babylonia and Assyria refused still to yield up their secrets. But Edward Hincks had already taken some important steps towards their decipherment; and Henry Layard's *Nineveh and its Remains*, which appeared in 1849, and excited at once the liveliest interest, told eloquently of a magnificent and imposing civilization, which, though as yet all but silent,

was destined before long to be again vocal. Major (afterwards Sir Henry) Rawlinson's great discoveries speedily followed; and from 1851 to the present day the stream of light which has poured from the mounds of Babylonia and Assyria upon the Eastern world has flowed unintermittently. The history and antiquities of two great civilizations, each, in a different way, having interesting links of connection with Israel, are now revealed to us—not, certainly, in their completeness; for that we must wait still for many years to come—but, nevertheless, in sufficient measure to enable us to estimate without serious error their magnitude and character, and to understand the nature of the influence exerted by them upon Israel. If not, on the whole, so epoch-making and surprising in their results as these two splendid achievements of modern genius and industry, the discovery and publication of inscriptions from Phœnicia, Syria, Moab, and Arabia, and the observations of travellers and explorers in the same regions, have in many important details augmented our former knowledge of the customs, and institutions, and habits of thought of Israel's neighbours, helping us thereby to realize more accurately the position taken by Israel amongst them, and the affinities, mental not less than physical and material, subsisting between them. The net result of these discoveries is that the ancient Hebrews are taken out of the isolation in which, as a nation, they formerly seemed to stand; and it is seen now that many of their institutions and beliefs were not peculiar to themselves; they existed in more or less similar form among their neighbours; they were only in Israel developed in special directions, subordinated to special ends, and made the vehicle of special ideas.¹

Archæology has also often a more direct bearing upon the Old Testament; it has made a series of most valuable

¹ In support of the statements in the preceding paragraph, the writer may be permitted to refer to his essay in Hogarth's *Authority and Archæology* (1899), pp. 1-152.

additions to our knowledge, sometimes supporting, sometimes correcting, sometimes supplementing, the Biblical data. What, for instance, can be more stimulating and welcome to the student than the Moabite king's own detailed account of an event dismissed in a single verse in the Kings? or the Assyrian king's own narrative of the entire campaign in which the Rabshakeh's mission to Jerusalem forms, as we now understand, a single episode? or the particulars, recounted by a contemporary, if not by an eye-witness, of Cyrus' conquest of Babylon?¹ The importance to Biblical history of newly-recovered facts such as these I cannot now pause to develop; I will merely, before I pass on, remind you of the very important light which has been thrown by archæology upon the early chapters of Genesis. The monuments of Egypt and Babylon combine to establish the presence of man upon the earth, and the existence of entirely distinct languages, at periods considerably more ancient than is allowed for by the figures in the Book of Genesis; and the tablets brought from the library of Assurbanipal have disclosed to us the source of the material elements upon which the Biblical narratives of the Creation and the Deluge have been constructed.² A clearer indication that in the early chapters of Genesis we are not reading literal history could hardly be found; and we see archæology supporting criticism in pressing upon theologians and apologists the urgent need of a revision of current opinions respecting parts of the Old Testament narrative.

¹ See Hogarth, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90, 105-107, 124-5, 128.

² Cf. Dr. Watson, at the Church Congress, held last October at Newcastle: the source of the material elements in the Creation-narrative was "ancient traditions, not the peculiar treasure of the chosen people, but traditions current amongst the nations in that plain of Babylonia which the Bible describes as the aboriginal home of the human race." See for details the articles, "Cosmogony," by Principal Whitehouse, and "Flood," by the Rev. F. H. Woods, in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*; Sayce's *Higher Criticism and the Verdict of the Monuments*, pp. 61-78, 107-120; Ball's *Light from the East*, pp. 1-15, 34-41; or *Authority and Archæology*, pp. 9-27, 32-34.

If we turn to the prophets and poetical books, we find, similarly, that they also have in many respects received new light from the studies of the past century. Prophecy is no longer defined, as it was once, by a celebrated and still justly honoured divine, as "the history of events before they come to pass."¹ More careful and exact exegesis, a truer appreciation of the aim and object set by the prophet to himself, the study of his writings in the light of history, especially with the help of the new materials afforded by the inscriptions of Assyria and Babylonia, have shown what the prophets primarily were: they were primarily the teachers of their own generation; they spoke out of the circumstances of their own age; it was the political mistakes, the social abuses, the moral shortcomings of their own contemporaries which it was their primary object to correct; their predictions of national deliverance or disaster, their broader ideal delineations of a future age of moral and material blessedness, all start from their own present, and are conditioned by the historical environment in which they moved. Nor does their theological teaching stand all upon the same plane. It is adapted to the spiritual capacities of those to whom it is addressed; a progress is in many cases discernible in it; and the rise and development of new truths can be traced in their writings.

Mutatis mutandis, what has been said holds good of the poetical books. Their connection with the names with which they are traditionally associated must be almost uniformly abandoned; in some cases language, in others contents and character, imperatively demand this. The poetical books are seen now in fact to have a much wider significance than they would have had, if they had been, as largely as tradition asserts, the work of David and Solomon alone; they reflect, in singularly striking and attractive

¹ Butler's *Analogy*, part ii. ch. vii. § 3, 6th paragraph. See for the correction of this definition Kirkpatrick's *Doctrine of the Prophets*, ch. i., esp. p. 15 f.

forms, springing out of the varied experiences of many men and many ages, different phases of the national religious life; in the Psalms we hear Israel's religious meditations, in the Proverbs the maxims of practical philosophy which its sages formulated, in Job and Qohéleth ponderings on the problems of life, in the Song of Songs an idyllic picture of faithful Hebrew love.

In what I have said I have indicated in outline (for details on an occasion such as the present are obviously impossible) the general character of the new light in which the Old Testament now appears; and I propose to devote the remainder of my time to considering three questions: (1) How do the facts I have referred to bear upon the inspiration of the Old Testament? (2) How do they affect the estimate which we form of its moral and doctrinal value? (3) What practical conclusions may be deduced from them? And the principle which, in answering these questions, I desire to emphasize is the existence of a *double element* in Scripture, a human not less than a Divine element, and the extreme importance, in view of the new knowledge which the present day has brought to bear upon the Bible, of recognising *both* of these. An intelligible but mistaken reverence often prevents religious people from recognising properly the human element in the Bible; and I wish to show how it is that the interests both of truth and of religion demand that the reality of this element should not be overlooked.

(1) With regard to the first of these questions, it is, I think, convenient to start with the formularies of the Church to which we individually belong. I naturally here speak primarily from the point of view of my own communion; but I believe that what I am about to say will be in accordance also with the formularies of those whom I am addressing. The formularies, both of the Church of England,

and (unless I am greatly mistaken) of the Congregational Churches as well,¹ permit, in regard to inspiration, considerable freedom of individual opinion: they affirm the Scriptures to be of supreme authority in matters of faith, they specify certain doctrines, which they declare to be contained in the Scriptures, and to be the means of salvation; but they include no definition of inspiration, and while they define the books of which the Old Testament consists, they express no theory respecting either its literary structure, or the manner in which the Divine Will was communicated to its writers, or the stages by which, historically, revelation advanced.

The term inspiration is derived, of course, from the well-known passage in which St. Paul speaks of all Scripture as *θεόπνευστος*. What, however, does this term denote? or, to limit the question to the point which here concerns us, what are the necessary characteristics of a writing which is spoken of as "inspired"? The use of the word will not guide us; for it occurs only in the passage referred to. Clearly the only course open to us is to examine, patiently and carefully, the book which is termed inspired, and ascertain what characters attach to it. Unhappily, a different course has often been followed. Men have assumed that they knew, as it were intuitively, what inspiration meant. They have framed theories without basis, either in Scripture itself or in the definitions of their Church, as to the notes, or conditions, which must attend it; they have applied their theories forthwith to the Bible, and have demanded that it should conform to them. The theories of mechanical and verbal inspiration have indeed been now largely abandoned, as it is seen that they are too plainly inconsistent with the facts presented by the Bible itself.

¹ See the "Principles of Religion" of the Congregational Churches (reprinted in App. C, at the end of the second of the *Bampton Lectures* of the Rev. G. H. Curteis, on "Dissent in its Relation to the Church of England").

But other theories still prevalent are not less inconsistent with the facts. It is often supposed, for instance, that an inspired writing must be absolutely consistent in all its parts, and free from all discrepancy or error. But the Bible does not satisfy these requirements. I may quote here the words of a speaker at the recent Church Congress: "I hope I shall not pain any one when I express my own opinion that the Bible is not free from imperfection, error, and mistake in matters of fact. Let me add that it is a conclusion to which I have slowly and reluctantly come." The Bible, moreover, contains accommodations to an immature stage of religious practice or belief; even in the Psalms there are passages which cannot be appropriated by the followers of Christ. The Bible also exhibits other characteristics which we should not antecedently have expected to find in it. It contains double and divergent accounts of the same events. The history has in some cases been committed to writing a considerable time after its occurrence, and is thus probably presented to us in the form in which it has been gradually shaped by tradition. In some parts of the Old Testament there are cogent reasons for believing that we are not reading literal history, but history which has been idealized, or, as in the Chronicles, transformed in parts under the associations of a later age. Elsewhere, again, literary considerations show that sayings and discourses are strongly coloured by the individuality of the narrator; the writers themselves also afford indications that they are subject to the limitations of culture and knowledge imposed by the age in which they lived. *A priori*, no doubt, we should have expected these things to be otherwise; but our *a priori* conceptions of the works and ways of God are apt to be exceedingly at fault. The facts which I have referred to should not surprise us, or tempt us to doubt the authority of Scripture. They may help to refute a false theory of inspiration, they will

be embraced and allowed for in a true theory. They belong to the human element in the Bible. They show that, as inspiration does not suppress the individuality of the Biblical writers, so it does not altogether neutralize human infirmities, or confer upon those who have been its instruments immunity from error. As the writer whom I have just quoted forcibly puts it, "Men argue that since the Bible is God's Word it must be free from all imperfection. The argument is equally valid that since it is man's word it cannot be thus free." Too often, it is to be feared, the explanations offered of the discrepancies and other difficulties of the Old Testament leave much to be desired, and are adapted to silence doubt rather than to satisfy it. But each time that this process is repeated the doubt reasserts itself with fresh strength. What wonder that there are men who, when they find that their beliefs about the Bible cannot be sustained without a succession of artificial and improbable suppositions, cast off the entire system with which, as they have been brought up to believe, these improbabilities are inseparably connected? It is a fatal mistake to approach the Bible with a preconceived theory of inspiration, or a theory formed irrespectively of the facts which it is called upon to explain. A theory of inspiration, if it is to be a sound one, ought to embrace and find room for all the characteristics displayed by the book which claims to be inspired.

The inerrancy of Scripture, as it is called,¹ is a principle which is nowhere asserted or claimed in Scripture itself. It is a principle which has been framed by theologians, presumably from a fear lest, if no such principle could be established, the authority of Scripture in matters of doctrine could not be sustained. The end is undoubtedly a

¹ Though the expression is, perhaps, more familiar in America than in this country. See Dr. Briggs' *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture* (1899), p. 615 ff.

sound one; but the principle by which it is sought to secure it is quite unable to support the weight which is laid upon it. In the past, probably, this was not apparent, but it is apparent now. We cannot honestly close our eyes to the facts contradicting it. It is the *facts* which force upon us the necessity of a revision of current theories of inspiration. It is true that, whether we are theologians or ordinary Christian men, it is the doctrines of Scripture that are of importance to us; it is the doctrines which are to form our guide in life, and our lode-star to eternity. But the truth of these doctrines will be best maintained if we judge Scripture by the canons of ordinary historical evidence. It certainly will not be maintained if we make it depend upon an artificial principle, which breaks down as soon as it is seriously put to the test. As I shall hope to show directly, the great theological verities taught in the Old Testament are absolutely untouched by critical investigation; while the documents on which the *specific* doctrines of Christianity rest are so different in their nature from those which are here concerned, that criticism, though it may in some cases modify the idea which we once held of their origin and structure, leaves the substance of them intact: in particular, the testimony to our blessed Lord's life and work is so much more nearly contemporary with the events recorded than can often be shown to be the case in the Old Testament, and also so much more varied and abundant, that, by an elementary principle of historical criticism, it is of proportionately higher value. It does not appear to me that the foundations of our faith are endangered either by the application of reasonable critical principles to the Old Testament, or by the adoption of a theory of inspiration which shall do justice to the facts that have to be accounted for.

(2) I pass now to the second question, viz., How do critical views of the Old Testament affect our estimate of its moral and doctrinal value? As I have just observed,

the vital truths declared in the Bible appear to me to be wholly unaffected by critical inquiries, or critical conclusions, respecting its structure: criticism deals with the external form, or shell, in which these truths appear, the truths themselves lie beyond its range, and are not touched by it. It may be that individual critics reject some or even many of those truths which Christians, speaking generally, regard as vital; but that is not because they are critics, as such, but because they approach the subject with some anterior philosophical principles, and they would reject these truths whether they were, in the technical sense of the word, critics or not. The Christian critic starts with the belief that the Bible contains a revelation of God, and that its writers are inspired: his object is not to deny the revelation or the inspiration, but to ascertain, as far as possible, the conditions under which the revelation was made, the stages through which it passed, and the character and limits of the inspiration which guided the human agents through whom the revelation was made, or who recorded its successive stages. By inspiration I suppose we may understand a Divine afflatus which, without superseding or suppressing the human faculties, but rather using them as its instruments, and so conferring upon Scripture its remarkable manifoldness and variety, enabled holy men of old to apprehend, and declare in different degrees, and in accordance with the needs and circumstances of particular ages or occasions, the mind and purpose of God. I say in different degrees, for it must be evident that the Old Testament does not in every part stand upon the same moral or spiritual plane, and is not everywhere in the same measure the expression of the Divine mind: inspiration did not always, in precisely the same degree, lift those who were its agents out of the reach of human weakness and human ignorance. The Bible is like a lantern with many sides, some transparent, others more or less opaque, and the

flame burning within does not shine through all with the same pure and clear brilliancy.¹ Or, to change the figure, there is room in the economy of revelation, as in the economy of nature, for that which is less perfect as well as for that which is more perfect, for vessels of less honour as well as for vessels of greater honour. Certainly, in a sense, every true and noble thought of man is inspired of God; the searchers after truth who in a remote past and in distant climes sought after God, in part also found Him; but with the Biblical writers, the purifying and illuminating Spirit must have been present in some special and exceptional measure. Nevertheless, in the words of the prophet, or other inspired writer, there is a human element not less than a Divine element; it is a mistake, and a serious mistake, to ignore either. We may not, indeed, be able to analyze the psychical conditions under which a consciousness of Divine truth was awakened in the prophets; but by whatever means this consciousness was aroused, the Divine element which it contained was assimilated by the prophet, and thus appears blended with the elements that were the expression of his own character and genius.

And so it is that the voice of God speaks to us from the Old Testament in manifold tones.² Through the history of Israel as a nation, through the lives of its representative men, and through the varied forms of its national literature, God has revealed Himself to the world. From the Old Testament we learn how God awakened in His ancient people the consciousness of Himself; and we hear one writer after another unfolding different aspects of His nature, and disclosing with increasing distinctness His gracious purposes towards man. In the pages of the prophets there shine forth, with ineffaceable lustre, those sublime declarations of righteousness, mercy, and judgment

¹ The simile is that of an old Puritan divine, quoted by Dr. Briggs, *The Bible, the Church, and the Reason* (1892), p. 101.

² πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως (Heb. i. 1).

which have impressed all readers, to whatever age, or clime, or creed, they have belonged. In the Psalms we hear the devout human soul pouring forth its emotions in converse with God, declaring its penitence and contrition, its confidence and faith, its love and devotion, its thanksgiving and jubilation, its adoration and praise. In the Law, viewed in its different parts, we hear the voice of God accommodating itself to the needs of different ages, and disciplining His people by ordinances, sometimes imperfect in themselves, till they should be ready for the freedom to be conferred by Christ. The historians set before us, from different points of view, the successive stages in the Divine education of the race. They do not, like the prophets, claim to be delivering a message which they have received immediately from God: their inspiration is shown in the spirit which they breathe into the narrative and in their interpretation of the history; they show how a providential purpose overrules it; and they bring out the spiritual and moral lessons implicit in it. Sometimes, especially in dealing with the earlier period, to which no sure historical recollections reached back, they are dependent, doubtless, upon popular oral tradition; but penetrated as they are by deep moral and religious ideas, and possessing profound spiritual sensibilities, they so fill in the outlines furnished by tradition, that the events or personages of antiquity become spiritually significant—embody spiritual lessons, or become spiritual types, for the imitation or warning of succeeding generations. And like all other writers of the Old Testament, they declare very plainly God's approval of righteousness and His displeasure at sin. It is impossible not to believe that both the literature and the religious history of Israel would have been very different from what they were, had not some special *charisma* of supernatural insight into the ways of God been granted to its religious teachers.

And so there can be but one answer to the question of

the permanent religious value of the Old Testament. The Old Testament Scriptures enshrine truths of permanent and universal validity. They depict, under majestic and vivid anthropomorphic imagery, the spiritual character and attributes of God. They contain a wonderful manifestation of His grace and love, and of the working of His Spirit upon the soul of man. They form a great and indispensable preparation for Christ. They exhibit the earlier stages of a great redemptive purpose, the consummation of which is recorded in the New Testament. They fix and exemplify all the cardinal qualities of the righteous and God-fearing man. They insist upon the paramount claims of the moral law on the obedience of mankind. They inculcate with impressive eloquence the great domestic and civic virtues on which the welfare of every community depends; they denounce fearlessly vice and sin. The Old Testament Scriptures present examples of faith and conduct, of character and principle, in many varied circumstances of life, which we, whose lot is cast in less heroic times, may adopt as our models, and strive to emulate. They propound, in opposition to all formalism, a standard of pure and spiritual religion. They lift us into an atmosphere of religious thought and feeling, which is the highest that man has ever reached, save only in the pages of the New Testament; the Psalter, especially, provides us with a devotional manual which must ever retain a unique, unapproachable position in the Church. They hold up to us, in those pictures of a renovated human nature and transformed social state, which the prophets love to delineate, high and ennobling ideals of human life and society, which, though, alas! not yet realized as the prophets anticipated, remain, nevertheless, as visions of the goal which human endeavour should strive to reach. And all these great themes are set forth with a classic beauty and felicity of language, and with a choice variety of literary form, which

are no unimportant factors in the secret of their power over mankind.¹

(3) Thirdly, I should like, if I may be allowed to do so, to offer some suggestions of a more or less practical character. A large amount of new light has been shed upon the Old Testament; our knowledge of the ways in which God of old time "spake to the fathers by the prophets" has been variously modified, corrected, or enlarged; and it is clearly our duty to turn this knowledge to some practical account. If, then, I may begin by addressing a few words more particularly to those of my hearers who may be regarded still as students and learners, I would observe that the foundation of all true Biblical study consists in a first-hand knowledge of the Bible itself, to be obtained, wherever possible, by a training in sound and scientific methods of philology and exegesis. Nothing can supersede an acquaintance, as intimate as it can be made, with the original language of the Bible; it is that knowledge which brings us as nearly face to face as is possible with the original writers, and enables us to perceive many links of connection and shades of meaning, which can with difficulty, if at all, be brought home to us by a translation. But we live in another world from that in which the Biblical writers moved; and hence the associations suggested by a given word, which were obvious at once to those who originally used it, or heard it used, are often not apparent to us; and they have to be recovered, painfully and slowly, by research of various kinds, in geography, archæology, life and manners in the East, or other subjects,

¹ The subject of the preceding paragraphs has been developed by the writer more fully in the 6th and 7th of his *Sermons on Subjects connected with the Old Testament*, and in a paper on "The Permanent Moral and Devotional Value of the Old Testament for the Christian Church," read originally at the Church Congress at Folkestone in 1892, and prefixed to the same volume (p. ix. ff.). See also the comprehensive and illuminative treatment of the same subject in Prof. Sanday's *Bampton Lectures on "Inspiration"* (1893), esp. Lectures iii., iv., v. and viii.

if the Bible is to speak, even approximately, with the same distinctness to us as it did to those to whom its various parts were originally addressed.

Philology and exegesis, assisted by such ancillary studies, form, then, the foundations of sound Biblical knowledge; but the next aspect under which, if it is to be intelligently understood, the Bible must be studied, is the *historical* aspect. The Bible is the embodiment of a historical revelation; and if the significance of the successive stages of this is to be adequately grasped, the different parts of the Bible must be viewed in their true historical perspective, in order that the correlation of the revelation to the history may be properly perceived, and the aims, and position, and influence of the different prophets, for instance, may be properly understood. This work can only be accomplished by criticism. And it is here that criticism, by distinguishing—as its name implies—what was once confused, has proved a most helpful handmaid of theology. There is a principle, the importance of which has long been recognised by theologians, the *progressiveness of revelation*, its adaptation, at different periods, to the moral and spiritual capacities of those to whom it was primarily addressed; and the so-called “higher criticism”¹ of the Old Testament is really the extension, and development to its legitimate consequences, of this principle. A true historical view of the growth of the Old Testament, and of the progress of revelation, besides being important for its own sake, is valuable also in another way; it removes, viz., many of the difficulties, sometimes historical, sometimes moral, which the Old Testament presents, and which frequently form serious stumbling-blocks. The older apologists, by the harmonistic and other methods at their disposal, were quite unable to

¹ On the meaning of this expression, and on the general character of the questions with which it is the function of the “higher criticism” to dwell, see (briefly) the writer's *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (ed. 6 or 7), p. 3; more fully, Briggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 24, 92-109, 280.

deal with these: historical criticism shows that they belong to the human element in the Bible, and that they are to be explained by reference either to the historical position of the writer, or to the imperfections incident to a relatively immature stage in the spiritual education of mankind.¹

What conclusions reached by critics may, however, be reasonably accepted? I must here insist again upon a distinction to the importance of which I have called attention elsewhere, because it appears to me to be one which is not always sufficiently kept in view. I mean the distinction between *degrees of probability*. The value and probability of a conclusion depends upon the nature of the grounds upon which it rests. Hence, I venture to think, it is a sound practical rule to acquire early the habit of *classifying* conclusions, of estimating them with reference to the grounds alleged on their behalf, and of asking ourselves, Is this practically certain? or, Is it only probable? or, Is it not more than just possible? I should apply this rule pretty freely to emendations, to interpretations, to historical or archæological hypotheses, and to other similar subjects. Now, some of the conclusions reached by critics rest upon such a wide and varied induction of facts that they may be accepted as practically certain, and as deserving to be called the assured results of criticism. But beyond the limit of these assured results there is a tolerably wide fringe, in which, from the nature of the case, from the fact that the data are slight, or uncertain, or conflicting, no indisputable conclusions can be drawn; there is scope for more than one possibility; clever and even illuminative hypotheses may be suggested, but we cannot feel confident that they are correct. We must not resent hypotheses of this kind being propounded, even though in some cases they should seem to us improbable; for such hypotheses, in this as in

¹ Comp. Kirkpatrick, *The Divine Library of the Old Testament* (1891), pp. 103-109.

other departments of knowledge, are one of the conditions on which progress depends. They mark out the lines upon which attention should be concentrated and investigation carried on, with the view, as the case may be, of either confirming or invalidating them. This fringe of uncertainty, as it may be called, forms an attractive field for speculation, and it frequently gives rise to rival hypotheses; but it is essential that it should be distinguished carefully from the field within which we may speak rightly of assured results being reached, and that conclusions relating to it should be adopted with caution and reserve. I may add that the differences between critics, which are sometimes laid indiscriminately to their charge, and spoken of as if they implied on their part the habitual use of false methods, are in reality limited to this margin of uncertainty, where their occurrence is simply a natural consequence of the imperfection or ambiguity of the data.

May I say, lastly, in what way, as it seems to me, the critical view of the Old Testament should be introduced into teaching? As regards children, I do not think that on this ground any change whatever should be made in the manner in which they are taught; they are not in a position to understand the questions or distinctions involved. But they should be familiarized early with the text of the Bible: if I may speak from my own experience, a text of the New Testament a day is learnt without effort by a child of six, and if the process is continued, a valuable selection of continuous passages from both Testaments may be known by heart by the age of nine or ten. Gradually, as the child grows older, it should be familiarized with the historical parts of the Bible, the narratives of the Gospels, the stories of the patriarchs, the Exodus, the Judges, and Samuel. Whatever is to be added afterwards, a knowledge of the text is a primary essential, and of course simple lessons suggested by the narrative may be pointed out, for

these lessons are there, whatever the historical character of the narrative should ultimately prove to be. But when the children reach an age at which their powers are maturing—and if they were boys in the upper classes of a public school, their mental outlook would be beginning to be enlarged, and they would be encouraged to inquire about many things which it would not have occurred to them to inquire about before—then I think that the principal conclusions reached by scholars on the subject of the Old Testament should be gradually and judiciously placed before them. It does not seem to me to be right or just that young men should be sent into the world with antiquated and untenable ideas about the Bible, which are no part of Christian doctrine, and are no element in any creed, and so to run the risk of being disillusioned, when the time comes, at unfriendly hands, and of making shipwreck of their faith. We have our treasure in earthen vessels, and it is not wise to imperil the treasure for the sake of the vessel. The principal difficulties of the Bible do not, to most minds, consist in the doctrines which it teaches, but in the *historical setting* in which these doctrines are often presented. This historical setting has, in the cases I have in view, inherent improbabilities, entirely irrespective of the miraculous element in it, and arising out of the representation itself; they may consist, for instance, in false science, they may consist in historical or literary inconsistencies: but whatever they are, they are due to the human element in the Bible; and it is our duty to recognise this element, to discover its character and extent, and to show clearly that it does not enter into the creed of a Christian man in the same way in which the fundamental doctrines of the Bible do. In the Apostles' Creed, for instance, we confess our belief in God as the Maker of heaven and earth; but we do not affirm that He made it in the manner described in the first chapter of Genesis.

The Bible can never suffer by having the truth told about

it. The Bible suffers, and religion suffers, when claims are made on its behalf which it never raises itself, and which, when examined impartially, are seen to be in patent contradiction with the facts. The undue exaltation of the human element in the Bible finds then its Nemesis. It ought, then, to be shown that the primary aim of the Bible is not to anticipate the discoveries of science, or to teach correct ancient history, but to teach moral and spiritual truths, and history only in so far as it is the vehicle or exponent of these. It ought, further, to be shown that the historical and literary character of the Old Testament writings is just a natural consequence of the conditions under which the authors wrote; those who lived nearer the events described being naturally, for instance, better informed than those who lived at a distance from them. No historical writer ever claims to derive the materials for his narrative from a supernatural source (cf. St. Luke i. 1-4); and so far as we are aware, it has not pleased God in this respect to correct, where they existed, the imperfections attaching to the natural position of the writer. Applying these principles, I should explain how, in the opening chapters of Genesis, two writers had told us how the Hebrews pictured to themselves the beginnings of the world and the early history of man; how, borrowing their materials in some cases from popular tradition or belief, in others, directly or indirectly, from the distant East, they had breathed into them a new spirit, and constructed with their aid narratives replete with noble and deep truths respecting God and man; how one writer had grafted upon the false science of antiquity a dignified and true picture of the relation of the world to God; how another writer, in a striking symbolic narrative, had described how man's moral capacity was awakened, put to the test, and failed; how in the sequel, by other symbolic narratives, the progress of civilization, the growing power of sin, God's judgment upon

it, His purposes towards man, are successively set forth.¹ Passing next to the patriarchal period, where real historical recollections seem to begin, I should show how the skeleton, which is all that we can reasonably suppose to have been furnished by tradition, was clothed by the narrators with a living vesture of circumstance, expression, and character, —being, no doubt, in the process coloured to some extent by the beliefs and associations of the age in which the narrators lived themselves,—and that in this way the pattern-figures of the patriarchs were created, and those idyllic narratives produced which have at once fascinated and instructed so many generations of men.² I should proceed similarly through the other parts of the Pentateuch, explaining, without concealment or disguise, the grounds which preclude us from accepting the narrative as uniformly historical, but pointing out that it was the form in which the Hebrews themselves told the story of the Exodus and of their conquest of Canaan, and emphasizing especially what is really its most important element, the religious teaching embodied in it,—for example, the lessons suggested by the beautifully-drawn character of Moses, and the many striking declarations which it contains of the character and purposes of God. I repeat it, the irreligious or unspiritual man may ignore all this; but no criticism can eliminate it from the narrative. I should also call attention to the three great codes of law contained in the Pentateuch, indicating the general character and purpose of each, and dwelling in particular upon the lofty spiritual teaching of Deuteronomy. I should then, as occasion offered, select passages from the prophetic books, showing in what way they had a meaning and a significance in the circumstances, political or social, of the time at which they were written,

¹ Comp., for details, the small but instructive volume by the present Bishop-designate of Exeter, *The Early Narratives of Genesis* (1892).

² Comp. the articles on the different patriarchs in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*.

and pointing out the permanent moral and spiritual lessons contained in them.¹ I need hardly say that I should not meanwhile neglect the New Testament; but I am not dealing with that to-night. I do not understand that by teaching such as this the religious value or authority of the Old Testament would be depreciated or impaired: I believe, on the contrary, that its contents would gain very greatly in reality; it would be read with increased interest and appreciation, and the Divine element in it would be placed upon a far firmer and securer foundation than is provided for it by the ordinary view. The importance of improved methods in the Religious Teaching in Secondary Schools has been recently urged with much force, and at the same time, with reason and discrimination, in a volume bearing this title by Dr. Bell, the Headmaster of Marlborough College. I am aware that, for the purposes I have indicated, the helps in the shape of commentaries and manuals which many teachers might require are at present far from adequate; but the claims of the Bible to be studied more intelligently, though at the same time not less reverently, than it used to be, have of late years been widely recognised in this country, and it is reasonable to expect that the deficiency in suitable books may in due time be supplied.²

S. R. DRIVER.

¹ Miss Bramston's *Dawn of Revelation, Old Testament Lessons for Teachers in Secondary Schools* (1899), contains much that is valuable and suggestive from the points of view that have been indicated. (The title is not an adequate one; for the lessons are taken from all parts of the Old Testament, fully one-half being from the Prophets.)

² Since this address was delivered, there has reached me a *brochure* by Prof. Kautzsch, of Halle, entitled *Bibelwissenschaft und Religionsunterricht*, in which, while the subject is treated in greater detail than was consistent with the plan of my address, the practical conclusions reached are largely the same. Prof. Kautzsch emphasizes in particular the *religious value* of the narratives of the Old Testament; and while he calls attention to the need of higher and more intelligent teaching being given in secondary schools, is careful to point out that a judicious teacher will naturally accommodate his teaching to the age and capacities of his pupils, and not, for instance, burden them with technical details in cases where it can be of no value for them to know them.