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*SOME PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL
INTERPRETATION.*¹

LET my first words from this Chair be a tribute of piety to the distinguished scholar, the revered teacher, who has laid down its duties after three and twenty years of service. I have a vivid recollection of attending his inaugural lectures on Ewald in 1886,² and of the impression which they made upon me. They were far above our heads as undergraduates, but they communicated to us the stir of a new experience. Voice and manner at once caught our attention; it was as though we listened to a poet imparting his vision, or to an artist revealing the aim and secret of his craft; above all, we gained some conception of what real knowledge means, of the exclusive devotion which its pursuit demands, of the sacredness of the cause of truth. The impression made in those early days has been strengthened by the lectures and writings of the years which followed. Many of us began to study Isaiah and the Psalms under his guidance; he opened new worlds to us; and though the author has changed his views since on many points, we still find those commentaries the most helpful in our language. The best kind of teacher is always learning himself and expects his students to learn with him; he does not do all the work for them, but sets them thinking and exploring on the lines which he points out. Such a teacher Dr. Cheyne has

¹ Inaugural lecture delivered by the writer, as Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture, in the Examination Schools, Oxford, January 20, 1909.

² *EXPOSITOR*, vol. iv., 1886, pp. 241 ff., 361 ff.

been. He has never lost his vitality and freshness ; his courage has never faltered, even in days when the principles of Biblical criticism were neither so well understood nor so widely accepted as they are now. The teaching which has come from this Chair has always been on the side of progress. No living master, perhaps, expects more of his learners than Dr. Cheyne in the way of intelligent co-operation ; but the discipline, if sometimes severe, is thoroughly wholesome ; he would spur us on to greater efforts and new points of view ; he would bid us not be afraid of the truth wherever it may lead us, and whatever the cost may be. Both his teaching and writing are coloured by his own strongly marked individuality, and this gives to both a peculiar attractiveness. The most transparent of writers, as he was once called, he takes us all into his confidence and discloses the working of his idea. And since he combines with a learning which cannot be surpassed in this country, or on the continent, the mind of a poet and the fine and beautiful temper of " a man of the spirit," his work has had an influence second to none in authority and range. This is not the occasion to enumerate in detail the immense services which my predecessor has rendered to Biblical science in these fruitful years. If it is the duty of a Professor to teach those who are willing to come and listen, he has an equal obligation towards those who are not within reach of the living voice ; he is called upon to make his contribution towards the advancement of learning by his written works. No one in this University has more amply fulfilled the obligation than Dr. Cheyne ; and no Oxford scholar has counted for more in the great world outside, wherever the Bible is studied. Without forgetting the importance of his other books, I should like to bear my testimony (for what it is worth) to that magnificent enterprise of combined scholar-

ship which will always bear his name, the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*. It would be difficult to point to any work of the kind edited with more consummate skill; and the whole of this vast undertaking is penetrated by a dominant spirit, inexhaustible in resource, fertile, original, adventurous. The student has already found in these splendid volumes not only a rich treasury of information but a stimulus to fresh inquiry in almost every department. With the publication of the *Encyclopaedia* Dr. Cheyne inaugurated a fresh epoch in his career as a Biblical scholar. He is teaching us now to look out for more signs of corruption and alteration in the traditional text than we used to suspect, to apply more vigorous tests to current views, and to keep an open mind for fresh discoveries in geography and archaeology and early religion. Whether we are convinced or not by his North Arabian theory, as it may be called for short, we cannot withhold our admiration for the astounding feat of heroism—it can be called nothing else—which has rewritten the work of a lifetime in the light of what he considers to be a discovery of new truth.

In the inaugural lecture of 1886 he quoted some words of Niebuhr: "History has two means by which it supplies the deficiencies of its sources—criticism and divination"; and on these words he based an appeal for "a more penetrating criticism and a better regulated though not more intense divination." The appeal was characteristic, and he has repeated it all through the years of his professoriate. He is not one, however, to despair of the younger generation of students whom he has influenced, because they must needs work on a humbler level according to their own lights. He has bequeathed to his successor a high tradition of concentration, of hard work, of single-minded devotion; and the disciple called to take up the succession, and in all

honesty realizing his unworthiness, is compelled to pray for "a double portion" of the master's spirit.

In thinking over the way in which I might best approach the task which my office lays upon me, the Interpretation of Holy Scripture, it occurred to me that there was something to be learned from a brief study of the principles of interpretation which may be discovered in Holy Scripture itself, especially in that part of it which I have to teach. At the outset the first thing that strikes us is a fundamental difference of method between the ancient and the modern practice. While we write commentaries *on* the text, the early practice was to write commentaries *in* the text ; or if the gloss was not actually inserted, it was written on the margin and ultimately crept in beside the original passage. The ancient material of the Old Testament has passed through a long course of editing ; it has been altered, adapted, enriched by successive generations of pious commentators. As a rule they interpreted the past by the present, and thus naturally enough transferred to antiquity the ideas and customs with which they were familiar. The interests of edification were supreme ; it was not history for its own sake, but history for the sake of its moral which determined how an early document was to be understood. Matters offensive to a growing spirituality of view were expunged ; sometimes increased knowledge led to a revision of traditional writings ; prophecies, especially unfulfilled prophecies, were re-interpreted to suit new needs. There is hardly a book in the Old Testament which has not been annotated and re-handled in this way : it took the Book of Judges, for instance, some five hundred years to reach its present form ; the literary history of our Book of Isaiah covers a period almost as long ; in fact the ancient Scriptures as a whole grew with the growth of the people. And what is true

of the Old Testament is equally true of other ancient traditional books. In his illuminating lectures on the Rise of the Greek Epic, my old friend of school and undergraduate days, whom we are proud to welcome to the Chair of Greek, Professor Gilbert Murray, has shown that the Iliad and Odyssey can only be understood if they are regarded not as primitive poems but as the products of a long process of development ; and he makes an effective use of the analogy of the Old Testament to support his argument. Some instances of the exegetical methods of Old Testament editors are two well known to need more than a passing reference. We are familiar with the manner in which the Deuteronomic editor of Judges and Kings interpreted the history of the past by his own standards of doctrine and practice, and consequently seldom allowed the conduct of rulers and people to pass without an unfavourable judgment. The artless enthusiasm of the author of Chronicles, again, leads him into the most courageous treatment of his sources ; a musical Levite, with a passion for the temple and its services, he must needs assign to the arrangements so dear to his heart the prestige of immemorial and unbroken usage, and he rewrites history accordingly. I have mentioned the tendency to get rid of names and things offensive to later religious feeling. There was a time when Israelites could use harmlessly the title Baal when speaking of Yahweh ; Gideon was known as Jerub-baal, Jonathan and David called their sons by such names as Merib-baal, Ish-baal, Baal-yada ; but Hosea found it necessary to protest against the custom ; and in later times the scribes altered Baal to bosheth, "shame," and turned Jerub-baal into Jerub-besheth, Ish-baal into Ish-bosheth, etc. In Chronicles the names were allowed to stand in their original form ; but in Samuel the names were altered, and the change must have been introduced

at some time later than the date of Chronicles, i.e. after the third century B.C.¹ The name of the idol set up by Antiochus Epiphanes upon the altar of burnt-offering must be given an opprobrious disguise; it was an image of Baal-shamaim, Baal of heaven; in Daniel the name becomes "the abomination which appals."² Again, it would never do to allow the patriarchs to set up pillars, or to offer worship under a sacred oak; accordingly the pillar is turned into an altar and the oak into grove.³ Nor must Ahijah carry about for Saul's benefit an ephod, probably the loin-cloth which the priest put on when he wished to consult or to deliver an oracle⁴; so Ahijah is made to carry about with him "the ark of God."⁵ It is not necessary to multiply instances of this kind. But I will illustrate my point a little further. I need not remind you that the stories of the creation, of the antediluvian patriarchs, and of the flood, are told in duplicate; the documents which narrate them are J, J², and P. It is common knowledge that these primitive traditions were more or less influenced by the similar traditions current among the Babylonians, though in passing through Israelite channels they have been purged of the gross polytheism

¹ Hos. ii. 16, 17, ix. 10. Judg. vi. 32, etc. 1 Chr. viii. 34, ix. 40, xiv. 7. 2 Sam. iv. 4, 5, v. 16, ix. 6, xi. 21.

² Dan. xi. 31, xii. 11, cf. ix. 27.

³ Gen. xxxiii. 20; cf. 1 Kings xvi. 32 with 2 Kings iii. 2. Gen. xviii. 1 cf. LXX.; Deut. xi. 30, cf. LXX. and Gen. xii. 6.

⁴ So the ephod is now explained with much probability: Sellin in Bezold's *Orient. Studien*, ii. 699 ff. (1906); Benzinger, *Hebr. Archäologie*,² 347 f. (1907). It might be made of costly materials, as in Judg. viii. 26; in Egyptian and Phœnician figures such richly ornamented loin-cloths are represented. The ephod worn by the high priest and by the priests in later times was also a loin-cloth, but it had lost its ancient significance and become merely one of the sacerdotal insignia.

⁵ 1 Sam. xiv. 18, cf. R.V.M.; similarly the case of Abiathar, cf. 1 Sam. xxiii. 6 with 1 Kings ii. 26. In 1 Sam. xv. 23, *idolatry* has probably been substituted for *ephod*.

which is characteristic of them in their Babylonian forms. Now the curious thing is that Babylonian influence appears most markedly in the document where we should least expect to find it, in the Priestly narratives, Genesis i., v., vii., viii., In the earliest document, J, the tradition is native not Babylonian; in J² a general acquaintance with the Babylonian forms is clear; but in P we trace a knowledge of details, even a studied approximation to Babylonian types, which fills us with surprise. Thus it is P who has preserved in Genesis i. two Babylonian words, the words for "void" and "the deep"; as in the Seven Tables of Creation so in Genesis i. the universe reaches its finished state in progressive stages; beginning with the emergence of light, as in Babylonia with the appearance of Marduk the god of light, and ending with the creation of man in the image of God, as in Babylonia with the creation of man out of the blood of Marduk mixed with earth. Again, in the list of patriarchs before the flood J originally gave seven names, in J² the number is increased to ten, recalling the number of the ten antediluvian kings of Babylon in Berosus' list; but in P this list is worked over, altered in details, and arranged in a more formal genealogy; the patriarchs are credited with fabulously long lives; all in agreement with Babylonian tradition. The duplicate narrative of the flood, again, shows in J² an adherence to the general outline of the Babylonian version, but P knows its very details, the measurements of the ship, the stories, the cells, the order to pitch the ship within and without with pitch. Here, then, we have an instance of a Biblical exegete revising the work of his predecessors in the light of more accurate knowledge gained from outside. During the exile in Babylonia the Priestly writer came into more direct contact with Babylonian traditions than was possible in the land of Judah; and while his own high con-

ceptions of God and the universe remained unaffected by the contact, he did not refuse to derive, even from Babylonian traditions, such information as suited his purpose.

It is instructive to notice how the editorial process, in dealing with old traditions, reflects the gradual development of national institutions, particularly of the hierarchy. A striking instance may be found in Numbers xvi., the story of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. The narrative of course is composite. First of all we pick out the story of Dathan and Abiram ; these make a protest against the civil authority of Moses, " Thou must needs make thyself a prince over us " : the authority of Moses receives an awful confirmation in the earthquake which swallows up the malcontents. We unravel next an account of the rebellion of Korah and his followers ; this is a revolt against the levitical rights of Moses, " Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and Yahweh is among them " : it is laymen here who are chafing under the domination of Levites ; in the end the tribe of Levi is upheld by the destruction of the rebels in fire from God. But the story of Korah when closely examined reveals yet another contest, or rather another interpretation put upon the last episode ; here Korah and other Levites claim the priesthood, the prerogatives of Aaron himself, " Seek ye the priesthood also ? and Aaron, what is he that ye murmur against him ? " ; the result is to establish the priesthood for ever in the possession of Aaron and his descendants. There is one stage further. Among the descendants of Aaron themselves rivalries and jealousies went on until the priesthood became permanently secured ; the true line, therefore, must be singled out and shown to have been settled from the beginning of the national history. We turn to Leviticus x. : there we are told how the two eldest sons of Aaron committed a

serious breach of ritual ; they were punished by the fire of Yahweh, which devoured them ; the elder sons of Levi were thus eliminated, and the priesthood secured to the younger branches of the family.¹ Truly a dreadful page in the record of hierarchical developments ! After the exile, when hopes revived, and there seemed to be a prospect of seeing once more a king on the throne of David and a priest in a restored temple, the prophet Zechariah was told to make crowns out of some offerings which had been presented, and set them on the head of Zerubbabel the prince of the old royal family, and on the head of Joshua the high priest ; the two were to reign over the new community as joint rulers in church and state : “ Zerubbabel shall sit and rule upon his throne, and Joshua shall be priest on his right hand, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.” So the text originally ran ; but it has been altered by a later scribe ; Zerubbabel has been cut out, and all the honours heaped upon Joshua. As time went on, history proved that the hope of a Davidic king was vain ; the high priest became the supreme authority ; and the text was altered to suit the facts. Or was the alteration prompted by sacerdotal jealousy of state interference ? The prophet must not be allowed to enthrone prince and priest side by side. Whatever the reason may have been, the change introduced into the text—it was clumsily done, for we can recover the original reading without much difficulty—reflected the changing fortunes or opinions of the people.

What are we to conclude from our observation of the methods of Old Testament exegetes and editors ? The answer is clear. The Old Testament was interpreted on the principle that it “ was at all times a word full of fresh

¹ See Stanley A. Cook, *Notes on O. T. History*, pp. 75 ff.

life and not a dead book." New truths and discoveries were continually being found in it. "Hence every period, every school, every individuality introduced into the Bible its own way of regarding the contents of the Bible." The Holy Book thus "became the full expression of the higher life of the people." I am quoting some words of Geiger published so long ago as 1857; ¹ the illustrations which he gives are inadequate, and will not all bear examination; but the progress of Biblical studies during the last fifty years has only confirmed with increasing emphasis the truth thus declared. As a living word from God, speaking to each generation an appropriate message, claiming from each a response of spiritual intelligence, that is how Jewish students regarded the traditional scriptures of their religion. Like a river fed by the streams which join it along its course, the record of God's revelation has come down to us enriched by those who were able to contribute to it something of their own insight and experience. In a fuller sense than we have been accustomed, perhaps, to think, the Bible is the record of a progressive, historical revelation; it must be studied in the historical spirit. We must learn to appreciate each stage in the long process and assign to each its just value; obviously, too, it is more than ever necessary to devote fresh study to the text that we may be able to detect the handiwork of editors and scribes; and we must be on the watch for new discoveries which may throw light on the historical situation or enable us to account for the particular interpretation put upon the text. The methods indeed of those early students were wholly different from ours and we cannot follow them; we must not read into the past the moral standards or the religious ideas of the

¹ *Urschrift*, p. 72 f., quoted by Cheyne, *Introd. to Bk. of Isaiah*, p. xix.

present ; nor must we expect to discover in the prophets, for instance, New Testament things under Old Testament names. Our methods will be those of our own day, the methods of historical and literary criticism ; but a principle of sound interpretation we may well learn from those devout scholars, our predecessors of long ago, who interpreted their Bible as a living word of God speaking to them in a language which was in touch with realities, and with an authority which was that of the Truth itself.

And there is one other principle of interpretation which I think we may discern in the work of the Biblical editors and scribes ; it is closely connected with the principle of which I have been speaking. These ancient exegetes were students of prophecy, that characteristic product of Israel's religious genius. Their study had trained them to familiarity with the prophetic manner of viewing the history of the past and the movements of the present. For the most part these students of the Bible lived in an age when the voice of prophecy was silent, when faithful hearts were haunted by disappointment ; " We see not our signs," they cried, " there is no more any prophet ; there is not one among us who knoweth how long " (Ps. lxxiv. 9). All the more eagerly, then, the ancient prophetic writings were searched for guidance, for consolation ; they were re-interpreted and enlarged in scope. Men turned from the unhappy present, say, at the end of the Persian period, to fortify themselves by recalling the days of the famous past. In some such way the great persons and the great events of former days acquired ideal proportions ; they became symbols, prophecies capable of far-reaching application. Thus the whole system of Israel's ceremonial and moral statutes came to be known as " the law of Moses," the ideal lawgiver (cf. Mal. iv. 4) ; David, " the darling of Israel's songs " and

her gallant warrior-king, became the typical Psalmist; Solomon, the typical wise man. The Exodus, the overthrow of Midian, the destruction of Sennacherib, were interpreted as types of deliverance and overthrow. At this period the text of Isaiah received additions of a Messianic and apocalyptic character;¹ in the case of the other prophets, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, passages seem to have been interpolated to relieve the prevailing sternness of the message and introduce a ray of hope.² It is held by many critics that the three famous Messianic prophecies, Isaiah ix. 2-7, xi. 1-9, Micah v. 2-5, belong to the age after the exile; chiefly for the reason that they speak of the royal family as reduced almost to extinction, as a "stump" left in the ground, and that they appear to have made no impression upon the times of Isaiah and of his immediate successors. Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, who are familiar with the writings of Isaiah, know nothing of this coming Saviour, nor does Ezekiel refer to him; Haggai and Zechariah fix their hopes on Zerubbabel, but betray no acquaintance with earlier promises of an approaching king who is to work a deliverance and set up a kingdom of righteousness; in all these prophets Yahweh Himself is the Saviour, not the Messianic king. It must be admitted that there is considerable force in these arguments; and the whole subject of the rise of those hopes and ideals which we are accustomed to call Messianic needs fresh investigation. But I see no reason why this ideal should not have taken shape so far back as the time of Isaiah; the argument from silence is proverbially unsafe; and there is really nothing in the language or terms of the prophecies which compels us to say that they could

¹ E.g. Isa. xxiv.-xxvii., xxxiv., xxxv.

² E.g. Am. ix. 11-15. Hos. i. 10f. Mic. ii. 12f., iv. 1-5 (cf. iii. 12). Zeph. iii. 19 f. Jer. xxx. 10, 11, etc.

not have been written by Isaiah.¹ But even if we adopt the usual view, and date the rise of this Messianic ideal so far back as the eighth century, there can be no doubt that it took increasing hold of the imagination and hope of the people during the later periods of Jewish history. This is apparent from the undoubted insertions of Messianic passages, and from the enlargements of ancient texts, made by those faithful students who turned to former prophecy in order to strengthen their faith in the destiny of their race.² Few things in the history of Israel's religion rouse our admiration more than the way in which these men clung to their hope in spite of continual disappointment and hardship of every kind. Let me give an instance. Jeremiah had prophesied that the exile should last seventy years (xxix. 10, xxv. 11); then Babylon would be punished, Israel restored to its own land (xxiv. 5, 6), and the good time would arrive under the new David, the righteous Branch (xxiii. 5, 6). The captivity in a sense did come to an end, but the good time did not arrive. Still the seventy years remained a fixed term in prophetic hopes and longings (Zech. i. 12); Haggai and Zechariah hailed Zerubbabel as the expected Branch of David, and they declared that when once the temple was rebuilt the glories of the Messianic kingdom would appear. The temple was rebuilt, but Zerubbabel vanished into obscurity, and no glorious kingdom followed. Generation after generation struggled on, and suffered, and never let go its hope. The seventy years continued to be a

¹ In the case of Mic. v. 2-5 this does not hold good to the same degree: the name Ephrathah is only found elsewhere in late passages.

² E.g. Mic. vi. and vii.; Jer. xxv. 12-14, xxix. 14-15, xlvi. 25 f., xlix. 23-27, 28-39, etc. In not a few instances the Massoretic scribes have made a pathetic attempt, by altering the vocalization, to interpret as future verbs which were meant originally to be past; see Driver, *Tenses*, p. 216, n. 4; Gray in *New World*, Mar. 1899, pp. 124-143.

rallying-point for drooping hearts. At last, about 168 B.C., the author of Daniel came forward with a happy suggestion : Jeremiah must be re-interpreted ; the fulfilment of the prophecy has only been adjourned ; the seventy years need only be multiplied by seven, i.e. turned into weeks of years ; 69½ are gone, only half a week remains ; in 3½ years Antiochus Epiphanes will meet with his fate, and the kingdom of the saints will fulfil the sure word of prophecy.¹ But the fulfilment was not yet to be. We go outside the canonical writing, and, following the skilful guidance of Dr. Charles, we find in Enoch lxxxix. 59 ff., almost contemporary with Daniel, another device for re-interpreting Jeremiah. The mystical number 70 is now taken to mean the 70 shepherds, i.e. the angelic rulers of the heathen countries. Their government is to come to an end in the present generation ; the Messianic kingdom is therefore close at hand. But again this hope was not realized. Coming down to circ. A.D. 90, after the destruction of Jerusalem, we meet with yet a further attempt to re-interpret Daniel and keep alive the ancient promise. Dr. Charles has called our attention to a passage in 4 Ezra (xii. 11, 12) in which Daniel's prophecy about the Greek kingdom is re-applied to the more formidable tyranny which had succeeded it in the East. The Fourth and last Empire, which the angel in Daniel vii. 19-25 explains to be Greek, is now declared to be Roman ; and God is made to say to Ezra, with naïve frankness, that there had been a mistake : " The eagle which thou sawest rising out of the sea, this is the fourth kingdom which appeared in vision to Daniel thy brother ; but it was not interpreted to him as I now interpret it to thee." ²

¹ Dan. vii. 25, 26, ix. 2, 25-27, xii. 7.

² Charles, *Eschatology*, pp. 171 ff. ; Beer in Kautzsch's *Apokr. und Pseudepigr. des A. T.*, p. 294 n.

Thus we trace the unquenched vitality of a principle of interpretation which found in the history and promises contained in the Holy Book an ideal, prophetic, mystical element capable of continuous application ; and again I think we may recognize the principle as a sound one. These early students interpreted their Bible in a sense which pointed to some larger issue and encouraged the hope of a higher fulfilment. To call them mystics would be, perhaps, to suggest too much ; but they were men who had strong affinities with what we understand by the mystical temper. Some of their number were no doubt the writers of the Jewish Apocalypses, who, for all their fantastic dreams, were nevertheless men of intensely spiritual vision. They have something to teach us. If we would interpret the Old Testament to the full we must do justice to the ideal element which it contains, to its capacity for re-interpretation in the light of larger experience and new needs. We may call this element prophetic or Messianic ; we may call it the sign of an increasing purpose in the development of religion. In any case it is this which distinguishes the history and institutions of Israel from those of other nations. They point forward ; they are leading up to a fulfilment. The Biblical interpreters understood this thoroughly. And I think that we need to be reminded that the historical spirit is not the only spirit which we must bring to bear upon our task ; at times we are apt to forget that the Bible is something more than a text which offers scope for our ingenuity, or an archaeological tumulus which "awaits the spade of the explorer." The Old Testament is first and foremost a work of religion, and it must be interpreted in the religious spirit. The worthiest interpreter will be in full sympathy with that temper of his distant predecessors which I have described as mystical.

It is significant, and I think not fanciful, that the Word of God is the name given, in the prophetic period, to the message which the prophets received directly from God and uttered as from Him : this was the period of creation. Then followed an age when the Word of God was identified with a written book, Deuteronomy and the codified Law : this may be called the period of reflection. At last the time arrived when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us : this is the time of illumination—the time in which we are called to study and to understand. We must be loyal to the whole truth ; following each stage in the process of its unfolding with a trained historical sense, and interpreting it all in the light, the True Light, which has shined for us.

G. A. COOKE.

PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY AND THE LOWER CLASSES.

II.

THE student of Primitive Christianity—the classical and creative period, distinguished from all others by the two names of Jesus and Paul—now finds himself in a new position. The lower classes of the period having been rediscovered, he is enabled to test critically the correctness of the first instinctive impression which comes to us of a close connexion existing between Primitive Christianity and the lower classes. And here a remark has to be made. On the one hand we see clearly, in the light of the recent discoveries, that Kautsky and Kalthoff were glaringly mistaken in their hypothesis when they derived Primitive Christianity directly from