

The Teaching of our Lord as to the Authority of the Old Testament.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE reasons which have led me to choose this subject for our consideration will, I think, at once readily suggest themselves to all to whom these words are addressed. Independently of the sort of general feeling that the time has come when the discussion of such a subject cannot profitably be delayed, there are probably few of us who would not agree in the more particular conviction that recent circumstances have now made this discussion positively imperative, and of the most vital and urgent necessity. The Scriptures of the Old Testament have been often assailed: their historical trustworthiness has been denied; their statements in regard of the early history of the world have been impugned; the morality they teach has, in many cases, been denounced not only as imperfect, but even as in direct opposition to the teaching of the gospel; their claim to be divinely inspired, in any sense that would imply a qualitative difference between them and the higher productions of human thought, has been eagerly disavowed and rejected. With all this we have been long since familiar; but that with which we have not been familiar, that which calls out our present anxiety, and makes discussion imperative, is the strange fact, that views which appear to many inconsistent with what may be termed the historical trustworthiness of large portions of the Old Testament, are now advocated and commended to us by earnest Christian writers, of whom it is impossible to speak otherwise than with respect, and who, in argument, must be treated by us with all brotherly kindness and consideration.

This strange fact, it is right to say, can to some extent be accounted for. The criticism to which we allude¹ would appear to be the outcome of an effort made by earnest Churchmen at one of our ancient Universities to remove the difficulties felt, it is said, by many young men of serious habits of thought and of cultivated minds, in reference to the Old Testament, its composition, its facts, its

¹ See *Luz Mundi* (John Murray).

miraculous element, and its claims to be received as a divinely-inspired revelation of the origin and early history of our race; and, more particularly, as a truthful revelation of the dealings of Almighty God, in past ages, with one chosen nation, and through them, directly or indirectly, with all the children of men. The unhesitating belief which the Church appears to require, not only in the general teaching and pervading truths of the sacred volume, but in its theophanies, its miracles, and its prophecies, has been found, it is said, to be a stumbling-block of so grave a nature to young men of really religious minds that some re-statement of the generally received view of the Old Testament has become absolutely necessary. It is maintained that the general interest in religion is far greater and more real than it was only a few years ago, and that unless we are prepared to see that general interest either die out or become merged in some form of philanthropic agnosticism, we must reconsider the whole question of the inspiration of Holy Scripture and especially of the Old Testament.

Whether this is a correct statement of the prevalent feelings of the more earnest and cultivated of the young men of the present day, or whether it is an unconscious exaggeration of what may be felt by a limited number of speculative minds with which the advocates of the new biblical criticism may have come more closely into contact, I am wholly unable to say. I come myself very closely into contact with young men of earnestness and intelligence; and, as yet, I have certainly met with no examples of the class in whose interest we are urged to reconsider our current views of the character and composition of the Old Testament. Four times, each year as it passes, I have the opportunity of contact with young minds; and up to the present time, I do not remember to have met with a single instance in which any serious difficulty appears to have been felt in reference to the Old Testament; nor have I been led to infer from what has been told me that doubts and difficulties as to that portion of the Book of

Life prevail among the general class of the students at our Universities, to anything like the extent which, it is alleged, is now to be recognised.

I am, of course, well aware that those with whom I come in contact belong to a class that we may reasonably hope is but slightly, if at all, affected by difficulties as to the trustworthy nature of the Book that is afterwards solemnly placed in their hands. I am aware also that the information that I may receive from such a class as to the current opinions of young men at our Universities may be partial and inadequate; still I cannot resist the impression that the class, in the interest of which these novel views of the Old Testament have been set forth, is much smaller—at any rate, at the Universities—than is commonly supposed. Under these circumstances, I must be excused if I retain the fixed opinion that there are far better ways of dealing with the difficulties of these young men than by the unreserved publication of disquieting and precarious concessions.

It may be doubted, however, whether the desire to help the distressed faith of others has been the only motive principle in the publication of the essays which have given rise to the present disquietude. The writers tell us honestly that they were compelled for their own sake no less than that of others to write what they have written. They avow themselves to be under the conviction that the attempt must be made to put the Catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems; and they distinctly tell us that if the true meaning of this faith is to be made conspicuous it must be disencumbered, reinterpreted, and explained. The avowal is singular and significant;—singular, as it would have seemed more natural to attempt to put these intellectual and moral problems into their proper relations to the Catholic faith than conversely; and significant, as showing the direction and bias of the minds of the writers. Their conviction would clearly seem to be that the faith, or, to put the most charitable construction on their words (for their language is not clear), the current faith of the Church, is that which must be operated on, and especially in reference to the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Be the motive principles, however, of this attempt to disencumber and reinterpret the faith what they may, this is certain,—that with regard to the authority of Holy Scripture, and particularly of the Old Testament, the

attempt has created in sober minds a widespread alarm and disquietude. And certainly not without reason.

Independently of the precise nature and details of the attempt, of which I shall speak afterwards, the quarter from which what has been called the higher criticism of the Old Testament originally emanated, and the plainly avowed principles of its earlier exponents, all combine in calling out anxiety, even in the minds of those who might not be wholly averse to a theology willing to put forth from its treasures things new and progressive as well as authenticated and old. The pedigree is certainly not satisfactory. This so-called “higher criticism” of the Old Testament took definite shape some two generations ago. It commenced with Genesis and the earlier historical portions of the Pentateuch. In these it claimed to demonstrate the existence of earlier documents in portions which had been supposed to be the work of a single writer; and it called especial attention to many indications, of which but little notice had been taken, that the alleged work of the single writer had received additions at periods considerably later than the supposed date of the original work. If it had stopped here there would have been no serious cause for apprehension. But it went much further. It proceeded to adopt criticisms which steadily tended more and more to disintegrate the inspired record, until, about half a generation ago, three writers of considerable learning and acuteness¹ brought to something like completeness this work of critical demolition. Ingenious theories were framed to support it, resting slightly upon language, but far more on internal arguments, until at length a view of the composition and probable dates of the books of the Old Testament has been commended to the general reader which, to use the most guarded language, is irreconcilable with a sincere belief in the inspiration, and even the trustworthiness, of several of the writings of the Old Covenant.

There is, however, one characteristic of this modern view of the Old Testament, as set forth by the three writers to whom I have referred, which must always steadily be borne in mind. And it is this,—not merely that this modern view tends to, or prepares the way for, a denial of the supernatural, but that it owed its very origin to the assumption that the existence of the supernatural

¹ Graf, Kuenen, and Wellhausen.

in these early records is exactly that which wrecks their credibility. This perhaps is not absolutely stated in so many words, but it is impossible to deny that the preconception and assumption which runs through the whole of the particular critical investigations to which I am referring, is a disbelief in the possibility of the miraculous. Attempts have been made from time to time by eminent writers in our own country to show that the basis of the well-known histories of Israel and of the religion of Israel is not really so naturalistic as it is assumed to be. But to this there is but one reply,—that almost every chapter of both these histories, and especially of the one last mentioned, will show either directly or by fair inference the futility of all such attempts. The basis of the histories and criticisms of the most eminent foreign exponents of the so-called higher criticism is patently and even avowedly naturalistic. "We have outgrown the belief of our ancestors" is the candid language of one of these writers, and certainly one who is not the least eminent among them. We thus do not deem it unfair to say that the whole system of Old Testament criticism, as set forth by some at least of these foreign expositors, is based upon rejection of special revelation, miracles, and prophecy,—in a word, the supernatural in all its relations to the history of the Chosen People.

Now, in calling attention to this startling characteristic of the majority of the best foreign treatises on this higher criticism, I do not for one moment desire to imply that writers of our own country who may have, somewhat too freely, availed themselves of the results at which these writers have arrived, are committed to their views of the supernatural and the miraculous. Each writer must be judged by his own statements, and by the reservations he may make in accepting the conclusions of others. I suggest, then, no inferences as to the opinions of those writers to whom, in the sequel, I shall more particularly refer, but I desire notwithstanding, to make plain, at the very outset, that disbelief in the supernatural has had a great deal to do with the development of modern views of the Old Testament. There is, at any rate, some such link between them as may at least suggest the greatest possible caution in assimilating results which have been arrived at under preconceptions such as I have described. This link there is; and it is my firm conviction that the obvious readiness with which these novel views of the composition of

the Old Testament have been accepted by imperfectly educated or unbalanced minds is due to a practical, though it may be unrealised, disbelief in many of the miracles recorded in the sacred volume, and perhaps even in the miraculous element generally.

There is also another principle which, though by no means of so dangerous a character as the rejection of the supernatural, has nevertheless produced almost equal effects in the shaping of theories as to the component parts of several of the books of the Old Testament, and in affixing to the books the dates that are currently assigned to them. And the principle is this,—to assume the existence of a continuous conflict between the schools of the Prophets and the Priesthood, and also of persistent efforts made, especially in the later periods of the history of the nation, on the part of the Priests and Levites to secure the supremacy. That there may have been, from time to time, strongly developed antagonisms, and that commanding figures like Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha may have provoked jealousies, and called forth opposition in what may be termed the ecclesiastical party, is perfectly thinkable, though it must be admitted that traces of such jealousies and oppositions between priests and prophets in their class-relations to each other are but few and shadowy. To assume, however, that most of the historical books were remodelled, over-written, or otherwise tampered with by the priestly party in consequence of these rivalries, is to assume far more than there is any sufficient evidence to demonstrate. Theories of a somewhat similar nature played their part in a past generation with reference to the New Testament. There are some of us old enough to remember how books of the New Testament, about the design of which no reasonable doubt could be entertained, were regarded simply as the outcome of the controversies that arose between Judaising and Gentile Christianity,—emergences from opposing schools of thought, and written manifestations of the vigour of apostolic dissensions. These theories, we may remember, had their day, enjoyed for a time a partial popularity, and caused in many minds anxiety and disquietude. But now where are they? Cast away long since on the waste-heap of baseless speculations, exploded and forgotten. And that such will be the fate of a large portion of those that we are now considering in reference to

the Old Testament, is certainly not a very hazardous prophecy.

But these two presuppositions are not the only manifestations of a bias which seriously affects the equities of argument. We may rightly note, in one of the three chief modern exponents of this higher criticism, language of a tenor that seems very far removed from the tone which ought to mark all discussions of what is by a general consent regarded to be a record of God's dealings with man. Reverence it might be too much always to expect; but seriousness of tone, and at least some regard for the feelings of general readers, might be expected from a writer of such recognised scholarship, learning, and cultivation as the author of the *Prolegomena of the History of Israel*. When, for example, such a narrative as that which we find in one of the early chapters of the First Book of Samuel—a narrative in which divine mercy is represented as a consequent on national repentance—is described as “a pious make up,” and set aside as not having “a word of truth in it,” and when similar language is constantly reappearing, and fraud frequently imputed when the narrative does not harmonise with the general theory, we cannot but feel that we are dealing with a writer whose bias is antecedently so strong against the documents that he is analysing, that the impartial character of his criticisms and his conclusions may most fairly be called into question. The eager and scornful advocate takes far too much the place of the judicial critic in a work that claims to be an impartial setting forth of national history.

Prejudices and presuppositions then are distinctly to be recognised in this so-called higher criticism of the Old Testament, and must have their due weight assigned to them in any estimates we may form of this criticism. It is too commonly assumed that all the prejudices and presuppositions are only to be found among those who disallow its conclusions. Prejudices and presuppositions on such momentous subjects as those we are now considering will be found distinctly on both sides. They will continually show themselves on the most impartial pages, and will often vitiate what might otherwise be equitable and even persuasive conclusions. Against all such presuppositions it will be my duty in these addresses constantly to be on my guard, and more particularly so as we pass onward into the more serious phases of the great

questions that will come before us in the present discussion.

And yet I must here frankly admit that with every effort and desire to write with the most scrupulous impartiality, it will be very hard to avoid, from time to time, myself manifesting the very bias which I am here deprecating. The very nature of the argument that forms the substance of these addresses almost necessarily carries with it a tendency to prejudgment which it will be almost impossible to resist. How far Christ authenticates the Scriptures that speak of Him—which is the main question proposed to be answered in these addresses—is a question which can never be answered without the constantly recurring danger of overclaim, and so ought never to be applied to particular cases that have not been considered beforehand with the most scrupulous care. The whole validity of the final conclusions will turn upon the choice of the passages which are supposed to contribute answers to the general question, and upon the equity and impartiality with which they are discussed. In pointing out, then, prejudgments in the case of those we criticise, we are bound not only to exercise the utmost vigilance in avoiding them ourselves, but also distinctly to recognise the liabilities to bias which the very tenor of the particular form of argument will be certain to introduce. It may, however, be just said in passing that it is fairly open to question whether the liabilities to bias are not quite as dominant in the working out of theories of disintegration as in the use of authority in countervailing them. There is a fascination in a destructive argument, especially when it necessitates ingenious elaboration, possibly quite as potent as any that may be found in the simpler and less personal process of traversing it by an appeal to One whose judgment, when expressed, must be accepted as ultimate and irreversible. There is quite as much tendency to bias in one case as in the other.

But to proceed. Thus far we have confined our thoughts to the chief sources from which the new criticism has emanated, and to the general characteristics which this criticism very distinctly reflects. We have thus far alluded mainly to the three foreign writers whose names are most closely connected with the reconstruction of the literary history of the Old Testament; and we have named the apparent presuppositions on which, consciously or unconsciously, they have executed their work.

We now turn to those with whom we are more particularly concerned,—the eminent writers in our own country who have adopted, with more or less reservation, the results which these foreign writers have arrived at, and who are now commending to the serious attention of English Churchmen some modified, but still very disquieting conclusions. On these conclusions, and on the general course of the argument which must be followed in regard to them, we will now make a few preliminary comments.

It is, however, somewhat difficult from the present state of the case to do this with perfect clearness and impartiality. Our English representatives of the new school of criticism are not, as yet, completely agreed among themselves as to how far they are prepared to accept the results on which foreign critics appear to be unanimous; nor again is it perfectly clear what particular conclusions, which the majority have accepted, have caused the widely-spread disquietude which, there can be no doubt, does exist among English Churchmen at the present time. We seem, therefore, obliged, in order to arrive at an equitable judgment on these points, and properly to understand the precise state of the complicated controversy, to feel our way towards some sort of standard, by means of which we may more correctly estimate the true nature of current opinion on the Old Testament. It will be desirable, therefore, to arrive at some agreement as to what may be considered the generally received view of the age and authorship of those books of the Old Testament that have been more particularly the subjects of controversy. We shall then have some kind of standard to which reference can be properly made; for the mere general term "the Traditional view," as frequently used by writers on these subjects, is far too vague and too diversely understood, if left undefined, to be made any use of as an available standard of comparison.

We must begin then by defining as clearly as we can what is meant by this general term, and in what sense it is generally used by writers on the Old Testament. The following would seem to be a rough, but substantially correct statement. By the Traditional view we commonly understand the view that has been generally maintained in the Jewish Church, and also in the Christian Church; and which may be expressed in the following terms, viz. that the books of the

sacred volume, in its historical portions, have been written or compiled, from contemporaneous documents, by a succession of inspired writers beginning with Moses and ending with Ezra and Nehemiah.

But here it is obvious that something more precise is needed: if we are to have anything like a standard with which other views can be compared; it being frankly admitted that in the general estimate of the nature of the contemporaneous documents and the manner in which they have been dealt with by the succession of inspired compilers, modern investigation and, it is fair to add, modern criticism have introduced some changes and rectifications. As this rectified view is the standard towards which we are feeling our way, our first care will be to set forth the traditional view with those rectifications introduced which our present state of knowledge has enabled us to make. We shall then have a fairly defined standard; and in using, as we shall have frequently to do, the term Traditional view, we must be understood as always meaning the Traditional view in its rectified form.

In the second place, it will be necessary to set forth clearly, in a similar manner, the results of modern criticism, and to sketch out the general estimate that has now been formed of the leading historical books of the Old Testament by foreign critics, and especially by those foreign writers to whom we have already alluded.

In the third place, it will only be just carefully to specify the extent to which the views of these foreign writers are actually accepted by the English Churchmen with whom we are here more particularly concerned. We shall thus have clearly before us what, according to these writers, we are to be considered at liberty to believe as to the origination of the books of the Old Testament.

It will then, lastly, become our duty to consider, closely and carefully, whether this enlarged liberty of belief can be reconciled with the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, as set forth in the Gospels, so far as it bears upon the trustworthiness and authority of the older portions of the Book of Life.

We have thus before us a twofold work. In the first place, we shall have to institute a careful comparison of the rectified traditional view of the Old Testament with the view of modern criticism, which it will be convenient to term the Analytical

view,—the term “analytical” being apparently the truest descriptive epithet of this newer or so-called higher criticism of the Old Testament, and having the advantage of not suggesting any pre-judgment as to the worth and validity of the system. In equitable controversy nothing is of greater importance than the choice of terms, in the description of the views of opponents, which correctly characterise, but, in regard of any expression, favourable or the reverse, are, as far as possible, colourless. The terms “traditional” and “analytical” seem fairly to fulfil these conditions, and it is under these terms that we shall institute the comparison.

It must be observed, however, that the comparison of these two views can only, in addresses like the present, be of a broad and general character. To enter into minute details or to analyse the separate reasonings, often highly technical and complicated, on which some of the results of the analytical view of the Old Testament are perhaps over confidently based, lies beyond the scope of our present endeavour. It is a work, however, that I trust will be undertaken by some competent scholar; for in the study of these subjects nothing has more impressed itself upon me than the unwarrantable nature of many of the assumptions on the analytical side in the discussion of these argumentative details, and the obvious bias with which the discussion has been conducted. This bias, I need scarcely say, is the bias against the supernatural, which frequently seems to permeate and modify the whole tenor of the criticism. It is of the utmost importance that this last-mentioned characteristic should always be clearly borne in view. The obliteration or, at the very least, the minimising of the supernatural is too plainly the principle, avowed or unavowed, that influences or conditions the whole of the more advanced analytical investigation of the Old Testament.

When this comparison between the opposing views has been fairly made, the second part of our work will then commence. With the two competing views clearly before us, we shall proceed to make our appeal to Christ and to His teaching, as to which of the two views is most in harmony with the Lord’s general teaching as to the relation of the Old and New Testaments.

But, alas, it will be necessary for us, first, to justify such an appeal; and next, to show that the appeal

is made to an infallible Judge, and to One whose judgment, when it can be shown clearly to be intimated or given, must be accepted as final, whatever analytical criticism may presume to say to the contrary. This judgment we shall endeavour to obtain in reference to the Law and the Prophets, or, to speak more precisely, in reference to the earlier portions of Scripture which include the Mosaic law, and the subsequent portions, whether historical or prophetic.

We shall then, lastly, review the whole argument, and endeavour to show that those with whom we are more particularly concerned, English scholars and Churchmen, have gone much too fast and much too far in their concessions to the so-called established results of the modern criticism of the Old Testament. This criticism, as we have seen, is of foreign growth. It is distinguished by great acumen, and almost boundless self-confidence. When it tells us, for example,¹ that “the exegesis of the writers of the New Testament, in reference to the Old Testament, cannot stand before the tribunal of science,” we see the lengths to which men, in many respects earnest and truth-seeking, are hurried by their convictions of the correctness of their own hypotheses; how all sense of proportion seems to be lost; and how vitally necessary it is to test these over-confident assertions, and to ascertain for ourselves how far these views of God’s Holy Word can be deemed to be compatible, either with the results of fair reasoning, or with the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

How writers of the high tone and Christian earnestness which obviously characterise some of the English exponents of the analytical view of the Old Testament can have been led to advocate some of the conclusions which will be set forth in the investigations that will follow, is by no means easy to understand. If it be to help the weakened faith of younger men in some of the forms of the supernatural that present themselves in the Old Testament,—if it be intended to alleviate the difficulties they may feel in accepting such miraculous incidents as those related in the earlier portion of the Book of Genesis, or in the history of Jonah,—then, however well-intentioned such aid may be, no worse form of giving it could really have been devised. And for this serious reason,—that, say what we may, reason as we may choose, we shall never obliterate the conviction that there

¹ Kuenen’s *The Prophets and Prophecy in Israel*.

is such a close and organic connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament, that whatever applies to the one, in regard of acceptance of the miraculous, is also applicable to the other. If the supernatural is to be minimised in the Old Testament, will it be long before the same demand will be made in reference to the New? To safeguard the miraculous in the New Dispensation, when criticism has either explained it away or attenuated it in the Old Dispensation, will in practice be found to be utterly hopeless. It will be in vain to plead that the Incarnation involves a completely different state of things,—that the visible presence of the Creator of the world in the world He came to save, involves necessarily ever alterable relations with that world, and makes possible and thinkable in the case of the Lord what in Elijah and Elisha would be incredible and unimaginable. Vain it will be, and utterly in vain; nay, worse than in vain. For the same spirit that has found irreconcilable difficulties in the supernatural elements of the Old Testament will ultimately challenge the evidence on which the Incarnation rests. And the more so, as all the age-long testimonies of the Old Testament, all the foreshadowings, all the promises that were greeted from afar, all the sure words of prophecy, will have been explained away and dissipated; and there will remain nothing save two narratives which, it will be said, bear so patently the traces of illusion, or, at the least, of an idealism expressing itself under the guise of alleged facts, that the doctrine of the Word become flesh, the doctrine which is the hope, light, and life of the universe, will in the end be surrendered to the last demands of what will have now become not a distressed, but a ruined faith. When that blessed doctrine is surrendered, the total eclipse of faith will have commenced, and the shadows of the great darkness will be fast sweeping over the forlorn and desolate soul.

It is simply amazing that these things are not realised by those who are now advocating, it may be in a modified form, views of the Old Testament which, at any rate, owe their origination to writers who frankly avow that the religion of Israel is regarded by them as simply one of the principal religions of the world,—nothing less and nothing more,—and is to be dealt with according to the principles of ordinary critical history. Inability to accept the supernatural is the distinctive feature

of the analytical system; all its results patently disclose it; all its investigations consciously or unconsciously presuppose it. How modifications of such a system, or deductions that may be drawn from it, however cautiously and guardedly, can ever be used to help failing faith, especially in such an age as our own, is to me inconceivable. When the freedom of the Creator of the universe to modify the varied evolutions of His own blessed work, to give fresh energies to secondary causes, and to interpose, in accordance with that law eternal, by which he sustains and develops the energies of all things,—when all this is now, as it is, directly or inferentially denied, when the last foolish utterance on the subject is that belief in the supernatural ought to be regarded as a religious offence, is this a time for English Churchmen to make concessions in regard of belief in the miraculous incidents of the Old Testament? Is this a time to suggest that the narratives before Abraham may be of the nature of myth, and to regard as the dramatised work of an unknown writer a portion of the Old Testament which the Saviour of the world vouchsafed to use in His conflict with the enemy of mankind? Is this a time for such perilous concessions?

After what has been said, can it be longer doubtful that it is now our plainest duty to give up all such hopeless attempts of aiding shaken faith? Is it not the height of imprudence to make concessions which inevitably will only prove to be instalments of the ultimate surrender of the supernatural? Ought we not rather to try “to lift up the hands that hang down and the palsied knees” by the quickening power of truth, patiently and sympathetically set forth, by the inherent persuasiveness of time-honoured beliefs, and by bringing more clearly home to young hearts the credibility of that traditional view of the Old Testament, which, when properly set forth, will be found to have lost nothing of its old and persuasive vitality.

To this duty we now address ourselves, and, as has already been intimated, will proceed to place in contrast the rectified traditional view of the Old Testament, and the analytical view,—alike in its more extreme form, and in the modified form in which, unhappily, it has met with the approval and acceptance of learned and honoured writers from whom it is a pain to be forced thus seriously to differ.