

THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE

I. FUNCTION OF CONSCIENCE IN BIBLE STUDY

GOD has given to men a conscience as well as a Bible. They are made to correspond with each other, as the eye is made to correspond with the light and the light to correspond with the eye. The chief function of the Bible is to develop the conscience. One great function of the conscience is to interpret the Bible. If you read your Bible, ignoring this function of conscience, you will misinterpret it.

Conscience is constituted to appreciate the distinction between right and wrong, between ought and ought not. If we make two lists—if truth, fairness, generosity, self-sacrifice be put in one list, and falsehood, unfairness, meanness, selfishness in the other, we are compelled by conscience to label the one set 'ought' and the other 'ought not.' We cannot help it. No one in his senses could reverse these labels. We know that if practising the first set bring pain, and the second set pleasure, yet we cannot reverse our decision. Nay, more, we feel certain that the distinction belongs not to this earth alone—that the ought and ought not stretch to the furthest planets, to the angels of God, to God Himself. Wrong would be no less wrong if it were attributed to God. No revelation, no external portent, could persuade us of the opposite. If even a voice from heaven should declare to us that lying and dishonesty were right, we should, as St. Anselm says ('Cur Deus Homo,' I. 12), be forced to believe not that they were right, but rather that the voice which spoke was not God. We must carry this belief into our Bible reading; that is true faith. Faith in God means faith in a Person, faith in a character; faith in an infinite justice and love and nobleness and generosity—faith in a God to whom it would be absolutely impossible to do what was unfair or ungenerous to any man.

Therefore, if we are offered a certain interpretation in Scripture that clashes with men's highest sense of what is generous and fair, we must not ignore that clashing. We must refuse to accept that interpretation for the present till we have enquired more about it. For example, if we are told that in the 'hardening of Pharaoh's heart' God punished Pharaoh for something that Pharaoh could not have helped, we must decline that interpretation. If we read in Ro 9 St Paul's famous passage about election, and if any man

should explain it to mean that God destines some men to eternal heaven and some to eternal hell, not for anything of good or evil in them, but for His own glory to magnify Himself, we are bound to reject such a meaning without hesitation. This is not a question of doubting the Bible, but of doubting men's interpretation of it. True faith will not accept an interpretation that is dishonouring to God. It is as if a schoolboy got a letter from his father containing a passage capable of an evil meaning. A companion suggests such a meaning. The boy, though he does not understand the passage, instinctively rejects that interpretation as unworthy his father's character. If he can find no other meaning he prefers to leave the passage a mystery for the present.

It is very necessary to say this; yet it is necessary also to add a grave caution against the attitude that would make every man set up his own judgment as to what he would believe or disbelieve. It is not at all safe to judge from the recoil of this or that man's individual conscience, lest there may be in it anything abnormal. It is only when one can feel sure that a certain interpretation of Scripture, though otherwise possible, clashes with the best men's sense of what is right and true, that he is justified in rejecting it.

Such humble, prayerful, yet fearless use of conscience soon sets us asking questions which lead to important results. For we begin to find in the Old Testament utterances that fall below the level of the enlightened Christian conscience, and actions that one feels would not win the approval of Christ. We find permission of slavery, plurality of wives, divorce, etc. We find fierce, vengeful words in the imprecatory Psalms. Conscience insists on our questioning these things, and the more conscience is enlightened by the main teaching of the Bible the more will it insist on such questioning.

II. THE DIVINE AND HUMAN IN THE BIBLE

There are two answers. First, that in the Bible the divine and human are blended (see art. 'Inspiration'). We must not regard the Bible as an absolutely perfect book in which God is Himself the author using human hands and brains only as a man might use a typewriter. God used men, not machines—men with like weakness and prejudice and passion as ourselves, though purified and

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ennobled by the influence of His Holy Spirit; men each with his own peculiarities of manner and disposition—each with his own education or want of education—each with his own way of looking at things—each influenced differently from another by the different experiences and discipline of his life. Their inspiration did not involve a suspension of their natural faculties; it did not destroy their personality, nor abolish the differences of training and character; it did not even make them perfectly free from earthly passion; it did not make them into machines—it left them men.

Therefore we find their knowledge sometimes no higher than that of their contemporaries, and their indignation against oppression and wrong-doing sometimes breaking out into desire of revenge. This would not surprise us in the least in other good men who were, we knew, striving after God and righteousness. It surprises us in the Bible, because of our false preconceptions; because it is in the Bible we do not expect the actors to be real and natural; because of our false theory of Verbal Inspiration we are puzzled when the divine is mingled with the human. We must learn that the divine *is* mingled with the human.

We cannot draw a line between the divine and the human. We cannot say of any part, 'This is divine,' or 'That is human.' In some parts, as the Gospels, there is more of the divine; in others, as the Chronicles, more of the human. It is as a mine of precious ore where the gold is mingled with the rock and clay—the ore is richer in one part than another, but all parts in some degree are glittering with gold. It is as sunlight through a painted window—the light must come to us coloured by the medium—we cannot get it any other way. In some parts the medium is denser and more imperfect, in others the golden glory comes dazzlingly through. It is foolish to ignore the existence of the human medium through which the light has come; it is still more foolish to ignore the divine light, and think that the tinted dome is luminous itself, that the light of heaven has only come from earth. Both must be kept in mind—the divine and the human—if the Bible is to be rightly understood.

III. PROGRESSIVENESS OF REVELATION

And the other answer to the questionings of conscience is this—that we must think of human life as the great school of God, where gradually, patiently, through all the ages He has been training humanity for nobleness of life. The Old Testament is to be read not as a series of perfect precepts equally applicable to all men in all ages of the world, but rather

as the story of God's gradual education of humanity. It was like our gradual education of our children to-day. We begin with the lowest rudiments of knowledge. Very crude and imperfect conceptions must satisfy us at first. Though all the glory of the highest knowledge lie before the child by and by, yet he can only partially receive it now until his mind has grown. Perhaps a better illustration of the attitude of the Old Testament is seen in the attitude of the missionary to-day in dealing with the lower races of heathendom. He knows how little is to be expected from them at first. He has to tolerate and overlook much that grieves him. He must be content to move slowly. He rejoices at every effort after good, even though it be largely mixed with evil. He gives warm approval to acts which for these poor savages really mean progress upward, though to the Christian world at home they may seem worthier censure than praise. He believes that God is helping men by His Holy Spirit, even though error and wrong-doing yet remain. By and by, when some of his converts have grown into noble, faithful strugglers after Christ, will they not look back on the early training and the early notions as on a lower stage that they have long since passed, and yet confess that it was a necessary stage in their progress upward?

Such was God's progressive education of the race. Many things in the early stages were overlooked or 'winked at' (Ac 17³⁰). Slavery was not at once swept away, but its cruelties were forbidden and its abuses checked—divorce was not absolutely prohibited, but laid under stringent regulations. When we read of these evils so allowed to exist—when we find, as in the Psalms, the lofty teachings and burning aspirations after God now and then marred by the fierce prayer for vengeance on the wicked—we must remember that we are judging men in the lower classes of the great school of God, and that the presence of His Spirit with men did not necessarily involve absolute perfection in teaching and conduct. Notice in the Sermon on the Mount how clearly our Lord teaches this progressiveness of revelation: 'Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time . . . but I say unto you,' etc.: see Mt 5^{17, 21, 27, 33, 38, 43} RV.

IV. THE BIBLE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the beginning of this new century there are other questions arising about the Bible besides those already referred to. There are questions of scientific accuracy, and questions as to the 'Higher Criticism,' as it is called. People have learned that the first chapter of Genesis cannot be reconciled with science; that the stories of the Creation and the Flood