

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

CURRENT ISSUES.

It is fifty years since the EXPOSITOR began. Till 1887 it was edited by Dr. Samuel Cox, who was probably the greatest expositor of his day. He not only edited the journal, but contributed largely to it. His expositions of the book of Ruth and of the book of Job, for example, appeared first of all in these pages. Since 1887 it has been edited by Sir William Robertson Nicoll, who was in charge of it when he died last year. Sir William wrote very little for it; he was content to secure contributors, and many of the leading scholars of the country rallied to his support, as well as some distinguished Continental and American writers. It was intended from the very first that the magazine should present "the best thoughts of the best men on the best of books," and that it should possess a permanent value. One effect of this policy has been that a number of works have appeared originally, in whole or in large part, within the EXPOSITOR. It has given birth in this way to books like Dr. E. H. Plumptre's *The Seven Churches of Asia*, Dr. A. M. Fairbairn's *Studies in the Life of Christ*, Professor Bruce's *The Epistle to the Hebrews* and *St. Paul's Conception of Christianity*, Dr. Alexander Maclaren's exposition of Colossians, Bishop Westcott's *Christus Consummator*, Sir G. A. Smith's *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, and Dr. Garvie's *Studies in the Inner Life of Jesus*. Even apart from this the bound volumes include contributions from most of the leading British scholars during the past half-century. The result has been to justify the hope entertained by the publishers at its commencement that the magazine would "live as a book long after its work as a periodical has come to an end." In almost every volume there are articles which have never been reprinted, to which scholars and students have to turn back for information and direction.

* * * * *

It is needless to open up again the reasons which led to the
VOL. I. JANUARY, 1924. 1

change of editorship in 1887. Most people know that Dr. Cox's views on what was known as "the larger hope" had begun to excite some suspicion and alarm. Dr. Cox was too honest an expositor to intrude his views into his interpretations of scripture. He was as scrupulous as Calvin himself on this point. But it was felt that his frank advocacy of such an opinion handicapped the magazine, and he himself, as he says in his farewell word, was "not surprised that as many as regard it as a baseless dream, or a dangerous delusion, should recognise its influence on my writings, and be offended by it." Since then the whole question of eschatology has been opened up and discussed without prejudice, at least in print; what Dr. Cox then startled the Christian public by propounding, or at any rate advocating—for he was only one of several agitators—is now debated without offence. It is rather significant of the changes which have passed over thought in this country that this problem can be handled frankly to-day, and that the aspect which seems to be most attractive in certain quarters is the idea of conditional immortality, if we may judge from a book like Dr. R. G. Macintyre's *The Other Side of Death*. The standard work on the whole subject is Dr. J. H. Leckie's *The World to Come, and Final Destiny*, where the ideas which men like Dr. Cox threw into the public mind are analysed, among others. Not that Dr. Leckie accepts them. But the point is that they can be quietly argued. Fifty years ago this was hardly possible. Dean Church did go to Oxford and preach one of his great, sober sermons in 1878. He tried to set the controversy in its true proportions, and the sermon, on Sin and Judgment (it is in the volume called *Human Life and Its Conditions*), remains one of the notable products of the dispute. But Dean Church was ahead of his age, and anticipated by years the wise reticence of Dr. Leckie. Besides, fifty years ago, the exegesis of the New Testament was not sufficiently strong to allow an adequate handling of the problem. Much work had yet to be done before the relevant passages could be weighed and arranged in anything like a satisfactory manner.

* * * * *

This reminds us of the other reason why Dr. Cox ceased to edit the EXPOSITOR. He was suspected of favouring unduly the critical views of the Bible which were associated with the name

of Robertson Smith. Well, the controversy over inspiration came and went. The publication of the Revised Version aided the education of the Christian public. So did the issues raised by the publication of *Lux Mundi* in 1899, which enabled Dr. Gore, for example, to say openly in 1890 that "for all the reality of its inspiration the Old Testament is on a lower level than the New," and that, in the use made by Jesus of the Old Testament books, "nothing depends on questions of authorship or date." These two sayings mark how the issue was broadening, and a free ground being won in this country for reverent and scientific interpretation of the Bible.

* * * * *

Every age has its own issues. Ideas about future punishment and inspiration do not occupy the mind to-day as they did fifty years ago. They have still their interest. But the interest is excited in other ways, and it is less exciting. No doubt this may be due to lower as well as to higher causes. Apathy sometimes means that people are not taking the trouble to think at all, or that, if they are thinking, it is in a confused fashion, which is not disposed to think things out. On the other hand, when interest wanes in any particular doctrine, it is the effect often of an imperceptible alteration of focus. So far as the question of inspiration goes, the latter cause has been at work especially. The results, or at any rate the methods, of psychology, of historical criticism, of textual research, and of comparative religion, have insensibly affected the mind to-day, till most Christian readers of the Bible practically believe in its inspiration because, as Coleridge said, it "finds" them. It is only those committed to the heresy of verbal inspiration who come to the Bible with a cut-and-dry theory of its origin and claims. And, for the time being, the crucial question is the reality and meaning of what Jesus was and did and taught.

* * * * *

A recent illustration of this may be given from Dr. William Adams Brown's striking volume on *Imperialistic Religion and the Religion of Democracy* (Hodder and Stoughton). He tells how a theological lecturer once asked his class whether the unique value attached by Christians to their Bible was not the outcome of local associations. Suppose they had been born in Japan or India, say, would they not have learnt to feel the same

about the local sacred books ? A young Japanese student made this reply. He said, "The case described was my own. I was converted to Christianity by reading a copy of the Bible. I knew nothing of Christ but what I found in this book, but when I read the Gospels they spoke directly to my soul, and I said to myself, 'This is God's word to me.' I had no difficulty with the Christianity of the Bible. It was only after I met Christians that my troubles began." The last sentence is a reproach, the reproach of modern Christianity. There is something radically wrong when a man's difficulties begin not with the Bible but with the Church, when he finds that the Bible is living and that the Church is not living up to the Bible. But the other point is equally important. As Dr. Adams Brown argues, this is the real test of life. Does the religion of the Gospels find us ? If so, then they are inspired. And "we shall persuade men that Jesus is God's supreme Word to men, not by insisting that they shall accept our definitions about Him, however important and satisfying they may seem to us"—nor, we may add, by insisting that they first accept any theory of ours about the Gospels as literature—"but by introducing them to Him, and letting Him speak to them in their own language, as He has spoken to us in ours." It ought to be the central aim, in the pulpit and in the study alike, to render this access to Jesus easier. For not all can find Him so naïvely as this young Japanese ; and even those who have found Him require to have His message interpreted and applied.

* * * * *

In 1875 Dr. Cox wrote in the *EXPOSITOR* that he "could not mention more than one commentary on any of the gospels," that is, one reliable commentary, and that on one Gospel he did not know of a single adequate edition in English. This defect has been made up, though work still remains to be done in the way of editing some of the Gospels for certain classes. But one real service which Dr. Cox used to render was to print advice about books. And this I propose to continue. Thus, there will be a series of articles by expert scholars on "The Best Ten Books" in various departments. One of these will appear monthly, giving an account of the literature with a critical appreciation. This ought to serve as a guide for busy clergymen and students. And for such it is one function of the *EXPOSITOR*

to cater. Whatever be the changes that have passed over the subject of exposition, this magazine still remains true to the original aim; it will "seek," as the prospectus said, "to furnish all who teach and preach the Word, not with complete and finished sermons indeed, but with the stuff out of which sermons are made." Which includes material for the private study of those who have to make the sermons.

* * * * *

The EXPOSITOR also is intended for research. These two aims are cognate. To study without a certain sense of the bearings of biblical study upon the Church is to fail. One source of weakness in some quarters of the Church to-day is the separation of research from the work of the ministry, just as the effectiveness of the ministry depends upon the constant personal study of the Bible. It would be a pity if investigations into the meaning of the Bible ever became the isolated preserve of a few. They sometimes are technical, and have to be conducted without regard to their practical value, just as is the case in the science of medicine. But ultimately their bearings on the work of the Church emerge. And in the EXPOSITOR there will still be an effort to further the interests of exegesis by detailed studies of the text and history. Thus, Mr. W. W. Cannon will contribute a series of fresh papers on the prophet Hosea. Those who know his work on the sixty-eighth Psalm and the Song of Solomon will understand how much he is likely to contribute towards a new vision of the meaning of the Old Testament text. Articles of this kind on the New, as well as on the Old Testament, will continue to be a feature of the magazine.

* * * * *

There are only two other words which I wish to say at this point. One is that the EXPOSITOR will be—and again I quote from the original prospectus—"informed by no narrow and sectarian spirit. Its tone will be broad, generous, catholic." Mark Pattison once wrote that "the most of Englishmen in theology have no other standard of merit than the prejudices of sect." This is Mark Pattison embittered rather than Mark Pattison critical, although there was perhaps a certain justification for his remarks, some decades ago. To-day one is glad to think that such an opinion would not be applicable to our age. Certainly it will not apply to this magazine.

The other word is this, that I propose to re-introduce the practice of reviewing current literature. Sometimes the reviews will be signed. But whether the notices are short or long, signed or unsigned, they will be intended to keep the reader abreast of what is being done in this country and abroad, both in books and in magazines. This is a feature which, I hope, will be welcome. And it will be meant for those interested in both functions of the magazine, research and exegesis, for the work of the study proper and also for work which is directly intended to equip the pulpit.

THE BEST TEN BOOKS ON THE PSALMS.

WHATEVER may be said about other parts of the Old Testament, the task of selecting a limited number of volumes as a help to the understanding and interpretation of the Psalms is an extraordinarily difficult one. Not even the Book of Isaiah has provoked a larger literature; the student who glances through the catalogue of some great library is bewildered by the number and variety of works which deal with the Psalter from one point of view or another. There are patristic commentaries, commentaries dating from the Reformation period, and commentaries of a more modern type. But actual works of exegesis only cover a small part of the field. There are works dealing with only a limited number of Psalms or with a small section of the book, discussions of introduction, dating, and of smaller points of detail, such as the "titles" and even the accentuation of the Hebrew text, to say nothing of other sides of the study of the subject.

The truth is that the Psalms have a wider interest and a deeper appeal than any other part of the Old Testament. They offer an expression of spiritual experience of many kinds, and it is difficult to think of a condition of mind and soul for which and to which some Psalm or other does