

# 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](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

## CURRENT ISSUES.

IN a recent number of *The Canadian Journal of Religious Thought*, Professor Ernest F. Scott, of Union Seminary, New York, has been moved to deliver his soul upon the value of psychology. He evidently thinks that the vogue of psychology in some quarters to-day might be added to the three or four things by which, according to Agur of old, "the earth is disquieted." One of these things is "a servant when he is king," and another "an handmaid that is heir to her mistress." So with psychology, Professor Scott finds that the exaggerated value attached to it is intolerable.

\* \* \* \* \*

Its recent vogue is remarkable. In 1890 Professor William James wrote to Sully that "psychology is like physics before Galileo's time—not a single elementary law yet caught sight of." This could not be said to-day. Much has been done in the way of discovering how the human mind works, especially in the field of religion. As Professor Scott admits frankly, we owe much to psychology. "Many things were put down," for example, "to supernatural agency which we can now account for by the operation of the mind itself." Also we now analyse the religious emotions more accurately, and appreciate their historical expressions more justly.

\* \* \* \* \*

But, just as some years ago there was a danger that the new science of anthropology would swamp the science of comparative religion, so there is a risk of psychology being allowed to claim too much in the sphere of theology and religious thought. This is what leads Professor Scott to issue his warning. Psychologists can tell you how the mind works, but not what it is. Psychology is not sufficient for all things, least of all in religion. Modern investigators, for example, will show you that the religious sentiment is closely connected with certain bodily

functions, but they are wrong if they imagine that this explains the spiritual facts. The idea of the Spirit, in early Christianity, is explained as "nothing but a primitive attempt to account for phenomena which we can now define psychologically on the ground of auto-suggestion, or mass-excitement, or over-charged emotion. This may be, but the fact remains that the man who feels himself moved by the Spirit has come into contact with a higher world of reality. A power is working in him, by what machinery it does not much matter, and the psychological explanation does not explain everything. It leaves you worse off than before, since you imagine that you now understand what is still a mystery."

\* \* \* \* \*

Professor Scott has some acute warnings upon the mischief which is being done by the devotees of this psychological cult in the universities, and particularly upon the obsession that it is needful to teach students for the ministry the intricate methods of the science. The first business of the theological student is to know Christianity, not to learn dodges about how to apply it. These are no more vital than the knack of a bedside manner is to a student of medicine. But the words he uses, in the sentence just quoted, about mystery, are particularly worth pondering.

\* \* \* \* \*

The working of God in human life is still a mystery, always a mystery. Religion is based on revelation, but revelation carries a mysterious element with it. What has discredited this truth has been the spurious mystifications in religion, the attempts to conceal or to darken facts. Men have come to resent that, as they resent less reasonably secret diplomacy, feeling that there is something unwholesome about anything that cannot bear the light. But this does not affect the fact that the highest truths have a fringe and a centre of true mystery. "The sphinx in our modern politics," said Lord Morley, "is usually something of a charlatan." So is the sphinx in our theologies. Yet this proper suspicion ought not to exclude the admission that the relations of God and man are a high mystery.

\* \* \* \* \*

A writer in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the other week, put this admirably. "God," he wrote, "has nothing to hide from man; and if He seems to move mysteriously in the per-

formance of His wonders, it is not because He is casting a haze about them to tantalize or to dazzle the superstitious worshipper, but because His acts, proceeding directly from His nature, have the unfathomable, the infinite quality which belongs to that."

\* \* \* \* \*

The allusion is to Cowper's verse :

"God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform :  
He plants His footsteps on the sea,  
And rides upon the storm."

Even, Cowper meant, upon the storm of insanity, one of the most perplexing of providences. But Cowper felt rightly where the clue lay to the mystery of God. "God moves." Mystery besets man, but it is the mystery of a God who really has a purpose in the world. And He moves "to perform wonders." That is, His purpose is kindly at heart. Once that can be believed, it is more easy to bear the mysteries of life. The intolerable mystery would be that of a God who did not move at all, a God who did nothing, a God who said nothing, or of a God who worked blindly and cruelly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The experience of religion suggests that there is still another word to be said, however, about mystery. It is not enough to admit the presence of a mysterious element. That does not make people necessarily religious. They may be rendered merely curious. Whereas the true impression made by mystery ought to be awe, a mental and a moral humility. Carlyle noted this in connexion with his friend John Sterling. Carlyle had at any rate the emotion of awe, and he missed this in the Christianity of his friend ; he noted that while Sterling was more orthodox than himself, he did not feel awed by the mystery of the faith. Sterling was merely fascinated.

\* \* \* \* \*

The same truth was observed by Mr. R. H. Hutton in the case of young Goethe. Goethe, he declared, "was a reflective, old-fashioned, calmly-imaginative child, always fascinated by a mystery, but never, properly speaking, *awed* by it. It kindled his imagination ; it never subdued him. He was full of wonder, and quite without veneration." This is a type of the religious nature. But it is never the highest type. And the appreciation

of mystery in any department of religion, either in the inspiration of the Bible or in the phenomena of the human experience, ought to create a sense of awe, if the attitude of the enquirer is to be profitable—profitable to himself or to anyone else.

*THE TEN BEST BOOKS ON THE SYNOPTIC  
GOSPELS.*

UNTIL the Fourth Gospel can be prevailed upon to yield up its secret with a more convincing clarity than investigators have yet been able to feel with regard to it, we shall remain wholly dependent, or very nearly so, on the Synoptic Gospels for our knowledge of the earthly life of our Lord. In spite of the great quantity of literature that has been and is being produced on the problems connected with the study of that life, it may be doubted whether the task which a reverent and at the same time courageous criticism has still to perform in the reconstruction of it, is recognised to-day among the teachers and preachers of the Christian Church as widely as it deserves to be. One still hears in too many quarters the plea put forward that, in view of Paul's version of Christianity, in view of our belief in the spiritual indwelling of the Living Christ, in view of the scantiness and doubtfulness of the records, in view of the changed conditions of life, or in view of something else, the historical details of what the real human Jesus did and taught, however interesting, are not a matter of prime concern for the modern Christian. But it has to be remembered that it was precisely what the real human Jesus did and taught—His impact on the lives of men about Him, mediated through those normal channels of sense through which we know one another—it was precisely this which set those forces in motion that produced Christianity, including the Pauline and Johannine experiences and all