

MODERN CRITICISM OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

“MODERN” Criticism is neither modern nor well founded. A person whose eyesight has gone astray looks out upon a landscape from a new angle of vision and finds it a novel sight, only because it no longer corresponds to reality. Thus the first three centuries of the Christian era abound with what were then “modern” heresies, some of which actually ascribed the origin of the Old Testament to the Evil One. In the fourth century arose the great Arian heresy, founded on what was conceived to be a “modern” discovery. “A father must always exist before his son,” said a lecturer at Alexandria, “so there was time when Jesus Christ was not.” This statement involved Church, State and Emperor in many misapprehensions till the Nicene Creed re-stated the essential Deity of the Saviour as “of one Substance with the Father and the Holy Ghost”, just as the great Origen had enshrined the same truth in the happy phrase “The Eternally Begotten”.

More than a century later Pelagius propounded what he deemed to be a great discovery concerning evil and the total depravity of man, but was refuted with the reassertion of the doctrines of grace by the great Augustine. At a later period, the Socinians afflicted the Church, and in the eighteenth century Butler, in the preface to his *Analogy*, stated that Christianity appeared to have been discredited “almost in its entirety by the criticism” of his time. The subject as a whole is too big for treatment here, but examination of some recent statements of modern criticism as to the Old Testament may point a moral and sound a warning.

I

WHAT INSPIRATION INVOLVES

Modern criticism, amongst other things, deplores what it calls any “attempt to revive the old position of the verbal-inspirationists.” If by “verbal inspiration” is meant that a miracle was wrought so as to move the hands of the various writers of the books of the Bible in a mechanical fashion, so as to produce, without their co-operation, words God actually

dictated, there might be room for this criticism, but believers in the verbal inspiration of the Bible do not necessarily hold that God ignores personality, history or spiritual experience; these are all absolutely at His command, and are over-ruled by Him. What is meant by verbal inspiration is that in the Bible we have the record of God working out His sovereign purpose through the will of men, the history of nations, the sin and righteousness, the joys and sorrows of immortal spirits—evil wrought and good achieved—a record in a book that was finally stereotyped by the invention of printing. As it lies before us, every word in it, at any rate as to its original manuscripts, is what God intended it to be. It contains all things necessary to our salvation, and is a book which no Church, no authority, no man can alter except at the peril of men's souls. It is a book which does not merely contain the Word of God, but IS the Word of God; a book through which God speaks by His Spirit to the individual soul; a book which a man must carefully investigate so as to hear its message as to what he ought to be, but as to which *he* has no right to say what the *book* ought to be. Modern critics judge the book; the believer holds that the book judges him.

At times, modern critics themselves realize an unhappy feeling in the breasts of those who begin to yield to modern criticism, and so think it necessary, out of love to their hearers, to assure them that they are promoting such views in order to lead their hearers to a higher conception of the Truth, and to a deeper spiritual life. But their honesty and good intentions only make their fatal error the more tragic. The woman who took from the shelf what she thought was a sovereign remedy for the children she dearly loved, found that, notwithstanding her good intentions, by mistake she had caused the children to be poisoned. Emptying churches and multitudes of perplexed souls prove what modernism will bring about.

II

DID JESUS VINDICATE MODERN CRITICISM ?

Nevertheless, modern criticism goes even so far as to assert that "Jesus vindicated criticism." In other words, they say that our Lord Himself was a modern critic. It is said that "He was very free indeed in the use of the Old Testament, declaring that much of it was to be laid aside in favour of a higher ethical

standard." There is, in the whole of the New Testament, no such statement or implication on the part of our Lord. Only one instance, quoted in support, need be examined. It is the passage in Matt. v. 38. "Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," etc., "but I say unto you," etc. Concerning this passage, modern criticism says, "Jesus says in no apologetic terms that this is wrong teaching." As a matter of fact there is no such statement or implication; undoubtedly the casual reader would at first sight conclude that the expression "an eye for an eye" referred to personal revenge, or some sort of personal retaliation; but there are three passages in the Old Testament, to one of which the reference of our Lord must have been made—viz. Ex. xxi. 24; Lev. xxiv. 20; and Deut. xix. 21. The passage most probably referred to is the second (Lev. xxiv. 20), but here, as in the other two passages, the sphere of thought from the beginning to the end of each section is legal and administrative—not personal at all, and the subject is that of legal compensation. Thus the passage in Leviticus begins, "Breach for breach, an eye for an eye," and so on; it is language as of a modern Court of Law, discussing a motor accident or something of that sort. Nor does our Lord criticise the propriety of compensation; He only expounds the passage more amply, and what He says in effect is this:—You are aware from the law that has always existed that, for any damage you may have done you must render an absolutely equivalent repair and discharge, but I want to lead you a step further; be liberal and generous, even where you have done no damage; even if a man take your cloak, give him something more; even if he do you wrong, be forgiving and generous. That His thoughts are moving in the legal atmosphere is made clear by the expression He uses in the ensuing verses: "If a man will sue thee at law," give him more than he asks; of course you will compensate, but go further!

III

THE QUESTION OF "INTERPOLATIONS"

There is another kind of argument: "The Pentateuch was not written by Moses, because in Gen. xxxvi. 31 there occur the words, 'Before there reigned any king over Israel.'" "How could Moses know anything about kings of Israel?" it is asked.

What we have here is an insertion, made at a later date than the bulk of the book. There are other similar insertions; for instance, Moses could not have written the account of his own death in Deuteronomy, but this causes no difficulty whatever in the belief that the bulk of the book is Mosaic—carefully preserved and guarded as such the ages through.

Sometimes the argument of modern criticism assumes this form: "Take the new view, and all the apparent contradictions of the Old Testament disappear!" "God does not at one time permit Samuel to 'hew Agag to pieces before the Lord', and at another time say, 'Thou shalt not kill', and at yet another time, 'Love your enemies.'" It would be difficult to formulate a more childish absurdity than this. Let the chapters and the verses in the book of Samuel, in which these expressions occur, be read, and it will be seen that nothing could be more clear than that Saul, the King of Israel, was charged to put Agag to death, *in a judicial capacity*. The nature of Agag's transgression was made perfectly clear; it is called sin; it is plainly shown to have been mortal sin; it had been treachery resulting in the death of multitudes. Saul was to be the executioner of a man who deserved death. When Samuel discovered that Saul had failed to carry out his duty, Samuel executed the divine judgment upon Agag peremptorily and promptly in vindication of the divine authority and honour which Saul had slighted.

IV

SIR ROBERT ANDERSON'S ILLUSTRATION

How little this modern criticism of such an incident is in accordance with history, experience, clear thinking, right instinct and reverence for the Deity, used to be most ably demonstrated by a devout Christian, the late Sir Robert Anderson, Commissioner at Scotland Yard, London. He was in the habit of telling his audiences that in the course of his career as chief of the C.I.D., he was called upon to deal with the putting to death of a man in the City of London. He had received information that prominent citizens of London, and even Royalty itself, were concerned in the matter. "Perhaps", he would say, "you imagine I am telling you what can scarcely be the case, for in the light in which I am putting the matter, your knowledge, experience and goodwill towards your fellow-men

refuse to accept such a statement as possible ; but when I tell you that I acted as a Chief of Police, that the Sheriffs of London were the persons of high position ; that Queen Victoria signed a warrant, and that the putting to death was an execution, you will understand the matter." All the agents concerned in the putting to death of Agag, like the agents that centuries afterwards brought about the execution just referred to, realized that they had received a call from God, and that by His plain direction they were carrying out His will and the will of the nation by putting the man to death. The moderns also, like Samuel, make sure of it, holding an inquest, with a medical certificate afterwards. The modern agents did it with the whole of the history of Christianity behind them, and yet the modern critics say that the agents in Samuel's case could not have had the command, "Thou shalt not kill", behind them. Could misconception go further ?

Modern criticism is, in short, a revival of the Serpent's old question : "Yea, hath God said ?" It has, sometimes, moderate beginnings, i.e. nothing more than such questioning, but in the end, as a necessary outcome, it denies the curse of sin, the Deity of the Saviour, His Atonement as a Substitute, Justification by Faith only, and eternal banishment from God for the finally impenitent. There are two causes which underlie its fatal misapprehension. First, it loses sight of the inner course of things, and inner truth as expressed by the words of Scripture. The late Professor Peake of Manchester, a most advanced critic, yet honest, loving and lovable as a man, said :—"Modern criticism has too much neglected the psychology of the Bible." There is the first cause. The next is that modern criticism allows itself to be limited by the things of time and sense, it forgets that God "inhabiteth eternity", that He is the Sovereign Ruler of men and all things, and that He cannot be judged in the light of the things of time and sense only, but must be thought of as the Sovereign "*sub specie aeternitatis*", that is under the implications and the aspects of eternal existence.

May God by His grace preserve us from the snare into which they fell, of whom the apostle wrote :—"The world by its wisdom concerning God, knew not God."

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