

that the latter derives its meaning and power. It is in Christ that we meet with the living God as a power of righteousness and love; and only in contact with that love that was separate from sin and yet sought out the sinner, does the divine condemnation of sin become a reality to us, and the divine forgiveness a reality. In setting the forensic theory of atonement at the centre of religion, Dr. Denney really replaces the fact by an idea drawn from it. Not Christ Himself is made the object of our faith, but an idea of something

great that Christ did for us. It is not, in his account, the love itself in all its richness, as embodied in our Saviour's every word and deed, and reproduced in human lives to-day—it is not that that saves; but the *idea* of a love that was so great that it assumed the responsibilities of our sin. We have already admitted that the forensic theory does embody a great deal of what is true of the reality; but an idea is never so rich as the reality, it is never, in its form at least, so enduring, and it can never take its place.

## Modern Criticism and its Influence on Theology.<sup>1</sup>

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THE aim of the Christian student is truth; and the aim of the Christian teacher is to bring that truth to bear upon human character and life. The Old Testament forms an integral part of the Bible. It was placed in the hands of the Christian Church by its Founder and His Apostles as the record of God's revelation of Himself to His chosen people and the manifold preparation for His own coming; as the source from which instruction in conduct was to be derived and as the means by which the spiritual life was to be fed. We cannot, therefore, treat it as any other book: it is sacred ground; reverence is demanded of us as we approach it. But it is no true reverence which would exempt it from the fullest examination by all legitimate methods of criticism. Inquiry into the origin, the structure, the character, the meaning of the books which compose it is not only permissible, but indispensable. 'To discover more clearly how anything has grown may enable us more truly to estimate its worth and to distinguish it more confidently from all other things.' God's revelation of Himself was progressive, and its interpretation must be progressive. We may reasonably expect that 'every increase of knowledge will bring forth a deeper knowledge of the truth committed to His Church.' New modes of thought, more searching methods of literary and historical investigation, fresh discoveries of

science and archæology, must necessarily affect and modify the interpretation of the Bible. It was once as easy as it was natural to regard the first chapter of Genesis as a literal account of the way in which the universe was brought into being; now that we have read the records of the rocks and learnt some fragments of the mystery of the heavens, we know that it cannot be regarded as literal history. But its religious value remains unaltered. It teaches religious truths which geology and astronomy could never teach with authority—truths which are more important for the mass of mankind than all the results of the most elaborate scientific researches.

But truth is not to be won without effort and, it may be, pain; and even, as it may seem, temporary loss. Times of change must be times of trial. They call for faith, courage, patience, sympathy:—for faith that God is still teaching His Church, as He taught it of old, *πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως*, 'by divers portions and in divers manners'; for courage to go forward trustfully, following the light of the reason which God has given us; for patience to 'prove all things' and 'hold fast that which is good'; for sympathy between those who cling to tradition and those who are animated by the desire for progress.

Now, what is the position of students and teachers of the Bible to-day? They are face to face with a treatment of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, which half, nay, a quarter, of a

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the Church Congress, Northampton, October 1902.

century ago would have seemed utterly irreverent, subversive of the foundations of the faith, and which still seems to many (it is not to be wondered at) irreverent and mischievous. Let me try briefly to state what modern criticism is saying with regard to the Old Testament. Pardon me if, for the sake of brevity, my statement is somewhat blunt and dogmatic.

(1) Textual criticism declares the text to be seriously corrupt. The old theory of the perfection of the Massoretic text is no longer tenable in the face of a mass of cumulative evidence to the contrary.

(2) Linguistic criticism throws doubt upon the interpretation of not a few passages. The meaning of words is disputed; grammatical constructions are ambiguous; allusions are obscure; translation fails adequately to convey the meaning of the original, and honesty compels us to recognize an element of uncertainty in a multitude of renderings.

(3) Literary criticism has investigated the origin of the various books, and pronounces that some books once supposed to have been written by single authors are compilations with a long and complicated literary history, and that some books cannot have been written by the authors whose names they bear. Sometimes it goes further, and asserts that some books have been revised and interpolated in such a way that their original authors would hardly be able to recognize them.

(4) Historical criticism affirms that much of the history has been coloured by the beliefs and practices of the times in which the books were compiled, long after the events, and must be regarded as rather an ideal than an actual picture of the national life. It bids us to a great extent revolutionize our views of the course of the history of Israel.

(5) The researches of archæology and the comparative study of religions show that the religion of Israel derived many elements from the primitive religion of the Semites, possessed much in common with the religions of surrounding nations, and was largely influenced in its developments by the faiths with which it came in contact in the course of its history.

In these and other ways modern criticism is demanding a new treatment of the Bible, which seems to many incompatible with the reverence due to it; it is offering a new view of the Bible

which seems to many to impair, if not to destroy, its value. Is not all this perplexing, disquieting, unsettling? Yes; but the new movement cannot be ignored; it cannot be crushed by denunciation; if it rests, as its advocates claim that it does, upon the honest recognition of facts, it must in the end be triumphant. Now, practically everyone who has made any serious study of the Old Testament has felt himself compelled to admit that the traditional view of its character—the view which was generally accepted fifty years ago—can no longer be maintained without modification. Many students of the Old Testament, probably a majority of them, have found themselves compelled to go further, to accept critical principles, and to revise their views of its textual, literary, and historical character to a greater or less degree, in the directions I have indicated. They have done so, not in obedience to any *à priori* philosophical or theological theories, but as the result of a careful and unprejudiced examination of the facts in the light of modern critical methods and enlarged knowledge. But they have not abandoned their belief that the Old Testament is the God-given record of God's special revelation of Himself through Israel in preparation for the Incarnation, and as such of permanent significance for the Christian Church.

This being the case, the clergy are in duty bound to endeavour to understand the methods of criticism, to estimate the validity of its results, and to consider how those results, if true, must affect their teaching. For if those methods are, generally speaking, sound; if those results are, to any considerable extent, valid; readers of the Bible must be gently and gradually prepared to accept them. The responsibility laid upon the teachers of the present generation is to guide those entrusted to their care safely through the inevitable dangers of a time of change; to show that the Bible is not less the Word of God because we are forced, in the light of modern research, to acknowledge that it does not possess many characteristics which it was once believed to possess, and which had come to be regarded as essential notes of a record of divine revelation; to explain how its religious value is not diminished, but increased, by a courageous treatment of it in the light of fuller knowledge. The clergy who are to teach must teach themselves; they have promised to be diligent in such studies as help to

the knowledge of Holy Scripture; and some knowledge of modern criticism is indispensable, partly that they may avoid basing the truth of Christianity upon insecure foundations and defending positions which they will presently be forced to abandon, partly that they may not be guilty of ignoring new light upon the meaning of Scripture which God intends should be thrown by the progress of modern thought. For there is a grave danger to faith in insisting upon views which the majority of thinking men have found, or will shortly find, to be untenable; and there is a serious loss to the faith if the results of criticism are ignored, supposing its claim to offer a larger and sounder theology is to any extent well-grounded. I do not plead that the processes or results of modern criticism should often, if ever, be directly discussed in the pulpit; in many churches they would be utterly out of place, and would only perplex and annoy; but I do believe that they must be taken careful account of in determining the way in which the Old Testament is taught, if the faith of the next generation is to be spared an abrupt and perilous shock.

But here it is necessary, in view of certain recent developments of criticism, to point out that it is all-important to distinguish between sober criticism, the results of which have been tested and are generally accepted, and speculative criticism, which is the outcome of individual ingenuity, and is never likely to command a general approval. Sober criticism is objective; it carefully collects facts, arranges them, and endeavours to ascertain their meaning. It recognizes its limitations; it acknowledges that many of its conclusions are only probable. Speculative criticism is subjective; it often pretends to impossibilities; it depends on the intuition of the critic; and frequently it convinces no one but himself. Thus, for example, it must be admitted that in a large number of instances the text of the Old Testament is corrupt, and honesty requires us to acknowledge it; but it is absurd to suppose that in more than a few instances the original text can with certainty be restored by conjecture, and it is ridiculous to imagine that history can be rewritten by the aid of a long series of unsupported guesses, however ingenious. The results of literary criticism are at best only probable, though in many cases the probability amounts to practical certainty; but literary criticism has been pushed to the wildest

extremes, as, for instance, when we are told that we have no genuine writings of the prophet Jeremiah except a few lyric poems, and that only a dim remembrance of the grand form of the prophet is to be discerned in the poetic portions of the book. The results of historical criticism, again, are only probable; it may easily be mistaken in its attempts to reconstruct history from scanty details; it is often presumptuous in presenting as certainties what are only tentative theories. Every movement is sure to have its extravagances; they misrepresent and injure it, for those who dislike the movement are only too ready to judge it by its extravagances, and to point to them as characteristic, when they are mere excrescences; and at the present time there are such extravagances of criticism, which must not be regarded as normal and representative. Those on whom lies the responsibility of teaching are bound to examine and discriminate.

But to return to our main subject. In what ways does modern criticism affect theology, *i.e.* our whole view of the content of God's revelation of Himself and of the way in which it was given and recorded? Let me speak of three points—the mode of revelation, the character of prophecy, the nature of inspiration.

(1) It leads us to regard God's revelation of Himself as a more gradual process than we have supposed it to be, effected, to a large extent, by the action of ordinary forces, developed in ways which we should now call natural rather than supernatural. There is an analogy between the process of revelation and the process of creation as we now understand it. The shaping of the universe, we now know, was the work not of six literal days, but of immeasurable ages; yet it was no whit the less the obedient response of matter to the fiat of Omnipotence. The lofty creed of ethical Monotheism was not flashed into the heart of the nation once for all amid the lightnings of Sinai, but won through many a struggle and many a failure; yet none the less it was Jehovah's message to the nation from the day when He brought it out of the land of Egypt.

(2) Prophecy, that unique gift of ancient Israel, was far more closely linked with the time and circumstances of its delivery than was formerly thought. We should place its evidential value now far more in its moral force than in its predictions, though this element must not be denied

or minimized. It was the exposition of eternal principles in the language of the time; rooted in the history and institutions of the chosen people; conditioned by the temperaments and fortunes and environments of individual prophets; yet none the less surely a message from God and no mere fanciful aspiration of enthusiasts and fanatics, or natural expression of moral ideals by the best representatives of a naturally religious race.

(3) Criticism compels us to revise our doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. We must not ascribe an equal value and authority to every part of the Old Testament. We must no longer talk of its infallibility and inerrancy. We must distinguish its temporary, imperfect elements. Our Lord Himself taught us to do so. While we hold fast to the belief that the Old Testament contains the record—the divinely-shaped record—of God's revelation of Himself to Israel and through Israel, we seem to be forced to admit that the record was not given and has not been preserved in such form as we might antecedently have expected and as has generally been believed. And surely, in this connexion, the fact that for centuries the Old Testament was known to the Church only through a most imperfect version gives much matter for reflection.

What follows from these results of criticism? Is not our theology liberated, deepened, strengthened?

(1) It is liberated.—We are relieved of a multitude of difficulties in the study of the Old Testament when we accept in general principles, if not in every detail, the critical account of its origin and character. We need no longer spend our time and energy in attempting to reconcile every supposed discrepancy. We can recognize most frankly that the immoralities and barbarities and imprecations which shock us belong to a

lower stage of religious history. Unfulfilled prophecies need no longer perplex us. We can look away from details to the great central truths which were being slowly taught to an unwilling nation, to the great divine purpose for the world which was being patiently wrought out in and through the vicissitudes of the nation's history and the sufferings and triumphs of its individual members.

(2) It is deepened.—For at the present moment, through the instrumentality of this criticism which to many seems destructive and unsettling, God is surely driving us back, lovingly, if sternly, from the letter to the spirit; from the word to the Speaker; from external details to the great spiritual truths which underlie them. We only follow our Lord's example if we concentrate attention on the great principles which sum up the teaching of the Old Testament (Mt 7<sup>12</sup> 22<sup>40</sup>).

(3) It is strengthened.—Criticism compels us to a deeper and more careful study of the way in which God wrought out His purposes in the world in history as well as in creation; and I cannot but believe that it has a special message for our time, because it presents to us a view of His action in past history which will confirm our faith and help us to believe more confidently in His continued working in the world. As we enter more and more sympathetically into the nature of the process of God's working in old time we begin to realize how hard it must have been, at the time, to be sure that God was guiding the destinies of Israel; yet, as we survey the completed history, we cannot fail to trace His guidance: and so we are encouraged to believe that, hard as we may sometimes find it to recognize His guiding hand in the tangled history of the present, all is converging to the 'one far-off divine event'—the universal establishment of His eternal sovereignty.

## At the Literary Table.

ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS:  
JOHN RUSKIN.

*Macmillan, 2s. net.*

LITERARY men and biographers have conspired to say there shall be no more heroes. It is perhaps a reaction. There was a time when every villain of

the past was washed a hero or a saint, till of Judas himself it was said, that 'all the ends he aimed at were his country's, his God's, and truth's,' and when he fell, he fell a 'blessed martyr.' But when English men of letters write on other English men of letters, they ought to be able to resist reactions.