

THE BIBLE AND CRITICISM: IS THE BATTLE ENDED?

--THE PRESENT STATE OF THE QUESTION.--

MUCH is said at the present time of the overthrow of traditional beliefs, and of the necessity under which every intelligent man now lies of adapting himself to the new condition of things. But has criticism already and finally won the battle, and has the time really come to divide the spoil? That is a question which should not fail to be asked by those who are seeking to adjust their theological bearings. If the last word has indeed been spoken, and if that word has confirmed the critical verdict, the outlook is one which we can hardly contemplate with a light heart. The Bible has made our country. The best manhood and womanhood in it have been awed, warmed, changed and cheered by its words. It has repressed what we thought was baser in us, and strengthened what we thought was nobler. It has humanized us. It has laid upon us the bands of brotherhood. It has done all this because it was received as God's Book, and because we felt that conviction of its sacred character deepened the more we studied its pages. If it is to be to our children all that it has been to us and to our ancestors, we may count upon the same national strength and honor, the same quiet reserve of power, the same hatred of wrong, the same endurance for right. But, if that belief in the Bible is to pass away like a dream, there is little to reassure us in the usual lofty talk. The ancient world had its philosophies and its culture. But the multitude was dropped as a weight which no philosophy or culture was able to carry; and the best efforts could not save the cultured classes themselves from sinking down into pollution which placed the civilization of the time infinitely beneath its barbarism.

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I am quite aware that truth has its sacrifices, and that no regard for consequences can make us keep on believing that two and two make five. But regard for consequences has its place. It enforces caution. It commends sobriety and earnestness in judgment. Is it really true that science has discredited Scripture? I know that this is confidently asserted, and that it is oftener assumed as being as much beyond argument as the Copernican theory. But I happen, also, to know that the science which is supposed to have discredited the Bible is the science of sixty years ago. I know that its indictment of the Creation history in Genesis cannot be sustained by the science of to-day; that authoritative geology has recently brought back the Flood and finds in it the great dividing line between paleolithic and neolithic man; that, in the brighter light shed by recent research, supposed differences between Scripture and science have disappeared, and left an agreement apparent which is one of the marvels of our time. The man who begins to settle his theological bearings under the belief that science has hopelessly discredited the Bible will, therefore, settle them under an unhappy delusion.

The higher criticism has worked along its own lines and has had its conclusions summarized for the reading public in a Bible Dictionary, in a couple of Encyclopaedias, and in the Polychrome Bible. In this last, which is also the most important of the critical publications, we are presented, not with the results of a discussion, but with the demands of a revolutionary junta. This thing of many colors and shreds and patches, which is really the *reductio ad absurdum* of critical methods, is the only Bible which is now to be left to the churches, the Sunday-schools, the educational institutions, and the homes of our country. And this is no empty threat. This "Bible in Tatters" is being handed to ministers and teachers all over the land as the new critical Revelation. It is being presented and accepted as "the truth about the Bible." It has even entered the mission field. It is easy enough to calculate the results of this movement. When the teacher's place is taken, and the pulpit is filled, by honest men who have no longer faith in a God-given Bible, how long will that faith linger among the people?

An important decision is consequently forced upon us as a nation. What is to be our attitude toward the new propaganda? Is it to be tame submission or strict inquiry? It may be asked,

however, whether a choice is possible? Have not these questions been threshed out by scholars in every way competent to deal with them? Is not the discussion closed, and does not the Polychrome Bible simply gather up the now unchallenged results of a prolonged controversy? No representation could be more misleading than that. There has been, properly speaking, no controversy. The critics have evaded discussion. There are works of undoubted scholarship which have traversed their findings, exposed their unproved assumptions, and triumphantly vindicated the universal convictions of the Christian Church with regard to the Bible. But the critics have not replied to these assailants; they have ignored them. What need is there for argument when you can quench opposition by applying the extinguisher of authority?

The lay mind knows something of the Shakespeare controversy, and has a lively sense of its inherent absurdity. But ridicule has not killed that craze. It has increased in boldness, and now questions the reality of "William Shakespeare." "There is no such historical man," says one, "no individual known who bore that name." It is quite within the limits of possibility that this craze may become fashionable, and that the tradition of the Shakespearian authorship may be given to the winds. There is an infectious exhilaration in paradox; and this is not without a respectable show of literary research and seemingly forcible arguments. Let us suppose that one professor of English literature after another is won over to the new views; that by well-directed influence those chairs are all gradually captured; that the literary class is impregnated with the new notions, and that by editors and reviewers the question is regarded as closed. History would then have repeated itself. For such has been the story of the critical movement. It has won its supposed triumph, not by scholarship or argument, but by sheer audacity and adroit manoeuvring.

Yet a temporary success of that kind is not a victory. If the views maintained rest upon solid fact, then the triumph, however achieved, may be expected to endure; but if its basis is only empty theory and mere assumption, the triumph is but the illusion of a moment. How much the imagined victors of today have to fear the future the following pages will reveal even to the lay mind.

THE LIMITS OF CRITICAL ABILITY.

The critics assume that they are able to dissect with accuracy manuscripts which are made up of the work of various writers. This is, in fact, their professed business; and it is in the exercise of it that they expect to benefit mankind. They are so conscious of their power in this matter that they assume the name of "experts." By attention to the subtleties of style, and to the peculiarities which distinguish the writing of one age and of one author from that of another, they tell us that they are able to say where the words which flowed from the pen of one writer stopped, and where the words of another writer began. It is this power which has enabled them, they say, to separate Isaiah, not merely into two, but into many portions; to break up the book of Genesis--the first of their achievements, and to partition the book of Revelation --among their last. In short, they fully confess that, without this power of what I may call literary divination, their work would never have been done, and the higher criticism could never have claimed the name of a science.

To see how unquestioningly they believe in this ability of theirs, we have only to open their "Polychrome Bible," Bacon's "Genesis of Genesis," or Addis on "The Documents of the Hexateuch." Here are some of the results gathered in this fierce light which beats upon the Bible. In a single page of "Joshua," by Prof. Bennett, besides the main divisions, I find the following instances of penetrating insight. The words: "And all Israel stoned him" ([Joshua 7:25](#)) are separated from the text, and are given to a writer who is supposed to have lived about 500 B.C. These three words, "Then Jehovah relented" [R3397 : **page 215**] (*ver. 26*) are similarly selected, and are said to be the work of an author who lived about fifty years earlier. This, it

will be confessed, is delicate work; but it is only an illustration of the sharp decisiveness and the firm--I might call it the sublime-- assurance which marks all the productions of this "expert" school. Bacon's work is equally astonishing. The passage, "In the day that the Lord--God made the earth and the heavens, (see [Genesis 2:4](#)) is dissected as follows. A stop is made after the word Lord, thus dividing the divine name in two. The words, "In the day that the Lord"--are assigned to a writer of 800 B.C. Those which precede are said to have been written three hundred and fifty years later; and those which follow, including the word "God," the second part of the amputated divine name, are alleged to be due to a third writer, an editor, about whose exact date there is still some difference of opinion among the "experts."

But to stop even here would give the general public no adequate conception of critical self-confidence. They are not only able to judge of what they see, but they can with equal imaginary infallibility divine what they cannot see. We used to be told that, when the Genesis narrative was separated, the critical analysis justified itself in every unbiased mind. The two accounts were said to be so beautifully complete! That superstition still lingers in many quarters; but everybody has not read Bacon's Genesis. It needs some painful but pretty patching to make up "the two narratives." There we find that "The Judean Prophetic Narrative" opens thus: "When as yet there was neither earth nor heaven but only the limitless abyss, Yahweh set fast the foundations of the earth, and raised up its pillars in the midst of the waters. And over its surface he spread out the dome of the heaven, establishing there the courses of the sun and the moon and the stars; but upon the surface of the earth beneath there was neither motion nor life: all was yet a solitude."

The reader rubs his eyes. He thought he knew the opening chapters of Genesis. He casts his eye down to the foot of the page and finds that the above is a critical make-up! Here is the note which meets his glance: "Conjecturally restored from indications in the earlier literature...and by comparison with the Babylonian cosmogonic myths." One is able to comment upon many things. This is beyond me. It must be left in its naked effrontery. Let "CONJECTURALLY RESTORED" be its only inscription and its epitaph.

It will be clear, however, that everything is based upon the assumed possession of this marvelous power to say where one writer's work ends and another's begins. Without this there would have been no discrimination of "sources;" no partition of documents, and, in a word, no higher criticism. Let this supposed ability be successfully questioned, and the painfully-piled-up edifice is not merely shaken to its foundations --it lies in irremediable ruin. But it is already demonstrated that there are, and can be, no "experts" of this sort. The assumed possession of this [R3398 : page 215] power has been put to test again and again, and the results have made these pretensions utterly incredible.

There exists, for example, a confessedly composite work in Finnish literature. Dr. Lonnrot, the collector of the Finnic Folk-poetry, formed a great epic, the Kalevala--by fusing together a large collection of those ancient songs. He bequeathed his manuscripts to the Society of Finnish Literature, so that what he borrowed and what he added are made perfectly clear. This work afforded too good a test of this imaginary critical power to be left unused. The critics were set to work; and with lamentable results. "While ignorant of the actual facts of the surviving songs," says Andrew Lang, "critical ingenuity could only give us, at many hands and from many sides, its usual widely discrepant results." And he adds: "We cannot trust it when the tests of facts, of documents, cannot be applied."

Not very long ago, an enthusiastic admirer of Thackeray (every characteristic and trick of whose pen he believed he knew) engaged in a search for papers which had not been embraced in that writer's collected works. He at last discovered a number in some early volumes of *Punch*. He had no doubt whatever as to the authorship. The mark of the master hand was

everywhere; and he was certain that, to any man who knew Thackeray's style, doubt was impossible. Arrangements were made for the re-issue of the newly-discovered writings in a leading literary organ in America. Some of the papers had already appeared, when a communication was received from the *Punch* office, saying that the treasurer's books made it plain that the articles were not Thackeray's. The re-publication was immediately stopped, and the editor retired from an ignominious position with as much grace as the circumstances permitted. The history of literature abounds with such facts. Critics, who can be trusted to divine the authorship of documents, have never existed. They do not exist now: and a "science" built upon that assumption rests upon what is considerably less substantial than air. I say nothing of the professed ability to furnish verbatim copies of manuscripts which no man has ever seen. I believe that the records of the higher criticism contain the only example of such a pretension outside the annals of a lunatic asylum.--Rev. John Urquhart, Scotland.

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