

The christian point of
view in the study of
the Bible.

by

T. K. Cheyne.

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THE CHRISTIAN POINT OF VIEW

Caspar René Gregory:

IN THE

Leipzig, d. 22. Oktober 1879.

STUDY OF THE BIBLE.

A Sermon preached in Balliol College Chapel on

Trinity Sunday, June 8, 1879,

By the Rev. T. K. Cheyne, M.A., Fellow of Balliol College.

PRINTED FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION

BY

E. FAITHFULL & Co., PRAED STREET, LONDON, W.



The Christian Point of View in the Study of the Bible.

“Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of Me. And ye will not come to Me that ye might have life.”—
John v., 39, 40.

“THE Bible, and the Bible alone, is the religion of Protestants.” Most unfortunate mistake, the utterance of an ill-balanced mind, which has, perhaps, done more harm to superficially cultivated persons than any other proverb. For surely we may say that it has become a proverb, and we must as surely place it on the list—not so short a one as we could wish—of proverbs which perpetuate misleading views of morality and religion. It has sent many a one to Rome; many another has it sent drifting on the starless sea of scepticism: for how, it has been asked, can we swear allegiance to a book which has suffered so many blows from historical criticism, and upon which the new science of Comparative Mythology is, perhaps, destined to inflict so many more? This chapel, however, is not in my judgment a place for controversy, a place for mere negations, and if I seem for a moment to put myself in opposition to that great Evangelical School, to which spiritual religion in England owes so much, it is simply because its popular leaders have taken up a cry which is very far from expressing its inmost convictions. If we protest against the watchword of the Evangelical School, let it be in the name of Evangelical Religion.

For what is the essence of those two great religious movements to which we give the names of Protestant and

Evangelical, but an appeal from all material forms, whether of speech or of ceremony, to Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man? Jesus Christ, and He alone, is the religion of Protestants.

There was a time, before the canon of the New Testament was fixed, when it was not only possible, but necessary, to be a Christian, without giving any place in one's religion to the book or books which we call the Bible. It may be that a time is coming (we need neither hope it nor fear it, for God is in His heaven) when large numbers of men will again be Christians, without giving a place in their religion, or at any rate, nearly so high a place as formerly, to the Bible. As long as a man reverences Jesus Christ, even if it be only the lower form of reverence accorded to a teacher, we cannot refuse him the name of Christian.

Truly, this is no millennial state of things. Jesus Christ both claims to be, and is, far more than a mere teacher; words are not adequate to express both what He is and what He has done for man. But unless those of us who believe in Him as God meet in the spirit of charity those who take Him merely as a teacher and an example, they run the risk of extinguishing the germs of better things which may spring up hereafter, and which after all must have been implanted by the great Sower Himself. Indeed, we ought to be only too thankful that there is among ourselves so large a class of persons who have imbibed something of the spirit of Christianity, although intellectual mists conceal from them the highest glories in the nature of its Founder. In Protestant Germany, there are many who fear that the recoil from Christian theology is passing into a revolt from the ethical ideal and requirements of Christianity. To avoid such a terrible disaster, let those of us who in the higher sense believe, treat with the utmost sympathy any who are willing in any genuine sense (and by a genuine sense I mean a sense borne out by their lives) to be called by the name of Christ.

I may seem to have wandered far from the passage of Scripture which I have taken as my theme. But I am really close at hand. The Jews in our Lord's time regarded *their* Bible—the Old Testament—as their religion. True, they overloaded it with traditions of men, but still the traditions existed for the sake of the Bible, and the Bible it was which, in the extinction of prophecy, was to them a palpable and

ever-present revelation. In it they thought, or imagined, they had eternal life; and our Lord blames them for idolising a mere written book, and neglecting the personal knowledge of Him of whom the Scriptures testify. Even if we take the other rendering: "Ye search the Scriptures," the same censure is involved. "Ye search the Scriptures, ye make subtle and profound inquiries into the letter of Scripture, but ye miss its real meaning, ye fail of that eternal life which seems to you within your grasp, because ye will not come unto Him to whom the Scriptures bear witness. Begin your search again by coming to Me, and then ye will understand the Scriptures." Well, this censure and this command apply *à fortiori* to Protestant Christians. "The Bible alone is our religion," we say. We learn it by heart in our childhood; its very dates and proper names are made the subject of our study; we think that such Bible-loving Christians are far superior to the benighted Romanists and Pagans; and behold, we come up to Oxford, and mix in society, and hear what criticism and science are doing, how the history of the Bible is legendary, its scientific ideas grossly childish, its prophecy a purely natural product, its theology either grossly anthropomorphic, or borrowed from the more refined philosophy of Alexandria, and our religion crumbles away, for it rested on a book, and the book has been shown to be no more exempt from human infirmities than any other book.

Is all this true, which we have been told? Of that we are not competent to judge. It is at least plausible, and in youth—that is, youth as it is by nature—plausibility generally wins the day. But if, in your early years, you had formed a personal relation to Jesus Christ, if Jesus Christ, and not the Bible, had been your religion, would your higher life have suffered in this way? No, no. In the first place, you would have had, through your belief in Jesus Christ, a greater solidity of character than belongs to youth by nature. You would have distrusted mere plausibility. You would have suspected the anti-Christian bias (using the word Christian of course in its full sense), the anti-Christian bias of most of the critics who sincerely believe themselves to be disinterested. In the next place, even if you were induced to give up what we may call the outworks of the Bible, you would hold fast to the central tower—that is, the Person and Character—the not to be imagined Person and Character of Jesus Christ your Lord. And thirdly, if your faith

in Him were strong, you would believe His words, when He says (and I attach no special importance to the accuracy of this particular report of His words, for the idea of it pervades all the Four Gospels): "The Scriptures are they which testify of me!" You would reply to the critics, "In spite of modern criticism and exegesis, there must be some sense in which the words of my Lord are true. He cannot have mistaken the meaning of His own Bible, the book on which in His youth and early manhood, He nourished His spiritual life. He who received not the Spirit by measure, cannot have been mistaken in the Messianic character of Psalms and Prophecies. *I* cannot answer your reasoning; but either you are mistaken in your facts, or there is some third system of criticism and exegesis, neither in the old-fashioned sense orthodox nor yet rationalistic, which can do justice to the elements of truth in both?" Such would surely be the natural reply of a young man of sense and religion. And he who speaks to you, knowing as he does both the opposing systems from within, feels justified in saying that this anticipation would be correct.

Consider for a moment the import of the strife which rages around this Biblical literature. What is the use of it all? What does it matter whether the records of a minute Asiatic population can be employed historically with the same unreserve as Tacitus and Thucydides? or whether the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah refers to a person or contains a personification of the Jewish people? or whether the doctrine of the Logos is or is not of Alexandrian origin? These questions are without practical significance, except you have a bias either for or against the belief in the claims of Jesus Christ. It is barely conceivable, indeed, that in yet far distant ages an aristocracy of genius may arise, free from our physical and intellectual limitations, free, moreover, from that passionate interest in religion which animates man as he is. Then, perhaps, a cool, scientific investigation of religion in general, and of Christianity and its records in particular, may be possible, but not till then. Meantime, those who study the Bible must first of all give an answer to that great question: "What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?"

Of course, the answer does not depend on your own inclination. You are under a heavy responsibility to determine the point in accordance with facts. Christian advocates, indeed, maintain that the Scriptural view of the divinity of

Jesus Christ meets the deepest wants of human nature. They may be right ; nay, an innumerable company of saints attest that they are so. Still, we are bound to see whether the facts of the life of Jesus compel us to adopt the theory (as we must call it provisionally) of His divinity. These facts (until they are disproved, we have a right to call them facts) are set down in the Four Gospels and in certain Epistles of St. Paul. St. Paul is, in fact, the earliest witness we have to the origin of Christianity, his marvellous conversion having taken place about the year 36 ; and St. Paul is in substantial harmony with the Four Gospels. This is of itself a weighty, though not an absolutely conclusive argument in favour of the truthfulness of our Gospels ; but the argument which I invite you to consider is rather this : 1. That the portraiture of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, confessedly based at any rate to a considerable extent on a trustworthy tradition, implies throughout the unique, and therefore (unbelievers at last allow us to draw this consequence), and therefore, in some sense superhuman nature of its subject : and 2. That a careful analysis of the picture of Christ in the Gospels, while it thoroughly confirms the supernatural view of Christianity, yet removes the peculiar difficulties of belief which arise out of the definitions of the Church. It may seem unreasonable to sit down to the Gospels with the expectation of finding something new in them ; and yet a strange pleasure will come upon you as you thus read them. It is only our immersion in the present, and our dangerous familiarity with the received translation, which prevent us from realising the utter wonderfulness of that combination of the natural and the supernatural which we find in Jesus. Better a thousand times to be absorbed in the contemplation of this image, than in sad unconsciousness of its glory to attain the highest reputation as a critic or a philosopher !

It is not easy, I know, so to put aside all obstructions of the mind's eye, and look at Christ as He was upon earth. Perhaps it is of God's mercy that He withholds that vision from those who are not prepared to take the next step, and account all opposing systems and theories but dung that they may win Christ. Downright honesty is essential in religion. A resolute determination to follow the light wherever it may lead us is alone honoured by God. "If a man desire to do His will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God," and if this desire be vague and fluctuating, we shall no more

see the glory of Christ's words and works than did those to whom our Lord said, in the words of the text: "Ye *will* not come unto Me that ye might have life."

Yes; it is not the letter of the Gospels, or of any part of the Bible, which is in itself life-giving, it is Christ, present by His Spirit, and revealing to prepared minds the life-giving truth beneath the letter. To find Christ is the key to the Scriptures. Christ sums up the Scriptures, so He tells us Himself; and every advance in our knowledge, especially of the elder Scriptures—I mean Jesus Christ's Bible, the Old Testament—carries us forward in our knowledge of Him. From this point of view, the most essential object to aim at is a realisation of the fundamental ideas of the Bible. Do not attempt to refine these ideas, under the pretence that their vesture is only poetical. It is indeed poetical, but the poetry is that of truth, and not of fancy. When, for instance, you read in Isaiah that "The light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be seven-fold, as the light of seven days, in the day that Jehovah bindeth up the breach of his people,"* do you think that merely means (as one commentator puts it) that "The days will seem to go brighter in the sense of the Divine favour?" No, it is the fundamental idea of all prophecy in both Testaments, that there shall be a new heaven and a new earth. These fundamental ideas, especially the greatest of all, that of the Living God, give the religious life a fulness, an intensity, in which a semi-philosophic Christianity is sadly deficient. To realise them will save us from many a conscious or unconscious deviation from the straight line of Christian truth. Many people think that they are sound in the faith, who are in reality far from apprehending the true meaning of the Biblical and Christian forms of thought. And there are some persons, perhaps, who regard themselves and are regarded by others as heterodox, simply because the forms in which they conceive religion are nearer to the Bible than those of dogmatic theology. No doubt, these too have their value; in these, too, the moulding Spirit of God has been at work, but surely not so directly as in the inspired Scriptures.

"The inspired Scriptures:" it is a common phrase, but it may, perhaps, mislead some who hear it used. The doctrine of the New Testament is that the Holy Spirit is

* Isaiah, xxx., 26.

given to all who believe in Jesus. St. Paul says, speaking of himself and his fellow-Christians: "The things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, God hath revealed unto us by his Spirit." And he continues: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God, that we may know the things which are freely given us of God."*

The only difference in this respect between the Apostle and other believers is one of degree, so that it is, perhaps, more strictly accurate to speak of the Scriptures as the writings of inspired men, and not as themselves, in any exclusive sense, inspired. It may be urged, indeed, that there is a Scriptural justification for the latter phrase, that the New Testament writers, and at least on one occasion our Lord Himself,† speak as if even the verbal form of a Scripture were divinely ordained. But it should be remembered that there are also passages in which the words of ordinary believers, when bearing witness for Christ, are said to be "given" or "taught" from above.‡ Verbal inspiration, then, is a perfectly Scriptural doctrine, but it is not confined to the Old and New Testaments. It is a development of the fundamental Scriptural idea of the Living God. The circumstances of man's life, specially on great occasions, are providentially arranged, and when a servant of God, acting in the simplicity of faith, puts forth some newly-revealed truth, or enforces some older revelation, his words are not entirely his own; they receive a providential direction. No attempt is made in the Bible to explain this; it is a natural though unconscious inference from the great pre-supposition of the Living, Personal God.

This view of inspiration, as something common to all believers in a greater or less degree (and the degrees are infinitely various in different ages, nations, and individuals),¶ only requires to be supplemented by two more considerations, to remove all the chief difficulties connected with the subject. These considerations are: first, That in order to give an outward form to revelation, a certain amount of reflection is necessary, so that we cannot possibly obtain an absolutely perfect embodiment of divine truth. In order to put his revelation into words, the prophet has to reflect—to use his

* 1 Cor., ii., 9, 10, 12. † John, x., 35. ‡ Matt., x., 19. 1 Cor., ii., 13.

¶ It is not, therefore, without reason that Christians honour the Biblical writers far above any others, even though these, too, have been "taught of the Spirit."

logical, rather than his intuitive faculty. Providence—that is, the Living God—may overrule the results of this process, but cannot entirely dispense with it, so that we may, in this connexion, fairly apply those words of the Apostle: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” And secondly, that a revelation is designed, in the first instance, for a special historical moment, that we must make allowance for the state of morals, manners, politics, and religion, at the time when it was granted. Prophecy, the highest form of revelation, is no mere natural product; and yet, prophetic revelation never violates the psychological laws of human nature.

These arguments, indeed, are only of weight to those who accept the fundamental ideas of the Bible, and no one, perhaps, would accept these ideas in their integrity, were it not for his faith in Jesus Christ. As long as the name of Jesus Christ is merely a symbol for the all-forgiving love of God (a doctrine which was hardly that of the great Teacher Himself), you can exercise an agreeable eclecticism, choose what you will take of the Biblical forms of thought, and what you will reject, and attach your own shade of meaning to your selection. But those who have taken the Gospels as they stand, and contemplated apart from human theories the astonishing figure therein presented, will not be very eager to claim so dangerous a privilege. They will prefer to believe in religious matters as Jesus Christ believed, and the experience of their spiritual life will ever more and more ratify this initial act of self-subordination. By such, the considerations which I have urged may be found useful.

Far be it from me to undervalue the literary and historical criticism of the Bible, or to join an eminent canon of a northern cathedral in describing as equal enemies of the faith materialism, and what is called the “higher criticism.” Literary and historical criticism had not arisen among the Jews of our Lord’s time. In accordance with the psychological fitness which marks every part of revelation, the Spirit who spoke in Jesus Christ could not move Him to solve problems with which religion was not as yet concerned. Questions of date and authorship, and within certain limits of exegesis, and even of historical fact, are therefore as open as geology, even to those who, in the full sense of the word, believe in Jesus Christ. All that is forbidden to such a one

is, to form assumptions based on a denial of the supernatural; he cannot admit the pre-supposition that experience—that is, non-Christian experience—is the measure of all things, and that the event of all events could not be prepared for by providential arrangements only less strikingly supernatural than itself.

Still, as I have said, there are but few of us who are called to enter minutely into Biblical criticism. What we have to do, is to “search” the sacred texts; indeed, without this as a preliminary, of what use would be the fullest acquaintance with modern criticism? I have tried in this sermon to point out the importance of beginning our study at the right end, viz., at the New Testament, and especially the life of our Lord regarded as a whole. Unless you do this, you are liable to be carried away by every wind of modern doctrine—not to speak of the deadening influence on the spiritual life, of a mere literary analysis of the Biblical writings. But once get a clear view of the master-figure of the Gospels, and yield yourself to the transforming influence which issues from it; in a word, believe as St. John and St. Paul believed, and you will carry with you a heavenly atmosphere, which will enable you to breathe in the most uncongenial, the most decidedly non-Christian society. You will not (if you have much of the Spirit of Christ) be nervously anxious to answer objections. You will recognise, as Christ would have recognised, the love of truth and the sound reason which distinguish many of those who follow not with you; and you will not imagine that, because God has vouchsafed to you the gift of faith, you are therefore competent to determine off-hand the numerous difficulties inseparable from an ancient literature like the Bible. You will probably, as I have said, divine the existence of some third solution of the great Biblical problems, neither in the old-fashioned sense orthodox, nor yet rationalistic, but which does justice to the elements of truth in both, and equally in conversation and in your private reading you will be ready to learn from those on either side. Only you will not be ashamed of your definitely Christian bias, and certain fundamental facts and ideas will to you be beyond the range of discussion.

The fundamental ideas of the Bible require a much deeper study than we are in the habit of giving. It is as explaining the progressive revelation of these ideas that the

study of the Old Testament, and the study of Hebrew, are, to a theological student, of such importance. One other source of illustration of these ideas yet remains to be mentioned—the study of the religions of the other Eastern races besides the Jews. It can hardly be doubted that several of our theological controversies would have been either avoided or conducted more intelligently if we had entered into earlier relations with the Eastern races. The most fundamental of all the Biblical ideas—that of the living, loving, and righteous God—is far more vividly realised by the genuine Mohammedan than by most Protestant Christians. It is, of course, inevitable that it should be so. In order to carry on the work of civilisation committed to the Western races, we must act more or less frequently as if second causes were all in all, and as if our own will were the highest thing in the universe. But the Mohammedan, as in former times did the Jew, still believes that God acts immediately alike in natural phenomena, and in the events of human life. It is not merely a blind fate, but a loving Providence which he believes in. The prayer which the poor Arab of the desert repeats before going to sleep, closes with these most touching words: “O Thou who providest for the blind hyæna, provide for me!” Then, again, take the idea of Incarnation. To the Hindoo, this is the logical and necessary result of the belief in God. It is true that his idea of God is very incomplete. He only knows God as an all-pervading life; the Christian knows Him as Righteousness and Love. But the Hindoo realises distinctly—indeed, only too distinctly—that God cannot exist in isolation, but must reveal Himself in the noblest of all forms, the human. Again, take the Christian idea of holiness, as consisting in detachment from self and the world. The genuine Buddhist realises this with only too great an accuracy. For want of other moderating and mitigating truths, holiness becomes something very difficult to distinguish from annihilation. Still, he does realise it; and a great French writer has said that next to Jesus Christ there has been no such model of exalted virtue as Sakya Mouni, called the Buddha.

To some, versed in the annals of Christian charity, this may seem an excess of generosity. But *he* can well afford to be generous, who believes with the most spiritual of the Evangelists that Christ, the Word of God, is “the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”*

* John i., 9.

It is, perhaps, a permissible dream that the next revival of Christianity may take place, not in the West, but in the East. At any rate, it was from the East that we received our fundamental religious ideas ; to the East let us return as students for a fresh religious inspiration. Did we but believe the true, the complete religion as fervently as the genuine Mohammedan, or the genuine Buddhist believes his untrue, because incomplete religion, oh, what different lives should we lead ! What they need to supplement and correct their religion is the knowledge of a fact, viz., that all their deepest longings are fulfilled in the Son of God made flesh. What we need is too often that hunger and thirst of the soul, that sense of sin and weakness, without which the life of Christ will be either a mere fact of history or a cunningly-devised fable. Our case is bad, but it is not hopeless. All power is given unto Christ both in heaven and on earth, and he can revive that spiritual sense which we seem to be almost without. Let us put our foot on the lowest round of the ladder, and looking to Christ, confess our own utter inability to save ourselves. With this humble act of faith our progress in the spiritual life must begin, but having once begun, it need never cease till through the grave and gate of death we pass to the presence of Him who is the Resurrection and the Life.

LONDON :
VICTORIA STEAM PRESS, PRAED STREET,
PADDINGTON, W.





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