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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## ON THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

### I

IN times of stress and strain, when men and women are put to it to keep a calm sough, when a God who is the very figment of concentrated *ideals* would be the pure mockery of an aid in facing the *real* devilries of which Europe is to-day the victim, at any time, indeed, of spiritual conflict or unrest, it is important to have been made aware *that* God is real, to know *how* He makes Himself real to men and *where* He allows Himself to be found of them in His undeniable reality. It is plain sense, that if God is to be true and real for us in a valid sense, He must be the same and be presented as the same by His messengers and disciples. I have enough experience of regular pew work to know the diversity of teaching that exists in matters of the faith, and how desirable it is to choose one's minister if that is possible. But if one cannot, and if from the pulpit winds and waves of doctrine blow and flow which do not hang together, we must have some sort of measure by which to sort out the right from the wrong message. We want to use the good in all earnest preaching and to discard what is useless, useless because not God's truth.

The one infallible source *is* God alone. But men have such various ideas of God and of His commands, that some of them *must* be deceived. To those whose knowledge of God is not knowledge of God as we have it in Christ—even if they think it is!—it is our Christian impulse as well as our duty to send missionaries. But sometimes even missionaries, at all events at the beginning of their careers, differ as to what is essential. The raw divinity student has been known to doubt the unpalatable knowledge of his preceptor in Christian doctrine. It is not surprising! Do not all of us subconsciously desire to believe what *we* approve? And Christian truths, some of them, are actually most uncompromising. There is an ingrained tendency, hard to eliminate from human nature, to make God after its own image or its own fancy, to argue from human sentiments or ideals

what He *must* or must *not* be like in His nature and actions. To those who approach divinity studies under the sway of such uninstructed eclecticism it comes at first as a shock to be told, that the teacher does not care what students think or imagine concerning what truth should be; he is in his chair to teach them a record of facts and nothing but facts, facts which at their peril they are at liberty to take or to leave, but which for the Christian "winna ding", which refuse to be twisted into something other, even reputedly better in human eyes. There must be something in this cast-iron orthodox view, because at once you recollect that after all Christians of every hue, not to omit the devil, like to *quote* Scripture for their purposes, if possible. Clearly, somehow, Scripture is an *authority*, and even the critic would make it *the*, on *his own*, authority. To what extent? Over what range? By what usage? The Christian answers to these questions are valuable, usable knowledge. We must be sure that they really are Christian. If we can open up to believers the treasure house of the Bible—and such it clearly is to the best of Christians—they will be able to fortify themselves directly at the source of all truth and power, since that is one of the awkward facts that "winna ding"; we shall all indeed find ourselves immutably ingrafted into that power. What is the Bible and how are we to use it, so that our morale (to use that horrid word!) is connected up with an inexhaustible supply, proof against everything?

Knowing the recent history of the Christian search for truth, the question for us is how *we* are to interpret the Bible, and how far this interpretation may become criticism. The older of us can remember the slow corrosion of Higher Criticism, which honestly felt the dictates of reason compel it to dissent from the older, orthodox view, that if a man have the Spirit of God—a very large "if"!—he is thereby able to discern the Gospel in Scripture as he could not discern it without the Spirit, however great his natural talents, however steadfast his application to study. Are we to say to-day, as John Knox, e.g., would have said, that the Bible is the word of God, in the sense that if—again that large "if"—a man have the Spirit, the Bible is literally God speaking?

## II

Higher Criticism is a very *sensible* outlook upon this whole problem. The critic comes as a man of judgment and culture to the reading and interpretation of our wonderful Christian volume; yet, if he could only realise it, he begs the *Christian* question by taking an impartial view of the problems revealed by his study. It is no crime to be impartial, and it is an enthralingly fascinating pursuit, when applied to Scripture. But it is clean off the narrow gauge of Christian faith. Commonsense, human sense alone becomes the arbiter in all disputes, granted that it is backed by competent knowledge in the necessary departments. The results have been manifold and largely valuable, but to those accustomed to the inerrant word of God (not man), frequently disquieting or unsettling. Sometimes they have aroused a righteous anger, termed by the critics "obscurantism" or even "intellectual dishonesty", rightly enough from the so-called critical viewpoint, which eliminates the work of the Holy Spirit. This critical outlook with its mundane clarity emanated chiefly from Germany. The basis of the new-fangled interpretation was and is that all truth is one, whether it is God's truth (in the Christian view accessible only to believers), or truth accessible to human intelligence as such, regenerate or unregenerate. If science is true, then *some* of the Bible is untrue. And science does not mean just Genesis or Joshua or Kings. It means palaeography, historical judgment, facility in languages and a host of other faculties and credentials, which make the human factor in Bible religion critically, in the sense of judicially important, which indeed give it the last word. For criticism in all its departments must obey the rules and outlooks of all the departments of human knowledge which it exercises, as *sui juris*. There must be no gap in the unity of known and knowable.

Now the upsetting thing for the higher critics is that, if God's revelation is indispensable to salvation and men cannot know of it without *super-natural* revelation, then truth is *not* one, at least not one on earth, but *two*. There is the truth accessible to human genius or ingenuity, and there is the truth that even the fool can call his own, if it please God to impart it to him. Between them yawns a gulf, a bottomless abyss, across which God *alone* can *bring* it. And God is not an "object" of knowledge; He is an insoluble reality, whom we must take as

He presents Himself, namely, in Himself, a surd indescribable to which we have not even an approximate answer on the scale of human categories. Before God as Christians meet with Him, men worshipping bow the head—which is not the higher-critical, the scientific attitude. And yet we hold that the systematisation of the Christian facts which “winna ding” is scientific!

Just suppose you believe that knowledge of God in Christ is specially communicated to God's chosen people by God Himself and not otherwise, and that God increases the faith and sanctification of His chosen by referring them to the *Bible*, and making that as *He* pleases, flare up into supernatural fires of revelation, always by His own Spirit. Then someone comes along and tells you that you really must not thus take Scripture for granted—which you *must*, if it is God's word, God speaking!—that if you study it you will see, for instance, that the Mosaic books are neither by Moses nor by any one man, but are a “mosaic” of clearly discernible sources, which criticism can readily separate out; that the Psalms are not by David, and the Proverbs are not by Solomon; that Jonah was not a prophet, because no whale could have swallowed him; that Esther ought not to be canonical, because it does not mention the name of God; that certain documents in the N.T. are apocryphal and that its historical as well as some of its parenetic documents are, as regards unity and authorship, in a most interesting state of composition, not to say decomposition. At once you ask yourself where *God* has got to. You are perhaps miserable, because you once believed the old stuff. Perhaps you are delighted, because now you can manufacture your own stuff and hang it on Biblical pegs, to pseudo-comfort any remaining Christians: because of *course*, on higher critical principles, it is *man* who is important, and God only if *man* consents to God's importance. Perhaps you will become a Fabian or a modernist, or search for God at the end of a telescope, or in the realms of higher mathematics with the Bishop of Birmingham.

*And yet the higher critic still appeals to the Bible!* He feels that he has got to use it, that he is serving truth by his criticism. Modernists like the Anglo-Catholic are in some ways as devout and reactionary as could be desired. What are we plain people, *commonly* called Christians, to say to this destruction of *revelation*?—to the measurement of it, I mean, by the final decision of

*human* judgment, while still professing to retain a modicum of reverential authority for the Bible as God's word as it stands?

### III

I thank and praise God that I am still wholeheartedly old-fashioned, and unimpressed by the chess play of criticising Biblical documents on Teutonic lines. I do agree that Higher Criticism so called is more than mental and moral gymnastics. It is even high-souled. It is a perfectly justifiable, incomparably interesting pursuit, from the linguistic, literary and historical standpoints. But to the issues of living Christian faith it is totally *irrelevant*. Regarded otherwise it is positively dangerous, and leads men off the narrow way. Any old-fashioned person to whom God grants the gifts of His Spirit sees that at once. The book we are left with is *not* the word of God written! And we know that no higher critic could be ignorant of this, were it not that, because of his own a priori views, he is *not in a position to be aware of his ignorance*—God having withheld His Spirit. Only those know, to whom God makes His *supernatural*, saving approach. We are not superior when we say this: we know how humbling it is to hear God speak. But we must assert what, thanks be to God alone, we know to be true. Let us glance at chance examples of this higher criticism: and the Old Testament "results" constitute the commonest stumbling-block.

The Higher Critic says of the creation story that its obvious source is the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh. But to say that the true meaning of Genesis is the meaning of the Babylonian epic is sheer nonsense. Even if the writer of Genesis knew the Gilgamesh tale, he did not turn *it* into the Genesis story; by writing the Genesis story *he deliberately denied it*. We also feel that the Higher Critic should see *that* for Himself. Or we are told that the Hexateuch is made up of sources conveniently called J E D P H and so on, which were stuck together by a mere redactor or compiler. The critics cannot see that the man who made such a compilation was a man of spiritual insight far above the critics, and that he meant, not his separate sources if we have them in the Massoretic text, but *his compilation so-called*: his work is great because it was done in the Holy Spirit, i.e. by God's own command. Is any man who is a Christian likely to override our Lord's attitude to the *Old Testament* as preaching

himself? Will he rule out the "doubtful" cases among the New Testament documents, because they stress doctrines like election, reprobation, predestination, which are contained in the, historically, best documents in the whole Bible? I trow *not!* And yet no human philosophising can like or explain such doctrines; the human instinct, revelation apart, is to explain them *away*.

No man or woman who knows what conversion is, i.e. who has been reborn in Christ by the promised Spirit, can feel any difficulty about reading the *Bible* as it stands, as a unity created and made effectual for us by God Himself according as His people can bear it. Such a man or woman knows that the soul has literally been fed and strengthened through the reading of the Word and the hearing of it preached, through God's own direct means, for Christ's sake. Pulpit and pew need the same sustenance, though their gifts may widely differ. We Christians know that our reading of Scripture as the Word of God is our *indispensable* food for the spirit. If we are not being fed on it, it is because we do not approach it as the word of God; we do not realise that it is *God's* word. We are forgetting, perhaps, that *every time* we must wait for *God* to unlock the revelation it contains. We never control God: God controls us. And it is the very same when we approach Him through the Bible. We cannot control the Bible as Scripture. We open the Book, then, for no reason except to seek *Jesus Christ*, the primeval Word of God and our salvation. He that *seeketh* findeth, not the man who expects God to manifest Himself at the mere opening of the Book, or a man who is probably without real desire to meet the Most High. If God the Spirit dwell in our hearts, the Book *will* speak and our hearts be joyful, though we certainly shall not be able to reason *behind* what it tells us. If there is no voice from Scripture at *our* will, let us learn the vital lesson of waiting patiently upon God's good pleasure. But it is not His good pleasure to starve His chosen of spiritual food, although He alone prescribes the measure of His grace to them. His food is meat indeed, sustenance to carry us through grievous tribulations, given us for the doing of God's will, not our human pleasure. Let us then be patient and confident in our waiting: God *has* His times for us.

## IV

Now, seek God as you consider some of these Scriptures. "Every scripture inspired of God is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for discipline which is in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work", 2 Tim. iii. 16. "The sacred writings are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus", ib. iii. 15. The men of Berea "received the word with all readiness, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so", Acts xvii, 12. "Seek ye out of the book of the Lord, and read . . . for my mouth *it* hath commanded and *his* spirit it hath gathered them", Isa. xxxiv. 16. It is by our study that "we have the mind of Christ", 1 Cor. ii. 16. "We have the word of prophecy made *more* sure; whereunto ye do well in taking heed, as unto a lamp shining in a squalid place, until the day dawn and the day-star arise in your hearts. No prophecy ever came of private interpretation"; why? "because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; but men spake from *God*, being moved by the Holy Spirit", 2 Pet. i. 19-21. Consequently in reading what they spake, "we are begotten again, not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible, through the word of God which liveth and abideth", 1 Pet. i. 23. This word of God "is living, and active, and sharper than a two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit . . . and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart", Heb. iv. 12.

Note how these quotations refer to the Old Testament. In a sense it is true that we are all New Testament Christians. But those who use the New without the Old are not New Testament Christians but maimed Christians. We must then search the Old Testament also with diligence, for it speaks of Christ to come, and is a prophecy of which the incarnate life is the fulfilment both in Bethlehem for a season and for ever in glory. The whole word of God, the Bible, the Holy Spirit opens up for us, so that we are taught and empowered of Him the Comforter, to put on Jesus Christ and to realise and live out our incorporation in Him. So Scripture makes our souls grow up unto life eternal. We shall know what is being done to us, because we shall be enabled to live life unto God, even we. But

this knowledge is insusceptible of any human explanations at all. For equally we shall know that, but for the Spirit and the Word, we should and do know nothing more than the wisdom of the higher critic *as such*.

Do let us remember as Christians, that we are really God's people, that for us God is His own critic of what He imparts to us—a "high" enough critic for us!—and that, as we grow in holiness by His Spirit, He will open up His word and confirm our faith thereby, till we can *prove* in faith's way, thus and thus only, that He is the Rock upon which faith is built.

I have deliberately sought to avoid learned categories. My aim is to exhort fellow Christians, in reading Scripture, to look more and more to God as His own interpreter, who will contrive to make it abundantly plain for us to live victoriously by it, because the Bible is His word and we are the people to whom it is addressed. That He does it by His own Spirit is abundantly plain from the sheer power that invades our being, and from the hope begotten of it, which maketh not ashamed. Thanks be to God, we know the facts, though the facts are solely of God, though no *human* exegesis can ever fill their message with saving power. And now

"Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel,  
Who only doeth wondrous things;  
And blessed be his glorious name for ever;  
And let the whole earth be filled with his glory.  
Amen, and Amen."

Ps. lxxii. 18-19.

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