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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.[1]

I. General.

We are all fully familiar with the fact that religion is a divisive force amongst progressive and strenuous peoples. Religion, for instance, has split English society into a thousand fragments.

Every period of the history of Israel illustrates this truth. The Pentateuch continually describes the struggles between Moses and those who disputed his authority. Later on we have the kings of Israel and Judah divided into two classes, "those who did that which was right in the eyes of Yahweh," and "those who did evil in the sight of Yahweh." Then we have Elijah and Elisha contending with the worshippers of Baal; later still we have a succession of great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and their fellows denouncing the conventional religion of their times in opposition to the ecclesiastical authorities, kings, priests and prophets. Again after the Exile we find similar divisions, Ezra and Nehemiah are the leaders of one party, while many of the nobles and priests of Judah are found in the other. This division was perpetuated in the bitter feud between the Jews and the Samaritans.

When Alexander the Great had introduced Greek civilisation into the East, the Jews were divided between the friends and the enemies of Greek culture. In our Lord's time there were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.

[1] Two Lectures delivered at the Oxford Summer School of Theology, 1912.

Herein, as in so much else, Christianity has followed in the steps of Judaism.

Christ Himself was under no delusion in this matter, He knew that He had not come to give peace in the earth, but rather division, henceforth there were to be five in one house divided, three against two and two against three; father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

It has been very much the fashion to deal with these antagonisms under simple and clear categories which provided vivid contrasts, e.g., true religion and idolatry, good and bad kings, true and false prophets, the Chosen People—the heathen. One party was all right and the other all wrong.

According to this view, true religion might be compared to a single stream, forcing its way through all obstacles, gathering strength as it went on—one, simple, homogeneous, subduing all things to itself. There would of course be a measure of truth in the figure. Or, again, we might take the Biblical figures; religion is a tree whose history is that of continuous growth from a seed, continuous development of what was present in the seed at the beginning. Or yet again, the gradual leavening of a mass by a small piece of leaven.

In these days we think in terms of evolution (not perhaps so much now as we did a few years ago, but still very largely), and we think of the steady continuous evolution of truth from good to better, from better to best.

In all this there is much truth. We take sides, as it were, with Moses and David, with Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezra, and we applaud and admire them and condemn their adversaries; and practically and broadly we are right.

Practically and broadly—but when we look at the matter from the point of view of the historian, we can hardly be satisfied with the popular treatment of the controversies of the Old Testament.

Let us take two or three well-known examples, e.g. Jeroboam I., who made Israel to sin, Ahab and Jezebel. How often we have heard these monarchs held up as monsters of iniquity. Their ecclesiastical policy was condemned by the more mature experience of Israel; they were in opposition to the prophets whose teaching ultimately triumphed, and therefore—they may be assumed to be guilty of every possible crime. Smith's *Old Testament History*, for instance, speaks of the vices of Jeroboam and his family, and describes Ahab as the feeblest of the kings of Israel; such phrases as "the wicked Ahab" are familiar; and as for the unfortunate Jezebel, her very name is a byword.

Notice too what different measure is meted out to Ahab and David. The record of each is blotted by a foul crime. David had Uriah done to death for the sake of his wife; Ahab had Naboth executed for the sake of a vineyard. Each of these sinners repented at the admonition of a prophet and received the Divine forgiveness.

But David is a saint and hero; we treat his act as the one great lapse of a noble character; we admire his penitence almost more than we abhor his sin. But in the case of Ahab it has been the fashion to treat *his* sin as characteristic, to judge his whole life by it, and even to doubt the sincerity of his repentance. Thus Calvin (*Inst.* i. 530) tells us that Ahab "was only amazed on the sudden, and afterwards continued his former course of life. He, indeed, clothed himself in sackcloth, covered himself with ashes, lay on the ground and (as the testimony given to him bears) humbled himself before God. It was a small matter

to rend his garments while his heart continued obstinate and swollen with wickedness."

I may illustrate by a modern instance. If any one were to say that Mr. Asquith or Mr. Bonar Law, as the case might be, was the David of our English Israel, we might think the comparison inappropriate, but we should understand that it was meant to be complimentary. But if I were to say that Ahab was as respectable as some leading politician of the present day, I should probably delight some of my readers and disgust the rest. I certainly could not venture to parallel any lady to Jezebel.

I have an impression that this attitude still persists in a good deal of popular teaching and preaching, but Christian scholarship has become more impartial; some perhaps are inclined to go to the opposite extreme in whitewashing the villains, so to speak, of the Old Testament.

I have no wish to go to such extremes; but it is only fair to remember that the judgment of the Old Testament on these kings is political and ecclesiastical. Jeroboam was a rebel against the House of David, the founder, or at any rate the patron, of sanctuaries which were rivals to the Temple. Ahab and Jezebel encouraged the worship of the Tyrian Baal and neglected the claims of Yahweh to the exclusive homage of Israel. It does not therefore follow that they were bad. There is nothing, for instance, to show that the family of Jeroboam was more vicious, or indeed anything like so vicious, as the family of David. We have practically no information whatever about the moral character of Jeroboam. Considering that all we read about him comes from hostile pens, it seems to me that it is quite possible that he was as good—I do not say as spiritual—a man as David.

We are coming to recognise too that, as Dr. Welch says (p. 158), Ahab was not "the feeble fool who is frequently

held up to derision," and may be inclined to agree with Loisy (p. 137) that "Ahab was, so far as we can judge, a brave prince and an able statesman."

It is quite clear that the Syrians did not regard him as a "feeble fool" at his last fatal battle at Ramoth Gilead; he was the one man that mattered both to friend and foe. "The king of Syria commanded the thirty and two captains of his chariots, saying, Fight neither with small nor great, save only with the king of Israel." Sore wounded and dying, "he was stayed up in his chariot against the Syrians till the evening," and it was only when he died that his army dispersed.

A prince or soldier or statesman may take the wrong side in religious controversy and yet be able, good and even devout.

That, I suppose, seems obvious when it is stated as an abstract proposition, but we are slow to apply it practically in our own times, in such matters, say, as Disestablishment; and we are not much inclined to apply it to history. For instance, the popular Protestant view of Queen Mary Tudor is usually summed up in a single rude uncomplimentary epithet. So, too, in the Old Testament the popular imagination clings to the sacred tradition which provides it with striking contrasts between perfect saints and heroes on the one hand and desperate villains on the other.

But we cannot afford to sacrifice too much to the popular passion for melodrama, the Scripture narrative gains in real value when we understand the progress of revealed religion not as a struggle between angels and demons, but as worked out between people who were alike human and imperfect. On both sides, for the most part, men were earnest, sincere and well-intentioned; on both sides there was usually a measure of self-will and self-seeking.

We do not lose much; we need not dwell on the defects

of the saints, the Scriptures encourage us to contemplate them at their best, when they attained most nearly to their ideals; but we have a great gain because we can recognise what was noble and true and good even in men who had the misfortune to be on what ultimately turned out to be the wrong side.

Take, for instance, the end of Saul, forsaken by God and man, defeated and slain, he and his gallant sons, in a last, desperate struggle with the enemies of Israel. I suppose it would sound very dreadful to say that such an end was more heroic, more noble, than that of David, who passed away in the odour of sanctity, with priest and prophet about his dying bed. And yet I am not sure that David, harassed in his last hours by the selfish intrigues of his wife and sons, eager for the succession, may not have envied the loyal fellowship in life and death of Saul and Jonathan. At any rate David knew how to appreciate Saul; it may be, of course, that the right view of him is as the guilty king, the sinner crushed by the wrath of God; but I am not sure how far we have the right to judge him. Surely the world owes much to princes and captains who persevered in their service to their country, though the Lord did not answer them either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets, though they were banned by the Church and the oracles were dumb.

Let us turn, by way of further example, to the antagonism represented by the judgments of the Deuteronomic writers on the kings of Israel and Judah. You remember that these monarchs are dealt with in the fashion which we have been describing; they are sharply divided into two classes, one class receives emphatic approval, the other an equally emphatic condemnation. There were the kings who "did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did David" (Asa, 1 Kings xv. 11), and those "who did

that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord" (Baasha, xv. 34). We may call them for short the "good" kings and the "bad" kings. There is no express statement as to what is meant by the formulæ.

But I think we can easily discern that these judgments were not, essentially and in the first instance, moral or even religious, but rather ecclesiastical and political. They mean that these kings, from the point of view of the Deuteronomic writers, were on the wrong side in religious controversies and incidentally also on the wrong side in politics.

To begin with the kings of Israel, they were all without exception "bad," they all "did evil in the eyes of the Lord." There were twenty-one of them and they belonged to several different families. The condemnation is evidently a conventional formula; it is applied even to Zimri, who only reigned a week (1 Kings xvi. 19); and also, to refer for a moment to kings of Judah, to Jehoahaz, who came to the throne at the age of twenty-three and reigned three months (2 Kings xxiii. 31); and to Jehoiachin, who came to the throne at the age of eighteen, and also reigned three months (xxiv. 8).

Now, in the absence of express and definite statements as to the evil deeds of the kings of Israel, it is hardly fair to condemn all twenty-one, all the members of all the various dynasties, on the strength of a conventional formula. We rather interpret the formula by its indiscriminate application to so many men who must have differed widely in their moral character and conduct.

No doubt, there were amongst them not only able statesmen and brave warriors like Ahab, but also men of high moral character, who were also earnest and devout. When a formula is applied to all the kings of Israel, it is clear that they are condemned because they were kings of Israel;

heads of the State and Church in the Northern Kingdom.

It was an offence to the Deuteronomic writers that there was any Israelite state which did not own Jerusalem as its capital and a Davidic prince as its king; and that there was any Israelite Church of which Solomon's Temple was not the one sanctuary. Hence in their eyes the kings of Israel were all rebels, heretics, and schismatics; they did evil in the sight of the Lord.

The use of the formulæ for the Northern kings helps us to understand what they mean for the kings of Judah. When it is said that a king of Judah "did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord," it means first of all that he was a prince of the House of David and a patron of the Temple. If we ask how much more it means, various answers may be given.

The matter, however, is simple for the last kings of Judah. The judgments upon them, as we have said, are the work of writers whose Bible, so to speak, was *Deuteronomy*. For them, therefore, an essential feature of true religion was the unique position of the Temple as the only legitimate sanctuary of Yahweh. Hezekiah, we are told, anticipated the requirements of *Deuteronomy* in this matter, and Josiah carried out its ordinances; therefore it is said that they did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord. The other kings after Hezekiah failed in this respect, therefore it is said of them that they did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord.

But when we turn to the period before Hezekiah, the formulæ cannot be explained thus. *Kings* tells us frankly that none of the "good" kings were "good" in this respect; none of them tried to limit the public worship of Yahweh to the Temple, all of them tolerated other sanctuaries. Again and again we are told that the high places were not taken away, even by the "good" kings. Hence before

Hezekiah the criterion of royal rightness in the eyes of the Lord cannot have been a scrupulous insistence on the unique claims of the Temple.

The condemnation of the "bad" kings of Judah is mostly intelligible. Rehoboam seems to have lost the ten tribes by a display of foolish insolence; moreover *Deuteronomy* regards misfortune as a mark of God's anger against sin. Thus both the disruption of the kingdom, and the way in which it came about, would fully explain the adverse judgment on the king who was responsible for this calamity.

Another group of Jewish sovereigns were discredited by their connexion with Ahab and Jezebel; Athaliah was their daughter; Jehoram was the husband of Athaliah; and Ahaziah was their son. We need not ask for any further reason why it is said that Jehoram, Ahaziah and Athaliah did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord; though, of course, Athaliah's massacre of the princes of the House of David, and her Baal worship were heinous sins.

It is a little striking that Jehoshaphat is described as a "good" king, for he made peace with Israel; he became an ally of Ahab; and presumably arranged the match between his son Jehoram and Athaliah. Apparently, however, all this was more than atoned for by his other doings; we read that he executed certain moral reforms, and that he attached more importance to a single prophet who was hostile to Ahab than to the 400 prophets of the Lord who gave the king of Israel the advice he wanted.

There is no definite information to explain the statement, I. xv. 3, that Abijah the son of Rehoboam "walked in all the sins of his father." Moreover 2 Chronicles xiii. omits this description of Abijah's conduct and rewards him with a great victory over Jeroboam, because in his

days Judah was loyal to Yahweh. It may be doubted how far any real information is behind either *Kings* or *Chronicles* as to the character and conduct of Abijah. Ahaz could not fail to be condemned because of his antagonism to Isaiah.

Turning to the "good" kings, Asa, like Jehoshaphat, effected certain reforms in morals and ritual; Joash was the protégé of a high priest; Amaziah acted like Joash, Uzziah like Amaziah, Jotham like Uzziah. Here again the statement that "X did according to all that his father Y had done" is clearly a conventional formula indicating continuity of ecclesiastical policy, and may have nothing to do with the personal character of the several kings.

When we try to explain the different formulæ in the light of the facts, two main alternatives suggest themselves, and it is not easy to decide between them.

(1) It is possible that throughout the monarchy there were two well-defined religious parties, and that the sovereign sometimes belonged to the one and sometimes to the other; the kings of the one party did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, the kings of the other party did that which was evil in His eyes. If this were so, there was an age-long religious controversy in Israel between a higher and a lower faith, and the government was sometimes upon the one side and sometimes upon the other; or, as we might say, now the one, and now the other was the Established Church; much as for a time the English sovereigns and the English Church alternated between Romanism and Protestantism.

Our view on this particular point will largely depend on our theory as to the early history of the religion of Israel; and here unfortunately there is much uncertainty, because the data are meagre and ambiguous. According to some, Moses, or even Abraham, taught a pure and

enlightened monotheism. Thus, for instance, Volz, in his monograph *Mose*, not only credits Moses with such teaching, but also supposes that he founded within Israel a league or guild to preserve and transmit his teaching. After the Conquest of Canaan many of the people adulterated the pure worship of Yahweh with Canaanite superstitions, and even identified Yahweh with the Baals, or worshipped the Baals along with Him ; but the League and its followers remained faithful to the higher faith. If this is a correct theory, it might give us our two parties, one faithful to the traditions of Moses, the other indulging a loose, eclectic worship, which combined or confounded Yahweh and Baal.

It is quite possible that the Deuteronomic writers held some such theory.

It is, of course, true that we can trace two tendencies after the Conquest ; on the one hand there are the Israelite ideas of religion and worship, which they brought with them from the wilderness and associated with Yahweh ; on the other hand the Israelites came under the influence of Canaanite religion and largely yielded to that influence. But I doubt whether these developed a sharp antagonism between defined and organised parties on the lines of these two tendencies.

Doubtless there would be rivalry between the priests of one sanctuary and those of another ; but the evidence suggests that the priests of two Yahweh-Temples, say Jerusalem and Bethel, might be as bitterly opposed to one another as a Yahweh priesthood to a Baal priesthood.

The value of the Deuteronomic theory on this matter is uncertain ; even if these writers were following tradition, they probably interpreted the tradition according to their own experience, and transferred to ancient history the conditions of their own times. Probably they disguised these conditions in names and words suitable to the bygone

days of which they wrote; they were familiar with the warfare between Yahweh and Bel of Babylon; it was easy to imagine a like struggle between Yahweh and Baal of Canaan. The later contest with the idolatry of Babylon had clear and definite issues; it was easy to imagine that the earlier controversy was equally simple.

But the surviving literature does not give the impression of conscious and continuous antagonism, of opposing ideals represented by conflicting parties. At any rate, so it seems to me, and such, I should gather, is the view of most of the writers on Old Testament Theology, though they do not expressly discuss this problem.

The primitive portions [1] of the history up to the time of Ahab and Elijah imply a certain unity amongst Israel in religious matters, Yahweh is universally acknowledged as the God of Israel, but the special devotion of Israel to Yahweh does not exclude a minor homage to other supernatural beings. Within this unity there were many differences and dissensions, differences of ritual at the various temples, rival priests and sanctuaries, rivalries between priests and prophets and kings, varying degrees of zeal for Yahweh as shown in external religious observances. But all these differences were such as might exist in a single church, so to speak, which had not developed any clearly defined parties.

If this view is correct, it follows that the "good" and "bad" kings cannot have been representatives of such opposing parties.

Indeed the uniform badness of the Northern kings seems fatal to any such view.

There were constant revolutions and changes of dynasty in the Northern Kingdom; and in the nature of things a pretender to the throne would sometimes have associated

[1] I.e., omitting the notes, etc., of the Deuteronomic Editors.

himself with the religious party opposed to the reigning sovereign. Once indeed something of the sort happened; Elijah and Elisha were hostile to the dynasty of Omri, and Jehu came to the throne by the help of Elisha, and Elisha appears as the friend and counsellor of Jehu and his successors. Nevertheless Jehu and his house are "bad" kings, because—we are told—they still maintained the worship of the Golden Calf. But probably at this time nobody in Israel objected to the Calf.

Let us turn, then, to a second alternative, thus :—

(2) We have already said that the judgments on the kings cannot be regarded as determining their conduct or their moral or spiritual character. In the case of the later kings of Judah these judgments probably indicate their ecclesiastical policy; it is possible that the judgments on the earlier kings of Judah are an application of the Deuteronomic theory as to the alternate supremacy of parties loyal and disloyal to Yahweh. The Deuteronomic framework of the Book of Judges is constructed on that theory.

The theory no doubt had some foundation in fact, there *were* changes of attitude towards the exclusive claims of Yahweh, but the details both in *Judges* and *Kings* are due to a mechanical and rigid application of the theory which does not correspond to the facts.

I am inclined, therefore, to believe that the judgments on the earlier kings of Judah are not based on real information as to their religious policy. I should rather explain these judgments thus : a king of Israel, as I have said, was "bad" because he was a king of Israel, nothing could atone for rebellion against the House of David and patronage of rival sanctuaries to the Temple. Similarly the kings of Judah were "good" simply as kings of Judah, unless tradition had preserved the memory of wrong-doing or

misfortune, etc., which marked them out as "bad," in the way we have already shown.

Thus this discussion as to "good" and "bad" kings serves in any case to illustrate the position that kings, judges, and other secular leaders who are condemned by the writers of the Old Testament, may nevertheless have been good and spiritually-minded men. The Old Testament writers were concerned with the practical edification of the people for whom they wrote. They condemned, and rightly condemned, principles and practices inconsistent with a fuller revelation; and they condemned certain persons as symbols and representatives of a lower obsolete stage of religious development. The practical effect of their judgments was entirely right.

A moment's thought will show that this principle cannot be limited to kings and judges; but must be extended, however startling it may seem, to priests whose ritual was condemned by inspired prophets, and even to the so-called "false prophets" whom the true prophets denounced.

High-priests of the sanctuary at Bethel where the Golden Calf was the symbol of Yahweh, and prophets who opposed Israel and Jeremiah were in the wrong as a matter of judgment and insight, but they might be good and holy men.

Indeed the principle must be carried even further: I said that these men were wrong as a matter of judgment and insight; that is not quite true; it requires two qualifications. (1) The religion which is condemned had its value for a primitive people; it carried their religious experience up to a certain point and expressed their spiritual emotions. Even with regard to idols, our experience of the immense superiority of worship without images prevents our realising that there is a stage at which images have their use, and that Israel passed through that stage.

Doubtless there came a time when certain priests and

prophets were wrong in clinging to obsolete formulæ and ceremonies which had outlived their usefulness, or would soon have outlived it. But this surely cannot be an unpardonable sin, for it is a characteristic of some of the best Christians of our own time; they are absorbed in the practical duties and exercises of religion, and do not care to revise the idioms, vocabulary and symbols of their faith. Thus in every period of transition there are always many for whom the older formulæ and the older spiritual dialect are still valid, and those who minister to them in this dialect are still delivering a divine message. Doubtless this was as true in the time of Amos and Isaiah as it is now.

(2) The second qualification is this. The history of religious controversy shows that the victory is never wholly on one side; the final result is always a compromise. The ultimate settlement owes much to the conquered as well as to the conquerors. This was true of Christianity and Judaism, Christianity and Paganism, Christianity and Greek Philosophy. It was also true of the various stages of the development of the Revealed Religion.

Moreover the contribution of the vanquished heretic to triumphant orthodoxy is not merely adulteration or corruption. It may be crude and primitive, inferior in a sense as other metals are to gold and silver; and yet the baser metals are useful as alloy in a coin or in the setting of a diamond.

But even as regards pure and ultimate truth, neither side in a theological controversy is ever entirely right; and even here the permanent faith often owes something to the heretic.

At one time there was much controversy in Israel between priest and prophet, between the religion of external observance and the religion of the inner life and of pure morality.

The final form of Judaism took much from each side. Ancient superstitions survived in rites which might be unmeaning but were harmless and picturesque. Sometimes such rites were clothed with a new symbolism, as in the case of Azazel and the Scapegoat. The elaborate ritual of the later law was largely a survival or an adaptation of things which Amos and Isaiah held of little account; and yet it had its value for the development of religion.

The angelic and demonic hierarchy of Judaism and Christianity is only the primitive world of supernatural beings thinly disguised.

Many other illustrations might be given, and my second lecture will deal with some of them.

Meanwhile I may conclude with one or two modern analogies to the relation between such prophets as Elijah and their opponents.

In the first place we must avoid a false analogy which does much to prevent a proper understanding of the Old Testament. Many modern Christians who are interested in missions would compare the relation between the prophets and their opponents with that between a modern missionary and the heathen of our day. Such a comparison is obviously misleading.

The missionary and his hearers belong to different races and different civilisations, and are often on entirely different planes as regards knowledge, education, and religion; whereas the prophets and their opponents were very much alike in all these matters; the differences were personal, such as might exist between two groups of Englishmen,—I am leaving on one side all question of inspiration.

I do not think, therefore, that the relations of missionaries to the heathen throw much light on our subject. Controversies in Israel would be better illustrated, as we have just suggested, by the contentions between two opposing

ecclesiastical parties in England, or some other mediæval or modern state.

Take, for instance, Protestants and Romanists; a controversial preacher or pamphleteer might speak about the other side much as the prophets did about their opponents.

Personally I am a pronounced Protestant, with the utmost respect and admiration for Luther and Calvin; but I should hardly use their statements without verification for a history of the Reformation or even of the Middle Ages. I feel, for instance, that I must make some allowance for rhetoric when Calvin says (Acts xxvi. 7) that "the Papists . . . oppress the Word of God, and give also the name and title of the Catholic Church to a filthy rabblement of unlearned and impure men without any colour or shame."

The sort of criticism we should apply to Luther and Calvin applies also in some measure to the writers of the Old Testament. They are first-class authorities, of their kind, on the social, moral and religious condition in their own times. Moreover, they have an inspired message. But we must remember what kind of authorities they are, and with what purpose they write and speak. Many of them, especially the prophets, are not only preachers or public speakers, but also poets; and they were engaged in a fierce controversy. The historical force of their statements must be estimated accordingly. Words and phrases used by orators and poets on the one hand, and by scientific historians and theologians on the other, have quite a different meaning and value. We allow for poetic and rhetorical licence.

We in no way detract from the sincerity of the inspired writers or from their importance for the development of Revealed Religion; but we must make these allowances if we seriously desire to understand the history of Israel.

W. H. BENNETT.