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THE HOLY BIBLE: with an Explanatory and  
Critical Commentary. By Bishops and other  
Clergy of the Anglican Church. Edited by F.  
C. Cook, M.A., Canon of Exeter. Vol. I. The  
Pentateuch. London: John Murray.

THIS is the first instalment of a work which, under the name of the Speaker's Bible, has been expected by the public for the last seven years. The idea of it originated during the excitement created in religious circles by the appearance of "Essays and Reviews" and the critical performances of such writers as Bishop Colenso and Dr Samuel Davidson. The principles maintained in such productions were calculated to shake the popular faith in those ideas of Inspiration and Biblical Infallibility which, however much questioned or even denied on the Continent, had long held undisputed sway in the average English mind. By many persons of the highest respectability the prospect of a change in this respect was viewed with disapprobation

and apprehension, and many pamphlets and treatises appeared, intended to guard the public mind against what were believed to be the dangerous doctrines of the innovating critics. Among others, the present Speaker of the House of Commons interested himself in the maintenance of the traditional views, and suggested to the Archbishop of York the advantages that would accrue to orthodox opinions by the publication of a comprehensive Commentary on the Scriptures, in which the latest results of Biblical learning should be presented in such a manner that a layman of ordinary education might have no difficulty in seeing the groundlessness of the objections raised against the opinions in which he had been reared. The Archbishop adopted the suggestion, and got together a number of coadjutors, expressly confined to the clergy of the Church of England, the first-fruits of whose labours, after various delays and the cogitations of several years, are now before the public.

In judging of such a work, it is only fair to bear in mind to whom it is addressed, by whom it is executed, and what object it has in view. It is intended for the laity, is meant to reconcile them to the ordinary evangelical view of the authority of Scripture, and is the production of persons who regard themselves bound in honour to maintain that view. In such circumstances we cannot expect the exhibition of scholarly processes, or much in the way of bold or even independent research or speculation. It would not have been too much, however, to expect that so extensive and wealthy a corporation as the Church of England might have given proof of the possession of a fair amount of ripe Old Testament learning, and of skill and decision in the defence of whatever critical positions were assumed. This expectation, however, is to a large extent disappointed. The Commentary, so far as it has gone, does not exhibit great or original Hebrew scholarship, or mature acquaintance with criticism. It is the work of

men who are intelligent rather than learned in the subject with which they deal. It would be unfair to deny that a very great deal of information, historical and exegetical, has been collected and judiciously arranged for the purpose of a popular elucidation of the text; but it is mainly a transference from Continental sources, and the one or two authorities whom we have at home. The lay reader will be saved the drudgery of hunting through Smith and Kitto for the explanations suitable to different passages and subjects, but that is really about the most that can be said of by far the larger portion of the notes and excursuses. This is no doubt a very useful work to have done, but it is work of a decidedly humble order. Perhaps the most original contribution to the volume is an Egyptological essay by Canon Cook, which is well done both as a *résumé* of existing materials and as an independent criticism of their import. But even of this production, meritorious though it be of its kind, it must be observed that it is very doubtful how far it is likely to impress the mind of an ordinary reader with the views which the Commentary was designed and executed to promote. Its main object is to confirm and illustrate the narrative of the Pentateuch from the Egyptian monuments, and from these sources it is undoubted that strong evidence is adduced in support of the authenticity of many statements in the Sacred Record. But it will not escape the notice of a vigilant reader of this kind of evidence (and Canon Cook's essay is only one of many such), that it fails to authenticate that class of statements for which authentication is most needed. It produces confirmation of the ordinary and natural events of history, but none whatever of those supernatural events which are the main or only stumbling-block to many readers, and the great object of modern scepticism. It is interesting to find side-light thrown in from the monuments upon the history of Abraham and Joseph, Pharaoh and Moses, and to see that the

current of ordinary events there narrated is in harmony with the actual conditions of Egyptian history and society at the period ; but it is very remarkable that no similar corroboration can be produced from those monuments of any of the miraculous and more extraordinary narratives which are the real sources of religious perplexity in connection with the Biblical record. On such events as the messages from Heaven to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others, the predictions of Joseph, the swallowing up of Moses' and Aaron's rods by those of the magicians, the plagues, the dividing of the Red Sea, and the like, the monuments are dumb. In matters where there are no difficulties of faith, this kind of apologetic is profuse in confirmation ; it begins to fail only at the point where faith needs to be assisted. It may well be questioned whether such a system of defence as this does any good to the cause which it is designed to support. Canon Cook's essay, moreover, illustrates another mistake which is not seldom committed by apologetic writers in the excess of their eagerness to maintain what they believe to be important positions. They often seek to defend their position too well, and in their zeal, use means of protection which have the effect of throwing open to attack, or even surrendering other parts of the general scheme which it may be equally essential to their purpose to maintain. For instance, Canon Cook, in his anxiety to establish an early authorship for the Pentateuch, makes it extremely difficult to establish a similar early authorship for the Book of Judges. He finds it necessary for his argument to show that during the time of the Judges, Judea was continually traversed or occupied by the Egyptian or Assyrian hosts in their strategical movements in search of each other. Had the Book of Judges been a contemporary record, it is not conceivable that it should have contained no reference to such transactions, any more than it is possible to imagine a history of Belgium



written without an allusion to the battle of Waterloo or those marchings, counter-marchings, and conflicts which made it the cockpit of Europe. Of course, if the Book of Judges is made out or conceded to be comparatively modern, the case is to that extent strengthened for those who contend for a later authorship of the whole Old Testament Scriptures.

If the Anglican clergy could not have produced, or were not, in terms of their undertaking, bound to produce, a great work of original scholarship and criticism, they might at least have been expected to perform with dexterity and resolution the special task which they avowedly took in hand—the reconciliation of the average popular mind to the traditional views. It cannot, however, be said that they have been very successful here. The people on whom the book will tell most powerfully in the interests of orthodoxy are those who, for want of intelligent interest in critical questions, will never read it. The fact of the book, and its size, will produce a favourable impression on them. It will set them at rest to know that the Bishops have demolished Colenso and Davidson, for is not here the confutation in a dozen volumes to be triumphantly pointed to? Must not the Bishops be right when they have so much to say for themselves? People, however, who will read the book with a desire possibly to have apprehensions allayed, and who will moreover read it, not with open mouth, but with some little degree of discrimination, are likely to experience considerable disappointment. In not a few instances they may find themselves constrained to ask in unpleasant surprise, as they notice the forced character of many of the arguments employed, "Is this all that the clergy have to say for themselves?" And the general impression left upon their minds seems likely enough to be that, while Colenso and Davidson, and what is vaguely called the Rationalising school, may be assailable on various points of detail, there is more to be

said for many of their positions than they had imagined possible. They will be dissatisfied and staggered by the haziness and hesitation with which many important topics are treated in the Commentary, and, instead of the simple, well-defined, thorough-going views of Scripture in which they had been trained, and which they may have expected to find vindicated out-and-out, they will find themselves introduced to concessions and compromises, and to a degree of uncertainty and indefiniteness of view, which is in effect a kind of helpless scepticism.

To take one or two examples. It is not unusual for the commentators to assume that the divergencies among critics opposed to themselves are a sufficient proof of the unreasonableness of their opposition to the view which they themselves uphold. For instance, in dealing with the authorship of the Book of Leviticus, we are told that "the theories which are counter to its Mosaic origin are so much at variance with each other—no two of them being in anything like substantial agreement—that it does not seem worth while to notice them in this place." Accordingly, there is no special argument of any kind advanced in support of the Mosaic authorship of this book. This can hardly but be unsatisfactory to a reader of average discernment. He will not fail to notice, that however much the anti-Mosaic theorists may differ in their positive opinions, there is "substantial agreement" among them in the negative opinion that, whoever wrote the book, Moses did not; and he will scarcely be able to avoid feeling that it would have been well to explain how so many people who have learnedly investigated the matter, have unanimously gone astray, and that the matter is not properly disposed of by a mere assertion that the opinions of such persons are of no consequence.

It appears to be considered a matter of great importance to show that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. No doubt this is part of the traditional faith, but if it

be an essential part of it, the readers of this Commentary are not likely to be greatly reassured upon the point. The writers seem to be affected with considerable diffidence as to the power of their arguments, and, when all is done, to be prepared for making indefinite deductions from the breadth of their conclusion. Two kinds of arguments are used. The first is, that Christ has recognised Moses as the author of the Pentateuch. To doubt the Mosaic authorship is accordingly represented as "impeaching the perfection and sinlessness of Christ's nature, and seeming thus to gainsay the first principles of Christianity." If such an argument be good at all, it requires no confirmation. But the commentators proceed to fortify the impregnable, by endeavouring to show from historical and internal testimony that Moses might have written the Pentateuch, and that he probably did so. It will be difficult for a reader of ordinary shrewdness to avoid asking why, if Christ's word on the matter is so conclusive as it is alleged to be, it should be necessary to back it up by what must be at the best delicate and questionable inference. If the iron bridge is safe, why should it be buttressed with pasteboard? And then, when all is done, it is found that the Mosaic authorship is only asserted in a modified manner. It is admitted that Moses may have incorporated into his work documents by other hands, and that in later generations, particularly after the Babylonish captivity, ten or eleven centuries subsequent to Moses, there was probably a recension, comprising various unknown rearrangements, explanations, and assertions; so that the view with which the reader is left is, that perhaps Moses wrote a great deal of the Pentateuch, but which parts are his, and which are his predecessors' or editors', we have not now the means of determining. If the Mosaic authorship is of the religious importance which seems to be ascribed to it, surely this is not a satisfactory position in which to leave the subject.

This perplexity is apt to be increased by the way in which it is proposed to reconcile the existing Biblical text with various parts of the testimony of modern science. The commentators admit the difficulty that is presented by the very great antiquity which they concede to the origin of man in view of the limited duration of human history as given in the genealogies which occupy the early chapters of Genesis, even with the extraordinary length of life there ascribed to the Patriarchs. In explanation, they resort to the supposition that the genealogies are not complete; and in answer to the objection, that they present every appearance of completeness, they tell us that we must "consider all that may have happened in the transmission of the text from Moses to Ezra, and from Ezra to the destruction of Jerusalem." But if the text could be tampered with in the way here indicated in one important matter, why not in many others? and what criterion have we by which to single out what is really original and what has been interpolated, or altogether transformed, between the dates of Moses and Ezra, or Ezra and the destruction of Jerusalem? And it is not only the text which grows uncertain in the hands of the commentators; the interpretation of it appears to become equally precarious. It is certainly the popular and traditional view, that whatever the Bible says is true, and that it says what the natural meaning of its language conveys. The commentators, however, introduce two principles which appear fitted to create very great confusion in the minds of persons who have been accustomed to read the Scriptures with the old simple theory respecting their authority and significance. They affirm it to be "plain that a miraculous revelation of scientific truths was never designed by God for man," and leave us to understand that we are to look for revealed guidance only to those parts of the Scriptures which contain their "testimony to Divine and spiritual truth." They do not, however,



furnish any directions for drawing the line between what is "scientific truth" and what is "Divine truth." There are various historical statements and metaphysical doctrines contained in the Scriptures, and it may easily be conceived that the plain reader, having got over his first surprise of learning, that he must not take Scripture as his rule of faith in everything, should be anxious to know whether and when seeming affirmations on such matters are to be accepted as revelation. This anxiety cannot fail to be increased by the second principle laid down by the commentators, which is, that although the Bible does not give revelations upon scientific matters, yet anything it does say upon such things must be true, and therefore wherever the apparent meaning of Scripture is contradicted by undoubted science, we must conclude that the apparent meaning of Scripture is not the real meaning, and must be content to believe that the real meaning of Scripture would be recognised as true, if we could only know what the real meaning is.

A good illustration of the working of this method of interpretation is afforded by the mode in which the commentators treat the history of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, which they appear to regard as dealing with "scientific" as distinguished from "divine and spiritual" truth. The traditional interpretation of this passage, as is well known is, that the universe was made in six days, and in the manner and order which are suggested by the natural meaning of the words. The commentators, it need hardly be said, allow that this interpretation cannot stand in the present day, but hold that, nevertheless, the conclusion must not be drawn that the narrative is mythical, or in any way erroneous. It is quite correct, only we do not know fully what it means; but in so far as we do know, we see that it accords with science. We fear, however, that the difficulties against which this conclusion is pressed will leave a disconcerting impression

on the mind of the reader who has been accustomed to the old and thoroughly unhesitating view of Biblical infallibility. To show that, so far as understood, the narrative in Genesis is in agreement with science, the commentator, leaving aside minute discrepancies, alleges that the order in which organised beings have successively appeared on the earth is represented in Scripture in substantially the same manner as by science." "The chief difference," it is said, "if any, of the two witnesses would seem to be, that the rocks speak of (1) marine plants, (2) marine animals, (3) land plants, (4) land animals; whereas Moses speaks of (1) plants [it should be land plants], (2) marine animals, (3) land animals; a difference not amounting to divergence. As physiology must have been nearly, and geology wholly, unknown to the Semitic nations of antiquity, such a general correspondence of sacred history, with modern science, is surely more striking and important than any difference in details." But surely there is an amount of begging the question here that is quite impermissible. Even supposing it were of no consequence that the Mosaic account omits the "marine plants" altogether, and that other differences in "details" could be fairly left out of the account, is it to be said that where the order is restricted to three things—marine animals, land plants, land animals—there is no discrepancy worth mentioning between the history which places the marine animals before the land plants, and that which places the land plants before the marine animals? If this is not a substantial difference on the question of order, what is likely to be held as a difference? Manifestly, if the scientific order is adhered to, it is necessary to fall back upon the present unintelligibility of Genesis, as is done with the rest of the narrative in question. Perhaps the word unintelligibility does not best describe the view of the commentators in this matter. They seem not so much to hold that the words mean nothing, as that they

may mean anything, and that the Hebrew language in such places as this has no ascertainable fixed significance. Thus they maintain that the word "created," as applied to the "heavens and the earth," means "formed out of nothing;" but that same word "created," as applied to the marine animals, they affirm to mean merely "made" out of pre-existing materials. But this word "made," applied in the sense just mentioned to the land animals, has, in their view, a totally different meaning from what it has when applied to the sun, moon, and stars, which are apparently represented as formed after the creation of light. In this case, to "make" the sun, moon, and stars, means merely to "make them appear" by rolling away the clouds and vapours which had previously concealed them. It will certainly alarm not a few of the laity to learn that Hebrew lexicography is in so very uncertain a condition.

There are various other cases in which the traditional and apparent sense of the Biblical narrative is departed from, not for any assigned lexical or grammatical reasons, but because otherwise it appears difficult to face modern scientific habits of thought. The history of the Fall is substantially given up as an allegory, although the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel is taken as simple history in the apparent sense of the words. The Deluge, however, is treated with more effort. It is explained as only partial, confined to the district of Mesopotamia, where the hills are very low, and beyond which the human race, notwithstanding the long antiquity already conceded to it, and the powers of rapid multiplication claimed for it in the commentary on Exodus in connection with the Israelites, is not supposed to have spread. The height of the water, apparently alleged in Scripture to be fifteen cubits above the highest mountains in the world, is thus to be calculated in relation to nothing loftier than the elevations of Babylonia. "The in-

habitants of the ark," it is said, "probably tried the depth of the Deluge by a plumb-line, an invention surely not unknown to those who had acquired the arts of working in brass and iron, and they found a depth of fifteen cubits." The ark is rested "perhaps to the south of Armenia, perhaps in the north of Palestine, perhaps somewhere in Persia, or in India, or elsewhere." It appears to be forgotten that extending the area of the Deluge to India, not to speak of "elsewhere," interferes with its proposed limitation to Mesopotamia, and that the proximity to India of the Himalayan range, rather tends to take from the employment of heaving the lead, somewhat grotesquely ascribed to Noah and his family, any air of probability which it may be supposed to possess.

The endeavour to tone down the miraculous character of certain of the narratives from their apparent meaning, which is illustrated in the instance now quoted, is also shown otherwise. The plagues of Egypt are laboriously described as mainly a mere intensification of the natural calamities and distresses of the country. Balaam and his ass are treated as follows:— "God may have brought it about that sounds uttered by the creature after its kind became to the prophet's intelligence as though it addressed him in rational speech. Indeed, to an augur, priding himself on his skill in interpreting the cries and movements of animals, no more startling warning could be given than one so real as this, yet conveyed through the medium of his own art; and to a seer pretending to superhuman wisdom, no more humiliating rebuke can be imagined than to teach him by the mouth of his own ass. The opinion that the ass actually uttered with the mouth articulate words of human speech, or even that the utterance of the ass was so formed in the air as to fall with the accents of man's voice on Balaam's ears, seems irreconcilable with Balaam's behaviour." We shall give but one other instance in



which popular surprise will probably be created by the departure of the commentators from the apparent and traditionally accepted interpretation of the text. The seeming discrepancy between the Exodus and the Deuteronomy versions of the Fourth Commandment, in respect of the conflicting reasons assigned for its enactment, is well known. The commentary, however, explains that these "reasons annexed" formed no part of the command as issued, however much the narratives appear to assert it, and that the First Table of the Decalogue, as originally given, probably ran thus:—1. Thou shalt have no other God before me. 2. Thou shalt not make to thee any graven image. 3. Thou shalt not take the name of Jehovah thy God in vain. 4. Thou shalt remember the Sabbath-day to keep it holy. 5. Thou shalt honour thy father and thy mother. This abbreviated Decalogue, we should suppose, will be exceedingly welcome to schoolboys. The parts omitted are accounted for as expositions and comments dictated on separate occasions from the issuing of the original decrees. Still, with all the deductions, it will be observed that "*Remember* the Sabbath" of Exodus, and "*keep* the Sabbath" of Deuteronomy, remain unreconciled, and the question between an original command or the resuscitation of an ancient one is left undecided.

From such illustrations, which might have been multiplied, it will be plain that in the view of the commentators the Bible may very clearly seem to mean a certain thing, and yet may mean something very different; nay, its apparent meaning may look as if it were unmistakably distinct and indisputable, and yet its real meaning may be undiscoverable by human sagacity. The effect of such teaching, so utterly opposed to the *perspicuitas* claimed for Scripture by the Reformers, must be to produce great perplexity in the minds of those for the re-establishment of whose faith this Commentary is professedly constructed. They will be irresistibly urged to ask, "What part of Scripture

can we ever be sure that we really understand? Here are certain parts of it which we and the generations before us thought were as clear as noonday, and on the strength of that conviction were endeavouring most dutifully to believe, and even condemning or persecuting other people for disbelieving; and yet it turns out that they mean something totally different, or that their meaning is absolutely undiscoverable. Where is this to stop? If the account of creation does not mean what it seems to mean, how can we be sure that the account of Justification means what it seems to mean? It is true the commentators wish it to be understood that this dubiety attaches only to "scientific" statements, and not to those that affect "divine or spiritual truth?" But who is to tell which is which? On the whole, we cannot grant that the aim of the Commentary seems likely to be much advanced by its publication. People who have no difficulties, and want to have none, may be helped by its appearance to hector the perplexed, if possible, a little more loudly. But waverers, if we may use the expression, are in danger of being confirmed in their wavering. Yet we would not like to say that it is a useless, or that it is not a respectable work. It will form a good introduction to the subject for those who want to get a compendious glimpse of the latest state of the questions. We are bound also to say that it is free from acrimony and abusiveness, and if not written always with scientific impartiality, is invariably pervaded by a gentlemanly tone. It promises to be the most notable work produced by the conjoint labours of English divines since the Thirty-nine Articles and the Westminster Confession, and the future Church historian will probably point to it as an important landmark in the history of British theology, as showing how many important positions had come, since the formation of those memorable documents, to be regarded as very uncertain, or even untenable, towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century.