

CT 114

THE
QUESTION OF METHOD

AS AFFECTING

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT.

BY

A CLERGYMAN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

Οὐκ αἰσχρὸν ἡγεῖ δῆτα τὰ ψευδῆ λέγειν ;
Οὐκ, εἰ τὸ σωθῆναι γε τὸ ψεῦδος φέρει.

To speak untruly—dost not think it shame ?
Not when we fare the better for the same.

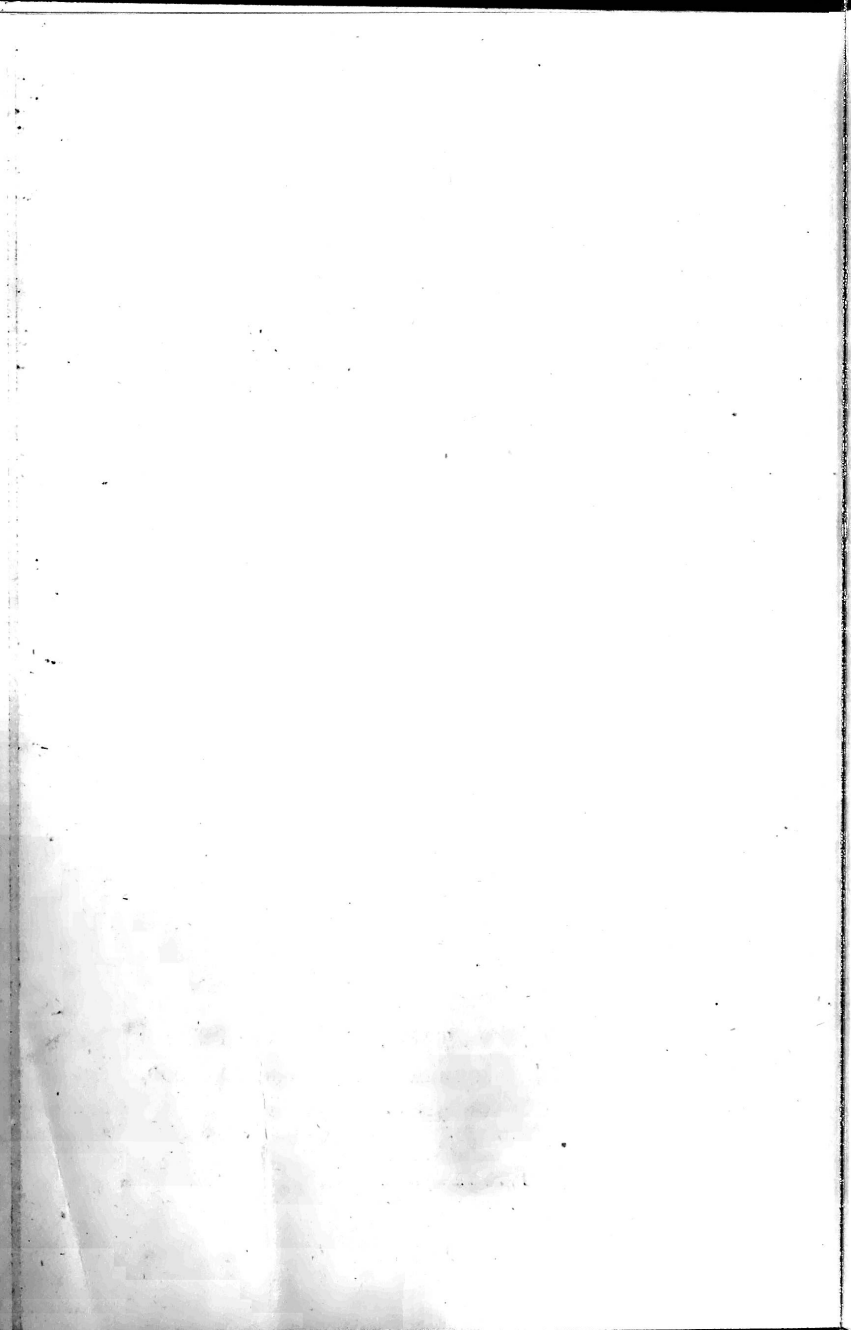
SOPHOCLES *Philoctetes*.



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WHENCE comes the possibility of that strange fact,—strange indeed, yet in the present day by no means unfrequent,—that men having like opportunities and abilities come to utterly diverse conclusions on religious subjects? You may note, say for example, two brothers, each possessed of unusual talents, starting from the same early training, each animated by a pure zeal for truth, one of whom, through whatever wanderings, holds fast at least by the great doctrines of Christianity, while the other leaves all orthodox belief far behind him. For—wonder at the fact if you will—we are constrained to admit that men do doubt and disbelieve every Christian dogma, who, whatever judgment may hereafter be passed upon them, live, so far as human eye can see, not less pure or upright lives than the most strenuous upholders of the faith. How can these things be? How can two men, both sane and sound, affirm of the same fountain, the one that its waters are sweet, the other that they are bitter? Christianity is true or it is false. That is to say, those occurrences on which all orthodox bodies found their religion have historically happened or they have not. The issue is a simple one, and one

might suppose that honest men who wished for nothing but the truth would have little difficulty in arriving at a similar conclusion one way or other. Yet we find that men apparently possessed of honesty, ability and learning, hold contrary opinions on the subject. The object of the present paper is to point out the broad beaten road which leads to orthodoxy, and also the narrow thorny path which ends in unbelief.

Now if in studying the same subject inquirers arrive at opposite conclusions, either they must start from different premises, or they must adopt a different method of inquiry. Obviously, starting from different premises is a fruitful source of difference in religious as in other matters. Thus in disputes between a Christian and an unbeliever the former will often base his arguments upon biblical texts, forgetting that the other will by no means accept them as conclusive. The one starts from the premiss that the Bible affords an infallible source of information, the truth of which the other denies. Such an argument often ends in mere bitterness, as the parties do not see that there is no common ground between them on which the argument may rest. Or if they consent to go deeper, and discuss the proposition which to one side formed the premiss of the previous argument, yet again they fail to find common ground, and therefore to appear reasonable to each other. Now the source of the difference must surely be this, that they approach the subject in a different spirit: each adopts a different method of inquiry. I believe the most common method used by the orthodox party is that of assuming some one point,—as the authority of the Church, or of the Bible,—and then arguing from that. This method, however, labours under the disadvantage mentioned above. However satisfactory it may be to the individual who accepts it, it cannot enable him to convince unbelievers. Such a method may even to

some extent be open to the charge brought against it by uncivil persons of being a *petitio principii*.

To those who endeavour to go to the root of the matter, there are, as far as I can see, but two methods which they can use as instruments of thought, between which they must take their choice. I shall call these *the emotional method* and *the critical method*.

These may be briefly characterised as follows :

The former method accepts an explanation simply as satisfactory to the mind : it does not seek to compare or test further : it rests on intimate conviction. The critical method, on the contrary, mistrusts every hypothesis until verified ; if an explanation seem probable in itself, it is not allowed to rest there : it is brought face to face with other facts and theories, and questioned as to its agreement with them ; it is, in short, tested in every conceivable way, and not accepted unless it can endure the trial. The critical method is based on verification.

I shall now endeavour to show that while the latter method has its value—perhaps is the only one of any value—in scientific inquiries, the emotional method alone can lead to orthodox results in religious investigations.

In ancient times the critical method was almost or quite unknown. Whatever men wished to explain, from the genesis of the earth and the human race to the derivation of a word, was explained out of hand, and evolved with child-like confidence out of the mind of the explainer. When Pindar told of the birth of Ajax (Aias), he derived the name from *aierós* (aietos) an eagle. It was enough for him that the first two letters corresponded in each word, and that the explanation seemed to him a probable one. When Eve bare her first-born she called his name Cain, and said I have gotten (from the verb *kanah*, to get) a man. There was a sufficient resemblance between Kain and *kanah* ; although, according to the

critical method, Cain would seem to have been a smith (רפ) by name, although not in trade, and Cain's sons were smiths. These two examples will suffice to show the principle on which names were anciently derived. But a similar method was employed in other and more important matters. In order to illustrate this, perhaps the reader will allow me to tell him a story out of Philo. An animal is placed on the list of those allowed to be eaten in Levit. xi. 22, which our translators, for some mysterious reason, call "beetle," and which the Septuagint version as unaccountably renders ophiomachus, serpent-fighter. Now Philo had already proved to his satisfaction that the Serpent which tempted Eve was *pleasure*. Therefore the reason why this ophiomachus was recommended for the Jewish table was plain. "For," says he, "this ophiomachus seems to me to be nothing else than *temperance* symbolically, which wages endless war against intemperance and pleasure." I was charmed when I read this passage, for nothing could more evidently set forth the advantages of the emotional method. See how beautifully the old worthy works it out! The *ὄφιομάχης*, which he lit on in his Septuagint, fitted into the theory he was constructing, just like a long-sought, queer-cornered bit in a child's puzzle-map. Then what "uses," what edification, proceed from this interpretation? What earthly meaning could there be in bidding the Hebrews eat a particular sort of locust? But when you understand how the locust represents asceticism, what light and interest is shed on the Mosaic command! And to think that Philo and we should have lost all this had he only been cursed with the very smallest tincture of the critical method! Had he had any notion of verifying his facts, he would have compared the Septuagint with the Hebrew version, and thus have found that the name of the creature in the original language has nothing to do with ser-

pents, but means simply *a leaper* (chargol), and so his theory would have fallen to pieces at once. Fortunately he was secure in the strength of his method; the inward satisfaction which he felt was ample proof of the correctness of his position; and as the Septuagint version suited him, why should he go further to seek another which might not suit so well? It would be easy to multiply instances of the use of the emotional method from the writings of authors of all ages; but I forbear to quote further from uninspired writers. To do so would seem to be the more unnecessary, inasmuch as this method, and no other, was employed by the writers of the Books contained in the New Testament.

If this be shown, it will be obvious that those who wish to hold to the faith which those holy men promulgated must walk in their steps and use their method. If we attempt to use the critical method in the exegesis of the Bible, we commence by placing ourselves at a point of view utterly different from that at which its authors contemplated their subject; and shall therefore understand it in a sense alien from theirs. It is by so doing that so many writers and others, whose learning and honesty of purpose are beyond all question, have changed that which Christians hold to be the Word of God into a collection of more or less curious myths. When the New Testament writers found a passage of the Hebrew Scriptures which seemed to them to bear upon the life of Christ, they assumed at once that it was in its origin prophetic of him. For example, Matthew remembers the words of Hosea, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son." The critical inquirer remembers that the prophet was alluding to the Exodus of Israel. To the Evangelist it is sufficient that these words, taken apart from their context, serve to illustrate his narrative. So little did the Evangelists and Apostles care for such accuracy as is required by the

critical method, that their quotations from the older Scriptures are often distortions of the words and meaning of the originals, at least as these latter have come down to us. I am not now writing a treatise on prophecy, and it will be sufficient to request the reader who may doubt my assertion to compare the quotations in the New Testament with the prophecies themselves; he will often be able to detect the distortion, even if he has no knowledge of the original languages. I may observe here that what has been said holds true of the doctrine of Types. What critical inquirer could ever believe that the narratives of the brazen serpent, of David, Jonah, &c., have any reference to Christ? These stories are complete in themselves as they stand in the Old Testament, and do not require any further fulfilment. He alone who proceeds always on the emotional method can perceive that the fact that an older narrative may profitably be employed to illustrate the life of Christ, justifies the assumption that it was intended to do so. So impressed, however, were the Apostolic writers with the truth of this doctrine, that they seemed to have considered the Hebrew Scriptures as of little importance for any other purpose. Thus Paul cares only for the story of Isaac and Ishmael in so far as they typify the Christian and Jewish churches, and for that of the passage of the Red Sea as exemplifying the doctrine of Baptism. When he reads the words, "To Abraham and his seed were the promises made," he does not understand "seed" to refer to the descendants of the patriarch, as any critical student would, but he insists upon applying it to Christ. Indeed Paul is perhaps the most consistent of all the New Testament writers in his exclusion of the critical spirit. So much so, that he rests entirely on his emotional convictions. He is far indeed from comparing critically the accounts of the Resurrection. He will not confer with flesh and blood. He rejects

all knowledge of Christ "after the flesh;" his inner belief, apart from all comparison with the convictions of others, or verification from external facts, is sufficient for him.

It is impossible within the limits of the present paper to do more than illustrate the position here taken up by a few examples. But I feel no doubt that any candid person who will consider those here brought forward, and himself search the Scriptures for others, will be convinced that the writers of the books composing our Bible had not the very slightest idea of the critical method, and would, could they have understood it, have condemned it as unsuited to their purposes. If this be so, let those who would continue to think as the evangelists and prophets thought, beware how they tamper with a method so alien from their spirit.

At the risk of being tedious I must adduce another example of the danger of deserting the emotional method. Many such suggest themselves; indeed the adoption of the opposite method breaks up the Bible in all directions, and leaves, in place of one homogeneous infallible book, a collection of tales, most of them of little historical value. I cannot, however, go into this subject any further at present. The one instance which follows may be sufficient to serve as a caution to those who wish to stand in the paths of orthodoxy in these slippery days.

The apparent contradictions in the Gospel narratives have driven our orthodox commentators into great straits, except when they have got over a difficulty by omitting to notice it. They would, however, find no difficulty at all if they had sufficient faith in the emotional method, and forebore the attempt to wield the weapons of their adversaries.

They need not fear lest they should fail to be secure against doubts and disputations if they will be careful to avoid the critical method. When the critical

inquirer compares the different narratives of the life of Christ, he finds, among other points of a similar nature, that Jesus is said to have ascended to heaven both from Bethany and also from a mountain in Galilee. According to Matthew,—who is so far confirmed by the narrative which closes the second Gospel as we have it,—the disciples met the risen Christ by appointment in Galilee. There Mark further informs us that the Ascension took place, they having first been charged to go at once (as it appears) and teach all nations. In Luke, on the contrary, the Eleven do not quit the immediate neighbourhood of Jerusalem; nay, they are expressly charged not to do so until they should be “endued with power from on high.” This account agrees with that given in Acts, while John does not mention the Ascension at all. Here we see plainly the effect of the comparing or critical method. To one who adopts it, it seems impossible that the disciples could both have remained at Jerusalem for a considerable time, and also during part of that very time have been in Galilee; nor less so that one and the same Ascension should have taken place at Bethany and on a far distant mountain. The emotionalist, on the other hand, feels no difficulty. To compare the different and differing accounts in a critical spirit would be foreign to his nature. Each several account satisfies and edifies him, and he cares for nothing more. Should such an one be pressed to the point by an unbeliever, he might reply that the sojourn of the disciples at Jerusalem is to be understood in a spiritual sense. They were commanded to tarry at Jerusalem, that is, not to break with the Jews and Jewish customs, until the descent of the Holy Ghost. For the double site assigned to the Ascension I have indeed no explanation to suggest; yet I am confident that the holy ingenuity of a second Philo—who would care nothing for historic truth and everything for spiritual edifica-

cation—would explain this also as triumphantly as the first turned the leaping locust into a slayer of allegorical serpents.

If the reader has done me the honour to follow my arguments up to this point, it is ten chances to one that he feels somewhat disposed to quarrel with my position.

It is likely enough that he will ask whether the critical method be not that by which all scientific discoveries have been made, and all our knowledge of historic truth obtained; whether, if that be so, it be not the right method to use in that inquiry which is of all others most important; and whether in fact many eminent writers on religious subjects have not used that method and no other. To the last question I reply, that I am not acquainted with the works of any theologian who has successfully used the critical method and at the same time kept within the confines of orthodoxy; nor can I conceive it possible that there should be such. There are, indeed, orthodox writers who use with more or less success the critical method throughout the bulk of their work; but, so far as I know, they always start with one or more assumptions which are arrived at by the emotional, not the critical method. They assume the authority of the Bible or of the Church; the necessity of a Divine revelation, and of its miraculous character; the authenticity of the sacred writings on which they rely; and other such points. Having made these assumptions, or some of them, they may proceed to deduce their conclusions from them by the critical method. But the propositions on which their whole subsequent reasoning is based are assumed, not as critically demonstrated, but as appearing natural and necessary to the mind of the writer. The superstructure may be critical, but the foundation is emotional; and it is from the latter, not the former, that the entire work must take its distinguishing character.

With regard to the other question, viz., whether the critical method be not the better, and therefore the right one to employ, it should be considered that either method is an instrument for aiding us to attain certain ends. We must choose the one best fitted for our purpose. The critical method is an admirable instrument for enabling us to ascertain truth of fact. If we wish to acquaint ourselves with the probability of a reported occurrence having really taken place or otherwise, with no care whether we are led to the affirmative or the negative conclusion, the critical method will serve our turn. But—I am addressing myself to those who are predetermined to preserve their orthodox faith—is this desired? The critical method is very exacting. If we adopt it we must take nothing for granted: we must not say I will believe this because it satisfies my emotional needs; or because it is so conducive to public morality and the peace of the individual mind. This method binds us to the pursuit of truth pure and simple, uninfluenced by any preconceived wish as to the result. The emotional method, on the contrary, allows a man's feelings to determine his belief. If we adopt it we shall never need to trouble ourselves with disagreeable questions, such as, Do we know when and by whom the Gospels were written? Do they or do they not contain numerous contradictory statements? Are the accounts therein given of the doings and sayings of Christ in all cases to be relied upon as matters of historical certainty? and the like. These and many such beset the path of the critical inquirer like importunate beggars, who will not be shaken off until they have their answer. He whose first object is to continue steadfast in his religious belief should refuse altogether to enter upon such inquiries. To deal with them candidly implies a wish to know the truth rather than to continue orthodox; and such a wish, if acted on, is apt to be fatal to orthodoxy. The

importance of inquiry after truth in religious matters has been much overstated. An orthodox believer should never inquire after truth; he should assume that he has it. The word *truth* is indeed occasionally used in the Bible, yet always in a sense widely different from that in which it is used by the modern critic. Thus the Apostle says: "We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth;" but by *truth* he means his own system of religious belief, the truth of which he assumes, and which indeed is the only truth for which he cares. So, again, Christians are bidden "search the Scriptures." But it is implied, as I have attempted to show, that they are to use a method of search,—a mode of interpretation,—which certainly would not lead to such truth as is sought by the man of science or modern historian.

I say again, let your wish to know truth always stand second to your desire to continue orthodox; otherwise there is much danger that your truth will not be that of the Church or of the Bible. Should any one say in reply to this: "What is orthodoxy to me? I desire to know whether or not the religion I have been taught to profess be really founded on fact. If it be so, it will stand the severest testing by the most rigorous method; if not, I will none of it:" to such an one the arguments used in this paper are not addressed. Let him go on his way, if he is sure he has strength to follow it out: taking however this warning with him. I have known those who have acted as he proposes to act; who, starting with a more or less orthodox belief, have insisted on subjecting it to the critical method without fear or favour. The consequence has been that they have found themselves in the end stripped of most of those garments with which their earliest instructors had invested their minds, and, in some cases, with their worldly prospects blasted. Let him then count the cost first, lest having begun he should not dare to finish.

I turn for a concluding word to those who prize their religious faith above all things: who know that it brings them peace, comfort, and worldly prosperity; and are not to be ousted from these solid advantages by a sneer about honesty. Let such be careful to abide by the emotional method, to take the satisfaction which religion and religious books bring to their minds as the surest—the only—basis of their belief. The men of science have with their critical method “turned the world upside down” as effectually as did the Apostles of old. Beware then how you allow yourselves to inquire on their method into the truth of sacred narratives. Consider that faith is not as robust as it was; it now needs hot-house treatment: it must be glazed, and warmed artificially, and kept from rude scientific contact. Guard it from critical thought as you do your exotic plants from frost. Consider, a few degrees of cold will consign it to a grave from which no coming spring can summon it to resurrection.

