

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES.

I.

ON

THE BOOK OF GOD

BY

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THE BOOK OF GOD
AN OPEN LETTER
TO THE
MINISTERS OF ALL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES.

GENTLEMEN,—

I am going to address you on a very important subject, and I shall do it in very plain language. It is my desire to be understood, both by yourselves and by others who may read what I write. At the same time I have no intention to be rude or personal. The *truth* of what I utter may hurt your feelings, but *in that case* you have only yourselves to blame.

You are, all of you, as Christian ministers, the expounders of a book called the Bible, which you all allege to be the Word of God. Many of you, being Catholic priests, do not treat this book with exactly the same veneration as others are Protestants; you put the Church first, and the Scriptures second, and make the truth and authenticity of the one depend upon the living authority of the other. Yet, it is evident, *all of you*, Protestants and Catholics alike, would be *lost* without the Bible. Say what you will about tradition, and inspiration, and infallibility, it is after all the BOOK on which you depend. Were the Bible lost for ever, and all recollection of its contents obliterated from men's minds, the Christian religion would certainly disappear. The "fathers" and "divines" would be some assistance for a while; but unless you had the BOOK to quote from, to select texts for your sermons, and to put into the hands of children, nothing could save your faith from speedy, absolute, and irrecoverable destruction.

Now it is upon this Book—the Book of God, as you call it—that I wish to address you; and my *right* to address you is involved in my being an English citizen. In this country the Bible is only allowed to be printed by certain printers; it is "appointed" by the Queen, that is, by the Government, to be "read in all the churches" of the Established Religion; it is put into the hands of the children in our public schools, supported out of the rates and taxes, and they are *forced* to read it as a sacred volume; and, further, it is protected by law against such criticism as may be applied to other books, so that men are liable to long terms of imprisonment like common

thieves for bringing it "into disbelief and contempt." This being the case, and your BOOK being set up *by law* as something *holy*, I have a right to ask you some questions about it. Every book that is published, in a certain sense challenges criticism; but a book like yours, which claims, and enjoys, such an exalted position, should have its reputation established beyond any reasonable doubt. Every man, I think, must agree that a book, which we may be imprisoned for bringing into "disbelief and contempt," *ought* to be God's Word, whether it is or not. For my part, however, I do not believe it is; and, before I have done, you will know *why*.

The Book of God which you use in this country is printed in English; in other countries it is printed in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and so forth. It is not alleged, however, that God wrote himself, or inspired men to write, in these languages. The Bibles in use in the various Christian countries are *translations*. Now I know something of translating, and I know it is *simply impossible* to translate from one language into another with perfect *accuracy*, and sometimes difficult to translate with any *approach* to accuracy. I am sure, therefore, even without an examination, that the English Bible *cannot* be the *real* Book of God. Besides, there is more than *one* translation into English. The Authorised Version, done in the reign of James I, in 1611, was very largely a *collation* of previous translations. The Revised Version has been done by an "appointed" Committee of *Christian* scholars in the present generation; and it was done, I suppose, because the old version was unfaithful. This new version is found fault with in turn, and many disputes have arisen over special passages. In the face of these facts, I say that you have no right to pass off your Bible as *the* Book of God. You may declare it is pretty nearly the same, or as nearly as you can make it; but the *very same* it is not, and in learned books, not meant for the people's eyes, you admit its deficiency.

Have you then, I ask, the hardihood to stand up and tell me that *this* is all I am entitled to expect from my "Maker"? If a father has any communication to make to his children, should he not make it in their own language? Do you believe that God is not as able to speak in English as in Greek or Hebrew? Ought not his "Revelation" to be expressed clearly, definitely, unmistakably? Ought it not, therefore, to be expressed, not through questionable translations, but at first-hand, in all the several tongues on this planet? It would cost God no effort to do this, for he is omnipotent; and no trouble, for he is omniscient. Can you assign any legitimate reason for his not addressing us all in the only way in which we should be sure to understand him?

I will now go back to your *real* Book of God, if such exist, and ask you a few questions about *that*. Is not the Old Testament written in Hebrew? Is not Hebrew a language very hard to understand? Was it not written right on, from side to side of the parchment, without a break between the words? Was it not written without *vowels*? Would it not be difficult for one man to be quite sure of the meaning of another who wrote in this way? Would not the writer himself, after a lapse of time, be occasionally puzzled to know what he meant himself? Is it not a fact that the meaning of a vast number of passages in the Hebrew Bible is still disputed? Have not candid authorities, like Sir William Drummond, confessed that they hardly knew of any two Hebrew scholars who translated six consecutive verses in the same way? Is not all this now admitted by Christian scholars, such as Canon Driver and Professor Bruce? Does not the latter plainly declare that the Masoretic Hebrew text—that is, the text now in use, with vowel points—is only “a translation by Hebrew scholars of the vowelless original”? Does he not decisively assert that the “errorless autograph” is a “theological figment”?

Most of you, gentlemen, teach that Moses (for instance) wrote the Pentateuch, and that he lived, roughly speaking, 1,500 years before Christ. But what is the age of your oldest Hebrew manuscripts? The editors of the Revised Version admit, in a footnote to their Preface, that “the earliest MS. of which the age is certainly known bears date A.D. 916.” Now this is 2,400 years from the time of Moses; and let me ask you, plainly, Is not this long enough for any amount of accident and vicissitude? And, unless you fall back on a miracle, have you the slightest reason for supposing that Moses himself would recognise the A.D. 916 document as his own production?

Besides the difficulty and obscurity of Hebrew, is it not the case that the existing Manuscripts are full of *different readings*? I gather from scholars on your own side, to say nothing of sceptical investigators, that the number of different readings amounts to *many thousands*, indeed to *many myriads*. Will you kindly explain, then, how any man, even if he be a perfect master of Hebrew, can be sure of having the exact Word of God? You are also aware, or should be, that the more ancient versions of the Old Testament—such as the Greek *Septuagint* and the Roman *Vulgate*—differ very considerably from the Masoretic text.

Thus we have Version differing from Version, and a vast quantity of variations in the current Hebrew manuscripts; that is, collection differs from collection, and, in the same collection, document differs from document. It is evident,

therefore, that the Hebrew Old Testament is no more the *real* Word of God than the English Old Testament. I may be told, of course, that the variations are *unimportant*, and do not affect the *substance* of the volume; but I deny this, and I add that no variation *can* be unimportant when we are dealing with a communication from God to mankind. *You* may think it unimportant, but how do you know that *God* does?

Supposing that God, for some reason which passes human comprehension, chose that the first part of his revelation to *all men* should be given in a language only known to a *small section* of them: even then, would it not be reasonable to suppose that he would take care to preserve it in its integrity, so that we might not be burdened with the difficulty of finding out its *words* as well as its *meaning*? You admit that the manuscripts have suffered the common fate of ancient writings, in the hands of custodians and copyists; and, to my mind, this is an evidence of their human *origin*. I believe that, if God wrote a message for us, personally or by proxy, he would take the trouble to preserve it as he wrote it.

The New Testament manuscripts are older than those of the Old Testament. None of them, however, go beyond the fourth century; that is, the oldest copy we have of any book in the New Testament, including the Gospels, was written at least three hundred years after the death of Christ. Why is this? Why are there no *earlier* manuscripts? Surely, if God inspired the writers of them, he would not neglect their safety for three centuries after their composition, and *then* begin to take care of them. Had he preserved them until the days of Constantine, the Church could have preserved them afterwards. I dare say you will tell me that God did not work *miracles* to preserve the autographs of the New Testament; but he worked miracles to be *recorded* in them, and miracles to inspire the *writers* of them, and I cannot see why he should not work *another* miracle to preserve what they wrote.

So much for the documents themselves; and now let me ask you whether, in the Greek documents as we have them, there are not hundreds of thousands of different readings? If this be so (and you cannot deny it), the Greek Testament itself, in a multitude of cases, must contain what the Apostles and Evangelists did *not* write, besides omitting, perhaps, many things which they *did* write; so that, here again, your very New Testament, even in the original Greek, is not, and cannot be, the *real, exact, authentic* Word of God.

The Gospels are *four* in number, and there were many *others*. The Church selected the four and stamped them as *canonical*; it rejected the others, to the number of dozens, and branded them as *apocryphal*. To a Catholic, of course, this is quite satisfactory, for he holds the Church to be

infallible; but the Protestant does not, and what is *his* guarantee? You, gentlemen, who belong to Protestant Churches, take the four Gospels on trust from the Catholic Church, which you so often describe as idolatrous and fraudulent; but I want you to give *me* a reason for accepting these four Gospels, and no others, as the inspired Word of God. What suits your *convenience* does not satisfy my *intelligence*. I want a *reason*; something different from custom and tradition, something founded on logic and evidence.

Let me now draw your attention to another aspect of your Book of God. Over the heads of the various documents it contains, you have their authors' names printed. Thus you announce that the first five books, the Pentateuch, were written by Moses; that most of the Psalms were written by David; that Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Canticles were written by Solomon; that the very curious story of a prophet and a whale was written by Jonah; that a certain prophetic book, referred to by Jesus Christ, was written by Daniel; that fourteen epistles were written by Paul, one by James, two by Peter, and three by John, who also wrote the Revelation; and that the four Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

These announcements of yours, as to the authorship of the books of the Bible, are most of them *false*. You were told so, long ago, by sceptics like Spinoza, Voltaire, and Thomas Paine; but now the fact is not only admitted, but proclaimed, by scholars and professors within your own Churches. Let me take, for instance, a volume like *Lux Mundi*, edited by the Rev. Charles Gore, late Principal of Pusey House, Oxford. This clergyman allows that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, who is only responsible for the Ten Commandments; he also allows that David did not write the Psalms, nor Solomon the Proverbs; and that Jonah and Daniel are "dramatic compositions," and not history; although, as a matter of fact, Jesus Christ referred to *both* Jonah and Daniel as records of actual occurrences. But the admissions of Mr. Gore are outdone by those of Canon Driver, in his *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*. According to this clergyman, the book of Genesis was written hundreds of years after the time of Moses, by more than one hand; Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers are just as modern; while Deuteronomy was written some time between Isaiah and Jeremiah. The Hexateuch—that is, the Pentateuch and Joshua—was the work of nameless Jewish scribes; and the whole of the Priestly Code, or Law of Moses, belongs "approximately to the period of the Babylonian captivity."

This view of the Pentateuch was advocated by Thomas Paine, and unanimously opposed by the Churches. Dean

Graves, Bishop Watson, Dr. Marsh, and a host of other ministers, stood up for its Mosaic origin; and scores of men and women were sent to gaol for selling books in which the opposite was maintained. However, the case is now altered; Canon Driver can only urge that the Jewish priests, who made laws and ascribed them to Moses, should not be accused of the crime of "forgery," as they were only conforming to "the literary usages" of their age and nation; though, for my part, I hold with Mr. Gladstone, that, if the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by Jewish priests and scribes, eight hundred years after his time, both the Jewish and the Christian worlds have been made the victims of "a heartless imposture."

Let us take the rest of Canon Driver's admissions as to the Old Testament books. David did not write the Psalms, which "set before us the experience of many men, and of many ages of the national life." Proverbs was "formed gradually," and not written by Solomon; nor was Ecclesiastes, which belongs to the second or third century before Christ; nor was the Song of Solomon, which is a love poem, and not an allegory; so that the headings of the chapters, in our English Bible, are an absurd, if not a base, imposition on the British public. Job is not history, but a drama, belonging to the period of the Captivity, and the speeches of Elihu are interpolations. Daniel was written hundreds of years after the time of its ostensible author, probably about B.C. 168; so that its prophecies were fulfilled, because the events occurred first and the writer issued his predictions afterwards. Jonah was written long after the prophet's age, probably in the fifth century; and it is "not strictly historical"; that is, Jonah never converted Nineveh, and never took a submarine excursion in the belly of a whale.

There is a great outcry in your Churches, gentlemen, against the *publication* of such conclusions as those of Canon Driver, but I do not observe that the clamorers try to *answer* him. They want to *silence* him. But it is too late to do that; the cat is fairly out of the bag. People with any eyesight, and there are more of them than you think, now perceive that all you have been teaching, for so many hundreds of years, about the Old Testament, is a *falsehood*. Its various books were *not* written, for the most part, by the persons whose names you have put at the top of them; in fact, you do not know *who* wrote them; and, if you have been all along mistaken as to who wrote these books, and when they were written, I say it is a thousand to one that you are also mistaken as to their *contents*. It seems to me downright nonsense to say you do not know who wrote a certain book, and at the same time to say you are quite sure that all it contains is true.

The books of the New Testament, as to their authorship, are just as uncertain as the books of the Old Testament. Of the

fourteen Epistles by Paul, only *four* are generally admitted as *authentic*, and even those are *disputed*. The other Epistles, by Peter and John, are also doubtful, if not spurious. Nor are the Gospels in any better plight. Mr. Matthew Arnold thought it time to tell the public that the Gospels did not exist, as we now have them, before the last quarter of the second century; that is, a good deal more than a hundred years after the death of Christ. Dr. Giles, a clergyman of the Church of England, declares that *none* of the New Testament books existed, as we have them, within a hundred and twenty years after the Crucifixion. It is generally allowed by the most competent critics that the earliest writings about Jesus Christ are lost; that the four Gospels, bearing the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were written long afterwards, in the second century, by unknown persons; and that it was a very common thing, in the early Christian Church, to compose books and attach to them the names of the Apostles.

Now, gentlemen, I want to ask you a plain question, to which I should like you to give me a plain answer. Your Bible is stuffed with the most tremendous miracles; that is, stories which no man is called upon to believe, unless they are accredited by the most tremendous evidence. Do you really think, gentlemen, that the evidence you offer is *good enough*? Can you expect people, who think for themselves, to believe a host of things contrary to sane experience, on the word of men who lived *somewhere*—God knows where; and at *some time*—God knows when?

The "advanced" ministers—that is, those amongst you, gentlemen, who patronise the "New Criticism"—are patching up a new theory of *Inspiration*. They see that it will no longer do to maintain the old position, that the Bible contains *truth* only, without any admixture of *error*; or, to use the words of the late Mr. Spurgeon, that every sentence of it was written by an Almighty finger, and every word of it fell from Almighty lips. Knowing that their Book of God does contain errors, in science and history, to say no more; they now teach that the writers (whoever they were) were only *inspired* in relation to religion and ethics; in short, that the Bible is God's Word because it reveals to us religious and moral truths which we could not ourselves discover. But this is only a temporising theory; it may do for the time, but it will presently be seen through and abandoned; in brief, your Book of God will, sooner or later, have to stand on the shelf, side by side with other Books of God; and then, gentlemen, you will have to get your livings in a more honest and useful profession.—Yours, with best wishes, G. W. FOOTE.