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Prove all things; hold fast that which is good

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THE OLD TRADITION AND THE NEW¹

Professor Willis J. Beecher, D.D., Auburn, N. Y.

In a publication of the year 1902 may be found the following four paragraphs, defining the issues at stake between the older orthodoxy and the type of Higher Criticism now currently denominated the Modern View. I do not name the author because I prefer to treat the publication as representative rather than personal. The ability displayed in it entitles it to be so treated. Many statements of like character have appeared; this is one of particular excellence, chosen from among the many.

"And what are these two methods? That of the Higher Criticism is—that the Bible shall be interpreted by a devout study of its various parts with all the light that can be thrown upon it from all sources. Its concrete purpose is to ascertain its full and exact history. It has no theory of inspiration; it simply investigates, and reports what it finds.

"The method of the other side is based on an unquestioning assent to the Bible as a miraculously inspired book, every word literally true, every event historical, without myth or legend—infallible—the whole being the product of the direct inspiration of God and therefore equally authoritative in all its parts. Such and so unlike are the two methods."

"The two methods cannot be mingled; each excludes the other by its definition of itself. If either side crosses the dividing line in order to make exceptions, the issue between them dies out and debate ceases for lack of a question."

"It should be enough to dispel all doubts and fears over this subject that almost the whole body of educated teachers in our colleges and theological seminaries, as well as those in Great Britain, accept the Higher Criticism in its main points. . . . If this vast body of men are regarded as self-deceived and mistaken in conclusions which they have reached through close and conscientious scrutiny, the question may well be raised whether those who doubt them are sane."

The first of these four paragraphs, as here arranged, defines the position of the Higher Criticism; the second defines the position of the old orthodoxy; the third affirms that we must all necessarily take one or the other of these

¹ The substance of this paper appeared as an article in "The Congregationalist" of March 7, 1903. A considerable portion, omitted for lack of space when the article was first printed, was restored in a pamphlet subsequently issued, making the argument complete as it came from the writer. It is here reprinted by permission, as setting forth the point of view from which The American Bible League enters upon its work, and as presenting a plea for its existence and for its invitation to friends of the Bible for co-operation in its enterprise.—EDITOR.

BIBLE STUDY AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Professor Willis J. Beecher, D.D., Auburn, N. Y.

Under this title the American Institute of Sacred Literature has recently issued a tract of thirty-two pages, containing an address made by President William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago. The fact that President Harper is one of the best known of the living advocates of the so-called Modern View of the Bible gives significance to the positions taken in the address.

The opening sentence is:

"I have come to you with the sincere feeling that I have for you a message."

In the first paragraph President Harper speaks of

"that old, old message, the truth of which has become more firmly established with every cycle of the years."

In the second paragraph he asks permission to assure us

"that the positions suggested are those which I have tested by my own personal experience."

The tone of this is exceedingly old fashioned. The same old fashioned echo reappears all through the address. He affirms the importance of correctness in our theological beliefs.

"What a childish thing it is to raise a hue and cry, as many do, against creeds! What man is there that does not have a creed? This is only the outward expression of his inner thought."

He makes avowal of a religious experience, saying that the religious life

"really consists in consciousness of sin and a longing for truth; in consciousness of fellowship with God and trust in His goodness; in consciousness of love for God as well as for one's fellow men."

With graphic amplification he

"emphasizes the truth that one's conception of God, one's attitude toward Him, is the fundamental thing in life, whether that of the individual or that of the nation."

With this conception of the dominant value of personal religion, President Harper takes the position that the Bible is unique in its moral and religious worth.

"Of all agencies which may serve as sources of help in the training and strengthening of the religious life, the Bible, when studied, is the most helpful, and, in a word, is indispensable."

"The one source, the only source, as well as the original source, for help of the kind here considered is the Bible."

"No great man has wrought among his fellows, no nation has made history, except under the influence and inspiration of these books we call the Bible."

The uniqueness of its ethical and religious worth is due to its unique divine origin and authority.

"The very fact alleged shows all the more clearly the power of the Scriptures, for if they possessed not a special power and value given from on high, their influence could not have permeated as it has all modern literature."

Of the Hebrew Psalter he says:

"It has for nearly twenty-five centuries served as the mouthpiece of untold millions of God's saints, and is destined, so far as we can see, to continue thus to serve a suffering humanity for all time."

The ceremonial of Israel he calls "the divinely authorized precursor of the Christ," and he describes Israel as

"a people rightly called holy, because they had been the agency chosen by God Himself for the revelation of Himself to all humanity."

In the following passage he comes very near surrendering one of the most fundamental positions of the scholars of the Modern View.

"Do you remember that most interesting discovery made in the days of King Josiah in Jerusalem, the discovery of a long-lost Bible?"

It would be a mistake to infer from these and similar utterances that President Harper here commits himself throughout to the positions of evangelical orthodoxy. For example, he emphasizes the doctrine of sin, but not that of repentance or pardon or atonement. He emphasizes the divineness of the Scriptures, but teaches no doctrine of inspiration. He emphasizes the person of Jesus. He affirms (p. 28) that the resurrection is a historical fact. But he is silent as to the deity of Christ, and nearly so as to His mediatorial offices. In points like these, however, his silence should not be counted as equivalent to denial; he has simply omitted saying things that were not required by his purpose.

It has taken some moral courage on the part of President Harper to issue this declaration. It is very common for the men of the Modern View to affirm their high appreciation of the religious value of the Scriptures, or even in glittering generalities to affirm that the Scriptures are unique or divine or authoritative; but of late years it has not been common for them to make affirmations of this kind as the product of their personal religious experience, and to spread them out in details with simple, old fashioned earnestness. That President Harper has done this is a circumstance very gratifying to lovers of the Bible. It is the more gratifying to some of us because it seems to us that the things he says in this tract are absolutely inconsistent with some of the critical positions he has heretofore held. We do not understand that he is in it announcing any change of ground; but we see clearly that men who hold such views will not forever keep on attributing to the Bible the degree of untruthfulness demanded by the theories of the Modern View.