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OF
RELIGIONS

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PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS, HELD IN CHICAGO*

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THE SIXTH DAY.

THE TRUTHFULNESS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE.

BY PROF. CHARLES A. BRIGGS, D.D.

All the great historic religions have sacred books which are regarded as the inspired Word of God. Preëminent among these sacred books are the Holy Scriptures of the Christian Church. The history of the Christian Church shows that it is the intrinsic excellence of these Holy Scriptures which has given them the control of so large a portion of our race. With few exceptions the Christian religion was not extended by force of arms, or by the arts of statesmanship, but by the holy lives and faithful teaching of self-sacrificing men and women who had firm faith in the truthfulness of their Holy Scriptures and who were able to convince men in all parts of the world that they are faithful guides to God and salvation. We may now say to all men, "All the sacred books of the world are now accessible to you. Study them, compare them, recognize all that is good and noble and true in them all, and tabulate the results, and you will be convinced that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are true, holy and divine." When we have gone searchingly through them all, the sacred books of other religions are as torches of varying size and brilliancy lighting up the darkness of the night, but the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are like the sun dawning in the earliest writings of the Old Testament, rising in prophetic word and priestly thora, in lyric psalm and in sentences of wisdom, until the zenith is reached in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. Take them, therefore, as the guide of your religion, your salvation and your life.

The Holy Scriptures of the Christians are now the center of a world-wide contest. We are living in a scientific age which demands that every traditional statement shall be tested by patient, thorough and exact criticism. Science explores the earth in its heights and depths, its lengths and breadths, in search of all the laws which govern it and the realities of which it is composed. Science explores the heavens in quest of all the mysteries of the universe of God. Science searches the body and the soul of man in order to determine his exact nature and character. Science investigates all the monuments of history, whether they are of stone or of metal, whether they are the product of man's handiwork, or the construction of his voice or

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“WHEN WE HAVE GONE SEARCHINGLY THROUGH ALL THE BOOKS OF OTHER RELIGIONS WE SHALL FIND THAT THEY ARE AS TORCHES OF VARIOUS SIZES AND BRILLIANCE LIGHTING UP THE DARKNESS OF THE NIGHT, BUT THE HOLY SCRIPTURES OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS ARE LIKE THE SUN SHINING IN THE HEAVENS AND LIGHTING UP THE WHOLE WORLD.”

pen. That man must be lacking in intelligence or in observation who imagines that the sacred books of the Christian religion or the institutions of the church can escape the criticisms of this age. It will not do to oppose science with religion, or criticism with faith. Criticism makes it evident that a faith which shrinks from criticism is a faith so weak and uncertain that it excites suspicion as to its life and reality. Science goes on in its exact and thorough work, confident that every form of religion which resists it will ere long crumble into dust.

All departments of human investigation sooner or later come in contact with these Christian Scriptures. All find something that either accords with or conflicts with their investigations. The question thus forces itself upon us, can we maintain the truthfulness of these Holy Scriptures in the face of all these modern sciences? We are obliged to admit that there are scientific errors in the Bible, errors of astronomy, of geology, of zoology, of botany, and of anthropology. In all these respects there is no evidence that the authors of these sacred writings had any other knowledge than that possessed by their contemporaries. Their statements are just such as indicate a correct observation of the phenomena as they would appear to an accurate observer at the time when they wrote. They had not that insight, that foresight and that grasp of conception and power of expression in these matters such as they exhibit when they wrote concerning matters of religion. If, as all concede, it was not the intent of God to give to the ancient world the scientific knowledge of our nineteenth century, why should any one suppose that the divine Spirit influenced them in relation to such matters of science? Why should they be kept from misconception, from misstatement and from error? The divine purpose was to use them as religious teachers. So long as they made no mistakes in religious instruction, they were trustworthy and reliable, even if they erred in some of those matters in which they come in contact with modern science.

2. There are historical mistakes in the Christian Scriptures, mistakes of chronology and geography, errors of historical events and persons, discrepancies and inconsistencies in the historians, which cannot be removed by any proper method of interpretation. All such errors are just where you would expect to find them in accurate, truthful writers of history in ancient times. They used with fidelity the best sources of information accessible to them; ancient poems, popular traditions, legends and ballads, regal and family archives, codes of law and ancient narratives. There is no evidence that they received any of this history by revelation from God. There is no evidence that the Divine Spirit corrected their narratives either when they were lying uncomposed in their minds, or written in manuscripts. The purpose of the sacred historians was to give the history of God's redemptive workings. This made it necessary that there should be no essential errors in the redemptive facts and agencies, but it did not make it necessary that there should be no mistake in dates, in places, and in persons, so long as these did not

change the religious lessons or the redemptive facts. None of the mistakes, discrepancies and errors which have been discovered, disturb the religious lessons of Biblical history. These lessons are the only ones whose truthfulness we are concerned to defend. All other things belong to the human framework of the divine story.

3. Textual criticism shows that the best text, versions and citations of these Holy Scriptures that we can get, have numerous and important discrepancies. The errors do not decrease in number as we work our way back in the laborious processes of criticism towards the original text. The discrepancies are so numerous that few Biblical scholars are able to take a comprehensive view of them and to make a competent judgment upon them. The most exact textual criticism leaves us with numerous errors in Holy Scripture, just where we find them in the transmitted texts of other sacred books, but critics acknowledge that there are none which disturb any article of faith or any principle of morals.

4. The higher, or literary criticism, studies all the literary phenomena of Holy Scripture. It has thus far done an inestimable service in the removal of the traditional theories from the sacred books, so that they may be studied in their real structure and character. The higher criticism recognizes faults of grammar, of rhetoric, and of logic, in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The Biblical authors used the language with which they were familiar, some of them classic Hebrew, others of them dialectic and corrupted Hebrew. Some of them have a good prose style, others of them have a dull, tedious, pedantic style. Some of them are poets of the highest rank, others of them write such inferior poetry that one is surprised that they did not use prose. Some of them reason clearly, profoundly and convincingly, others of them reason in a loose, obscure and unconvincing manner. Some of them present the truth like intuitions of light, others labor with it and eventually deliver it in a crude and undeveloped form. All these matters belong to the manner and method of their instruction. Errors in these formal things do not impair the truthfulness of the substance, the religious instruction itself.

The higher criticism shows us the process by which the sacred books were produced, that the most of them were composed by unknown authors, that they have passed through the hands of a considerable number of unknown editors who have brought together the older material without removing discrepancies, inconsistencies and errors. In this process of editing, arranging, addition, subtraction, reconstruction and consolidation, extending through many centuries, what evidence have we that these unknown editors were kept from error in all their work? They were men of God, and, judging from their work, they were guided by the Divine Spirit in their apprehension and expression of the divine instruction; but also, judging from their work, it seems most probable that they were not guided by the Divine Spirit in their grammar, in their rhetoric, in their logical

expressions, in their arrangement of their material, or in their general editorial work. In all these matters they were left to those errors which even the most faithful and most scrupulous writers will sometimes make. Unless we take some such position we are really exposed to the peril of making the Holy Spirit the author of bad grammar, of the incorrect use of words, of inelegant expressions, and of disorderly arrangement of material, which indeed was charged upon the critics of the seventeenth century by their earliest opponents.

The sciences which approach the Bible from without and the sciences which study it from within agree as to the essential facts of the case. In all matters which come within the sphere of human observation and which constitute the framework of the divine instruction, errors may be found. Can the truthfulness of Scripture be maintained by those who recognize these errors?

5. There is no prior reason why the substantial truthfulness of the Bible should not be consistent with circumstantial errors. God himself did not speak according to the Hebrew Scriptures, more than a few words from theophany, which are recorded here and there in the Old Testament. God spake in much the greater part of the Old Testament through the voices and pens of the human authors of the Scriptures. Did the human voice and pen in all the numerous writers and editors of Holy Scripture prior to the completion of the Canon always deliver an inerrant word? Even if all the writers were so possessed of the Holy Spirit as to be merely passive in his hands, the question arises, Can the finite voice and the finite pen deliver and express the inerrant truth of God? If the language, and the style, and the dialect, and the rhetoric are all natural to the inspired man, is it possible for these to express the infinite truth of God? How can an imperfect word, sentence and clause express a perfect, divine truth? It is evident that the writers of the Bible were not as a rule in the ecstatic state. The Holy Spirit did not move their hands or their lips. He suggested to their minds and hearts the divine truth they were to teach. They received it by intuition in the forms of their reason, they framed it in conception, in imagination and in fancy. They delivered it in the logical and rhetorical forms of speech. If the divine truth passed through the conception and imagination of the human mind, did the human mind conceive it fully without any defect, without any fault, without any shading of error? Had the human conception no limitations to its reception of the divine truth? Had the human imagination and fancy no colors to impart to the holy instruction? Did the human mind add nothing to it in reasoning or in fancy? Was it delivered in its entirety exactly as it was received? How can we be sure of this when we see the same doctrine in such a variety of forms, all partial, all inadequate? How can we know this when we find the same ethical principle in such a variety of shading?

If the human medium could hardly fail to modify the divine truth

received by it in revelation, how much more must the human medium influence the divine instruction in connection with Biblical history, lyric poetry, sentences of wisdom, and works of the imagination which make up the body of the Old Testament. Here the mass of the material was derived from human sources of information; the history depended upon oral and documentary evidence; the lyric poetry was the expression of human emotion; the sentence of wisdom was the condensation of human ethical experience; the works of the imagination were efforts to clothe religious lessons in artistic forms of grace and beauty. All that we can claim for the Divine Spirit in the production of these parts of the Old Testament is an inspiration which suggests the religious lessons to be imparted.

God is true. He is the truth. There is no error or falsehood in him. He cannot lie. He cannot mislead or deceive his creatures. But the question arises, When the infinite God speaks to finite man, must he speak words which are inerrant? This depends not only upon God's speaking but upon man's hearing, and also upon the means of communication between God and man. It is necessary to show the capacity of man to receive the inerrant word and the adequacy of the means to convey the inerrant word, as well as the inerrancy of God, before we can be sure that God can only communicate inerrant words to man. We may by an *a priori* argument be certain of the inerrancy of the speaker of the word, but how can it be shown that the means of communication are inerrant, or that man is capable of receiving an inerrant word? It is necessary that we should consider that in all his relations to man and nature God condescends. The finite can only contain a part of the infinite. God limits himself when he imparts anything of himself to the creature. In the converse of Heaven, we may say that there may be inerrant communications. But has God in fact spoken inerrant words to weak, ignorant, sinful men in a world so imperfect and inharmonious as ours?

The analogy of divine revelation in other forms and of the communication between men and men, and especially between Jesus and his apostles, make it altogether probable that the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures does not carry with it inerrancy in every particular. It was sufficient if the divine communication was given with such clearness as to guide men aright in a religious life; that God would not deceive or mislead them, but would give them true, faithful, reliable guidance in holy things. The errors of Holy Scripture are not errors of falsehood, or of deceit; they are such errors of ignorance, inadvertence, and of partial and inadequate knowledge, and of incapacity to express the whole truth of God, which belong to man as man, and from which we have no evidence that even an inspired man was relieved. Just as the light is seen, not in its pure, unclouded rays, but in the beautiful colors of the spectrum as its beams are broken up by the angles and discolorations which obstruct their course, so it is with the truth of God; its revelation and communication meet with such obstacles in

human nature and in this world of ours that men are capable of receiving it only in its diverse portions and divers manners as it comes to them through the divers temperaments and points of view and style of the Biblical writers. Few men are capable of more than one portion of these colors—the most capable knows in part. Not till the day which closes the dispensation shall dawn will any one know the whole, for not till then will men be capable of seeing the Christ as he is, and of knowing God in his glory.

6. The position we have thus far attained enables us to dispose of the greater difficulties which lie in the way of the truthfulness of Holy Scripture. These are religious, doctrinal, and ethical difficulties.

(a) The religion of the Old Testament is a religion which, with all its excellence as compared with the other religions of the ancient world, inculcates some things which are hard to reconcile with an inerrant revelation. The sacrifice of Jephtha's daughter and the divine command to Abraham to offer up his son as a whole burnt-offering seem unsuited to a divine religion. There is indeed no prohibition of the offering up of children in the earliest codes of the Hexateuch. The prohibition was first made in the Deuteronomic code, and originated somewhat late in the history of Israel. The early Hebrews shared with the Canaanites and other neighboring nations in the practice of offering up their children in the flame to God. From the point of view of sacrifice nothing could be more acceptable than the best beloved son, except the offerer himself. The higher revelation of the New Testament teaches the offering of the whole body and soul to God in the spiritual sacrifice of an everlasting ministry. But it required centuries of training before that divine lesson could be taught and learned. God accepted the sacrifice of Jephtha. He graciously accepted the ram instead of Isaac. He provided a sacrificial system which gradually grew in wealth of symbolism through the ages of Jewish history. But the prophets, with great difficulty and with increasing opposition from priests and people, gradually taught them that the sacrifices must be of broken and contrite hearts, and of humble, cheerful spirits. But what pleasure can God take in the blood of animals or in smoking altars? How could the true God ever prescribe such puerilities? This is the inquiry of the higher religion of our day. We can only say that God was training Israel to understand the meaning of a higher sacrifice, even the obedience of the Christ in a holy life and a martyr death in the service of God and of humanity; and of the similar sacrifice that every child of God is called upon to make. The offering up of children and of domestic animals and grains was all a preparing discipline. The training was true and faithful for the time. But it was provisional and temporal, to be displaced by that which is complete and eternal. These were the forms in which it was necessary to clothe the divine law of sacrifice in its earlier stages of revelation. These partial forms were the object lessons by which the little children of the ancient world could be trained to understand the inerrant law of sacrifice for men. They have their propriety



THE BUDDHIST HIGH-PRIESTS OF SIAM.

as elementary forces, but they err from the ideal of religion as it lies eternally in the mind and will of God. Paul calls them weak and beggarly rudiments, (Gal. iv. 9) a shadow of the things to come.

(b) We cannot defend the morals of the Old Testament at all points. Nowhere in the Old Testament are polygamy and slavery condemned. The time had not come in the history of the world when they could be condemned. Is God responsible for the twin relics of barbarism because he did not condemn them, but on the contrary recognized them, and restrained them in the Old Testament? The patriarchs were not truthful; their age seems to have had little apprehension of the principles of truth, and yet Abraham was faithful to God, and so faithful under temptation and trial that he became the father of the faithful, and from that point of view the friend of God. David was a sinner, but he was a penitent sinner, and showed such a devout attachment to the worship of God that his sins, though many, were all forgiven him; and his life, as a whole, exhibits such generosity, courage, variety of human affections and benevolence, such heroism and patience in suffering, such self-restraint and meekness in prosperity, such nobility and grandeur of character, that we must admire him and love him as one of the best of men, and we are not surprised that the heart of God went out to him also.

The commendation of Jael by the theophanic angel for the treacherous slaying of Sisera could not be commended in our age, and it is not easy to understand how God could have commended it in any age. And yet it is only in accord with the spirit of revenge which breathes in the command to exterminate the Canaanites, which animates the imprecatory psalms, which is threaded into the story of Esther, and which stirred Nehemiah in his arbitrary government of Jerusalem. Jesus Christ, praying for his enemies, lifts us into a different ethical world from that familiar to us in the Old Testament. We cannot regard these things in the Old Testament as inerrant in the light of the moral character of Jesus Christ and the character of God as he reveals him. And yet we may well understand that the Old Testament times were not ripe for the higher revelation, and that God condescended to a partial revelation of his will such as would guide his people in the right direction with as steady and rapid a pace as they were capable of making.

Jesus Christ teaches us the true principle by which we may judge the ethics of the Old Testament when he repealed the Mosaic law of divorce and said: "Moses for your hardness of heart suffered you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it hath not been so" (Matt. xix. 8). In other words, the Mosaic law of divorce was not in accord with the original institution of marriage, or of the real mind and will of God. In that law God condescended for a season to the hardness of heart of his people, and exacted of them only that which they were able to perform. The law was imperfect, temporary, errant, to be repealed forever by the Messiah. So through all the

stages of divine revelation laws were given which were but the scaffolding of the temple of holiness, which were to serve their purpose in the preparatory discipline, but which were to disappear forever when they had accomplished their purpose. The codes of law of the Old Testament have all been cast aside by the Christian Church as the scaffolding of the old dispensation, with the single exception of the Ten Words, and with reference to the fourth of these the words of Jesus are our guide : "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

(c) When now we come to the doctrinal teachings of the Old Testament we find less difficulty. The doctrine of God in the Old Testament is magnificent. The individuality of God is emphasized in the personal name Yahweh, which probably means "the one ever with his people." The doctrine of the living God is so strongly asserted that it is far in advance of the faith of the Christian Church at the present day, which has been misled into abstract conceptions of God. The attributes are so richly unfolded and comprehensively stated that there is little to be added to them in the New Testament. The doctrine of creation is set forth in a great variety of beautiful poetical representations, which give, in the aggregate, a simpler and a fuller conception of creation than the ordinary doctrine of the theologians, who build on a prosaic and forced interpretation of the first and second chapters of Genesis. The doctrine of providence is illustrated in a wonderful variety of historical incidents, lyric prayers, thanksgivings, and meditations, sentences of proverbial experience, and prophetic teaching. The God of the Old Testament is commonly conceived as king and lord. He was conceived as the Father of nations and kings, but the "Our Father" of the common people was not known until Jesus Christ. The profound depths of the mercy of God in Jesus Christ was not yet manifest, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was not yet ripe, but there is an advance in God's revelation of himself through the successive layers of the Old Testament writings which is like the march of an invincible king.

It is true that there are at times representations of vindictiveness in God, a jealousy of other gods, a cruel disregard of human suffering and human life, an occasional vacillation and change of purpose, the passion of anger and arbitrary preferences, which betray the inadequacy of ancient Israel to understand their God, and the errancy of their conceptions and representations. But we all know that the true God does not accord with these representations. We may call them anthropomorphisms or anthropopathisms, but whatever we may name them, they are errant representations. They do not, however, mar the grandeur of the true God as we see him in the Old Testament. The truthfulness of the teaching of the doctrine of God is not destroyed by occasional inaccuracies of the teachers.

The doctrine of man in the Old Testament is a noble doctrine. The unity and brotherhood of the race in origin and in destiny is taught in the Old Testament as nowhere else. The origin and development of sin are

traced with a vividness and an accuracy of delineation that find a response in the experiences of mankind. The ideal of righteousness as the original plan of God for man, and the ultimate destiny for man, is held up as a banner throughout the Old Testament. Surely these are true instructions, they are faithful, they are divine. There are doubtless dark strands of national prejudice, of pharisaical particularism, of faulty psychology, and of occasional exaggeration of the more external forms of ceremonial sin; but these do not mar; they rather serve to enhance the golden strands which constitute the major part of the cord which binds our race into an organism, created and governed by a holy God, in the interests of a perfect and glorified humanity.

The most characteristic doctrines of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, are the doctrines of redemption. These are so striking that they entitle us to regard Biblical history as essentially a history of redemption, and Biblical literature as the literature of redemption. The redemption of the Bible embraces the whole man, body and soul, in this world and in the future state, the individual man and the race of man, the earth and the heavens. The Biblical scheme of redemption is so vast, so comprehensive, so far-reaching that the Christian Church has thus far failed in apprehending it. The doctrine of redemption unfolds from simple germs into magnificent fruitage. The central nucleus of this redemption is the Messianic idea. This comprehends not only the person of the Messiah, but also a kingdom of redemption, and the redemption itself. Man is to pursue the course of divine discipline until he attains the holiness of God. Israel is to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. All the world is to be incorporated as citizens of Zion. Zion is the light and joy of the entire earth. A Messianic king is to reign over all nations. A Messianic prophet is to be the redeemer of all. A priestly king is to rule in peace and righteousness, a kingdom of priests. All evil is to be banished from nature and from man. The animal kingdom is to share in the universal peace. The vegetable world is to respond in glad song to the call of man. There are to be new heavens and a new earth, as well as a new Jerusalem, from which all the wicked will be excluded. Such ideals of redemption are divine ideals which the human race has not yet attained. But in the course of training for these ideals, the provisional redemption enjoyed in the experience of God's people is rich and full.

It is quite true that forgiveness of sins was appropriated without any explanation of its grounds. The sacrifice of Calvary was unknown to the Old Testament as a ground of salvation. It was the mercy of God which is the ultimate source of forgiveness. There is a lack of apprehension in the Old Testament of the righteousness of faith. It was Jesus Christ who first gave faith its unique place in the order of salvation. The doctrine of holy love which is urged in Deuteronomy, Jeremiah and the great prophet of the

exile is only a faint aspiration when compared with the breathings of the love of God to man and man to God, as taught by the writings of John.

The doctrine of the future life in the Old Testament is often obscured by questioning and doubts. It is only in the later stages that there is a joyous confidence in the enjoyment of the favor of God after death, and not till Daniel do we have a faith in a resurrection of some of the dead. "Jesus Christ hath abolished death and hath brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel." (1 Tim. i. 10.)

Thus in every department of doctrine the Old Testament is seen advancing through the centuries in the several periods of Biblical literature, in the unfolding of all the doctrines, preparing the way for the full revelation in the New Testament. The imperfection, incompleteness, inadequacy of some of the statements of the Old Testament as to religion, morals and doctrine necessarily inhere in the gradualness of the Divine revelation. That revelation which looked only at the end, at the highest ideals, of what could be accomplished in the last century of human time, would not be a revelation for all men. It would be of no use to any other century but the last. A divine word for man must be appropriate for the present as well as the future; must have something to guide men in every stage of religious advancement; must have something for every century of history; for the barbarian as well as the Greek, the Gentile as well as the Jew, the dark-minded African as well as the open-minded European, the dull Islander as well as the subtile Asiatic, the child and the peasant, as well as the man and the sage.

It is just in this respect that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are so preëminent. They have in them religious instruction for all the world. They trained Israel in every stage of his advancement, and so will they train all men in every step of their advancement. It does not harm the advanced student to look back upon the inadequate knowledge of his youthful days. It does not harm the Christian to see the many imperfections, crudities and errors of the more elementary instruction of the Old Testament. Nor does it destroy his faith in the truthfulness of the divine word in these elementary stages. He sees its appropriateness, its truthfulness, its adaptation, its propriety; and he learns that an unerring eye and an inerrant mind and an infallible will have all the time been at work using the imperfect media and straining them to their utmost capacity to guide men, to raise them, and advance them in the true religion.

The sacred books are always pointing forward and upward; they are always expanding in all directions. They are now, as they always have been, true and faithful guides to God and a holy life. They are now, as they always have been, trustworthy and reliable in their religious instruction. They are now, as they always have been, altogether truthful in their testimony to the heart and experience of mankind.