

The Princeton Theological Review

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IS GOD ALMIGHTY?

III. OMNIPOTENCE AND PHILOSOPHY¹

“God either wishes to take away evils and is not able; or he is able and not willing; or he is neither willing nor able; or he is both willing and able. If he is willing and not able he is feeble, which does not belong to the nature of God. If he is able and not willing he is envious, which is equally foreign to God. If he is neither willing nor able he is both envious and feeble, and so is not God. If he is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, whence are the evils? or why does he not take them away?” It is in this way that Epicurus, according to Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*, xiii, formulated the problem of evil. A similar dilemma, stated in more up-to-date fashion by a soldier in the trenches who writes from “Somewhere in Hell,” is thus set forth in a letter to an American preacher in London: “The luck is all on your side; you still believe in things. Good for you. It is topping, if one can do it. But war is such a devil’s nursery. I got knocked over, but I am up and at it again. I’m tough. They started toughening me the first day. My bayonet instructor was an ex-pug, just the man to develop one’s innate chivalry. They hung out the bunting and gave me a big send-off, when we came out here to scatter the Hun’s guts. Forgive me writing so. I know you will forgive me, but who will forgive God? Not I—not I! This war makes me hate God. I don’t know whether he is the God of battle and enjoys the show, as he

¹ Previous articles have discussed the Biblical Data and Omnipotence and Religious Experience. See this REVIEW, October, 1922, and April, 1923.

forth of the author's own conclusions. The great point, however, is that Luther's spiritual crisis was a real one, and that he actually found the peace he sought, and found it where all must find it. All this is made perfectly plain by Professor Strohl.

Lancaster, Ohio.

BENJAMIN F. PAIST.

SYSTEMATICAL THEOLOGY

The God of Our Fathers. By H. P. S. Fleming. H. Revell Company. 1923.

This volume, as the title suggests, is a popular and very timely treatise on Theism and Apologetics. Being the latest book of its kind its nature might best be perceived by contrasting it with the first real work on the subject written in 1704-5 by Samuel Clarke on *The Being and Attributes of God*. Diametrically opposite modes of approach are followed. The work of Clarke is *a priori* deductive reasoning in syllogistic form; the present work proceeds as much from the concrete, from use of illustration and analogy to the abstract, as possible. The former was written by a foremost metaphysician for philosophers and won him the position of the leading metaphysician of England for a quarter of a century. The present volume is written with purposeful exclusion of philosophical readers, for the express end of helping those "who in any walk of life, are striving to stay the dreadful tendency of the age." Clarke wrote to exhaust the subject and to be a master of it. The present author says, "I have no hope of writing an exhaustive work and shall be satisfied if I can aid even a few toward acceptance of the divine being," and advises the reader to "go to the masters," if his presentation is found inadequate. Clarke employed a technical and stilted language of logic. The present author avoids "all technical language and endeavors to write for those who love plain speaking."

The work is a much needed putting into popular paradigms and simple style what Flint treated with such classic learning in his *Theism* half a century ago. The presentation is forceful, warm with invective at times, and written from a conservative viewpoint.

Princeton.

FINLEY DUBOIS JENKINS.

Inspiration. A Study of Divine Influence and Authority in the Holy Scriptures. By NOLAN R. BEST, Editor of *The Continent*. New York, Chicago, London and Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1923. Pp. 160. Price, \$1.25 net.

The first paragraph of Mr. Best's preface is as follows:

"Discussion between conservative and progressive theologians reveals one difference in viewpoint which accounts for all their other differences. Briefly it may be said that the inspiration of the Bible is the single central issue on which they are at odds. But even that statement of it would exaggerate the breadth of their actual dissension. That the Bible is inspired by divine wisdom for the religious edification of mankind both would instantly consent. What the effect

is of that inspiration on the quality of the Bible is the much narrower question on which alone evangelical opinion differs radically. If at this point some measure of common understanding could be had in Protestant churches, unseemly contention would almost cease to mar their peace."

These words are characteristic of the book which follows. Mr. Best is a vigorous advocate of one side in the great controversy which is now raging in the Church, but instead of saying plainly that the other side is wrong and that his side is right he represents himself as an advocate of peace. Yet the peace that he advocates is a peace of complete victory for the Modernist party and of abject surrender by their opponents of everything that they hold most sacred and most dear. It is small comfort to those whom Mr. Best designates as "conservative" theologians to be told in effect that if they will only allow the "doctrine" which forms the very sum and substance of their gospel to be treated as a matter of small moment without which Christian fellowship in service is perfectly possible they can live in ecclesiastical amity with the Modernist party in the Church. Of course such a proposal begs the whole question. Mr. Best speaks of the inspiration of the Bible as the question on which alone "evangelical" opinion differs widely. But apparently he does not see that that word "evangelical" prejudices the very point at issue. If our view of what Christianity is be correct, then the position occupied by Mr. Best and his Modernist associates is not evangelical at all. Community in Christian service between *evangelicals* is no doubt possible; but the question now being debated in the Church is just whether the propagandists of Modernism are evangelicals or not.

It is therefore certainly not true that the inspiration of the Bible is the only question about which opinion in the Church differs widely. On the contrary the question about the inspiration of the Bible is only the formal side of a debate which concerns the central content of the Bible. The conflict in the Church is a conflict not between differing adherents of the same religion but between two mutually exclusive religions, which differ radically in their view of God, of man, of sin, of salvation, and also in their inner life and outward service.

But let us approach the matter as it is approached in the book now under discussion. What view of inspiration is advocated here?

Mr. Best holds that there are errors of fact in the Bible and also "crudities unmistakably human, for the origin of which no half-way candid reader would look higher than a this-world plane" (p. 13). But, he holds, these errors and crudities are always corrected elsewhere in the Bible itself, so that the Bible as a whole is a safe guide. On this view, the authority of the Bible would seem to be like the authority of some modern politicians, who since they have been on both sides of every question have in all cases been right at one time or another in their lives. The difficulty is that one cannot always tell just when they are right and when they are wrong. The difficulty may well be the same about the contradictions, moral and factual, which are thought to be discovered in the Bible. According to Mr. Best, indeed, the choice in

the case of the Bible is not impossible—one needs only to take the later and the higher teaching in the Bible in preference to the earlier and the lower. But the trouble is that there may be differences of opinion as to which is earlier and which is later, and certainly there will be differences of opinion as to which is lower and which is higher. The decision, Mr. Best might perhaps say, can be made by Christian experience. But if so, it is not the Bible but Christian experience which is “the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” And the question arises as to what experience is Christian and what is not. One must therefore probably decide whether the teaching of the Bible is to be tested by experience or experience by the teaching of the Bible. It is the latter procedure which is meant when the Bible is called “the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” Undoubtedly one important testimony to the fact that the Bible is the Word of God is found in Christian experience, but that does not mean that after the Bible has once been established as the word of God its teachings in detail are to be accepted only in so far as they are commended by individual experience.

But we have not yet done justice to Mr. Best’s view of inspiration. Despite the individual errors and moral imperfections in the Bible, Mr. Best holds, the Biblical writers were under the influence of the Spirit of God. This influence, it is true, was not different in kind from that which is exerted upon true Christian men and women today. But a second work of God came in to supplement the original inspiration—namely, the divinely ordered selective process by which just these books and no others out of the mass of Hebrew and early Christian religious literature came to have a place in the canon of Scripture. As a result of the two divine operations, the Bible thus produced is—not in its individual parts but as a whole—thought to be “the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”

The word “infallible,” however, is here used in a sense quite different from its ordinary acceptance. It designates apparently, according to Mr. Best, not that which is always true in matters of fact but that which will never fail to accomplish the result for which it was intended. “When ‘infallible’ [as distinguished from ‘inerrant’] is the word used,” Mr. Best says, “there rises on one’s vision a mighty thought of power and authority radiating from the Bible as a central luminary in the moral sky just as energy radiates from the daily sun in the firmament of heaven” (p. 70). So the Bible is to be regarded as “a volume of enfranchising literature challenging men to adventure the greatening of their spiritual knowledge by exploration of the ways of God” (p. 116). The consequence is that fiction and allegory have a place in the Bible; it makes little difference, for example, whether the book of Daniel is historical or not. May not fiction be “true to life” (p. 89)? “If any man says that a piece of imagination can never be inspired enough for a place in the Bible, the mere mention of the parables of Jesus is all the answer needful” (pp. 92 f.).

Of course the refutation of this use of the parables is simple enough. The whole question is what effect the writer or speaker intended to

produce upon the mind of the reader or hearer. In the case of the parables of Jesus, the figurative intent is perfectly plain. But in the case of Daniel the matter is not so clear. If the writer intended the book to be taken, not as a parable like the parables of Jesus, or as a work of instructive fiction, but as history, then if the book is not historical it is simply untrue. Or would Mr. Best say that although the writer intended the book to be taken as historical God intended it to be taken as instructive fiction? It is just that method of Biblical interpretation which our author himself has condemned most vigorously—for example, in the case of the Song of Songs.

But let us return from such questions to the great point at issue. The important thing is that Mr. Best regards the Bible as "enfranchising literature," and is inclined to be indifferent as to whether the enfranchising literature is history or fiction. We do not mean that this view is presented in any thoroughly consistent way. Mr. Best does speak of the "objective truth" of the Bible, and we doubt very much whether he would regard Christianity as so completely independent of historical fact as it is represented by the school of which he has, it is true, made himself the indiscriminate advocate. But it is perhaps not unfair to treat Mr. Best's book somewhat as he treats the Bible—namely as a whole. And when it is so treated the fact shines out with perfect clearness that the author's heart is in the bulk of the book in which he regards the Bible simply as part of what has been called the "literature of power" and not at all in his isolated tributes to "reason" or to "objective truth." These latter passages are in marked contradiction to what precedes and follows.

The true impetus of the book is rather to be found in a passage like the following:

"Yet the Bible is none the less a 'standard of doctrine'—but rather in the way of a touchstone than as a measuring stick. It can't be pretended that the Bible contains all the truth in the universe, even about religious matters. But it does contain a great copious sample of the truth out of God's deepest and most eternal vein, and it serves and will always serve to judge the genuineness of whatever else in man's philosophizing and in man's experience may turn up in the guise of claimed-to-be wisdom. Let it all be brought in and compared; if it agrees with the fiber, texture, structure, of the Bible's highest and final teachings, let it be called honest goods, But if it disagrees, then out with the stuff; it is but shoddy after all."

This, we believe, is at bottom our author's notion of the authority of the Bible—the Bible is simply a touchstone to determine the kind of thing that is true and good.

But if so, Mr. Best is diametrically opposed to that which we are constrained to regard as alone the "evangelical" point of view. Much would be gained if we could lead men to a mere understanding—to say nothing of an acceptance—of that point of view. To this end we may be pardoned if we try to get back to the roots of the question. Let us make the attempt by way of an example.

Suppose there is a man who has come under the conviction of sin. He knows that he is condemned by God's law, and either because of imminent death or because he has come to understand the hopeless insufficiency of human goodness, he knows that nothing that he can do can possibly remove his guilt. But just when he is in blackest despair an evangelist places a hand upon his shoulder and tells him that, although his guilt is more irrevocable than it is represented even by an awakened conscience, God Himself in the person of His Son has taken all the guilt upon Himself and paid the dreadful debt on Calvary, so that the sinner can draw near without fear even to the awful judgment seat of God. In such a case, what is the first question which the penitent asks as he turns his tear-stained face to the evangelist who has approached him in the midst of his despair? Is it the question whether the evangelist's message, if written down, would be "enfranchising literature"? Is it not rather the simple question, "Is that *true*?"

Yet such a case, according to evangelical belief, is the case of every man. The real question is not the question whether the Bible is inspiring or "true to life"; the real question is the question whether the wondrous message of the Bible is true. Evangelical Christianity is founded not merely upon eternal "principles" of religion or ethics, but also (and more especially) upon a piece of news. And the question of all questions is the question whether the news is true.

An affirmative answer to this question will involve a totally different attitude toward "doctrine" from that which is advocated by Mr. Best. For Mr. Best's attitude is a radical skepticism or at least indifferentism. This indifferentism concerns not merely things that lie upon the periphery but also the very centre and core of the Christian faith. It concerns, for example, the supernaturalism of the New Testament and the atoning death of our Lord. With regard to the supernatural, as exemplified in the Virgin Birth, Mr. Best speaks of "men of faith" who have asked why the spiritual miracle of our Lord's entrance into the world should have been accompanied by a "physical miracle" (pp. 140 f.). But what shall be thought, then, of the empty tomb? As it is represented in the New Testament the empty tomb is just as much a "physical miracle" as the Virgin Birth. The Modernist party in the Church, which Mr. Best champions so indiscriminately, either disbelieves the story of the empty tomb altogether or else supposes that the tomb became empty by the act of Joseph of Arimathea or of the Jews or by some unknown chance. Will Mr. Best follow his Modernist associates here—or at least regard the question whether his view is right or wrong at this point as a matter of indifference to Christian faith? He says that he believes in the "resurrection," but the word "resurrection" has been "interpreted" by the Modernist preachers until it becomes a mere means of concealing their thought. To leave the basic fact of the Christian faith in this half-light is a thing that can never be borne for one moment by any evangelical Christian man. The truth is that the rejection of the "physical miracles" of the New Testament regularly means the rejection of the whole New Testament picture of our Lord and the adoption of an

attitude of soul toward Him which is very different from the Christian attitude. The indifferentism of Mr. Best with regard to the Person of Christ runs through that whole book and is summed up in the following words (p. 142):

"Whether men do or do not esteem Him to have been brought into the world by a miracle, they do esteem Him the superlative Teacher of mankind in the truths of the spiritual life—the one supreme Mentor of the consciences of men. Such is the consensus which now approaches unanimity throughout the thoughtful world. And men do not rate Him simply as a man either; without the refinements of theological definition which the creeds attempt, the world calls Him its one actual superman and at the least a neighbor to the divine."

These words, it is true, are put by Mr. Best, not as expressing his own thought but only as representing the consensus of modern opinion. But his own indifferentism as to the creeds and as to the most vital elements in the New Testament account of the Lord involve him only too deeply in the antitheistic view of "the divine" which he quotes here with such a show of favor.

But Mr. Best's indifferentism concerns also Jesus' vicarious death; "it is all one," he says, "whether he [the man who can say, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures"] considers that Jesus thus died for the sinner as a substituted sacrifice or in a great dramatic demonstration of an everlasting divine love stronger than death and supreme in unselfishness." "It is all one"—these words represent the attitude of our author toward the central message of the New Testament and indeed of the Bible from beginning to end. We cannot agree. It does make all the difference between two mutually exclusive religions. The religion which considers that Jesus died "as a substituted sacrifice" is Christianity; the religion which regards His death as "a great dramatic demonstration of an everlasting divine love stronger than death and supreme in unselfishness" (at least in the way in which such utterances are commonly meant) is the naturalistic and agnostic Modernism, anti-Christian to the core, which during the present year, as one battle in a great war, is struggling for the control of the Presbyterian Church.

The real trouble is, not that Modernism rejects some doctrines and retains others, but that it rejects all doctrine. It regards the Bible as "enfranchising literature," not as containing a piece of news. Its preaching is in the imperative, not in the indicative, mood; it supposes that the Bible "is intended above all else to persuade men that they can and ought to have fellowship with God" (p. 44) instead of finding in the Bible above all else a record of the redemptive act of God by which alone fellowship has been freely conferred.

The meaning of this attitude is perhaps not fully clear to Mr. Best himself, and there are individual utterances which perhaps are contradictory to it. But it is the real basis of the book and of the propaganda which the author is carrying on in *The Continent*. Diversities of doctrine

are, according to Mr. Best, favoured rather than deprecated by God (p. 102). If God "wanted an unvarying creed and an undiversified polity throughout His Church, there is certainly enough loyalty abroad among His people to secure what the Master wants." The argument seems to be that the fact of doctrinal contradictions proves that God desires them. But how about the fact of sin? Does the fact of sin in the Church prove that God wants us to continue in sin? If not, then the same thing is true about error. Error, like sin, is an evil which the Christian man should avoid with all his might. The fundamental business of the Church, according to evangelical belief, is to deliver the gospel message and to deliver it straight and full and plain. To treat the determination of the content of the message (in other words, Christian doctrine) as a matter merely on a par with questions of "polity" is therefore an offence against the central commission which has been given us by our Lord.

So the matter is regarded by every true evangelical Christian. And so it is regarded by the constitution of the Presbyterian Church. It is quite useless to argue about the meaning of the word "infallible" in the ordination pledge. The question just now does not concern merely the inerrancy of Scripture, important as that question no doubt is; it concerns rather the central content of Scripture. Mr. Best regards the central content of Scripture as persuasion of the human will; the constitution of our Church regards it fundamentally as a message or as "doctrine." The second part of the ordination pledge throws a flood of light upon the first. After accepting the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as "the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice," the candidate is required to receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of the Church as containing the "system of doctrine" taught in the Holy Scriptures. The important thing is that the Scriptures, according to that declaration, contain a "system of doctrine," but according to Mr. Best they do not. And one cannot read the present book carefully without seeing that the difference is a difference of heart as well as of mind; it is two mutually exclusive religions which are in conflict here. Mr. Best may not now be clear which religion he himself has chosen, and we hope that ultimately he may choose aright. But the choice, in one way or the other, must certainly be made.

That does not mean that we are without sympathy for certain qualities which appear in the book or that we have read without being moved the fervent passage with which it closes. We can well understand how in the present age of unbelief many earnest souls find any one system of doctrine too difficult to defend and are led therefore to find solace in a mysticism to which doctrine is at the most of secondary importance. We recognize, in particular, the high motives of the writer of the present book. But we do maintain that the Modernist party of which at present he is a champion would be happier and would be freer to give expression to the deepest things of their lives if they would frankly recognize by withdrawal from the ministry or eldership of the Presbyterian Church the profound line of cleavage which separates them from a Church the very purpose of whose existence is the

propagation of a "doctrine" which they cannot accept. Such a cleavage in organization would not lead to a breach in friendship. On the contrary it would lead, we believe, to a much greater mutual respect. Unity of organization is a desirable thing where there is unity of aim; but where two parties are striving to accomplish exactly opposite results, their union in the same organization leads to contention, equivocation and every evil thing. It is the latter relation which prevails between the "conservative" (or as we would say the "Christian") and the Modernist (or as we would say the "anti-Christian") party in the Presbyterian Church. The chief effort of the evangelical preacher is just to break down that indifferentism to "doctrine" which the Modernist is attempting to maintain. Christianity, according to evangelical belief, is a life produced not by attention to "enfranchising literature" and not merely by a mystic experience but by the application to one's self of a piece of news. Our religion is based altogether, therefore, upon doctrine; and the Bible, we believe, contains primarily a body of facts.

Princeton.

J. GRESHAM MACHEN.

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The Christmas Canticles. By GEORGE ELLIOTT. New York: Abingdon Press 12mo. Cloth. Illustrated, pp. 144. Price \$1.00 net.

A touch of brightness and a note of reverence will be added to the celebration of Christmas by a thoughtful perusal of these meditations upon the inspired hymns which are ever associated in mind with the birth of our Lord. *The Magnificat, The Benedictus, The Gloria in Excelsis, The Nunc Dimittis*, are all reviewed in their appropriate connections. The author does not give an exposition, at least a critical exegesis of these inspired canticles, but he indicates their spiritual meaning and their practical application. He includes short chapters on The Names Given to Christ, on The Visit of the Magi, and on The Boyhood of Jesus.

Princeton.

CHARLES R. ERDMAN.

Moving Pictures in the Church. By ROY L. SMITH. New York: The Abingdon Press. 8 vo. Paper. pp. 74.

The contents of this volume appeared first as a series of articles in the Moving Picture Age. It discusses a problem of increasing seriousness to modern pastors. The various phases of the discussion are indicated in part by the title of the chapters. 1. Getting our Church into the Picture Business. 2. The Purpose of the Picture Program. 3. Pictures in the Community Program. 4. Pictures in the Educational Program. 5. Financing the Church Picture Program. 6. Some Problems and Some Results. In the concluding chapter the author makes certain rather technical suggestions which are intended to guide the exhibitor of church films. He further adds a long list of film distributors with their addresses which