

THE PLAIN TRUTH ABOUT THE BIBLE.

BY

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THE ALLEGED PROPHECIES CONCERNING JESUS CHRIST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT. AN EXAMINATION OF ALL "MESSIANIC" PASSAGES.

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I ENTER upon this investigation with no lightness of heart, with no emotion of pleasure; but none the less do I enter upon it undoubtfully as upon a duty that needs to be done. For a quarter of a century I have been trying to find out what is most needed in the religious world, to promote a free, pure, and devout search after truth, and I have come to the conclusion that the first thing to be done is to emancipate the human mind from the strange delusion that the Bible is the perfect, authoritative, and final "word of God." How that delusion stands in the way of seekers after truth, how it hinders honest inquiry, how it separates those who would otherwise be like-minded, how it gives a fictitious and unnatural life to palpable superstitions, how it tends to bring Religion itself into contempt, and to cloud the very face of God, I shall presently point out: here, I only say that it is high time it came to an end.

It will give pain to many to have this said, but the "plain truth" must now be told. What then? some may say, have we not been having the "plain truth" all along? I answer;—Not often, if at all: partly because the truth has not really been known, and partly because a variety of considerations have kept many public teachers from speaking out on this subject. Some of these considerations deserve a little sympathy and even respect, while others call for neither.

THE "ORTHODOX" VIEW.

The prevailing view—or the view that is believed to prevail—is that the Bible is the word of God; *i.e.*, that God inspired men to write it, from beginning to end, as a perfect and final revelation of Himself and of His will to mankind; that upon belief in its absolute truth our hope of eternal salvation depends; and that to deny its infallibility and authority is dangerous heresy or even damnable infidelity. Now it stands to reason that, while such a view of the Bible prevails, anything like free inquiry respecting it is impossible. On the one hand, laymen have, of course, been taught to repress their doubts, and to even treat doubt as a temptation of the devil and a sin; while, on the other hand, any departure from the accepted view by a minister involved persecution and the possible loss of the labours of a life. So that the plain truth about the Bible has not been easily obtainable; and we are now in this curious and dangerous position,—that while it is still held to be orthodox to maintain the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, and while the vast majority of ministers are pledged to that opinion, a mass of evidence, positively overwhelming, exists, to demonstrate that the

Bible, amid much that is supremely good, contains every variety of historical mistake, scientific error, moral blemish, and spiritual stain. To say this is held to be the greatest heresy of the age, but I hold that to hush it up is both dangerous and immoral; and I warn those who denounce us for saying these things, that they are running terrible risks in staking everything upon the divine perfection of a book the serious and fatal defects of which no one, in twenty years, will be able to deny.

THE VALUE OF THE BIBLE.

At the same time, I most earnestly desire to say that I am not insensible to the supreme value of the Bible. There, the devout reader may find recorded the purest, wisest, and most consoling thoughts concerning the dealings of God with man, and the hope of man in God. There, the anxious soul may see how men have sinned and suffered, risen and triumphed in days gone by. There, every tone of the spirit's yearning cry, and every cadence of its confiding song, can be heard. There, the sage may find more than he can master, and the child all that it can need. There, saint and sinner may see that their rapture or their remorse is not the accident of to-day, that other wayfarers have felt as they feel, and that the strange living link of a common experience and a common destiny binds them to the great mysterious brotherhood of humanity. There, the heavy-laden may indeed find rest for their souls,—a refuge from earthly tumults, a shelter from the storm.

But the "orthodox" world is under a great delusion in supposing that this is so because the Bible is supernaturally inspired: it is under a greater delusion still when it imagines that the Bible is *all* wise, and beautiful, and good, as a whole: it is under the greatest delusion of all when it asserts that it is in every part the final and authoritative word of God. To dispel these delusions, then, and not to depreciate the Bible, is the object I have in view,—to make it possible to read the Bible with discrimination and true understanding, and to make it to us what it ought to be,—a book subordinate to conscience and reason, whose sacred duty it is to "prove all things, and hold fast that which is good."

THE MAIN OBJECT OF THIS INQUIRY.

I should, therefore, be utterly misunderstood if it were thought that I am anxious to "lower" the Bible, or to "discard" the Bible, or to prove that it is "false," or, indeed, to do any one thing with it as a whole, except to prove that it is *not* one thing at all, but a very composite work, requiring the greatest possible care and discrimination from the reader of it. What I want to shew is that the Bible cannot be infallible, seeing that it is unequal, inconsistent, and full of startling contrasts of good and bad, earthly and heavenly; and that it cannot be a supreme and final authority, simply because it speaks in many tones, and says the most opposite things. In reading the Bible, the one great requisite is a moral and religious

faculty for choosing the good and leaving the evil. But if that is so, it is surely obvious that it is the human conscience and not the written word that is supreme,—the enlightened living soul and not the dead letter that really rules. A moment's reflection ought to convince any one that this is so; and it would be universally seen and acknowledged but for the fact, that everything, however obvious, is made to yield to the primary assumption and assertion that the Bible is the supreme, perfect, and final word of God. My main object is to demonstrate that it is not this—that it is, as I have said, *not one thing* at all, but many things, that it contains the most striking opposites, of good and evil, false and true. Hence, the conscience, the mind, and the devout soul, are and must be supreme.

OUR RIGHT TO INQUIRE.

But we shall be told that we have no right to sit in judgment upon the “word of God,” and that our “carnal reason” should be made to submit to that word. The reply is obvious. The reproof begs the whole question; for the very question at issue is,—What *is* the word of God? Nay, more; it is our very reverence for God and for the real word of God that makes us pause before giving credence to this or that which is *said* to be His word; for surely we ought to take the greatest possible pains to ascertain what *is* God’s word; and surely the measure of our reverence for God will be the measure of our scrutiny of anything that comes in His name, or that is said to come from Him. When, then, we bring reason and conscience to bear upon the Bible, we are acting in a really reverential and religious spirit: and it is a shame to call that *revolt* against God which in reality is an anxiety to be careful and faithful in giving heed to Him. Our scrutiny of the Bible, then, is itself an indication of our desire to *know* the will of God.

Besides, it is surely the intention of our Creator that we should use our best and noblest faculties—the only faculties indeed that seem to lift us above the brutes. When God made us men and women, and put the light of reason and conscience within us, do you think that He intended us, on the most sacred of all subjects, to neglect or destroy the best guide He has given us? The question is a very simple one:—Are Conscience, Reason, and Science to be relied on here as elsewhere? It is useless to reply that in any given case of “difficulty” we must conclude that the difficulty would vanish if we knew all the facts; for, in the first place, this is to assume far more than is admissible, and, in the second place, it is frequently *not* true that we do not know all the facts: and this I shall presently shew. The real test is to be found in this question:—Why do we believe that the Bible is true at all, or that anything in it is true? The only valid answer is;—We believe it because it seems right and good. Well then, if we believe this or that to be true because it seems to us to be right and good, is it not our duty to reverse the process if necessary, and to deem this or that to be *false* if it seems to us to be wrong and bad? Any other method

would logically land us in blank submission to authority ; and that lands us at the feet of the Pope.

You *ought* to reason about the Bible, then. It asks you to reason about it. If you are to be true men and women you must reason about it. If you are to have a faith worth the name you must reason about it. If you are to know what you believe in you must reason about it. It is a poor, suspicious thing to go about telling people that they must not look into things—that they must not ask questions, and use their reason. It is falsehood, not truth, that shuns the light of reason. It is guilt, not innocence, that flies from the light of thought. It is weakness, not strength, that asks you not to examine. What does Jesus say?—“ Whosoever doeth evil hateth the light, and cometh not to the light.” We call ourselves Protestants. Let us beware lest we sell our birthright. It was the old Roman Catholic Church that cursed the men of old, when they rose up and said—“ Let us prove all things, and only hold fast to that which is good.” It is the Roman Catholic Church that forbids reason to hold sway, and inquiry to bestir itself. But how much better are we when we talk about not using our “ carnal reason ” ? Why that is just what they said to the first Protestants—“ You must submit your reason—you must not ask such questions.” And now the Protestant Church raises the same frightened cry. What is the foundation so sandy that it will not bear a strong man’s tread ? Is the argument so bad that it will not bear the eye of reason ? Is the Church in such a plight that it will not bear the light of thought ? Is the Bible so unsatisfactory that you must not look it in the face ; What are men afraid of that they try to cry inquirers down ? I propose to ignore that cry, and to go on in a path where God and Duty seem to lead.

THE INQUIRY NECESSARY.

But I pause for a moment to answer a grave question. “ What,” it may be asked, “ do you expect to gain from unsettling people’s minds on this subject ?—what practical good can come of the critical examination of the Bible which you recommend ? ” This opens a wide question, and I can only just glance at it in passing, though before I conclude I shall have to refer to it again.

I might content myself with the reply that what I propose is necessary in order to really put us in possession of the Bible, and to enable us to properly use it. The arbitrary assertion that it is all alike true, inspired, and infallible, the word of God, and not the words of men, turns the Bible into a hopeless puzzle, and takes all reality, pathos, and beauty out of it. The assertion, on the other hand, that it is a precious record of the varying thoughts of men, of the struggles, hopes, fears, trusts, and doubts of men, floods it with meaning, and fills it with reality. It then for the first time takes its place as a part of the wonderful history of the race, and becomes indeed “ profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Besides, the Bible is notoriously

burdened with so-called "difficulties," that have become such only because of this unnatural way of treating the Bible as a perfect book. Contradictions and errors there are in the Bible, and we need to be put into honest relationship with these. We do not want to have them denied and *explained away*, we want them recognized and *explained*. We want to know the history of these contradictions and errors : and this is possible if we will only treat the Bible in a proper way, as a book with a history. We shall see that contradictions and errors are to be expected in such a book, and we shall be able to see how they arose: nay more the contradictions and the errors will have a value all their own. But the way is stopped, and the whole thing is put upon a false basis and in an artificial light, the moment infallibility is claimed. More and more is the Bible being disparaged and flung aside for no fault of its own, but only because of the absurd claims made on its behalf.

It is important, too, to proceed with this inquiry, for the sake of vindicating the character of God Himself, to whom the most dreadful things are attributed. Why should our Heavenly Father be made responsible for the horrible proceedings imputed to Jehovah by the Bible ? The fact is that this inquiry, inspired as it is by reverence for a just and holy God, is in the highest sense necessary and religious.

Then, as a matter of fact, belief in the infallibility of the Bible has stood in the way of progress ; has given the sanction of a supposed divine attestation to all kind of errors ; has bolstered up obsolete statutes, and perpetuated antiquated delusions, and made honest inquiry seem sinful or presumptuous. But if the Bible were seen to be what it really is, mankind would feel more free to bring reason and conscience into active play, and everything would be judged on its merits.

But perhaps the gravest evil connected with belief in the infallibility of the Bible is that Religion is thus daily brought more and more into collision with the intellect, the moral sense, and even the religious reverence of mankind. Indeed, I have no hesitation in saying that unless we can rescue the Bible from the hands of blind Bible worshipers, and present it in a sober and rational way to the world, the intellectual and moral revolt against it will become a peril to Christianity itself.

THE BIBLE HAS AGGRAVATED AND NOT SETTLED OUR DIFFERENCES.

And here, before I go a step further, I point to a grave fact that lies right before us at the very beginning. The Bible is said to be the word of God, given on purpose to settle our differences and guide us into all truth. It is a pernicious assertion : for it compels the reply that if God gave the Bible to that end *He has failed*. So far from settling our differences and guiding us into all truth, it has been the cause of division without end. Multitudes who would think and feel alike on all great religious questions have, at what they believed to be the Bible's bidding, gone as far as is possible

from one another. "See," people say, "see how good men and devout men differ. Does not that prove that the human mind needs an infallible authority?" See, I reply, see how this supposed infallible authority has *divided* men, producing those very differences which you say it was meant to obviate or cure!

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

I take up the Bible, then, and what do I find? I find that really, in the ordinary sense of the word, it is not a book at all, but a collection of books or fragments of books of an extremely composite character. The only unity I find in the volume is the unity that is given to it by its nationality, and by its unbroken reference to a national Deity. In every other respect, it is altogether unlike the production of one mind, saying one thing, and seeking one end. Least of all is it like the production of an infallible and divine authority. To tell the plain truth, it is manifestly the most unequal and the most contradictory volume in the world, whose blemishes are as strongly marked as its beauties, whose deformities are as repulsive as its graces are attractive,—a volume reflecting all the lights and shadows of poor humanity, and not the changeless splendour of the mind of God.

AN INFALLIBLE BIBLE IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT AN INFALLIBLE TEXT.

It is, of course, important to remember that the original writings are all lost, and that the only manuscripts now in existence are copies. These are of various ages and different values. As to the Hebrew Scriptures, existing manuscripts in the Hebrew language do not carry us beyond the tenth century; though there are in existence copies of the Greek translation of a very much earlier day. Copies of the Christian Scriptures are much older; but some of these contain only portions of what we call the New Testament: only a few are complete, and none carry us nearer to the originals than the fourth century. We are therefore separated from the original writings by an apparently impassable gulf. The gravity of this circumstance is increased by the fact that most of the ancient manuscripts are either imperfect or differ one from the other, or include books which we do not now reckon to be canonical. But it is only when we turn to the English Bible in our hands that we see the serious position we are in. That Bible, it is said, is infallible; but what is really meant is that the ordinary printed Hebrew Old Testament and the ordinary printed Greek New Testament are infallible. But we must go farther back than printed books. The great question is; Whence came the Hebrew manuscript for the one, and the Greek manuscript for the other? The answer is, that in neither case have we one manuscript at all. The standard Hebrew Old Testament only came into its final form about 170 years ago, and the standard Greek New Testament received its last touches in 1550; and, in both cases, various Hebrew and Greek manuscripts were used in the compilation of the standard versions. And so the

startling fact comes out that the English Bible, as we have it, is not a translation of one independent Hebrew and one independent Greek manuscript, but of compilations which were put together less than 400 years ago, by fallible men in Italy, Belgium, Spain, Germany, and France. Since their day, manuscripts of very much higher value than any they had have come to light; and, as a matter of fact, we have now in existence Hebrew and Greek texts immeasurably superior to those which lay before the producers of the authorised translation. But these better texts are themselves only compilations. Is it not perfectly plain, then, that unless we can get an infallible compiler we shall never get an infallible Bible?

**AN INFALLIBLE BIBLE USELESS WITHOUT AN INFALLIBLE CUSTODIAN,
TRANSLATOR, AND INTERPRETER.**

But a practical difficulty of another kind comes in here; for the uselessness of even an originally infallible text is apparent the moment you ask;—And where is the infallible custodian, translator, and interpreter? The Roman Catholic Church cuts the knot of the difficulty by saying that God has still an infallible witness on earth, who is commissioned to declare His will and to interpret His word; and the Roman Catholic Church, in saying this, and in pointing to the Pope as the custodian and interpreter of the word of God, only supplies, though by a pure assumption, the necessary link in the chain. For an infallible text, in such a world as this, *needs* an infallible custodian, an infallible translator, and an infallible interpreter; and the ordinary orthodox Protestant has none of these. Hence the Babel of corrections, interpretations, and explanations, demonstrate nothing so surely as *this*,—that an infallible revelation has not been given, or that it has disastrously failed.

THE HISTORY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Where, then, did the Bible come from? For the Old Testament we are of course indebted to the Jews. But it is all-important to remember that it contains only the *wreck* or re-construction of a literature. The Jews, however much they may have been “the chosen people,” and whatever their privileges may have been as the custodians of “the oracles of God,” were scattered and crushed by surrounding peoples, and altar and home were alike desecrated and laid waste: and it was only after their return home from miserable and desolating captivity that they began to gather up the mangled memorials of better days. This being the case, it is obviously very difficult to say, when, how, and by whom the various books contained in what is now known as the Old Testament were written and brought together. Only one thing is certain;—that the Old Testament, as we have it now, had no existence 500 years before Christ. It was probably Ezra (b.c. 450) who first attempted to found a canon of Scripture; and the Bible he put together, or sanctioned, included only the first five books, and even these he produced only by allowing to himself all the rights or privileges

of a compiler and editor. A singular proof of this is found in the fact that the Samaritan canon includes only the Pentateuch, that being the only canon in existence when the Samaritans quarrelled with the Jews; and their antagonism kept them from adding the books that were afterwards included.

It is thought that Nehemiah, a few years later, made or ordered the next great addition to the canon; adding Kings, Samuel, most of the Prophets, some of the Psalms, and other books. This brings us to within 400 years before Christ.

A third addition was made still later, including some of the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, Chronicles, and Daniel. This brings us to 150 years before Christ. But even in the days of Christ himself the canon of the Old Testament was not considered absolutely closed; and for 100 years after Christ the book of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, and other writings were only doubtfully retained by the Jews. So that, in truth, the Jews knew nothing of an Old Testament, believed to be perfect from the beginning, verbally inspired and unimproveable.

A Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, made or begun about 200 years before Christ, contained many books not reckoned by the Jews. It was this translation that was best known to writers of the New Testament, and to the early Christians writers.

THE HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

The New Testament also has a history. At first, the early Christians had no sacred books beyond the Old Testament; and they wanted none. Besides, the various schools or parties which all too soon arose looked with suspicion upon any attempt to erect a new canon or add to the old. In very early times, however, gospels and epistles appeared—good bad and indifferent; and it would naturally come to be a duty to sift these, and set up a kind of authoritative standard of appeal. When was this done? It is extremely difficult to say, but it is certain that the earliest Christians relied very little on any written word beyond the Old Testament, and that, outside of that, they had no such feeling as we have respecting inspired and uninspired, canonical and uncanonical books. Two other things seem certain—that the original writings are all lost for ever, and that no copies known to us carry us beyond the fourth century. In fact, the more we know the more we seem to be driven to the conclusion that we shall never have a really perfect text of the originals, and that we shall never know by whom the Gospels, in their present form, were written. It is, however, a fact that between the second and fourth centuries it was a common thing for books of Scripture to be mentioned with more or less approach to a *list* of accepted books, and that in the second century a list of canonical books existed, very similiar to our own. Beyond this, nearly everything is conjecture, except that at least 100 years lie between the death of Jesus and the *dawn* of the idea that there could be a

New Testament, final, authoritative, and inspired. Even so late as the year 332 the Emperor Constantine had to order a list of sacred Christian books to be made; and still 100 years later Augustine felt it necessary to labour for some settled adjustment of the canon.

Bearing in mind, then, the history of the books that compose the Bible, is it going too far to say that the theory of its unity and infallibility is as irrational as it is arbitrary?

FOUR LEADING FACTS CONCERNING THE BIBLE.

In the attempt to understand what the Bible really *is*, we must bear in mind four things:—*First, that the various books which make up the Bible were written or compiled during a vast period of time.* At least a thousand years lie between the writer of the earlier fragments and the writer of the last book. This is an important fact. These books were never written with the idea that they would ever be bound up together. They were never written with the idea of ever being put between the same covers and labelled “Bible”; and, as a matter of fact, the books composing our ordinary Protestant Bible never were so put together and labelled, till the reformers did it, less than 400 years ago; for, before their time, the Bible included books now deemed apocryphal. Now how natural it is that we should find in such a book, written at such immense intervals, and by so many men, a great deal of difference in the value and authority of its various parts; and how unnatural and unwise it is to take up the Bible, expecting to find it all equally authoritative, and all equally useful. Let us wisely distinguish, according to the light that is within us, and the facts of the case. Some of the books are plainly mere national records of wars, and the struggle for life,—simply history. Others are evidently only statements of what the ancients thought about such great problems as the creation of the world, the beginning of the race, the origin of evil and so on—plainly, not the miraculously inspired statement of the precise facts, but the result of anxious men’s thought on these things. Other books are mainly expressions of personal feeling, like the Psalms; while others are the fervid records of what the Jewish reformers said and did—as the book of Isaiah and the other books of the Prophets. It is clear, then, that we have in the Bible, not a consistent, infallible, and final revelation from God, but a record of what thoughtful men said and did in the olden time, in their efforts to find out God, and solve the problems of the universe.

A *second* fact is important,—that *many of the books are not original books at all, but simply compilations.* This is true, for instance, of the whole Pentateuch, which no free modern scholar would attribute to Moses; but, indeed, very little scholarship is needed for that. Moses could not have written, for instance, the passage about the time when the Canaanite and the Perizzite were “*then* in the land,” as something past and gone (Gen. xiii. 7): for in his day they were there; neither could he have written the passage about the time “before there reigned any king over the children of Israel” (Gen.

xxxvi. 31); for the first king came some centuries after Moses, and yet that passage supposes the establishment of the kingdom: neither could he have written the passage about the nations that were "spued out" before the children of Israel, for it was *after* his day that they occupied the promised land: neither, let us hope, could he have written the passage in Numbers (xii. 8) which declares that Moses was "very meek, above all the men who were upon the face of the earth. Assuredly, he could not have written, in Deuteronomy, the account of his own death.

But, not only is it the fact that the Pentateuch cannot be attributed to Moses: it is equally clear that these books cannot be attributed to *any one* person, as an original composer. The book of Genesis is now known to be a production of a very composite character,—a compilation of fragments, in fact, and of fragments very unlike one another, both as regards subject-matter and style. These fragments were put together by an editor belonging to a late period, who was more anxious to retain and preserve all he could than to make his various fragments agree. Readers of the Hebrew can see the differences of style in the different fragments, which have been pieced together to make this one book; but those who can only read the English may see that the book is a compilation, if they only notice the curious contradictions and the equally curious *duplicate* narratives in several of the books. Hence we have, for instance, two accounts of the creation,—one in the first and one in the second chapter; two accounts of the taking of the living creatures into the ark,—one in the sixth and one in the seventh chapter; two accounts of a discreditable transaction with Abimelech, in one of which (Gen. xx. 1-15) Abraham, and in the other (Gen. xxvi. 1-12) Isaac is the questionable hero.

The book of Deuteronomy is, as its name implies, a repetition of the Law; and it is a repetition which probably belongs to a much later date than the first giving of the Law in the earlier books, as, in many important particulars, it is a revised and altered edition of the Law. In this book, we have distinct traces of an ecclesiastical polity that could only have grown up after the time of Samuel and David. "The Law," be it remembered, was not a literary production, but a code, and a code that admitted of additions and re-adjustments; and such additions and re-adjustments the old Mosaic code received from time to time, and the results are seen in the very composite books that now stand first in the Bible—a veritable gathering of fragments, written and accumulated, not by one man at one time but by many men, during many hundreds of years.

The book of Psalms is another notable instance of compilation: and no one can read it with an open mind without seeing that it contains some of the worst as well as some of the best things in the Bible. Compare, for instance, the trustful piety of the 23rd Psalm with the brutality and passion of the 109th: or compare Psalm lxviii. 22-3 (where God is represented as promising that the foot of His people shall be dipped in the blood of their enemies, and

the tongue of their dogs in the same) with the Psalm on the same page in which we find the divine prayer that God's saving health may be known among all nations. From no one mind did these Psalms come : and if some things were inspired by the spirit of God it would surely seem that others were inspired by the spirit of Satan. Another striking case of compilation is the book of Isaiah, which consists of *several* books or fragments, written, not by one man or in one age, but during a period of 300 or 400 years.

The book of Proverbs is another instance of compilation, as that book is simply a collection of wise sayings by many men, though probably edited by one.

A third fact is also suggestive ;—that *we have only a small portion of what might have composed the Bible.* The truth is that what we have is only what chance preserved, or what reverence, and zeal, and patriotism retained. Did it ever strike you, in reading the Old Testament, what a number of other books are referred to ? Why were not these books included ? I have told you why. They were lost in the various buffettings the Jews got from other nations ; so that the Old Testament, after all, is only a fragmentary collection of fragments. If the Jews had not lost the other books, our Bible *might have been, perhaps, a dozen times as thick.* I will just refer for a minute to these other books. In Numbers we have a quotation from a book called, "The Book of the Wars of the Lord"—there is a book of old Jewish Scripture lost to us. In Judges and Samuel, we read of "The Book of Jasher"—there is another book lost. In Kings we read of "The Book of the Acts of Solomon"—that is another book we know nothing of. In Chronicles we read of "The Account of the Chronicles of King David"—this is also lost. We also constantly read of "The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah" and "The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel"—but these are both absent. In Chronicles we read of "The Book of Nathan, the Prophet." In the same chapter we read of "The Book of Gad, the Seer." In the Second Book of Chronicles we read of "The Prophecy of Abijah, the Shilonite," and also "The Vision of Iddo, the Seer." Where are these books now ? and what reason have we for supposing that they were less valuable than the existing books of Kings, or Esther, or Ruth ?

In addition to these lost books, we have, in the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament, a number of books now called "apocryphal"; but it was a common thing for even the early Christian writers to quote these as *Scripture.* Baruch, Tobit, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and other books were so quoted : and even Augustine, 400 years after Christ, held the books of Maccabees to be canonical. Nor were these early Christian writers any more orthodox in relation to the New Testament. Several of them, and to a comparatively late period, refused to admit books, as, for instance, the Epistle to the Hebrews and the second Epistle of Peter. Other fathers, of the highest authority, cited as "Scripture," books that have been shut out, such as The Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistles of Clement and Barnabas, now labelled "apocryphal."

A fourth fact must not be forgotten,—that *the writers of the Bible do not claim infallibility for themselves.* It would have been a wonder if they had ! The men who gave us the books of the Old Testament as they stand, knew perfectly well that they were human compilations of valuable documents or treasured traditions, and they were probably more conservative than consistent. The writers of the books of the New Testament, for the most part, either plainly tell us they are writing as reporters (Luke i. 1-4), or sufficiently indicate this in the nature of their work. Besides, they disagree with one another ; and, more than once, we are told that the apostles had to debate about grave matters, and settle them by discussion and vote (Acts xv.), that they even had quarrels and separated (Acts xv. 36-40), and that one great Bible writer (Paul) "withstood" another (Peter) "to the face," "because he was to be blamed" (Gal. ii. 11). How can men, so obviously fallible, have infallibility attributed to their writings !

And yet, with these facts before us, abundantly proving that the Bible is composed of books and fragments that the chances of a thousand years have brought together, people will go on talking of it as a unity—nay ! as the perfect, final, and infallible word of God !

THE SCIENCE, HISTORY, MORALITY AND RELIGION OF THE BIBLE.

Passing now from these facts concerning the Bible from what we may call a *literary* point of view, I pass on to the graver considerations that relate to science, history, morality and religion. And, in the first place, I would lay stress on the fact that we have in the Bible, on the most important of all subjects, the character of God Himself, the gravest possible contradictions. It is indeed, wonderful that any one can believe that the volume came from God, seeing that the pictures presented of God Himself are utterly at variance with one another. In one book He is described as a dreadful Being who commands the most horrible slaughters, and who takes the part of a favoured people against the rest of mankind ; in another book He is a God of love, and the Father of all men, whose tender mercies are over all His works. How are we to account for this if the Bible is the inspired and infallible word of God ?

The explanation which is sometimes offered, that God adapted His revelation to man's capacity, and that from time to time He gave man what we find in the Bible, because he was not able to receive anything better, makes God the author of error, confusion, and contradiction. It is surely far more reasonable to conclude that the errors in the Bible were the natural results of ignorance on the part of man. These inconsistencies and errors in the Bible are very perplexing so long as people hold that it is all the word of God ; and many distressing attempts have to be made to reconcile these inconsistencies and to disguise these errors. But the moment we accept the simple fact, that the Bible is a record of men's thoughts, men's experiences, and men's hopes and fears, all is plain

and all is useful. The very errors have a value as showing us how men have groped after truth, and the very inconsistencies are precious, as showing us the progress men have made in seeking after God. The fact is, we lose the chief uses of the Bible so long as we regard it as the word of God; but it begins to be intensely valuable, and to be all alive with interest, the moment we accept it as the word of man.

Then, just as we might expect, we further find that the Bible contains a variety of passages which conspicuously betray the scientific ignorance, the defective morality, and the very limited religious insight of the writers of them. What are we say about the Biblical accounts of the creation of the world in six days, 6000 years ago; the nature of the heavenly bodies as mere lights and signs in the firmament, subordinate to the earth; the origin of man, and the date of his appearance upon the earth, and the familiar conversations of God with His creatures? What can we do with the statement that the children of Israel, to the number of more than two millions,—a multitude equal to the united populations of Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester, Sheffield, Hull, and Bristol,—wandered about in a wilderness for 40 years with their flocks and herds, without fodder and with only miracle to depend upon for bread and water?—and what of *this* verse,—“And I have led you forty years in the wilderness: your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot.” What shall we say of such stories as that found in II. Chronicles xiii., that the army of the king of Judah, consisting of 400,000 men slew, of the army of the king of Israel, 500,000 men,—and all “chosen” men? The figures are foolish in their wantonness. What respect can we have for a story like that in Numbers xiv., which tells us that Jehovah was only kept from indulging his rage by a stimulation of His vanity that puts Him in the meanest possible light? What are we to say about the amazing stories that appear in almost every book,—some of them grotesque, like the story of Balaam and the ass, or Jonah and the whale; many of them childish, both for their simplicity and their ignorance, like the story of the fall of the walls of Jericho and of the halting of the sun; while too many are indecent or positively immoral, like the story of the Lord’s command to Hosea to go and take unto him “a wife of whoredoms” (Hosea i. 2) or the story of the Lord’s command to Ezekiel concerning barley cakes and dung (Ezekiel iv. 12, 15)? The books of Joshua and Judges are full of the details of savage warfare, horrible slaughter, and fearful crime; and the greater the ferocity the more emphatic is the assertion that the Almighty commanded it or condoned it.

In an earlier book (Exodus xxi. 20, 21) we read that God Himself uttered *these* words:—“And if a man smite his servant, or his maid, with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall be surely punished. Notwithstanding, if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished: for he is his money.” Can we really believe anything so derogatory to God as that He expressly condoned cruelty

and murder because the victim was the murderer's "money," in other words his *slave*? In the same book (chapter vii. 18) we are told that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and then punished him for doing what the hardened heart led him to do. Is that a reasonable or righteous thing to ask us to believe? In the book of Numbers (xv. 32-6) we are told that God actually commanded a man to be stoned to death, for gathering sticks on the Sabbath: "and all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses." What a clear case of enlisting the sanction of Jehovah's name for a stern mortal law-giver's discipline! In the same book (xxxii. 1-18), in the very midst of a series of assertions that "the Lord spake unto Moses," we find the following horrible story. The Lord commanded Moses and his bands to "avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites," and they did it. But they were too merciful for Moses (or the Lord) although they "slew all the males," took captive all the women and children, appropriated all their goods and cattle, and burnt up all their cities wherein they dwelt, for so the ghastly record runs. So he was angry with them, and cried, "Have ye saved all the *women* alive?" and then issued this horrible order,—"Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves." And they did it; keeping alive "for themselves" not less than 32,000 virgins (verse 35). Why, for doing things not a tithe as fiendish, the English people were nearly goaded to drive the Turks out of Europe: and yet, a verse or two on, the Lord goes on speaking to His favourite servant again, and with every appearance of approval. I say it is an insult to human nature to ask us to condone this: it is blasphemy against God to call the record His inspired word.

Or what shall we say of the horrible record in Deuteronomy xiii., where we are told that God commanded His chosen people to murder any one who proposed to worship any other God, even though the heretic were a brother, a son, or a daughter, or "the wife of thy bosom"; and where, further, it is commanded that any city guilty of worshiping any God but Jehovah shall be utterly destroyed with fire, its inhabitants all having previously been slain, because of "the fierceness of the anger" of Jehovah? Is it not true *faith* in God that leads us to see in all this only the ferocious spirit of a ruthless religious fanatic who mistook his own fierce and pitiless spirit for the spirit of the Lord?

Or what shall we say of the story which tells us that God tried Abraham by telling him to murder his only son? Only a demon would issue such a command; and only a man utterly unacquainted with the sanctity and supremacy of conscience would ever entertain the question of obeying it. Or what shall we say of the ferocious curse in Jeremiah (xlvi. 10) respecting those who failed to utterly annihilate the Moabites—"Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord negligently, and cursed be he that keepeth back his sword

from blood :"—evidently the brutal curse of a ferocious destroyer, but here attributed to Jehovah. What can any rational and really religious human being say to the atrocities recorded in Numbers xvi., where we find Jehovah acting like an almighty demon, in causing the earth to open and swallow Koran, Dathan, and Abiram, and their houses, their wives, and their little children, and in burning up with miraculous fire two hundred and fifty "princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown," for merely telling Moses and Aaron that they were too forward ; and where we also find Him the next day killing 14,700 persons with a plague, simply because they murmured at the destruction of the day before ? Or what of Numbers xxv., where we find Him commanding Moses to cut off the heads of certain persons, and to "hang them up before the Lord against the sun," that His "fierce anger" might "be turned away ;" where also He is represented as destroying 24,000 more with a plague, and as specially blessing a sort of Israelitish Bashi-Bazouk who ran a woman "through her belly" ? What is the good of talking about the infallibility of such a book ? The only thing we have to do is to make a stand for the honour of a righteous God, and to do what we should do if we found these statements in any other book,—repudiate them, with grief and shame that anybody ever believed them. I know full well that within a page or two you will find statements just as beautiful as these are hideous ; but that does not touch the question, except to shew the truth of the statement, that the Bible is a composite work, and that it has in it things good and bad, true and false, beautiful and ugly, lovely and hateful.

I have an intense repugnance to quoting these passages at all, and would fain avoid it : but how is it to be avoided ? If people will persist in declaring that the Bible, from beginning to end, is God's word ; and if, in saying that, they try to make it the master of the conscience and the ruler of the mind, and even try to make religious outlaws of us when we let conscience and reason guide us, we have no choice, we are absolutely obliged to do what is necessary to prove that this book is a human book, bright and helpful, it is true, with human aspiration, trust, and love, but also stained and marred with human passion, sin, and error.

Again ; it must be perfectly evident that very many things in the Bible relate only to local circumstances and transient needs—nay, belong only to long-outgrown phases of civilization, humanity, and culture. To these belong a vast proportion of the rules and regulations contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers ;—rules and regulations concerning diet, social life, worship, and trade, some of which were doubtless wise enough in their day, but all of which are now either antiquated, ridiculous, or pernicious. Who, for instance, can attribute to the Almighty the regulation that the hare shall not be eaten, because he " divideth not the hoof " (Lev. xi. 6), and that the swine shall not be eaten, only because " he cheweth not the cud " (Lev. xi. 7), or that shell fish shall be con-

sidered "an abomination" (Lev. xi. 10-12)? How ridiculous to call that a final and perfect revelation of the will of God which forbids the eating of oysters! How ridiculous, too, the supposition that the Creator Himself did not know the real habits and nature of the hare, but blundered in describing it as a creature that "cheweth the cud,"—the Creator Himself misled by the motion of the creature's lips and jaws! Or who can believe that God denounced the man who should eat the blood with the flesh of any animal, as one against whom He would set His face, and who should be cut off from among His people (Lev. xvii. 10)? What is the use of telling me that this is a portion of the infallible word of God? I deny it; and I deny it just because I believe in God, and trust Him, and love Him. Or who can believe that the Almighty, after making the most solemn preparations to shew Himself to Moses, did so only to give him minute directions, extending through seven chapters, concerning upholstery and joinery, about boxes, and tables, and rings, and lamps, and loops, and bowls, and curtains, and candlesticks, and rams' skins, and badgers' skins, and pans, and shovels, and basons, and clothes? (Exodus xxv.-xxxi.)

Now, how are we to account for all this? It is perfectly easy to account for it if you take the book as it stands, and for what it *is*, as a curious, instructive, but very composite and unequal collection of ancient records, each one reflecting a stage of civilization or a state of mind—each one telling, not of a revelation made by God, but of a discovery or thought on the part of man. If we see and understand *that*, all will be clear. Then, even the errors, the blemishes, and the atrocities will take their place as objects of interest; for then we shall not only be able to account for them but to find a use for them. No longer driven to explain them away, or to deny them, we shall give them their true place in the great process of human development; so that every word of the Bible will become valuable, as a record of some phase of the progress of the mind of man.

The Bible, *thus* understood, will become increasingly precious. It will gather pathos the more we find in it a record of the hopes and fears, the sins and sorrows, the wisdom and folly of struggling humanity; it will then live before our eyes with ever new meanings; its very imperfections will be storehouses of wisdom and knowledge; and the living present, gaining light from the past but trusting in God for itself, will find Him a God near at hand and not afar off.

I have spoken freely of the defects and errors of the Bible, but let it be remembered that I have had to do this only because of the untenable claims made on its behalf. I have already said that I see the other side. I go farther. I say that the Bible still stands as the book to which we must go for the noblest utterances of adoration, the most pathetic confessions of sin, the sweetest expressions of trust, the most tender and passionate pleadings of the heart in its yearnings after God, while, in the teachings of Jesus, we have that which the world can never hope or wish to make antiquated or outgrow.

THE BIBLE THE WORD OF MAN.

But, for good or evil, the Bible is the word of man and not of God ; it contains, not the oracles of Heaven, but the aspirations of earth. It grew from the old familiar soil of human longings and affections, hopes, and fears. It tells how men sought and suffered in days gone by, and by what strange paths humanity has gone in seeking after God. It is not the *tomb* of inspiration nor the sepulchre of the Eternal ; it is a witness, not to a voice that can be heard no more, but to a voice that waits *now* to speak in the living soul,—to One who will be to us all that He was to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and David and Jesus and Paul. It has its glooms as well as its glories, its shadows as well as its sunbeams, its deformities as well as its beauties, but nothing need be wished away, for nothing is there but what belongs to the history of our kind. It is the world's most precious witness-bearer to God, and it will fulfil its highest mission when it leads you to Him for yourself.

God, then, we say, has not changed either in His disposition, His intentions, or His relations to man ; and we are to Him all that men have ever been. From age to age we are borne on by the steady flow of His Providence. In science, in politics, in all the arts and aids of civilization, we are being slowly led on by His beneficent hand, and instructed by His enlightening spirit. The measure of our receiving is the measure of our capacity to receive. Revelation is really discovery, dependent, not upon God's willingness to reveal, but upon man's power to *see* : nothing is finished, nothing exhausted, in any field of knowledge or inquiry, the law of all things necessitating progress, but never allowing finality ; the ages explain one another, and in the thoughts, the hopes, the aspirations, the activities, and the experiences of wise and holy souls in every age, God is perpetually becoming incarnated and revealed ; the struggle after the perfection of what is human being simply the struggle after the discovery or development of that which is divine.

We bless God, then, for the Bible, and for all great souls and books ; for they have all come from the same Eternal Master-Mind. The wells of salvation were not closed when the New Testament was written, and the voice of God was not hushed when it spoke to the last Evangelist.

THE USES OF THIS INQUIRY.

And now, in conclusion, I return to the question I glanced at in the beginning :—Why tell the people these things ?—why unsettle the faith of those who seem to find the Bible an all-sufficient guide ? The reply is an obvious one,—I made it years ago ;—If we seem to snatch from any the staff on which they have been leaning with full content, this is our apology ;—The staff on which you lean will presently be broken before all eyes and it will be well to be prepared for it, that faith in God may not go with trust in the infallibility of a book. In its stead, we offer you not the words of a book that

are exposed to the assaults of time and the discoveries of every age, but the eternal truth and love of the Infinite God, assured to man, not by texts that may be doubtful, and sentences that may be obscure, but by the testimony of the living soul which even when fed with creeds of men, still cries out for the living God. I say that is a message worth bringing to men,—a true Gospel, putting to shame the bad news which is being dinned into their ears that this is a kind of God-forsaken world,—that God inspires men no longer, and that we can only live on the echoes of what He said to men thousands of years ago ! Rise up to the height of this great vital faith in God ; consider what the effect would be if men in all the churches were to cease preaching that inspiration has ceased and is dead ; and if they began to preach this truth,—that ours is the living God *to-day* ; consider, I say, what the effect would be if only for one day this nation were to live in full possession of this faith and under the influence of it. The memory of that day, and the results of it, would be fragrant when all who took part in its sublime fidelity had long since passed away.

Another reason for doing this work is, that when we recognise in the Bible a natural instead of a supernatural origin, we, for the first time, find a use for every portion of it. As I just now indicated, the Bible will become *more* instead of less interesting to us as we see in it a record of *human* struggles, thoughts, and experiences. Where we are now driven to blame and criticise, because of the theory of infallibility, we shall be able to feel sympathy and to admire. The old characters that look deformed, and the old writers that often look hideous, when they are set forth as fully and directly inspired by the Almighty, will look heroic or admirable when we see them as *seekers* after God, and *strivers* after the light, though amid thick darkness. Yes ! the Bible will become a *living* book, a book full of interest and instruction just in proportion as we give up the palpably impossible theory that it is the complete and final word of God.

But there is yet another reason for seeking to put the Bible in its true place as a record of human thoughts : this is, that while it is regarded as a complete and final revelation of infallible truth it will inevitably be the cause of strife and division. The theory is that the Bible has been given as a perfect revelation of Divine truth, to end our doubts and to authoritatively declare what is true : the fact is that the Bible has split Christendom itself into fragments. Every man or Church has its own point of view and its own half-unconscious preferences, that lead to exaggerated clingings to certain portions of the Bible or to one-sided interpretations of it : and it is these that are exalted into divine and infallible revelations.

But not only because of one-sided points of view is the Bible productive of strife and division : it is so also because it is in itself an inconsistent and contradictory book. In fact, there is in it so much that is fragmentary, inconsistent, or equivocal, that (and perhaps to a greater extent than any other book in the world) it furnishes

material for creed and theory builders of every kind. In truth, the condition of the religious world to-day supplies a grotesque commentary upon the statement that the Bible is the word of God, given to settle our differences and lead us all to infallible truth. Sects and churches, wide as the poles asunder, go to it for proofs of dogmas and justifications of practices utterly opposed to one another ; and the dwellers in this theological Babel all fancy they think as they do at the bidding of the Most High ! Some time ago, when George Dawson repudiated the bloody sacrifices of the Jews, and their perpetuation in the form of the bloody sacrifice of Christ, as an atonement for sin, this was the swift reply from the other side :—“What I do you dare to question the Bible ? Who, according to that book, enjoined the sacrifices of old ? Who sent Moses to Egypt to deliver the descendants of Jacob from bondage ? Who opened the red sea and formed a passage for their escape ? Who sustained the whole nation where there was all lack of natural sustenance ? Who assembled them round Mount Sinai, and gave them the laws and commandments which were to be their national constitution in the land to which they were going ?” And so the hopeless, irrational, wearying fight goes on,—the one side urging that we must advance on to rational, humane, and really religious ideas, the other demanding submission for all time to the letter of a book. The process is a melancholy one. First, people give in to the superstition that the Bible is the final word of God, then they take a particular point of view or bring to the Bible a foregone conclusion, then they see just as much as their point of view *enables* them to see, or as much as their foregone conclusion will *allow* them to see, then they busy themselves in persuading people that the result is the final, infallible, and perfect revelation of the will of God, to dispute which is to be damned ! And this it is—this taking of one’s own view of the Bible as the authoritative word of God—that is at the root of nine-tenths of the bigotries and extravagances and persecutions of Christendom. It is certainly at the root of the monstrous and pernicious idea that God will send to hell all those who do not believe certain dogmas that are said to be revealed.

Now if we could liberate the human mind and heart from this bondage to a contradictory book, and throw people back upon themselves—upon the reason, the conscience, and the affections,—the change would be enormous. People who now totally differ about their ideas of God and man and the future would soon approach one another, led by the same human instincts : and then it would be seen that they had all along been the victims of a theory which, though a mere assumption, had been powerful enough to deprive them of the use of their faculties, and to induce them to force themselves to believe the most unlikely and even the most distasteful and dreadful things. For see what people have forced themselves to believe. They have held by the ghastly fancy of natural depravity and the inherent sinfulness of the little child : they have insisted on the even ghastlier dogma of salvation by the offering of the

blood and agony of an innocent man to an angry and exacting God; they have clung with fearful tenacity to the doctrine of eternal damnation, acknowledging that they hold it in spite of their natural repugnance to it, but actually counting that repugnance a reason why they should receive it, as all the more "a trial of their faith," which really means that they silence God's true voice in the soul to listen to an imaginary voice in a book: they have taught and quarrelled over doctrines of predestination, of election, of final perseverance, and one knows not what, sowing the Church, broadcast, with the seeds of bitter controversies and cruel discords, all because, instead of hearing the voice of God as it spoke to *them* in the conscience and the heart, they insisted on compelling that voice to be still or to become, in some feeble, unnatural and forlorn way, an echo of another voice that comes sighing from the past. And the agony of this conflict has filled Christendom with those very distortions of truth and discords of error which are cited as proving that God is not speaking to men now, but which really bear witness against us for not listening to His voice.

Judge you what the effect would be if from the minds of all good men and women a clean sweep could be made of the assumption that the Bible or some particular notion thought to be extracted from it, is the word of God from which it is sin to swerve: judge what would happen if they could all be left with their truest selves—with their common sense, their common conscience, their common humanity, and shall I not add—their common reverence for God? I venture to say that the Babel of tongues would be at an end: the parted currents would flow in one broad natural channel, and the light of a simple trust in God would be shed over all. And where then would be the dark, depressing, irrational, and cruel beliefs that now only live because it is thought they are "revealed"? *bemath 9d*

Then see how theologians have fought against science, which has had to make its way, even in modern times, against the terrorism of orthodoxy and the ban of the Church. See how people, in the face of the clearest evidence, contend for the most impossible theories of creation, transgression, and redemption. See with what vehemence they insist upon the inherent sinfulness of all human beings, the existence of Satan, the reality of an eternal hell, and the need of atoning blood. Would all this be so, if it were not for the delusion that a supposed revelation from God has told us the final truth about these things? The proof of this is that when reason and conscience and humanity are appealed to for mere reasonable and humane ideas, we are deliberately told that the carnal reason (and even the carnal eyes) of man must submit to the word of God. In other words, we must silence the living witness whom we can question and improve, and compel ourselves to listen to a dead witness who can neither be cross-examined nor corrected!

If, then, there were no other reason for telling the plain truth about the Bible, this would suffice for me,—that the delusion as to

its perfection, inspiration, finality, and supreme authority, has led and still leads to strife, to persecution, to the stifling of thought, to the perverting of the judgment, to the silencing of the tongue, to the warping of the conscience, to the hindrance of reform. Throw men and women back, I say, upon the voice of God in themselves, upon the grand and solemn facts of life, upon reason, conscience, and the living soul : then, and only then will they know the truth ; and the truth will make them free.

Our cause, then, is the cause of the emancipation of the living soul from the dead hand of the past ; the liberation of the human mind from the oppressive weight of mere authority ; nay ! the making straight in the desert a highway for our God. We are not rebels, striving against God ; we are children, seeking Him. We believe that He is the living God for living men, and that He who spoke to the fathers will speak to us. We reverently and gratefully accept the good that is in the Bible, but we go to the God of the Bible for ourselves. We live in days that are rich with the accumulations of long laborious centuries,—with the hard-earned winnings of the thinkers of other days ; and it would be a shame indeed if we were not better able than they to solve many of the great problems that oppressed their souls. Knowing this, we lift up our hearts to God for the light, the truth, and the guidance that belong to us to-day.

