

## from "The Bible Under Trial." (1906AD.)

by

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### **The Present Day Trial of the Bible**

IT may be a suitable opening for these papers to consider how the case stands to-day with the trial of the Bible as the written Word of God. There are misconceptions and alarms prevalent which a calm outlook on the actual situation may do something to remove and abate. I would fain speak a word to remove the disquietude under which many labour, as if Christianity and God's Word were at length about to be engulfed in the encroaching waves of scepticism. There is conflict enough, but no such consequence as this is going to follow.

"The word of the Lord," the Psalm says, "is tried" (Ps. xviii. 30). Again, "The words of the Lord are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, purified seven times" (Ps. xii. 6). The Bible, least of all, need shrink from this ordeal of trial; nor does it. God never asks His people to put their trust in, or stay their souls on, that which cannot endure the most searching fires of trial. The supremest test, of course, to which the Bible can be put is—

#### THE TEST OF EXPERIENCE.

Does its message commend itself on personal trial to mind, and conscience, and heart? Does it verify itself, when accepted, in heart and life? Does it prove able to bear the weight which innumerable souls through long ages have rested on it? Does it show itself, historically, possessed of the properties which, as an inspired Word, are claimed for it—those, for example, in Ps. xix. 7, 8, of converting the soul, making wise the simple, enlightening the eyes; or in 2 Tim. iii. 15, 17, of making wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus, of being profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, "that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." He that has this witness of God's Word in himself (1 John v. 10) need fear no assault from without. We move here in a region high as heaven itself above all debatable questions of science and criticism.

It is not this test of experience, however, I mean to dwell on at present, though it will often recur in our discussions, but rather

#### THE OUTWARD TRIAL,

to which the Bible in our day is exposed—the trial of opposition, of conflict, of controversy.

I.

And here the first thing we need to remind ourselves of is that this trial of God's Word by outward assault is nothing new; God's Word has been a tried word in all ages. There never has been a time in history when it has not had to encounter fierce and persistent opposition. If, then, we see unbelief lifting up its head in many directions in these latter days, we need not be perplexed and dismayed, as if some strange thing had happened to us. It lies in the nature of things, and is God's will, that it should be so; it is part of the fiery trial of our faith (1 Pet. i. 7), and the chief way by which the imperishable truth of God's Word is made manifest. People are astonished that, if Christianity be true, it should be impugned by multitudes as it is. They forget. In Isaiah's day God declared that the stone He would lay in Zion as a sure foundation would be "a tried stone" (Is. xxviii. 16). God did not anticipate that this stone, being planted there, would remain there without being put to test or trial. It was not a stone which God was to lay, and no one dispute the laying of it; not a stone that God was to lay, and no one refuse to build upon it; not a stone that God was to lay, and no one contest its right to be there. If it was a foundation stone, it was at the same time to be a tried stone, and in the trial was to be proved to be the stone of God's laying more clearly than ever. He who realises this, the prophet says, "will not make haste"—will not readily be thrown into panic or anxiety when new forms of opposition make their appearance. As the Apostle Peter gives the sense of the words, he will "not be put to shame" (1 Pet. ii. 16).

This fact that God's Word has been

#### A TRIED WORD IN ALL AGES

would admit of easy demonstration were this the place to trace its history, and in it lies strong encouragement for our faith to-day. The Lord Himself was continually met in the preaching of His Gospel by the hostility and opposition of Scribes and Pharisees, who thought, finally, they had got rid of Him by condemning Him to the Cross which proved to be His throne of empire. The ministry of the Apostles was a continual experience of opposition and persecution. And what of after times? We are apt to think that in an age like ours, with its formidable new weapons of assault on revealed truth, the conflict of faith with unbelief is far keener and more deadly than in any previous time. But this is largely due to lack of perspective.

Does anyone, for example, who knows the conditions of

#### THE SECOND CENTURY,

think that the sceptical and subtle pagans of that age had not their eyes on all the weak points—or what they took to be the weak points—of our religion, when they wrote those books and satires, some of which still remain, as clever and witty, relatively to their time, as anything in the artillery of unbelief to-day. The second century was, indeed, to an extent not always realised, an era of strenuous conflict for the truth. It was marked not only by the outward martyr conflict with paganism, and by the keen literary attacks just referred to, but by the all-pervading influences

of a subtle Oriental theosophy, which, had they prevailed, would speedily have dissipated historical Christianity into empty phantasies. The controversy with Gnosticism was largely a conflict about Scripture. The Scriptures were the direct object of attack—the Old Testament in its entirety, as being, so it was held, the revelation of an inferior and immoral deity; the New Testament in considerable part, and wholly as regarded its historical truth. This, too, in an age when the Church was yet young and feeble, and its Canon of Scripture only yet in process of formation. When the era of pagan persecution closed, it was again with a determined effort to crush out the life of the Church by compelling the surrender and destruction of its Scriptures.

Or glance at

### THE MIDDLE AGES,

the latter part of which witnessed the attempt of the Roman Church to suppress the reading and circulation of the Bible among the laity. It is customary to speak of these ages of the ascendancy of the Church as the "Ages of Faith"; but does anyone think that there was no scepticism in Europe as the result of that great outburst of learning and of new ideas that broke upon the world in that period? Dr. Liddon has justly said: "It may fairly be questioned whether the publicly proclaimed unbelief of modern times is really more general or more pronounced than the secret, but active and deeply penetrating scepticism which during considerable portions of the middle ages laid such hold upon the intellect of Europe." The renaissance of paganism in the fifteenth century literally honeycombed Europe with new and bizarre forms of unbelief, while the Church which should have resisted it was sunk in deadliest corruption. Yet in pious circles the study of God's Word never wholly died out, and translations into the speech of the people were made, and circulated, mostly secretly, in the chief European countries. Thus was prepared the way for the grand revival of the Reformation, flinging open once more the gates of the knowledge of Holy Scripture; and great was the joy with which the enfranchised Church entered on its inheritance.

But soon the sky was again clouded. Philosophy and science made rapid advances as the result of that very emancipation of the human intellect which the Reformation had fostered, and ere long the seeds of a new rationalism began to be sown in the bosom of the Church, with effects disastrous to reverent faith in the Scriptures.

### THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

was the peculiar era of this older rationalism in all the countries of Europe, and, in its various forms of a rampart Deism in England, of Voltaireism in France, of the superficial rationalism of the "Illumination" in Germany, it ate into the vitals of these countries, and for a time made Christianity almost a name of mockery in cultivated circles.

What religion was in England in this period may be learned from the often-quoted passage from Bishop Butler's "*Advertisement*" to his "*Analogy of Religion*."

"It has come," he says, "I know not how, to be taken for granted by many persons, that Christianity is not so much as a subject for inquiry; but that it is now, at length, discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were, by way of reprisals for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world."

Will it be said by the most pessimistic that there is anything like this among us to-day? On the contrary, we have to-day, I dare to say, more aggressive work on the part of the Christian Church than almost in any previous age. The Church of Christ to-day, notwithstanding all these forces of unbelief we hear of around us, has more members, is circulating more Bibles, is doing more good, is extending itself more widely in the world, is cherishing in its heart, more earnestly the dream of universal empire, than at any previous period of its history! Only it is doing this on the ground of the old Evangel, not on the ground of the new theories of religion and of the Bible. Let us thank God for it, and not be downcast.

## II.

In this connection it is interesting to recall the causes which, in these different ages, brought about

### THE DELIVERANCE OF THE CHURCH

from an enthralling scepticism and irreligion. The present age has abounding faith in scholarship. When a scholar speaks about the Bible, let no man peep or mutter. And I should assuredly be the last to seem to throw any slight on sound and accurate scholarship. Let scholars be fought by all means with the weapons of scholars.

But it is very much to the point to observe that it has never been by learning, by philosophy, by science, by scholarship, that the Church has been revived and saved in eras of great religious laxity and abounding infidelity. When Jesus introduced His religion into the world He did not choose "scholars," but humble, simple-minded men, attached to Himself by a living faith, and endued with power from on high, to do it, as witnesses to His words, works, and resurrection. "The base things of the world, and the things that are despised, did God choose, yea, and the things that are not, that He might bring to nought the things that are" (1 Cor. i. 28).

And what has been the verdict of history on this method? Has it not justified it in the most emphatic way? Surely it is the greatest thing we can say about these first disciples of Jesus—the most convincing testimony we can bear to their own greatness—that they had the eyes to see, that when the wise men of the world of that time were blinded, and could not see, they had the power to discern something of the meaning, the importance, the world-wide significance of this great appearance in their midst; that they had the power to take, in some degree, the measure of that great spiritual movement which the heads of the people, the Caiaphases, Pilates, Scribes and Pharisees, Rabbis, were all blind to, and could only

set down to some passing spasm of superstition! They took in some degree the measure of the spiritual greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ, and saw something of what His Person and work really meant for men; saw that there was laid in Him the foundation of a great world-wide religion; that bound up in Him were hopes grand and glorious beyond expression for the individual and the race! This is their eternal title to honour. By means of it they became the instruments of a revolution which changed the face of the world. God hid it from "the wise and prudent," but revealed it "unto babes" (Matt. xi. 25).

So when we come to the later age of the Reformation, what brought the remedy for the unbelief and spiritual evils under which that age groaned? Not scholarship or science, but the discovery in Scripture and faithful proclamation of the living Gospel of the grace of God by Luther and his fellow-reformers, men who had felt its power in their own souls.

And once more, what rescued the Church from the torpor and death of the negation of the eighteenth century? The deliverance came, not from philosophy or learning, not even from the works of able apologists like Butler, but from the tides of

## THE SPIRITUAL REVIVAL

that swept over Britain, and were felt in other lands, under the preaching of such men as Whitefield and the Wesleys. This it was which gave evangelism the victory once more over indifference and unbelief, and breathed the new breath of life into society which introduced the era of missions to the heathen, Bible diffusion, home evangelisation, and the innumerable social reforms of the last century. It is to a like outpouring of the Spirit of God upon His Church, and to the same divine energy manifesting itself in holy lives and practical work, far more than to learned confutations, however valuable these may be in their place, that we must look for the overthrow of the forms of unbelief that lift up their heads among us to-day. The owls vanish when the daylight reappears.

### III.

## THE ASSAULTS UPON THE BIBLE

which cause most anxiety at the present hour, it will be generally agreed, are those which come from the newer schools of Old and New Testament criticism, from a popular monistic philosophy, from evolutionary theories in science, and from the absorbing interest which has recently been displayed in the study of comparative religion and mythology. The two subjects which are most to the front are criticism and science, though signs are not wanting that the foremost *role* may soon be taken by the comparative study of religions.

Of course, it is recognised that mistakes may be made, and old controversies on all these subjects carry in them lessons to be wisely laid to heart by both the assailants and the defenders of the Bible. Voltaire was confident that Christianity

would be overthrown by the discovery of the law of gravitation, and would not survive a century. Yet Sir Isaac Newton, who discovered the law, was a humble Christian man. Strauss boldly affirmed that the Copernican system gave the death-blow to the Christian view of the world. But what Christian to-day feels his faith in the slightest degree affected by the discovery that the earth goes round the sun, and not the sun, as was once believed, round the earth?

There were many vauntings that the Bible was discredited, and many shakings of heart on the part of believers in the Bible themselves, when geology made it certain that the world was immensely older than the 6,000 years assigned to it since the creation by the current chronology. The saintly Cowper could poke his gentle satire at the geologists:—

"Some drill and bore  
The solid earth, and from the strata there  
Extract a register, by which we learn  
That He who made it, and reveal'd its date  
To Moses, was mistaken in its age."

But few are troubled at the present time, or feel that even the "days" of Genesis are put in serious peril, by the discovery, through the same drilling and boring, of the magnificent procession of the aeons through which the work of creation actually extended.

On the other hand, as we shall see by and by, science also has had to lay aside many extreme hypotheses, and abandon or modify theories, which created, or seemed to create, difficulties in comparison with Scripture.

One is taught by these things to avoid dogmatism, and wait patiently for the progress of discovery, when many things which present difficulty at a cruder stage of science will clear themselves up of their own accord. Yet

#### THERE ARE LIMITS,

as everyone also must admit, set by the nature of the case to this process of conciliation. Because good Christian men once mistakenly contended for the inspiration of the Hebrew vowel-points, it does not follow, as seems sometimes to be argued, that the most radical results of a destructive criticism are compatible with faith in the Bible's inspiration and authority. Because people once believed that the sun went round the earth, and shook their heads in alarm at geological discoveries of the age of the earth, it does not follow that spiritual religion—not to say Christian faith—can ever reconcile itself to a form of theory that declares mind to be a mere function of brain, denies free will, and pours scorn on belief in immortality. Because there are different views on evolution and creation, it does not follow that any and every account of the mode of man's physical and spiritual origin leaves intact the Bible doctrine of sin. There is need, I grant, for caution, and for wise and charitable discrimination between essentials and non-essentials in belief, as in practice. But there are none the less great and vital issues between truth

and error about the Bible which no sophistry can obscure, and no juggling with words efface.

#### IV

The church is deeply concerned at the moment with the bearings and issues of what is called

#### THE HIGHER CRITICISM.

It is well to understand what the feeling really is which lies at the bottom of this anxiety. It is not at all, in the first place, a feeling as to the general legitimacy of criticism. I do not believe—and the reception given to my own volume on the Old Testament confirms me in this opinion—that any really devout student of the Bible desires to tie up honest inquiry on any question of author, origin, date, or mode of composition of the Biblical books, which does not involve clear contradiction of the Bible's own testimony on these subjects. By all means, if any traditional opinion can be shown by valid reasoning on sound data to be in error on such points, let it be corrected.

The feeling as to the type of Higher Criticism now in vogue goes much deeper. What is felt is that this newer school of criticism—commonly known as the Wellhausen school from its most distinguished representative—really subverts the basis of a reasonable faith in the Bible, and of a revelation of God contained in it, altogether. There are moderate and devout men in this country—men whom personally one must honour—who seek to tone down the negations of the theory, and breathe into it a more believing spirit; but for the exhibition of its principles one prefers to go to the originators and accredited representatives of the school; and, even in the works of the moderate critics, one soon discovers that the best efforts cannot remove the taint of rationalism which inheres in its very essence.

It is not extravagant to say that, on the

#### MOST FAVOURABLE SHOWING

in this theory, little is left of the patriarchal and Mosaic history; that the Bible's own account of the origin, nature, and course of development of Israel's religion disappears, and an entirely different account, resting on different premises, is substituted for it; that till the times of the prophets, at least, the supernatural recedes very much behind the natural, and miracle is hardly recognised; that practically all the legislation is taken from Moses and ascribed to a much later date; while the Levitical system in its main features is held to be a post-exilian invention, imposing on the returned Jewish remnant a code of ritual which the prophets of an earlier age, had they known of it, would have vehemently denounced as dishonouring to Jehovah!

Those who are acquainted with the literature of the school will admit, I think, that this is an exceedingly mild account of its general teaching; but if it is accepted,

it surely sufficiently explains the repugnance with which the immense mass of Christian people in our churches regard this strange method of dealing with God's Holy Word. If in their denunciation of it they sometimes say and feel that it is really asking them to accept

#### ANOTHER BIBLE,

they are not without justification for that opinion in certain utterances of the school itself. Here is a recent pronouncement by a distinguished representative of the more moderate wing of the school, Prof. A. Westphal, of Montauban. "It is not in vain," he says, "that the internal ferment provoked by the old struggles has troubled the Church for long years. If it has not succeeded in furnishing the theological renovation which was expected from it, the work of dislocation of traditional ideas is none the less accomplished. Little by little the abyss has been dug between the catechism of the Church (*du temple*) and the theology of the school; the day is coming when we shall be faced with two Bibles, the Bible of the faithful, and the Bible of the scholar."

It would be easy to multiply quotations to the same effect, but this is sufficient at present to show the gravity of the issue by which the Church is to-day confronted

It adds to the gravity of the case that, according to the school itself, the "critical views" represented by it (so writes one) are "at present all but universally held by Old Testament scholars." This, like many other statements of the school, requires, as we shall afterwards find, to be taken *cum grano*; but there is no doubt that for many years the Wellhausen school has been the dominant one, and has, in more or less pronounced forms, attracted an ever-increasing following to its banner; and that in Britain and America it is distinctly the ruling school still. Writers have almost ceased to argue about it; they are content to repeat its shibboleths, and register what they are pleased to call its "settled results." It might appear as if the representative of "the traditional view" had nothing left for him to do but to pull down his flag and gratefully accept what crumbs of history, law, and prophetic teaching—the last in larger measure—the critic is able to rescue for him from the general wreckage.

#### V.

Before, however, giving way to undue alarm, the believer in the Bible, as we have been accustomed to understand it, will do well to place before his mind

#### CERTAIN REASSURING CONSIDERATIONS

which may help somewhat to modify a desponding judgment on the situation. I mention here only two or three of these, reserving further survey of this and other forms of trial of the Bible to succeeding papers.

(1) One preliminary consideration of some importance is that, after all, very much in the contentions of the Wellhausen school is not new, and what is new has not yet, as theories go, had a very long time to



## THOROUGHLY TEST AND ESTABLISH

itself. Dr. Cheyne, in his book on *The Founders of Criticism*, draws attention with justice to the great indebtedness of the earlier critical schools to English Deism (pp. 1, 2). One is continually struck in reading the attacks on, and defences of, the Old Testament in the old Deistical controversy, with the surprising anticipations of the difficulties, errors, contradictions, imperfections, immoralities served up to-day as the newest learning in

Old Testament criticism. Not a little on these subjects in modern books is already to be found, as vigorously stated, in Morgan, and Bolingbroke, and Paine, and in the older rationalists like Vatke and Von Bohlen. Yet faith in the Bible withstood the shock then—gave, more over, exceedingly good reasons for doing so—and is not likely to be overturned by the reproduction of the same things now.

On the other hand, what is new in the Wellhausen theory, particularly the post-exilic dating of the Levitical Law, has not yet had a very long period of trial. The critical theory, of which it is the outcome, has been maturing for more than a century; but this part of it, though advanced tentatively by earlier investigators, met with little or no favour till twenty-five or thirty years ago, when, in the wake of Graf's book in 1861, it "caught on" through the able advocacy of Kuenen and Wellhausen. Previously to that it had been generally rejected as an incredible folly. Kuenen himself, in 1861, spoke of its grounds as "not worthy of refutation." While, therefore, the Wellhausen theory has more recently had a remarkable success, it is still, as such things go,

## A COMPARATIVE NOVELTY,

and it is quite too early yet to speak of it as "a settled result." The history of the Tubingen school in New Testament criticism holds out, as we shall by and by see, a warning here. There were causes in the state of thought of our time which favoured the rise of such a school; it was imported as a novelty, and "rushed" in this country by certain very able scholars; adventitious circumstances gave it an artificial *eclat*, and predisposed younger scholars in a chivalrous spirit to adopt it; as its influence spread it became a kind of tradition, a fashion of thought, and was often assented to because scholars "said it," without much independent examination of its grounds. Its somewhat gourd-like popularity is itself a good reason for being chary in yielding to it an unqualified assent.

(2) There is, however, a second consideration which strongly fortifies this moral of the first. The school in question has had an astonishing success, but it is by no means the case that it has had all the field to itself, or that it has it now, or has it in any increasing degree. It is a fact that in every age

## EXCESSES OF CRITICISM

tend to work out their own cure. It was so in the Tubingen school; and so it is proving itself to be here. Scholars may talk as they will of "settled results," but it is undeniable that extraordinary changes are taking place within the critical school, which augur ill for its future ascendancy. The Wellhausen theory applies the principle of evolution to the religion of Israel, but its own development is a remarkable illustration of the same principle. I shall have occasion later to speak of some of these developments; enough at present to say that they run the theory into such excesses in multiplication of sources, minute dissection of documents, extension of time in the process, complicated operations in combination and redaction, that the theory literally breaks down under its own weight, and becomes incredible to soberly thinking minds. I have compared it in my book to the constant adding on of cycles and epicycles in the Ptolemaic astronomer's chart, till it became a huge maze of confusion which defied belief. The theory, in my humble opinion, is rapidly running to seed; by its very excesses is digging its own grave.

(3) This leads me to say, next, that, in point of fact,

### GREAT CHANGES

are already apparent in influential quarters in the state of opinion on Old Testament questions; and greater change, are surely imminent in the near future. I do not refer to the still powerful body of opinion on the Continent that refuses adherence to the Wellhausen programme—a great deal more powerful than many imagine—or to the changes in individual opinion that occasionally occur, though these also are noteworthy as signs of the times. One may notice, however, as of special significance the decisive break of leading archaeologists, as Sayce, Hommel, Halevy, Ditlef-Nielson, with the Wellhausen theory, which most of them had earlier accepted.

My own conviction is that there is at the present moment a considerable and growing amount of distrust of the methods and conclusions of the reigning critical school in the minds of both clergy and laity in our own country. It is but a straw showing which way the wind blows, but one cannot but be interested in the statement made by Dr. Robertson Nicoll in his notice of the late Dr. George Matheson, that, after a period of sanguine acceptance of the processes and results of the Higher Criticism, as expounded by Prof. W. R. Smith, and of the doctrine of evolution, "he came," in later life, "to disbelieve in the Higher Criticism and in the doctrine of evolution—at least in its extreme form."

It is, however, something far more wide-reaching I have in view in the remark just made as to impending revolutionary changes in critical opinion. The truth is, the placards are again changing, and a new school has already arisen—the so-called

### "HISTORICAL-CRITICAL" SCHOOL,

which is gathering to it the younger generation of scholars, and which in its heart regards Wellhausenism as pretty much obsolete. It is not on that account more believing, but is in some respects more destructive: yet its critical positions show a

marked return in a conservative direction. I might illustrate from H. Gunkel, the influential Professor at Berlin, but prefer to take a single example from an address delivered recently at a conference at Eisenach, by the learned Orientalist, Hugo Winckler, a leading representative of this tendency. This remarkable address is nothing less than a vigorous assault on the whole foundation of the Wellhausen theory of the religion of Israel, in its advance from a tribal god to ethical monotheism in the age of the prophets, and in its alleged successive stages of nomad religion, agricultural religion, prophetic religion, and legal religion. Winckler assails the theory root and branch, and boldly declares that there has been no "development" of the kind. He decisively rejects the cardinal Wellhausen tenet of the origin of the Levitical Law in the exile, and contends that "law and prophets" must have been present from the beginning. He mentions that he also is here recanting an earlier view. Here is a revolution, indeed—one prophetic of much more. In how curious a light, after such a pronouncement, appears the talk about "settled results!"

(4) One other circumstance I would mention as tending to a recoil in many minds from the prevalent methods in Old Testament Criticism, and I refer to it only in a word. It is the spectacle afforded in recent works of what these methods really mean when applied with like unflinching boldness to the documents and history of

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT.

It is a remarkable feature in the existing critical situation that the critics, having apparently sucked their orange well-nigh dry in the Old Testament, are now precipitating themselves in increasing numbers on the New Testament, with the result that its texts, narratives, and portraiture of the life of Jesus and of the early Church, are being subjected to the same treatment as had laid in ruins the patriarchal and Mosaic history.

Here, however, the matter touches the Christian conscience too closely. Abraham and Moses may go in fidelity to the historical method, but if Christ is to be taken away, there is a start of shocked surprise. A halt must be called, and the methods that lead to such a result must be carefully looked into! Here the new historical-critical method is in its element, with its comparative mythology, and reduction of the narratives of the Nativity and Resurrection into legends.

One is interested in this connection to see the strenuous protest being made by so convinced an Old Testament critic as Prof. C. A. Briggs, in defence of the Virgin Birth. Again, perhaps, only a straw, but a significant one. This rejuvenation of assault upon the New Testament will also occupy us later.

#### SCOPE OF THE PAPERS.

The purpose and scope of the papers collected in this volume will now, I hope, be sufficiently apparent. Written from the standpoint of assured faith in the revelation of God in the Scriptures, they are intended to remove disquietude, confirm faith, and set forth considerations which may serve to show that, severe as the trial is to

which the Bible is at present subjected, it will emerge from the ordeal, as heretofore, unscathed, and may be depended on to retain its place in the devout regard of Christian people, as the repository of the living oracles of God for the guidance and salvation of mankind.

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