

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE II.

REASONABLE BIBLICAL CRITICISM.

BY THE REV. W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.,
TORONTO, CANADA.

IN the preface to his book,¹ Dr. Beecher expresses his belief that one of the great needs of to-day is that of "so setting forth the orthodox ideas that they shall appeal to the thinking of the present generation, and shall make the study of the Bible a live study" (p. v). His book is an attempt to meet this need, and he has aimed at giving a concise treatment at once comprehensive and concrete; "instead of presenting a logically complete outline, it presents a succession of topics that are typical in their character." The first six chapters, covering Part I., are concerned with the "Point of View and Principles of Reasonable Criticism." In the remainder of the book, consisting of sixteen chapters, instances are selected from different parts of the Old Testament to illustrate these facts and principles.

The opening chapter is entitled "Agnostic and Cryptoagnostic Criticism." By agnostic criticism is meant the attitude of those who will not affirm anything as to the existence of God, an attitude which of course prevents the holder from regarding the Scriptures as a Divine revelation. By "cryptoagnosticism" Dr. Beecher intends us to understand the position of those who are in a greater or less degree agnostic, but

¹ *Reasonable Biblical Criticism.* By Willis J. Beecher, D.D. 12mo. Pp. xvii, 335. Philadelphia: Sunday School Times Company. \$1.50, net.

who try to hold this position "without parting entirely from the traditional ideas of the sacredness of the Bible" (p. 4). This position, however, is really more dangerous than the former because it comes from "enemies concealed within the camp." Cryptoagnosticism is a denial of the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture, and Dr. Beecher argues that "any criticism which unduly assumes or affirms the lack of truthfulness in the Scriptures is thereby marked as either agnostic or cryptoagnostic" (p. 6). Cryptoagnostic criticism is one of the great phenomena of present-day thought, and is being "pushed by a propaganda that is wonderfully effective." As an instance of this attitude a quotation is given from Cornill's "Prophets of Israel," in which it is said that the narrative of the Old Testament "gives a thoroughly one-sided, and in many respects incorrect, picture of the profane history, and on the other hand an absolutely false representation of the religious history of the people, and has thus made the discovery of the truth well nigh impossible" (p. 7). Wellhausen is also commonly reported to have compared his own teachings with those of certain Scottish scholars in the following terms: "I knew the Old Testament was a fraud, but I never dreamt, as these Scotch fellows do, of making God a party to the fraud" (p. 8). It is pointed out that these and other utterances are by no means exceptional, and also that many who are not so outspoken yet adopt lines of thought and practice which are not less subversive of the truthfulness of Scripture. One of the most serious elements of the situation is what Dr. Beecher calls "amateur cryptoagnostic criticism," this critical attitude being adopted by men who have not given any special study to the subject; and the greatest trouble is that many of these amateurs speak as though the issues at stake were not particularly important, but mere cases of

hair-splitting. Those, however, who have given most attention to the matter are aware that the situation is really serious, and that the questions are undoubtedly vital. If our confidence in the Bible as a source of information concerning religion is shaken, it is difficult to realize how far we may not go; for, as Dr. Beecher points out, "it is not by accident that agnosticism concerning the Scriptures is accompanied by agnosticism concerning the fundamentals in morals and religion" (p. 12). It will be seen from this first chapter that the book is thoroughly alive to the issues involved, and we are grateful to the writer for his plain and fearless statement of the case.

The next chapter discusses "The Great Present-Day Question: Are the Scriptures True?" This is, indeed, the vital problem to-day, not whether the Scriptures are inspired, so much as whether they are ordinarily true in their statements. This is the line to be drawn between the two schools of criticism, and all other distinctions are of minor importance (p. 15). In a series of carefully-stated paragraphs Dr. Beecher discusses this issue, and shows what is involved in a belief in the truthfulness of the Bible; and he concludes that we are compelled to recognize the fact that on this subject "we have antagonists as well as allies." It is essential to state in the actual words of the author the position as he conceives of it:—

"One is on the wrong side if he prefers interpretations that make Bible statements contradictory or incredible, rather than equally feasible interpretations that make them true.

"One is on the wrong side if he needlessly prefers interpretations that bring the statements of the Bible into conflict with facts known by means of evidence from other sources.

"One is on the wrong side if, finding an apparent discrepancy between a biblical statement and evidence taken from some other

source, he takes it for granted that the other source is to be preferred to the Bible.

“One is on the wrong side if he prefers mere guesses, or suggested inferences from theories, to the testimony found in the Scriptures.

“One is on the wrong side if he rejects the testimony of the Scriptures concerning the date and authorship of the various parts of the Scriptures, particularly in the cases where this testimony is abundant and clear” (p. 23).

“Finally, one is on the wrong side if he rejects in its general outline and main sweep the history of the religion of Jehovah as it is given in the Old and New Testaments” (p. 24).

If it be asked why it is necessary to insist in this way on the historical character of the Bible, the answer is obvious. We want to know the truth; and, since the Bible purports to give us the history of the religion of Jehovah, there is every reason to believe that it gives it correctly. As a matter of experience, those who deny the facts, usually tend to deny the religious ideas associated with them, “because the facts and the religious teachings are bound together, and cannot be permanently separated” (p. 26). This is a particularly fine chapter, and its truths should be pressed home by all who are concerned for the essential trustworthiness of the Old Testament. It narrows and clarifies the issue to concentrate attention on this point before concerning ourselves with any doctrine of inspiration.

But Dr. Beecher proceeds to discuss in Chapter III. “Inspiration. How God gave the Scriptures”; and it is interesting to observe his statement of the old position:—

“The essential, sane idea of the old tradition is that the Scriptures are a unique body of literature, provided by God as an especial revelation of himself to men, with the use of whatever superhuman means were needed for the purpose, and having the authority—that is to say, the value as evidence—which properly belongs to such an especial communication from God” (p. 28).

He has some timely words on the subject of “dictation,”

and allows that when we speak of God giving Scripture through men it is natural to picture the matter as God dictating thoughts or words to the human author. "I fancy we shall never be able utterly to eliminate this idea, though the theologies all repudiate it, and every thinker tries to divest himself of it" (p. 29). It is essential, however, to remember that inspiration is not dictation, and that the idea of a business man and his stenographer is absolutely untrue in connection with the most orthodox doctrine of inspiration. Of course those whose view of the Bible is "cryptoagnostic" misunderstand and often scoff at verbal inspiration, as though it were the same as mechanical dictation, and yet, as Dr. Beecher points out, this meaning is repudiated by the very churches and men who believe in verbal inspiration. All that the phrase means is, that inspiration has extended to words as well as ideas (p. 30). The conclusion may be heartily commended for its clearness and frankness:—

"All the formulated doctrines of inspiration teach that there are human elements in the Scriptures, as well as divine elements. They affirm that while the Scriptures were in a unique sense given by God, they were given through human authors, each having his own characteristics. They unanimously reject the idea of mechanical dictation. Whoever, in attacking old-fashioned views, neglects these facts, is guilty of foul play" (p. 31).

What, then, are we to understand by inspiration in relation to the Scriptures? The author's view is expressed as follows, and could not be more to the point:—

"By providential and spiritual influences the Supreme Power caused men to perform actions, and by like influences caused men to record the actions performed. Of course, the making of the record included not merely the taking down of memoranda, but all the subsequent literary processes. In their final form the records thus made are the Scriptures as we have them" (p. 33).

It is the uniqueness of Scripture when compared with all

other literatures that constitutes the strongest argument for some Divine supernatural element which can be described only by inspiration (p. 35 f.). This chapter forms a clear, sane, strong statement of the true view of inspiration, which ought to make it impossible to misconceive the conservative position; but we suppose that, in spite of all Dr. Beecher and others are saying, we shall still have the critical scoff at "dictation," as if this were the traditional doctrine.

When Dr. Beecher proceeds to his next chapter, "How to account for the Existing Situation," he has a good deal to say that old-fashioned conservatives will do well to heed; for he does not hesitate to charge the defenders of the older view with much of the blame for the successes of their adversaries. He thinks views formerly held concerning Scripture were at many points inadequate and incomplete, and at some points incorrect, and that there was a real need for modifying them. This should have been done before the adversaries had had the opportunity of attacking the Scriptures, and if only the older scholars had shown the proper qualities in revising current ideas much of the harm caused by modern criticism would have been prevented (p. 40). It was not that the older view was incorrect but inadequate; and, in the light of the progress of research, revolution in modern ways of thinking, increased attention to specialization, different conceptions of God's relation to the universe, and the ideas associated with natural law, Dr. Beecher thinks that conservative scholarship has been seriously to blame for the existing situation. Added to this, many people had come to hold the older opinions on the Bible in a very mechanical way, and this should have been realized and the position duly stated. If it be said that the new view has made the Bible a new book, the explanation is probably due to the fact that many

who say this have imbibed ultra-mechanical views, and the change that has come to them is a mental awakening as well as the acceptance of a new opinion. But "the higher appreciation of the Bible was not due to the new opinion, but to the mental awakening that accompanied it" (p. 49). And so Dr. Beecher concludes that we need a critical view which shall succeed where the so-called modern view has failed. The modern view attempts to discredit the older tradition without offering anything adequate as a substitute. It offers what would be a change for the worse, and not for the better. The imperative necessity is to have such a view as shall retain the truths of the older tradition, correcting and supplementing it when necessary, and presenting it from the changed standpoint of modern thinking, thereby making the Bible actual and vital for the present day. The perfect candor of this chapter will commend Dr. Beecher's view to many, and will enable them to see how thoroughly he justifies his opinion, expressed in the preface, that we need a view of the Bible that will appeal to the thinking of the present generation.

In Chapter V. we are introduced to the subject of "Views that are held concerning the Bible." The present position of modern criticism in relation to the Pentateuch, or Hexateuch, is first sketched with clearness and fairness, and it is quietly but forcibly pointed out at the end that anyone who regards the Scriptures as ordinarily truthful has of necessity to repudiate this position (p. 48). Moreover, the acceptance of this modern view of the Hexateuch will necessarily affect the view of the rest of the Old Testament, and even of the New; because the later books of the Old Testament presuppose the contents of the Hexateuch, and affirm that they were current from the time of Moses, while the New Testament obviously

bases itself upon the Old Testament as it is now. Nothing could be fairer than Dr. Beecher's statement of these serious and solemn issues; and once again he protests not against any modern view in itself, but against the agnostic or "crypto-agnostic" criticism which necessarily regards so much of the Bible as untrustworthy in its statements.

The First Part closes with Chapter VI., discussing "Accepted Principles of Criticism." Dr. Beecher rightly urges that, if the modern view is true, we ought to accept it, and that to be critical is thinking for one's self. No acceptance of authority can be substituted for the use of personal judgment; and the human mind must be free to examine evidence, and to yield to it when it is found to be sufficient and trustworthy. Dr. Beecher carries the war finely into the enemy's country when he says that one of the most prominent vices of current criticism is its hide-bound traditionalism, — its helpless dependence on authority as distinct from evidence (p. 14). It appeals to the authority of experts, and cites opinion instead of citing evidence. "The men of the new tradition regularly tell you that their view is that of eminent scholars, and therefore you ought not to have the face to think differently" (p. 75). But the question at once arises as to what constitutes an expert, for a man without religious sympathy is less equipped for Bible study than an unlearned person who possesses this qualification. Again, true criticism will avoid undue assumptions. We must exclude prejudices, and be willing to follow truth wherever it may lead. Here, again, current criticism is marked by the habit of false fundamental assumptions. It is assumed that the Scriptures are not actually inspired, that the text is not correct, that the testimony is not true, that the statements are not trustworthy, that miracle is unreal, and that Christianity is on no different footing

from other religions. Above all, it is assumed that Israel's religion came within the general theory of evolution, and is to be judged in the light of this hypothesis. Once again, the true critic will give attention to all the evidence that is within reach, and will take care not to overlook any point lest it should have a bearing on the whole. Dr. Beecher is easily able to show that much of our current criticism viciously neglects this law.

"It deliberately ignores parts of the evidence. It minimizes the bearings of the evidence in one direction, and exaggerates its bearings in the opposite direction. It refuses to let the different parts have their natural effect in limiting and interpreting each the other. On the basis of this refusal it needlessly resorts to text emendations and other methods of modifying the facts as given in the evidence" (pp. 80-81).

Other principles are mentioned which are equally deserving of attention; and we could hardly imagine a student or young clergyman studying this chapter without becoming convinced of the fairness and force of the principles here laid down. One thing is absolutely certain, and that is, that a careful attention to these principles would produce a generation of biblical critics of the right sort.

The remainder of the book is concerned with the application of the principles in a variety of ways, and Dr. Beecher has managed to touch upon most of the crucial questions of Old Testament Criticism. Part II., covering seven chapters, discusses "Reasonable Criticism as Affecting Particular Narratives." The first of these is "The First Narrative in Genesis"; and, as the outcome of a careful discussion, our author says quite plainly that those who are of the opinion that the writer of the Genesis narrative cannot possibly have known the facts that are to be found in his production are guilty of "illegitimate reasoning." "How can you tell what he knew,

except from what he says? If the thing was beyond his knowledge, how can you account for his saying it?" (p. 100). And he remarks that if some old-fashioned person accounts for this chapter by saying that God gave it to him by special revelation, no better account of the matter is possible, and that, in any case, "careful study vindicates the concrete truthfulness of the first narrative in Genesis" (p. 100). The next chapter, dealing with "The Flood Narrative," is one of the most forcible in the book, and four questions are asked: Is the narrative composite? Is it self-contradictory? Is it true? Is it historical? On each of these, Dr. Beecher writes with his accustomed plainness and convincing force. A chapter is given to "The Narrative Concerning Abraham"; and, as the result of a careful study of various aspects, the conclusion is drawn that Abraham is a real person, according to Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament, and that no one holds that the story was written as a piece of religious fiction for the sake of the lessons it teaches. "The denial of its historical character is a part of the general denial of the trustworthiness of the statements of the Bible" (p. 129). Other chapters in this part are "The Case of Jacob," "The Narrative Concerning Joseph," and "Shepherds in the Wilderness"; and on each of these Dr. Beecher says that which goes to the heart of modern critical discussions.

We can mention only in general the contents of Parts III. and IV. The former is occupied with "Archæological Discoveries," and the latter with "Certain Books of the Bible." Among the archæological problems are the Code of Hammurabi and the Elephantine Papyri, while the books discussed include Deuteronomy, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. It will thus be seen that Dr. Beecher has not overlooked any storm-centers of Old Testament Criticism.

From first to last he seems to us to have accomplished his purpose of providing a book that sets forth the orthodox ideas in a way that will appeal to the thought of the present generation. His book is as timely as it is valuable, and all lovers of the Bible are under a debt of gratitude to him for it. His candor, courage, forcefulness, and scholarship are everywhere in evidence. If men wish to know what a scholarly conservatism means they can find it here. Only the other day¹ Professor Stanley A. Cook, of Cambridge, said that the only sequel to the great mass of material now coming forth in regard to Palestine, and the only sequel to studies in anthropology, archæology, history, and the comparative study of religion is to warn us to "refrain from insisting upon the Old Testament as an accurate or trustworthy record of the development of Hebrew history and religion"; and, also, that we are to look upon the Bible "primarily as the outcome of varieties of ancient religious experience." This, according to Professor Cook, is "the object of progressive criticism." We could not have the issues more definitely stated, and Dr. Beecher's book presents an unanswerable argument for the precisely opposite view. He fully believes in the essential trustworthiness of the Old Testament narrative, and its accuracy as a record of the development of Hebrew history and religion. If it is not true, we have nothing to fall back upon but the theories of critical scholars, which are quite evidently based upon naturalistic premises, and are dominated by a view of the evolution of Israel's religion that logically does not allow of any superhuman intervention. It is impossible to confine the problems of the Old Testament to literary questions, for the fundamental issue is religious. It is the predominant and constant virtue of Dr. Beecher's treatment that he realizes this essential

¹ *Expositor*, March, 1912.

issue, and presses it upon his readers with quiet yet irresistible force. His discussions are a fresh and welcome indication that the day of the dominance of the Wellhausen view is coming to an end, and that, supported by a mass of historical and archæological material, the essential trustworthiness of the Old Testament as an historical and religious record will once more shine forth with all, and more than all, its ancient glory.