

MISTAKEN METHODS OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM,  
A REPLY.

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IF a man taking some great work of art, a tragedy of Shakespeare, a poem of Dante, were to criticize the events related for their want of truth or the characters depicted for some defect of manners, he would be considered guilty of a crass misapprehension of the subject criticized. Equally wide of the mark are critics who approach the Bible—I will not say attack, for many such are doubtless sincere in their endeavor to properly appreciate its meaning—and condemn it for unscientific statements, for accounts of events, miraculous or otherwise, which seem to them incredible. Whether the world was created in six days or six centuries: whether the water at the marriage in Cana was turned into wine, are unessential details which do not affect the purpose or the value of the book. Criticism of this sort is not only lacking in intelligent comprehension, it is perfectly ineffectual because it misses the vital significance of the book criticized.

What then is the vital significance, the true purpose of the Bible? Perhaps the best concise answer will be to refer to the fundamental distinction drawn by that acute critic of literature DeQuincey, who divided all literature into two great classes: the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. Now while the Bible, in a very misleading fashion it must be admitted, does seem to have many characteristics of the literature of knowledge—it is full of narrative, historical statements abound—it is nevertheless, and properly speaking for our purposes, exclusively and solely in the class of the literature of power: that is, its vital purpose is not to inform, but to create a certain spiritual state in its reader. Its purpose is not to instruct primarily, but to inspire, to make you feel, not precisely, but somewhat in the way the work of art makes you feel. It follows, therefore, that it calls for a very different criticism and is to be judged by a different standard. Its truth is the truth, very largely, of a work of art; it is spiritual truth by which it is to be tried. Does it make me feel: not, does it correctly inform me: is the true question. And the criticism that judges it by its statement of facts or its scientific accuracy is as impotent as an attempt to weigh a melody of Mozart or to calculate the logical value of a painting by Titian would be. Such criticism is not ab-

surd: it is impossible. Primarily the fault of such a critic is philosophical; he does not intellectually grasp the instruments of criticism appropriate to his task, those by which alone the value of the Bible is to be tried. How and what these instruments are is not easy to define in the inept language of ordinary discussion.

It may shed some light on the nature of the difficulty if I cite a case of similar opacity of vision or failure to grasp the reality of the matters discussed in a cognate branch of inquiry in which the writer was confronted with a demand for a proof of the immortality of the soul, much as he might have been requested to do a sum in arithmetic. "What sort of proof would you like?" might have been perhaps a rude but certainly an enlightening reply. It would have forced the questioner to consider the nature of the problem presented, and the kind of proof adequate and appropriate. Did the questioner suspect that I had something in my pocket or concealed about my person, some yardstick, scale, or mechanical device, that had only to be produced to settle the question? It never occurred to him what was the real nature and the only possible means of such proof: that it was not a question of logical propositions, but of values; that in himself, in his own soul, dwelt the only proof possible and that it was for him to seek it out for himself.

As a preliminary then to criticism, we must remember that in the Bible, much as in a work of art, there is set up a certain wonderful and delicate process which is the very heart and soul of the whole, a process that is nothing less than the transference of a state of feeling from one soul to another. The critic must lend himself freely to this process; must identify himself with the work he criticizes. In the analogous case of a work of art, Tolstoy tells us: "The receiver of an artistic impression is so united to the artist that he feels as though the work were his own."<sup>1</sup> It is only by submitting himself to this process that the critic becomes qualified for his critical work. He must himself become the artist *pro hac vice*. It is said that a shoemaker once faulted a painting by Apelles for an incorrect shoe-lace, and similarly we have critics who condemn Christ's teaching because in their view he was an ignorant peasant; because the facts of the Resurrection appear incredible, or they seize upon some detached sentence such as, Whosoever believeth in me shall have eternal life, and descant learnedly on the absurdity of supposing that a mere intellectual belief in any person or thing should have such vast consequences. In other words, they play the shoemaker to Apelles by carping and caviling at trifling details.

<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy's *What is Art?*

emphasizing single expressions torn from their context, ignore other and qualifying expressions explaining the true meaning of the criticized passages, such as in the matter of belief the reference to "them that believe to the saving of the soul" which implies very much more in the meaning of belief than a merely intellectual act. For their own purposes such critics emphasize isolated passages to a degree that the most extravagant advocates of verbal inspiration might hesitate to follow. They miss the vital meaning of the Bible and of Christ's teaching which must be taken, not only as a whole *totu conspectu* but spiritually as the work of art is taken.

It is of this sort of impotent criticism that a recent writer on Jesus is guilty. He does not understand the nature of the task he has set himself. The Bible as a whole, or the teachings of Christ in particular, are to be approached by the would-be critic much as one approaches a great work of art. Both appeal to very much the same tests; they undertake a spiritual process, attempt to arouse and shape feelings, emotions: in fine, make their assault on the soul itself in its inner fastnesses. The question is not, Is this statement of fact, this representation of nature or man true? but the higher, deeper question, To what extent and in what direction do these move my soul?

In this way alone can we understand or approach our subject. We are not in a world of physical reactions of matter; the persistence of force, the indestructibility of matter have no meaning here, nor are we concerned even with the rational world of intellectual reasonings; logical propositions, excluded middles, the syllogism *Barbara* are not in point. We have come to a world of spiritual reactions, of which if we know very little positively, we may be still quite sure negatively that all those laws of the physical and rational world have no place. We must start on a different plane with different rules and standards. Let the critic ask himself, for example, what he knows of the change of human character brought about by means of personal example and teaching: how does he understand the working out of this spiritual miracle of God? If he be honest and fair he would be compelled to own his incompetence to deal with such a matter.

To justly criticize a poem, a melody, a painting, the critic must place himself in close and harmonious relation with them: he must receive and assimilate what they undertake to *convey* to him ere he can be fitted to pass competently on their merits or their defects, and the same attitude is required of the Biblical critic. The Bible expressly appeals to this method of appreciation of its work for it

declares in so many words that its teaching is only to be understood by those who obey; that is the test, the only test of the divinity of its precepts. "If any man will do his will he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God."

Or to put it a little differently and more simply, the criticism must be empirical: you must try the Bible in the way it asks to be tried: apply the tests it itself appeals to. It makes a bold challenge, has no fear of the most severe tests, only the tests must be such as are appropriate to its work, not some arbitrary tests chosen at the will of the critic who insists for his own ends in disregarding that which the Bible presents as its sole and only aim. The critic must, if he would truly criticize, make the trial the Bible offers. It says, in effect and very simply: follow me and I will make you good and happy. The conduct of critics who, refusing this, undertake a rationalistic or a scientific examination of the Biblical writings, seems very much like that of a set of savants with whom the mooted question, let us say, was, whether spring-water would assuage what is known as human thirst. I can imagine these gentlemen seated around a council table, a glass of water before them, which each wise gentleman would take up and proceed to learnedly descant upon its pellucid appearance: remark its temperature, quantity, liquidity, etc., etc., and from these would draw conclusions on its ability or inability to quench the thirst of man. I can then further picture to myself the entrance into this learned group of some plain man, who, on being informed of the question in dispute, should say in the simplicity of his heart, "Why, gentlemen, your dispute is easily settled," and taking up the glass should forthwith drink the water, and turning to them should conclude, "Well, I do not know how it may be with you, but that water certainly cured my thirst."

This empirical test the Bible answers both personally and subjectively as in the case of the glass of water, and objectively and externally. It says to the critic personally, I can do such and such things for you; and it says further, I have done these things for nearly two thousand years for every sort and condition of men in all countries: Romans, Jews, Greeks, civilized and savage, bond and free, millions and millions of men, some of the best, some of the worst of mankind; some of the ablest intellectually the world has ever known, some of the most degraded.

More than this, it may be safely asserted that there is no case of its failure, where properly and seriously tried, to answer this test, to meet all the legitimate demands for what it purports to afford. What other or different proof of truth would the most

captious critic require? "And does it then all come to so simple a question as that?" our critics may ask. Yes, on its practical side it is as simple as life itself is simple, that life which we live every day without understanding its why or wherefore. On its philosophical side, however, to puzzle-minded critics it is high as heaven, deep as hell, mysterious as death itself.

This, very briefly, is an imperfect statement of the place and function of the Bible and Christ's teaching in the minds of thinking men, and it is this that its critics have to meet if they would make an effective attack upon it.

## MISCELLANEOUS.

### OUR FRONTISPIECE.

President Wilson's stay at the residence of the Murat family while in Paris recalls the picturesque career of Joachim Murat (1767-1815), great-grandfather of the present Prince Murat, which is closely associated with the first efforts to create a united Italian kingdom, now at last crowned with success in overabundant measure. The son of an inn-keeper and destined to become a priest, Joachim Murat enlisted in the army when his money was gone. Owing to the political situation, however, his advancement was slow—not at all to the liking of his vain, ambitious, headstrong nature. The storms of the Revolution he weathered in much the same fashion as his future brother-in-law, Bonaparte, to whom he became greatly attached during the Italian campaign (1796-97). The battle of the Pyramids (1798) laid the foundation of his fame as a cavalry leader, in which capacity he served Napoleon in practically all his subsequent campaigns up to the battle of Leipsic. He married Napoleon's sister, Caroline, in 1800, was made Grand Duke of Berg in 1806, and King of Naples in 1808.

At last Joachim Murat was a king, and his vanity might well have allowed him to rest on his laurels. But he was also a son and heir to the Revolution, with its total disregard for historical traditions, its revaluation of all values of social standing, its bold application of common sense to problems that baffled all other solutions: so he seemed to be predestined to undertake more. Napoleon's triumphs over Austria and the old Empire had put the ideal of the Italian patriots within sight and even within grasp, his failure to satisfy the expectations which he had aroused seemed to assign to Murat the historical task of uniting Italy.

When Murat saw that the battle of Leipsic was lost he entered into secret negotiations with Metternich and, returning to his kingdom in haste, obtained