

# THE BIBLE

WHAT IT IS  
and  
HOW TO INTERPRET IT

We first discover that the Bible consists in reality of a number of books written at different times by different authors.

## **THE OLD TESTAMENT**

It opens with five, familiarly known as the "five books of Moses," a history written by Moses, of matters and transactions in which he performed a leading personal part. This history occupies a position of first importance. It lays the basis of all that follows. Commencing with an account of the creation and peopling of the earth, it chiefly treats of the origin and experience of the Jewish nation, of whom Moses says, "The Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto Himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth" (Deut. 14. 2). The five books also contain the laws (very elaborately stated), which God delivered by the hand of Moses, for the constitution and guidance of the nation.

It has become fashionable, under various learned sanctions, to question the authenticity of these books, while admitting the possible genuineness of the remaining portions of the Sacred Record. Without attempting to discuss the question, we may remark that it is impossible to reconcile this attitude with allegiance to Christ. You cannot reject Moses while accepting Christ. Christ endorsed the writing of Moses. He said to the Jews by the mouth of Abraham in parable: "They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them; if they believe not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16. 29-31). It is also recorded that when he appeared incognito to two of his disciples after his resurrection, "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24. 27). Further, he said, "Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: he wrote of me. But IF YE BELIEVE NOT HIS WRITINGS, HOW SHALL YE BELIEVE MY WORDS?" (John 5. 47). If Christ was divine, this sanction of the Pentateuch by him settles the question; if the Pentateuch is a fiction, Christ was a deceiver, whether consciously or otherwise. There is no middle ground. Moses and Christ stand or fall together.

The next twelve books present the history of the Jews during a period of several centuries, involving the development of the mind of God to the

extent to which that was unfolded in the messages prophetically addressed to the people in the several stages of their history. This gives them more than a historical value. They exhibit and illustrate divine principles of action, while furnishing an accurate account of the proceedings of a nation which was itself a monument of divine work on the earth, and the repository of divine revelation. The book of Job is no exception as to the divinity of character. It does not, however, pertain to Israel nationally. It is a record of divine dealings with a Son of God, at a time when that nation had no existence. Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon, are the inspired writings of two of Israel's most illustrious kings, writings in which natural genius is supplemented with preternatural spirit-impulse, in consequence of which the writings so produced are reflections of divine wisdom, and by no means of merely human origin. This is proved by Christ's declarations in the New Testament.

In the books of the prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi, we are presented with a most important department of "Holy Writ". In these seventeen books, respectively bearing the name of the writers, we find recorded a multitudinous variety of messages transmitted from the Deity to the "prophets", for the correction and enlightenment of Israel. These messages are valuable beyond all conception. They contain information concerning God otherwise inaccessible, and instructions as to acceptable character and conduct, otherwise unobtainable; in addition to which they have a transcendent value from their disclosure of God's purpose in the future, in which we naturally have the highest interest, but of which, naturally, we are in the greatest and most helpless ignorance.

## **THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Coming to the New Testament, we are furnished in the first four books with a history which has no parallel in the range of literature. The Messiah promised in the prophets, appointed of God to deliver our suffering race from all the calamities in which it is involved, appears and here are recorded His doings and His sayings. What wonderful deeds! What wonderful words! We are constrained in the reading to exclaim with the disciples on the sea of Galilee: "What manner of man is this?" He entrusted his apostles with a mission to the world at large. In the Acts of the Apostles we have made plain to us in a

practical way, what Christ intended them to do as affecting ourselves. In the same book we have the proceedings of the primitive Christians, written for our guidance as to the real import of the commandments of Christ, and the real scope and nature of the work of Christ among men.

The remainder of the New Testament is made up of a series of epistles, addressed by the inspired apostles to various Christian communities, after they had been organised by the apostolic labours. These letters contain practical instruction in regard to the character which Christians ought to cultivate, and in a general and incidental way illustrate the higher aspects of the truth as it is in Jesus.

Without these epistles, we should not have been able to comprehend the Christian system in its entirety. Their absence would have been a great blank; and we in this remote age should hardly have been able to lay hold on eternal life.

### **THE BIBLE DIVINELY INSPIRED**

Such is a scant outline of the book we call "the Bible". Composed of many books, it is yet one volume, complete and consistent with itself in all its parts, presenting this singularly literary spectacle, that while written by men in every situation of life, from the king to the shepherd, and scattered over many centuries in its composition, it is pervaded by absolute unity of spirit and identity of principle.

This is unaccountable on the hypothesis of a human authorship. No similarly miscellaneous production is like it in this respect. Heterogeneousness, and not uniformity, characterises any collection of human writings of the ordinary sort, even if belonging to the same age. But here is a book written by forty authors, living in different ages, without possible concert or collusion, producing a book which in all its parts is pervaded by one spirit, one doctrine, one design, and by an air of sublime authority which is its peculiar characteristic.

Such a book is a literary miracle. It is impossible to account for its existence upon ordinary principles. The futile attempts of various classes of unbelievers is evidence of this. On its own principles it is accounted for. God spoke to,

and by, its authors "at sundry times and in divers' manners". This is no mere profession on the part of the writers.

It is shown to be a true profession not only by the character of the book and the fulfilment of its prophecies, but by the fact that nearly all the writers sealed their testimony with their own blood, after a life of submission to every kind of disadvantage - "trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonments; were stoned, were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword, wandered about in sheep skins and goat skins, in deserts and mountains; in dens and caves of the earth, being destitute, afflicted, tormented" (Heb. 11. 36-38).

To suppose the Bible to be human is to raise insurmountable difficulties, and to do violence to every reasonable probability. The only truly rational theory of the book is that supplied by itself. "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1. 21). In this we find an explanation of the whole matter. The presence of one supreme guiding mind, inspiring and controlling the utterances of the authors, completely accounts for their agreement of teaching throughout, and for the exalted nature of their doctrines: on any other supposition the book is a riddle, which must ever puzzle and bewilder the mind that earnestly faces all the facts of the case.

There are, unfortunately, those who hold the book in contempt as a priestly imposture. There are few who do so as a result of individual investigation. It is the result of writings which are not careful about facts, or scrupulous in the use they make of them. The result is lamentable to those deceived.

They reject the only book which can possibly be a revelation from the Deity, and they throw away their only chance of immortality; for surely if there be a book on earth that contains the revealed will of God, that book is the Jewish Bible; and if there be a possibility of deliverance from the evils of this life - the corruptibility of our physical organisation, the weakness of our moral powers, the essential badness of a great portion of the race, the misconstruction of the social fabric, the bad government of the world - that possibility is made known to us in this book, and brought within our reach by it.

By his rejection of the Bible, the unbeliever sacrifices an immense present advantage. He deprives himself of the consolations that come with the Bible's declarations of God's love for man. He loses the comfort of its glorious promises, which have such power to cheer the mind in distress. He cuts himself away from all the moral heroism which they impart; he sacrifices the abiding support which they give; the soul-elevating teaching which they contain; the noble affection they engender; the solace they afford in time of trouble; the strength they give in the hour of temptation; the nobleness and interest which they throw around a frittering mortal life.

And what does he get in exchange? Nothing, unless it be licence to feel himself his own master for a few mortal years, to sink at last comfortless and despairing into the jaws of a remorse- less and eternal grave!

The effect of the Bible is to make the man who studies it, better, happier and wiser. It is vain for the leaders of unbelief to assert the contrary; all facts are against them. To say it is immoral in its tendencies is to propound a theory, and not to speak in harmony with the most palpable of facts. To declare that it makes men unhappy, is to speak against the truth; the tormented experience of the orthodox hallucinated is no argument to the contrary, when it becomes manifest that the Bible is no ways responsible for these hallucinations. To parade the history of unrighteous government and tyrannical priestcraft in support of such propositions, is to betray either ignorance or shallowness or malice.

Many are deluded by such a line of argument, and have the misfortune, in many instances, to become consciously impressed with the idea that the Bible is an imposture. Such are objects of pity; in the majority of instances they are hopelessly wedded to their view.

Let earnest-minded people throw aside tradition. Let them rise to a true sense of their individual responsibility. Let them emancipate themselves from the idea that theoretical religion is the business of the pulpit. Let them realise that it is their duty to go to the Bible for themselves. If they study diligently and devotedly, they will make a startling but not unwelcome discovery; they will discover something that will make them astonished they ever regarded popular religion as the truth of God. They will attain to what many an

intelligent mind anxiously desires, but despairs of obtaining; a foundation on which the highest and most searching exercise of reason will be in harmony with the most fervent and child-like faith.

## **HOW TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE**

We pass to the second part of the subject: "How to interpret the Bible". We get an introduction to this in the words of Paul to Timothy - "The Scriptures are able to make thee wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3. 15). Here we have apostolic authority for the Statement that the Scriptures "make wise". How is this effect produced? Obviously by the communication of ideas to the mind. But how are these ideas communicated? There is only one answer: by the language it employs. Hence, it ought not to be a matter of difficulty to determine how the Scriptures are to be interpreted. It ought to be easy to maintain that, with certain qualifications, the Bible means what it says. And it is so.

This emphasis of a very simple and obvious truth may seem superfluous, but it is rendered necessary by the prevalence of a theory which practically neutralises this truth as applied to the Bible. By this theory, it is supposed and assumed that the Bible is not to be understood by the ordinary rules of speech, but is couched in language used in a non-natural sense, which has to be construed, and rendered, and interpreted in a skilful manner.

What we mean will be apparent, if we suppose it were said to an orthodox friend, "The Bible, as a written revelation from God, must be written in a language capable of being understood by those to whom it is sent." To this abstract pro- position there is no doubt he would agree. But suppose his attention were directed to the following statements of Scripture: "The Lord God shall give unto him (Jesus) the throne of his father David (Luke 1. 32), and he shall be ruler in Israel (Micah 5. 2), and shall reign over them in Mount Zion" (Micah 4. 7).

For "the same Jesus that ascended to heaven shall come again in like manner as he ascended" (Acts 1. 11). "Yea, all kings shall fall down before him; all nations shall serve him; his dominion also shall be from sea to sea, from the river to ends of the earth (Psalms 72. 8-11); for he shall come in the clouds of heaven, and there shall be given unto him a kingdom, glory and dominion,

that all peoples, nations, and languages may serve and obey him" (Dan. 7. 13-14); and "the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed when the Lord of Hosts shall reign in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously" (Isaiah 24. 23).

And suppose, on the reading of these statements, the remark were made, "It seems plain from this that Christ is coming to the earth again, and that on his return, he will set aside all existing rule upon the earth and reign personally in Jerusalem, as universal king." - what would he say? It is not a matter of surmise. The answer is supplied by thousands of cases of actual experience. "Oh! no such thing!" is the instant response; "what the prophet says is spiritual in its import. Jerusalem means the church, and the coming of Christ again to reign means that the time is coming when he will be supreme in the hearts and affections of men".

This is the method of treating the words of Scripture to which we have referred. It cannot be justified on the plea that the Bible directs us so to understand its words. There are, in fact, no formal instructions on the subject. The Bible comes before us to tell us certain things, and it performs its office in a direct and sensible way, going at once to its work without any scholastic preliminaries, taking it for granted that certain words present certain ideas, and using those words in their current significance.

The best evidence of this is to be found in the correspondence between its terms, literally understood, and the events they relate to. The events which form the burden of them are fortunately, in hundreds of cases, open to universal knowledge in such a way that there can be no mistake about them, and themselves supply an accessible, easily-applied and recognisable standard for determining the bearing of Scripture statements.

Take a prophecy: "I will make your cities waste, and bring your sanctuaries into desolation, and I will not smell the savour of your sweet odours, and I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies which dwell therein shall be astonished at it, and I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you; and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste" (Lev. 26. 31-33). "And thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb



and a byword among all nations whither the Lord shall lead thee" (Deut. 28. 37).

There is no dispute about the mode in which this has been fulfilled. The sublimest spiritualisticism is bound to recognise the fact that the subject of these words is the literal nation of Israel and their land, and that in fulfilment of the prediction they contain, the real Israel were driven from their real, literal land, which became really and literally desolate, as it is this day, and that Israel has become a literal byword and a reproach throughout the earth.

This being so, on what principle are we to reject a literal construction of the following? : "I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel, and ONE KING shall be king to them all; and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all" (Ezek. 37. 21, 22).

It is usual, with this and other similar predictions of a future restoration of Israel and their reinstatement as a great people under the Messiah, to contend that they mean the future glory and extension of the church. That such an understanding of them can be maintained in the face of the fulfilled prophecies of Israel's calamities will not be contended for by the reflecting mind.

Take another instance: "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel" (Micah 5. 2.). How was this fulfilled? Turn to Matthew 2. 1: "Now Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the King." The fulfilment of the prophecy was in exact accordance with a literal understanding of the words employed, as everyone is aware.

In Zechariah, chap. 9. 9, we read: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion-shout, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold thy king cometh unto thee: he is just and having salvation, lowly and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass."

It is difficult to conjecture what the spiritualistic method of interpretation would have made of this as a still unfulfilled prophecy. That it would have expected the Messiah to condescend so far as to ride on the literal creature mentioned in the prophecy, is highly improbable in view of the surprised incredulity with which the idea is received that Christ will sit upon a real throne, and be personally present on earth during the coming age. All conjecture is excluded by the fulfilment of the prophecy in a way that compels a literal interpretation.

Matt. 21. 1-7: "Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying unto them Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them and bring them to me...And the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them, and brought the ass and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. ALL THIS WAS DONE THAT IT MIGHT BE FULFILLED WHICH WAS SPOKEN BY THE PROPHET, SAYING," etc.

The event that fulfilled the prophecy was the event spoken of in the prophecy. So it is with all fulfilled prophecies. They came to pass exactly as the terms of the prediction, plainly and literally understood, would have led us to expect; that is, a certain thing was plainly predicted, and that thing came to pass. Is not this a rule for the understanding of unfulfilled prophecy?

But it will be asked, is there no such thing as figure in the Scriptures? Is there no such thing as predicting events in language that will not bear a literal construction, such as describing the Messiah as "a stone", "a branch", "a shepherd", etc.? True, but this does not interfere with the literal understanding of prophecy. It is a separate element in the case co-existing with the other without destroying it. Metaphor is one thing; literal speech is another. Both have their functions, and each is so distinct from the other, that ordinary discrimination can recognise and separate them, though mixed in the same sentence. This will be evident on a little reflection.

Now with regard to the Bible, it will be found that in the main, this is the character of its composition. As a revelation to human beings, it is a revelation in human language. It is not a revelation of words but of ideas, and hence everything in its language is subordinated to the purpose of imparting

the ideas. The peculiarities of human speech are conformed to in the various particulars already mentioned.

Metaphors, for example, find illustration in the following: A place of national affliction is likened to an iron furnace. Says Moses, in the 4th chapter of Deuteronomy, 20th verse: "The Lord hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt." The fact that Egypt is metaphorically spoken of as an "iron furnace", does not interfere with the fact that there is a literal country of Egypt.

Nations are said to occupy a position high or low, according to their political state. Thus in Deuteronomy 28. 13, Moses says to Israel: "The Lord shall make thee the head and not the tail: and thou shalt be above only, and thou shalt not be beneath". So Jesus says of Capernaum (Matt. 11. 23): "And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell". And Jeremiah, lamenting the prostration of Judah, says (Lam. 2. 1): "How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger, and cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel".

The nations are likened to rivers and waters. In Isaiah 8. 7, 8, we read: "The Lord bringeth upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the King of Assyria, and all his glory".

And hence, in referring to the constant devastations to which Israel's land has been subject at the hands of invading armies, the words of the Spirit are, "Whose land the rivers have spoiled" (Isaiah 18. 2).

Instances might be multiplied: but these are sufficient to illustrate the metaphorical element in the language of the Scriptures. Metaphor there is without doubt; but this is a very different thing from the gratuitous and indiscriminating rule of interpretation which, by a process called "spiritualising", obliterates almost every original feature in the face of Scripture, making the word of God of none effect.

There is another style of divine communication which is neither literal nor metaphorical, but which is yet sufficiently distinctive in its character to prevent its being confounded with neither; and also sufficiently definite and intelligible to admit of exact comprehension. This style is the symbolic style,

which is largely employed in what may be called political prophecy. In this case, events are represented in hieroglyph. A beast is put for an empire, horns for kings, waters for people, rivers for nations, a woman for a governing city, etc.; but there is in this style no more countenance to the spiritualisation of orthodoxy than in the metaphorical. It is special in its character, can always be identified where it occurs, and is always explicable on certain rules supplied by the context.

The literal is the basis; the elementary principles of divine truth are communicated literally; its recondite aspects are elaborated and illustrated metaphorically and symbolically. The one is the step to the other. No one is able to understand the symbolical who is unacquainted with the literal; and no one can understand the literal who goes to the Scriptures with his eyes blinded by the veil which the "spiritualising" process has cast over the eyes of the people. This must be got rid of first; the literal must be recognised and studied as the alphabet of spiritual things, and the mind, established on this immovable basis, will be prepared to ascend to the comprehension of those deeper things of God which are concealed in enigmas, for the study of those who delight to search out His mind.

There remains one other important matter to be considered. Not long ago, on the occasion of an address on a kindred subject, a person in the audience put several questions. In answering them, the writer quoted from the prophets; but was stopped by the remark, "Oh, but that's in the Old Testament; we have nothing to do with that; the New Testament is our standard; the Old has passed away." Now this sentiment is a common one with many religious people. It is an erroneous idea, and has done great mischief. It has a slight basis of fact.

The "first covenant" dispensation of the law, or the old constitution of Israel, has been abolished; but it is far from being true that what God communicated through the prophets has been annulled. The New Testament itself shows this clearly. As we have already seen, Paul says, "The Scriptures are able to make thee wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3. 15). Now it must be remembered that this could only apply to the Old Testament. When Paul made the statement, the New Testament was not in existence. Consider then the import of the statement - the Scriptures of the Old Testament are able to

make us WISE UNTO SALVATION. If this be true, how can it be correct to speak of the Old Testament having been done away?

And this statement of Paul's is by no means the only one to this effect. Hear what he said before Agrippa (Acts 26. 22): "Having therefore, obtained help of God, I continue unto this day witnessing both to small and great, saying NONE OTHER THINGS than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come".

Now, if, in preaching the Christian faith, he said "none other things than those which Moses and the prophets did say should come," it is obvious that Moses and the prophets must contain the subject-matter of that faith. This is undeniable. It is borne out by the interesting incident narrated in Acts 16. 11. where, speaking of the inhabitants of Berea, to whom Paul preached. it says. "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica; ...and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so; therefore, many of them believed."

If the Bereans were satisfied by a searching of the Old Testament, which were the only Scriptures in existence at the time of their search, that what Paul said was true, is it not evident that what he said must in some form be contained in the Old Testament? Does it not follow that the Old Testament furnishes a basis for the things spoken by Paul? That Paul's faith as a Christian laid hold of the Old Testament, is evident from what he said before Felix the Roman Governor: "After the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and the prophets" (Acts 24. 14).

In harmony with this individual attitude of Paul in the matter, we find that when he went to Thessalonica, he entered the synagogue, and "three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures" (Acts 17. 2), that is, out of Moses and the prophets for there were no other Scriptures for him to reason out of. And when he called together the Jews at Rome, it is testified that "he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses and out of the prophets, from morning till evening" (Acts 28. 23).

The same fact, that the Scriptures of the Old Testament are accessory to the teaching of Christ and his apostles, is apparent in several other statements to be found in the New Testament. Peter exhorts those to whom he wrote in verse 2. of 3. chap., 2nd epistle, "to be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets?" and in the 19th verse of the first chap. of the same epistle, he says, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy, WHEREUNTO YE DO WELL THAT YE TAKE HEED." Does not this settle the question? Jesus puts this statement into the mouth of Abraham in a parable (Luke 16. 29, 31): "They have Moses and the prophets; LET THEM HEAR THEM; if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

And it is recorded of him that during an interview with his disciples, after his resurrection (Luke 24. 27), "Beginning at MOSES AND ALL THE PROPHETS, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." If the Saviour himself appealed to the Old Testament in exposition of the things concerning him, and exhorted us to "hear Moses and the prophets," what further need of argument?

## **THE REVELATION OF GOD TO MAN**

It is obvious that those people fall into a great mistake who suppose that Christianity is something distinct from the Old Testament. So far from Christianity being distinct from the Old Testament, it will be found that Christianity is rooted in the Old Testament. The Old Testament lays the foundation of all that is involved in the New.

The New Testament is simply an appendage to the Old, valuable beyond all price, and indispensable in the most absolute sense; but in itself, apart from the Old Testament, far from being sufficient to give us that perfection of Christian knowledge which constitutes a person "wise unto salvation", The two combined form the complete revelation of God to man, vouchsafed for his spiritual renovation in the present, and his constitutional perfection in the future. Divided, they are each inefficacious to "thoroughly furnish the man of God unto all good works."

Never mind if others do not consider it their business to study the Bible.

Remember that the majority have always been in the wrong in all ages of the world. Look not at your neighbours, think not of your friends in this matter. They are in all probability like the world in general. They lack independence, and are subservient to their worldly interest. They cannot afford to deviate from orthodox sentiment and usage, and long conformity has deadened their power to judge of the evidence. With all their church-going and religious profession, the anxiety of the majority of people centres in the present evil world. Act for yourselves. Do as Peter told a Jewish assembly to do in Jerusalem: "Save yourselves from this untoward generation".