

## Modernism and the Higher Criticism

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Modernism is one of the “assured results” of the higher criticism. The fruit is characteristic of the root. The higher criticism is based on a method so erroneous that error was certain to appear as the result. Any one who has given attention to the higher criticism will readily perceive that it is largely based on a philological method. Philology has its value, and may be legitimately applied in its proper sphere ; but to make it the sole criterion of historical data, or the determining factor of such data, is unworthy of a serious investigator. The higher critic is essentially a word-monger, and his method enables him to prove, to his own satisfaction, what is not true by any other method of determination, and to deny what all other methods assert. Hence it is the fact that historians and archaeologists generally reject the findings of the critic.

Without denying the value of philology (and it has its value, and some historical value, too), it is still true that the philological method of the higher critic is a false procedure in historical investigation. By this method the higher critics have resolved Abraham, Moses, David, Samson and others into astral myths.

Canon T.K. Cheyne declared that the existence of such a personage as Moses was unproved and improbable. There are some of us uncharitable enough to think that if Professor Cheyne had been consigned to an asylum at the age of forty, it would have saved this world a lot of bother. By the very same methods employed by the critics some obliging individuals have *demonstrated* as “assured results” that Napoleon, Gladstone, and Chamberlain were similar myths ; and the same accommodation might be readily extended to Prof. S.R. Driver.

Now, it is needless to say to intelligent readers that there have been honest critics. No doubt there has been a rationalistic bias in much of the critical work that has vitiated the results, but some at least must have the credit of honest purpose. The assiduity, the erudition, the indefatigable toil displayed in the analysis of the Scripture text are not only prodigious, but the amazement of contemplating minds. But the fault was in the method. No amount of toil can make a wrong method produced “assured results.” To re-construct centuries of history in a remote past by a study of words is impossible, notwithstanding a contributory value in philological studies. What value would attach to a history of the discovery and settlement of America based on philological grounds? Documents and even traditions furnish more reliable information.

To assign a large part of the Pentateuch to post-exilic times, as the critics do, is an anachronism from the standpoint of historical criteria, whatever it may be from a philological standpoint. The historian takes account of records, traditions, institutions, laws, national and private life, influence transmitted to succeeding ages and a hundred other things that validate a true history. Can we conceive of a Hebrew people in Palestine without an Abraham? Can we account for the laws, usages, worship, beliefs, and customs of the Israelites without a Moses? Then may we account for Christianity and deny that there ever was a Jesus Christ? Then may we account for the Lord’s Supper, celebrated throughout the ages, and deny that any historical event lies at the basis of it? From such examples we may see that many things validate a history besides linguistic research ; and that the real historian draws from a varied field.

The higher criticism of the classics produced the same results as have been so confidently asserted of

the Pentateuch. But there is no one so poor to-day as to do reverence to the abject failure of the criticism of the classics. With the utmost prodigality of good ink, the critics dissected and analyzed and re-distributed and re-combined till, as one has facetiously remarked, they "refined grand old Homer into Homer Ltd. But at present Homer Ltd. is bankrupt, and Homer is still Homer." Regard to sane historical methods might have saved much midnight oil.

If now some archaeologist's spade should bring to light some tablets or cylinders of the Pentateuch dating from the days of David or Samuel, the whole higher critical fabrication would go up in smoke. A record on clay or rock, coming down from primitive times, or a manuscript having clear evidence of lineal descent from antiquity, or even a well-traced tradition going back to, or near to, the events in question, is of more historical value than all the speculations that spring so sporadically from a German critic's brain. The higher criticism of the classics is indeed beyond resurrection, and the higher criticism of the Pentateuch only awaits a suitable day for burial. The one is as hopelessly inane as the other. Even on the ground of philological investigation, with such historical value as might be rightly attributed to it, some of the modernistic pretensions meet with strong contradictory evidence. Against the claims of Professor Driver we may confidently urge the more complete induction and generalizations of Prof. R.D. Wilson. Professor Driver, like Schliermacher, died too soon to see the futility of his methods.

The world ought not to be allowed to forget the services of some eminent men in the field of philology. For example, Prof. Fritz Hommel has made learned and painstaking investigation into certain features of the language of South Arabia. Out of a mass of material gathered by assiduous labor he has shown that primitive personal names from South Arabia are frequently compounds of the word *Ilu*, God ; but seldom, if ever, are these names compounded with the names of gods. The practice parallels that found in the Scriptures as witnessed by the frequent use of El and Jah, etc. in early Scripture nomenclature. And furthermore, it bears witness, by the persistence of these patronymics, to a primitive monotheism, on which the polytheistic cults of a later day were but parasites. This is the entire reversal of the modernism that is so glibly recited in many quarters to-day. It is not without great value in the argument that the Scriptures and the philology of South Arabia bear witness to the same thing and tell the same story. Monotheism is not the evolutionary product of a primitive polytheism ; but polytheism is the mistletoe bough on the stronger oak.

The fallacy of half-truths and the folly of half-methods have wrought irreparable harm to the faith and to the souls of men. It *does* matter whether or no men believe the doctrine of the virgin birth, a personal devil, and the coming of Christ for judgment. Dean Brown to the contrary notwithstanding. "When I am asked about the virgin birth, my answer is that of Paul ; he said nothing ; I am content to follow Paul." Aside from the danger of men's faith in discrediting the veracity of the Scriptures, the method of the argument is false *toto cælo*. What men do not say on a subject which they are not discussing is quite inconclusive evidence. Shall we believe in the atonement? James does not mention it. Did Jesus rise from the dead, and shall our dead rise again? James says not a word. Shall we therefore refuse to sing :

*"When with the morn those angel faces smile,  
Which we have loved long since, and lost awhile?"*

Shall we adopt the rule that no doctrine is to be received unless every Scripture writer has mentioned it? What Paul *does not* say is no refutation of that which Matthew and Luke *do* say. What Paul *does* say has not much weight with men who belong to the school of Dean Brown ; but what he *does not* say is proof conclusive.

Modernism is a present-day fad. It will damage the faith of multitudes, and wreck the lives and souls of multitudes more. But it will pass and be reckoned as one of those evanescent vagaries numerous enough to fill the Encyclopedia Britannica. Higher Criticism and Modernism will pass because founded on wrong methods. This is not the only reason, to be sure; but reason sufficient to forecast their demise. They will pass as gigantic evils like war, but their wreck and ruin and ravage and devastation will strew the centuries. Alas for the souls snared by the unbelief which they generate.

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