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The Quest for Wisdom:

A Plea for the Freer use of Reason in Matters of Revelation.

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TEXT:—'Wisdom is before him that hath understanding: but the eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth.' Prov. xvii., 24.

This Scripture is a graphic little word-sketch. While we read it, a picture seems to unfold itself before us. Two distinctly drawn figures occupy the foreground of the scene; and perhaps no two persons could by possibility more widely differ. On the face of one of them there beams a look, sober and thoughtful, yet serene and satisfied. The other is a man whose wandering vacant eyes are viewing "the ends of the earth." Intelligence and Ignorance are ever ill-mated companions.

Interpreting the passage thus, does our age believe it? Most emphatically it does believe it. Men to-day rightly appreciate learning; truth, of whatsoever kind, is being eagerly welcomed. At the same time there is a current distrust, and happily a growing distrust, of all that pertains to ignorance. The world has come to endorse the verdict of Scripture, when the latter affirms that ignorance is folly. Some go so far as to declare that contentment with ignorance,—and, much more, all connivance at ignorance,—is palpably a crime.

Thus it has come about that, in our day, knowledge is being diffused as never before in the history of the race. The door of the school stands invitingly open everywhere. From the unpretentious Kindergarten up to the endowed University, regularly graded series of well-equipped Educational Institutions are practically at the service of all who desire to enter them. And besides, there are all sorts of supplementary Schools of Instruction, suited to the circumstances of special classes of students,—night schools, summer schools, trade schools, exclusively professional schools, and all that diversified educational machinery which we now cover by the phrase University Extension.

As the outcome of this exceptional intellectual activity, two results have emerged,—two results which might have been anticipated.

1. On the one hand, many have come to hold an altogether exaggerated idea of the value of mere intellectualism.

Such a view is short-sighted. The human mind is indeed a wonderfully capable instrument. The signal triumphs of cultivated and highly trained thought, during the past century, are quite fitted to fire even a sluggish imagination. Nevertheless there are scores and scores of truths which, if received at all, must be accepted not as facts but as beliefs. Kant has shown conclusively that the mind is so constituted that there are many certainties which lie wholly beyond its reach. The Agnostic, in a sense, is perfectly right, no man can *know* God, however good may be the grounds for our *believing* in the existence of a Supreme Spirit. The teaching, therefore, that seeks to deify reason defeats its own end. To clothe that faculty with unnatural, unnecessary and impossible functions, serves only to draw attention to its inherent limitations—serves only, in the end, actually to advertise a weakness which this very procedure is intended to conceal.

2. Hence, within recent years, we have witnessed a protest and a powerful reaction. Another school of opinion has been formed, and it has uttered its dictum. Within the sphere of the higher investigations (it declares), and especially within the domain of religion, reason is of comparatively little value.

Surely, in this instance, the pendulum has swung to the opposite end of the arc! If many have over-estimated the importance of our current intellectualism, it is quite as grave an error to under-estimate its importance. Yet this is undoubtedly the attitude of not a few to-day. Because too much has been claimed for reason in the past, some would now rob it even of its due. Let it be recognized that the human understanding has its limits, boundaries beyond which it must not presume to pass; but within those recognized limits, within those appointed boundaries, it were sheer insanity not to employ it.

What is a Man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more!
Sure He who made us with such large discourse,
(Looking before and after) gave us not
That mental capability, that Go^d-like reason
To rust in us unused.

Unquestionably a man is as guilty in the sight of God if he fail to exert the abilities with which he has been endowed, as when he urges and strains his faculties beyond their legitimate powers.

Now apply these considerations to a survey of the contents of the Bible. That Book is professedly a revelation from God. In the study of Scripture, in how far are men at liberty to examine and test and question its claims upon their belief and their obedience?

It is the chief complaint of the Reactionists, to whom reference has been made, that men to-day are examining and testing and questioning, whereas in former days they exhibited a meeker and more teachable spirit. To this change of attitude and method is attributed the widespread unbelief of our times, and the doubts which have been raised as to the inspiration and general authority of the several parts of Scripture.

So far, however, is this opinion from being correct, that it may be pronounced the very reverse of interpreting accurately the real state of the case. Not the current doubts of our age, but our beliefs, are the true fruitage of recent investigations and inquiries. Such confidence as we do possess in the inspiration and authority of the Bible rests upon these very inquiries. The microscopical scrutiny to which the books of Scripture have lately been subjected has only served the more fully to confirm our belief in their supernatural character. Instead of being robbed of our faith by the critics, the investigations of experts (ancient and modern) have furnished us with the evidences—and, what is more, with the only existing evidences,—upon which we can retain our theological beliefs intelligently. Faith remains as fervent to-day as ever, but it has grown more robust and confident.

God has a high and holy use for a vigorous and emancipated reason. Even Strauss, arch-sceptic though he was, fulfilled grandly his invaluable mission. The scholars of Tübingen, for they were true scholars, shook the German Universities rather rudely from their sleep, but that rough awakening proved effective. There has been no dozing over New Testament studies during all the interval of more than half a century. But did not Tübingen shatter, or at least shake, our belief in the veracity of the Gospel narratives? By no means; on the contrary, it raised up a host of defenders of the faith,—men who, with their successors, have re-asserted in irrefutable arguments the true divinity of Jesus. And it will not be otherwise with the attacks which are now being made upon the Old Testament: its assailants are proving to be our best friends. They are compelling us to make a re-examination (and a very close examination) of each of the Old Testament Books, and so to arm ourselves with a deeper and more reliable knowledge. This scholarly attack has called forth,—and from some new and most unexpected quarters,—the scholarly defence: and thus our beliefs have gained precision, alike in conception and in statement. As Farrar reminds us in his "Critical History of Free Thought"—

"The various elements of truth—which exist quite often on both sides of the argument—are brought to light by the controversy." But after the struggle, still going on in some quarters, shall have reached its ultimate issue, the residuum of truth which is supplied from even diametrically opposite positions shall become the prize and permanent possession of all believers.

Accordingly a plea for the freer use of reason in dealing with the Biblical records should not be deemed untimely. Many considerations justify such a plea, but at least two facts may be stated and examined.

(a) Reason was intended to assist us in discriminating between the spurious and the true.

But is not the whole of THE BIBLE true?

At the outset, the inquirer is unable to answer affirmatively or negatively,—unless indeed he is prepared to accept some other man's convictions, and adopt them as his own. Beyond all denial, not every alleged revelation is really divine in its origin: of this the Bible itself is constantly reminding us. "Many deceivers are entered into the world," it declares. It is ceaselessly putting us on our guard against "seducers and the doctrines of devils." "Even now (it says) there are many Anti Christs." The Bible erects an exacting standard of measurement; it must not decline to be itself measured by that standard. The Bible warns men to exercise all caution in accepting other alleged Revelations; it must be prepared to face a like spirit of caution, created and fostered by itself, when men come to deal with the revelation which it contains.

But let it be proclaimed upon the housetops that this ordeal of reason,—this exemplary caution, and the temporary suspense of judgment which it involves,—the Bible honestly and cheerfully invites. It is between the covers of that very book that men are uniformly and most strongly recommended—nay, enjoined—to inquire into the sacred oracles, and to try the spirits whether they be of God. "Prove all things (we read); hold fast that which is good." Individual churches and individual scholars may say of the Scriptures:—"Let them alone: they constitute a volume at once mysterious and unique"; but Christ so speaks NEVER! On the contrary, reaching them forth in his hand to every earnest inquirer, He exclaims:—"Take them and diligently search them. I at least deem it no heresy that you should think deeply concerning them, and weigh them in the scales of a candid and dispassionate judgment." And God holds every man responsible for the result (or, it may be, for the lack) of some such conscientious inquiry. There is much in the Bible that we cannot understand, for the measure of God's truth is not restricted by the capacity of men to comprehend it. But the evidences which support that truth we reject (or remain in ignorance of) at our peril: and it is to enable us



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