

Methods of Bible Study.*

By Rev. Neil MacNish, B.D., LL.D.

The Bible occupies a unique position in the literature of the whole world. To an extent which cannot be overestimated, and which comparatively few members of the Christian Church are able to appreciate, the language of the Bible has entered into the ordinary literature of the nations. From the time, in the far-off centuries, when the canon of the Old and of the New Testament was completed, and when, therefore, those books which we now receive and venerate as inspired Books came to be regarded as Canonical, and as being, or forming, the Word of God, scholars of strong intellectual powers and of unwearied diligence have expended nights and days in examining the Word of God or the Bible, and in writing commentaries of larger or smaller fullness and minuteness on the numerous books that make up the Bible.

It has been judiciously observed that the Bible has produced a varied and prodigious literature. A library made up of all the books that have been written solely in defence of the Bible would be an imposing spectacle. No other book has left so many and such deep traces on human literature. On modern literature the traces of the influence of the Bible are incomparably deeper and more legible than those which are left by any other single volume. One whose name is well known in certain ecclesiastical circles in our day avers:—"But the silver cord of the Bible is not loosed, nor its golden bowl broken as Time chronicles his tens of centuries that are passed by." Huxley, who was a votary of science, whose intellect was strong and clear, and who could not be regarded as having any undue affection for the Christian Church or faith, made this noble admission regarding the Bible: "For three centuries the Bible has been woven into all that is best and noblest in English history. It has become the national Epic of Britain, and is familiar to noble and simple." With this statement we shall all agree: "The Bible came from a nation alike despised in ancient and modern times; it still has an exceptional history. Homely the Bible often is, as it must be—if it be the Book for all men and for all time. The best theologians and scholars are content to sit at its feet and learn. They declare that they cannot approach its depth and breadth and fullness." The members of the Christian Church everywhere are in our time seriously affected by the destructive theories, as they regard them, which are abroad, and which are upheld and defended by scholars of acknowledged learning. It will not be without advantage to cite the opinion of two men who are regarded by many Christians as holding and as en-

forcing views that are detrimental to the solemn reverence with which the Bible is to be held. The late Robertson Smith, who by his peculiar views incurred the disfavor of the Free Church of Scotland, has these excellent praises to bestow upon the Bible: "The testimony in favor of the Bible as the Word of God is universal. The persuasion that in the Bible God Himself speaks words of love and life to the soul is the essence of the Christian's conviction as to the truth and authority of Scripture." In general, the real fruit of Bible reading lies less in any addition to one's stock of systematic knowledge than in the privilege of withdrawing for a moment from the thoughts and cares of the world to enter into the pure and holy atmosphere where the God of love and redemption reveals Himself to the heart, and where the simplest believer can place himself by the side of the psalmist, prophet, or apostle in that inner sanctuary where no sound is heard but the gracious accents of divine promise and the surest response of assured and simple faith." The name of Dr. Briggs is well known in the Presbyterian Church of North America owing to the peculiar views which he once propounded. His profound reverence for the Bible is deep and unmistakable. It thus found expression: "Bible study is the most important of all studies, for it is a study of the Word of God, which contains a Divine revelation of redemption to the world." The Bible is an ocean of heavenly wisdom. All the sciences and arts, all the literature, histories and religions of the world gather about the Bible to contribute to its study, and to derive help from its revelations. Bible study is the most profound of all studies, for it has to do with the secrets of life and death, of God and man, of this world and other worlds."

It is very gratifying to have thus the assurance from themselves, that, however much Robertson Smith and Briggs may be supposed by many intelligent and earnest Christians to have travelled in paths of theological aberration, they express the greatest reverence for the Word of God.

It is the merest truism to contend that the Word of God, and therefore the truth, has nothing to fear or to suffer from the most searching and the closest investigation, if such an investigation is carried on with honest faithfulness and with an invariable deference to unbiased reasoning, and to the demands of unimpeachable logic.

We can accord our ready assent to the avowment of the present Archbishop of Canterbury, in a contribution which he made several years ago to the now famous "Essays and Reviews:" "The thorough study of the Bible, of what it teaches and does not teach, must take the lead of all other studies. He is guilty of high treason against the faith who

fears the result of any investigation, whether philosophical or scientific or historical." Bunsen has wisely written that it will be seen more and more as the years pass by that the full light of science does not eclipse the truth of the Bible, but only leads us by its discoveries to understand the sacred pages aright. Among the many wise sayings of Froude, this saying has a prominent place: "Liberty of opinion, which is the life of knowledge, as surely becomes the death of falsehood."

A pious and diligent student of the Evidences of Christianity asserts that there is no end to our discovery of the evidences of Divine truth. Every page of the inspired volume will present to us rich mines which cannot be exhausted, and which astonish and delight the student as he advances in his enquiries."

These citations, taken as they are from the writings of warm friends of the Word of God, as well as from the opinions of those who are, as many Christians believe, in open or in covert opposition to the Word of God, will suffice to indicate how strong and deeply seated in the human heart is reverence for the Word of God and for the Bible.

It is not for ministers of the Christian Church, but for earnest and intelligent laymen as well, that the phrase higher criticism has a remarkable interest. The attitude of many believers towards the higher criticism may thus find expression: "The methods of the so-called higher criticism are employed to shake the authority of the books that form the Bible, and to show that they were not written by the men whose names they bear, nor at the periods which have hitherto been regarded as the date of their origin." All lovers of truth will acquiesce in the contention that the Bible must be subjected to exactly the same tests as any other document."

To Canon Driver a place of eminence pertains owing to his ability and scholarship among the higher critics of our time. His frank admissions are certainly well worthy of our attention. In his "Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament," he writes on this wise: "In the critical study of the Old Testament there is an important distinction that should be kept in mind—that of degree of probability; many results can only be approximate. It is not the case that critical conclusions, such as those expressed in the present volume, are in conflict either with the Christian Creeds or with the Articles of the Christian faith. Those conclusions affect not the fact of Revelation, but only its forms. They do not touch either the authority or the inspiration of the Scriptures of the Old Testament." They must be comparatively few who have not read the book from which I have extracted these views of Canon Driver, that are aware how safe his position is accord-

*Paper read before the Synod of Montreal and Ottawa at Cornwall.