

# Gladstone and the Bible

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WHEN Gladstone was a Student of Christ Church, Oxford, at the beginning of last century, Bishop Charles Wordsworth, a kinsman of the poet, said of him that no man of his standing in the University habitually read his Bible more or knew it better. A similar claim can be made for the great statesman at every stage of his long life. He was ever a lover of God's Word. He drank deeply of its perennial wells of consolation and inspiration, and he endeavoured to regulate his public and private life by reference to its commandments and statutes and laws. In the full tide of his career he could write in this strain: "On most occasions of very sharp pressure or trial, some word of Scripture has come home to me as if borne on angels' wings. Many could I recollect. The Psalms are the great storehouse."<sup>1</sup> In old age he prepared an edition of the Psalter, containing the Prayer Book Version and supplementary matter including an elaborate concordance that must have involved a considerable expenditure of time and trouble, although it was doubtless a labour of love and faith. From such facts as these it may be inferred that Gladstone's devotion to the Bible never varied during his unique career. It was ever the man of his counsel.

In these circumstances a great deal of interest, and a certain amount of importance, attach to his views on such questions as the Biblical Revelation, the Inspiration of Holy Scripture, and the conclusions of the modern critical movement in the realm of Biblical scholarship. Gladstone's reactions to these subjects are all the more significant because of the intellectual revolution which took place during his lifetime with regard to the attitude of theologians to the nature and authority of Holy Writ. When he commenced his political career as Member of Parliament

<sup>1</sup> Morley, I, p. 201.

for Newark on December 13th, 1832, it can safely be said that the historic doctrines regarding the supernatural origin of the Bible were being widely held. When he resigned the premiership on May 3rd, 1894, it can be said with equal truth that a very different conception of the Scriptures had gained possession of the field. Gladstone lived to see the triumph of the school whose most illustrious name is Wellhausen. It is true that the New Testament had not been handled yet in such radical fashion, but that was yet to come. At the close of Gladstone's career the doctrine of Holy Scripture whose keystone was belief in its plenary inspiration had been largely abandoned in scholarly circles. Of this change *The Times* observed in a leading article, dealing with the Victorian age, that it shook British Christianity to its foundations, as well it might. Gladstone was thoroughly cognisant of these changes, and the effect which they had upon him is very striking.

In the main it may be said that no impression was made on his convictions regarding the supremacy and sufficiency of the Bible in all matters of faith and practice with all that such a claim implies regarding the share which the Holy Spirit must have had in its production. That was in keeping with his general conservatism on all theological questions, all the more remarkable because the Bible was not the only department of historic Christianity which was made the subject of critical investigation during the nineteenth century. Thus Christology was reviewed and re-stated in a form which tended to differ radically from the form in which it had so long commanded the spiritual and intellectual allegiance of the church. But Gladstone seems to have cared for none of these things. Morley writes of him that his theological opinions had no history. He never departed from the beliefs which he cherished at Oxford as a fervent Evangelical. That is scarcely in accordance with fact. There can be no doubt that his theological tenets underwent a certain amount of modification. Thus he began by denouncing that of Butler's view of human nature as not evil in the sense required by the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity. Subsequently we find him defending Butler's position, and quoting Augustine in support of it. As this paper will show, the diffusion of the critical interpretation of the Bible did not leave him unmoved. It can,

however, be said with truth that any such changes were of a slight type, especially when compared with his alignments in other walks of life. The most famous of these occurs in his political allegiance. Every schoolboy knows Macaulay's characterization of him on the publication of his first book as "the rising hope of the stern and unbending Tories." That referred to his reputation at the beginning of his career. Is it an exaggeration to say that, when he retired finally from public life, he was the idol of the proletariat? His churchmanship also exhibits changes equally remarkable. He was the son of an evangelical home; and for some years he remained loyal to his early training. But his views underwent an immense change so that he became an enthusiastic supporter of the Oxford Movement whose presiding genius was John Henry Newman. In contrast to these changes, any revision of his views on the Bible must seem to be very slight indeed. That is all to his honour and praise, for it can be safely said that, in the ecclesiastical and political realms, his change of opinions might be compared to swimming with the tide, while his comparative immobility in theology can be truly characterized as swimming against the tide.<sup>1</sup>

Gladstone's convictions regarding the Bible may be classified under these three headings, the Biblical Revelation, Inspiration, and the Higher Criticism. With regard to the Biblical Revelation he has some arresting things to say. Thus he refers to a saying of John Bright on the subject in this fine passage: "John Bright has told me that he would be content to stake upon the Book of Psalms, as it stands, the great question whether there is or is not a divine revelation. It was not to him conceivable how a work so widely severed from all the known productions of antiquity, and standing upon a level so much higher, could be accounted for except by a special and extraordinary aid calculated to produce special and extraordinary results; for it is reasonable, nay needful, to presume a due correspondence between the cause and the effect. Nor does this opinion appear to be otherwise than just. If Bright did not possess the special qualifications of the scholar or the critic, he was, I conceive, a very capable judge of the moral and religious elements in any case that had been brought before him by his personal

<sup>1</sup>Morley, I, p. 207.

experience."<sup>1</sup> In the same strain reference may be made to one or two observations in the Preface to his edition of the Psalter. Here is a specimen: "Nay, there are many of its single verses on which, taken severally, we might be content, so lofty is their nature, to stake the whole argument for a Divine Revelation."<sup>2</sup> There can be no question at all that Gladstone never wavered in his belief that the Bible is the repository of an unspeakable disclosure of God's grace and truth.

That disclosure not only takes the form of abstract teaching regarding God's character. It also comprises records of the Divine dealings in history with the children of men, notably with the seed of Israel. These sources of information are equally valid and valuable as means whereby the world might come to such a knowledge of God as may be necessary for the right conduct of life in this world and the next. The Divine ways were made known unto Moses, and His acts unto the children of Israel. Actions always speak louder than words, and that is as true of heaven as of earth. In view of these facts, Gladstone constitutes himself as an impassioned defender of the historicity of the Bible, commencing with such a perplexing phase as the cosmogony of Genesis. He crossed swords with Huxley on the subject, defending the trustworthiness of the narratives at the beginning of Genesis with an appeal to the findings of science. He is equally prepared to do battle against any attempt to impugn the integrity of the revelation contained in the Bible. Thus controversy with Huxley on the morality of our Lord's action in sanctioning the destruction of the vast herds of swine belonging to the Gadarenes aroused a great deal of interest and attention towards the end of last century. Huxley maintained that our Lord's behaviour was open to criticism on the grounds that it represented the wanton destruction of other people's property. Gladstone's reply seems to be rather feeble. He tries to prove that the men of Gadara were subject to the Mosaic Law which treats the pig as an unclean animal. In consequence their possession of herds of swine was religiously illegal, and our Lord merely enforced the provisions of the ancient national code when He acted as He

<sup>1</sup> *Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture*, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> *The Psalter*, p. 111.

did. Gladstone's occasional resort to arguments of that type brought him into some measure of contempt. That is to be regretted, especially in view of the fact that he could repel an objection in such masterly fashion as this. Dealing with the moral problems of the Old Testament, he writes in this strain. The entire paragraph is so fine that I shall transcribe it. The sentences furnish a rare cordial for peace of mind and heart. "The sacred book states in bare outline, and at various epochs approves, certain acts in whole or in part irreconcilable, so far as we can see, with the law of Christian love. It only indicates, and does not give us the advantage of knowing the contemporary argument in defence. These acts are, in perhaps the most difficult cases, analogous to acts which are now produced in times of violence, and which do not draw down the censure of mankind. Admit that they leave a moral difficulty unexplained. It is in a volume which, taken as a whole, bears a testimony, comprehensive, wonderful, and without rival, to truth and righteousness. How are we to treat the case? I answer by an illustration. Suppose I am reading a work full of algebraic equations, which I find to be a sound and masterly book. But at length I arrive at one which I cannot wholly solve, cannot wholly comprehend. Should I on this account renounce and condemn the book? No; I should reserve it in hope of a complete solution in the future. This seems to be the mode which is dictated alike by reverence and good sense, not only in the case of the Holy Bible, but in regard to the mysterious problems which encounter us when our eyes traverse the field of human destinies at large. We know the abundant richness of the gift we hold and enjoy; as to the small portion of light at present withheld, we contentedly abide our time."<sup>1</sup> It is along such lines that the reply to Huxley's reasoning must be sought. There are spots on the sun, but that does not justify men in refusing that glorious creature and its indispensable ministry. In the same way, the evidence in favour of our Lord's claim to be all that He said that He was far outweighs any factors which seem to point in a contrary direction. The Biblical Revelation of which Gladstone was such a vigorous defender rests on proofs strong enough to admit some problematic aspects without serious loss or detriment.

<sup>1</sup> *Later Gleanings*, p. 395.

Turning to Inspiration it has been stated, even by such an authority as Goldwin Smith, that Gladstone accepted the doctrine best described as the plenary inspiration of the Bible. That is a mistake as one of the essays in his volume, *Studies Subsidiary to Butler's Works*, abundantly shows. The very fact that he should refer to this theory as stereotyped is evidence that he has no sympathy with it. He bases his rejection of that view on the superficial grounds that it is incompatible with the state of the text which varies through a thousand degrees of uncertainty. He seems to have been impressed with the argument so often repeated that, if the Bible had been fully inspired, the text would have been preserved immaculate by a continuous miracle. "Has the Almighty given us, or has He not, a volume verbally inspired? And that question is sufficiently answered by two brief observations: first, there is no absolute security for identity with the original record; and, secondly, there is no verbal inspiration of translators."<sup>1</sup> These observations take no account of the real and basic reason why the doctrine of plenary inspiration is accepted. That consists in the fact that the authors of the Bible make such a claim on its behalf. They never hesitate to assert that they are God's spokesmen, putting on record His message for men, and they also declare that they do so in words which God Himself teaches. These propositions are widely disputed, but their truth or error is not the point at issue. That is concerned with the foundation on which belief in the full inspiration of the Bible rests. That does not consist in the evidence which can be culled from its pages, nor in the circumstances which attended its composition and transmission but in the account which it gives of itself. It has been well and truly said that, if we cannot credit what it has got to tell us with regard to its inspiration, it is hard to know where we can trust the information regarding religious truth in which it abounds. Gladstone never mentions that aspect of the subject. He is governed by the idea that the theory of verbal inspiration is a case of prejudice and preconception which will vanish away as soon as the actual facts of the case are carefully investigated.

That line of reasoning demolishes his contentions based on the trustworthiness of translations, although it may be

<sup>1</sup> *Subsidiary Studies*, p. 17.

remarked that the argument is singularly infelicitous. The Bible has exerted a much greater influence by its translations than in the original tongues, the work of the British and Foreign Bible Society being the best commentary on that statement. That is surely a powerful factor in constraining men to believe in its unique and supernatural origin. A similar claim can be made for no other book. As to the translators, it is arguable that those who were responsible for such masterpieces as the Vulgate or the Authorized Version were inspired in some similar way as the authors of the autographs, although in much lesser degree. To turn Gladstone's guns upon himself we have already found him urging that every effect requires a sufficient cause. There is always fire where there is smoke, and where there is much fire, we may expect much smoke. When an endeavour is made to find an adequate explanation for these literary miracles of translation just mentioned, one is compelled to acknowledge that more than human wisdom and knowledge are required for such a result.

The question naturally arises as to the basis on which Gladstone was prepared to rest the authority of the Bible as the rule of faith and practice in Christianity. That he finds in the Church. Its imprimatur guarantees the claims made on behalf of the Bible. Writing of evangelicals and their distinctive tenets, he observes: "Most of all, it has suffered very seriously from the recent assaults on the *corpus* of Scripture, which it has received simply as a self-attested volume; and on its verbal inspiration; a question which has never offered so serious a dilemma to such as are content to take their stand on the ancient constitution of the Church, and to allow its witnessing and teaching office."<sup>1</sup> In short, the Church certifies the genuineness of the Bible's claims. The only comment which need be made on that statement is that the major part of the Bible in the shape of the Old Testament had attained to an unchallenged position before the Church of Christ had any being except in the mind of God. The Old Testament was the Bible of our Lord and His Apostles. It is true that our Lord set His seal upon it, and for that reason, if for no other, it is received by the Church which He founded as the everlasting way of truth and life—"the Word of God in the words of God."

<sup>1</sup> *Gleanings*, III, p. 116.

It is when we turn to discuss Gladstone's attitude to the assured results of modern criticism that we are most puzzled. On the one hand, he refuses to abandon his belief in the peerless glory of the Bible as it disclosed itself to the old-fashioned evangelicals whose ranks he once adorned. On the other hand, he makes statements with reference to modern Biblical criticism and its characteristic methods which are hard to reconcile with his views as to its Divine majesty. If an attempt were to be made to summarize his position in a sentence, it would be by saying that it was his firm conviction that the truth of the Biblical narratives, not to speak of the trustworthiness of its teaching, was in no way affected by the theories which may be advanced regarding the date of the documents, or the means whereby they assumed their present form. To take a concrete case, it is a matter of indifference as far as the reliability of the Pentateuch is concerned, whether it be Mosaic or a mosaic. "It is now pressed upon us that, according to the prevailing judgment of the learned, the form in which the older books of the Old Testament have come down to us does not correspond as a rule with their titles, and is due to later though still, as is largely held, to remote periods, and that the law presented to us in the Pentateuch is not an enactment of a single date, but has been enlarged by a process of growth, and by gradual accretions. To us who are without original means of judgment these are, at first hearing, without doubt, disturbing announcements. Yet common sense requires us to say, Let them be fought out by the competent, but let not us who are incompetent interfere. I utterly, then, eschew for myself the responsibility of conflict with these properly critical conclusions."<sup>1</sup> In another place he says: "And yet upon the very threshold, I embrace, in what I think a substantial sense, one of the great canons of modern criticism, which teaches us that the Scriptures are to be treated like any other book in the trial of their title."<sup>2</sup>

In fairness to Gladstone let it be said that he tries to reconcile acceptance of modern critical teaching as the origin and growth of the Bible with his firm and unsearching belief in what he well describes as "the ineffable and unapproachable position held by the sacred volume,"<sup>3</sup> by

<sup>1</sup> *Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.



arguing like so many others who, like himself, find themselves in a strait betwixt two, unwilling, on the one hand, to surrender their convictions regarding the uniqueness of the Bible, and, on the other hand, reluctant to repudiate the findings of more recent Biblical scholarship, that God is glorified in an even greater degree if the Bible be a kind of patchwork in place of a garment woven without seam. "Indeed it may be that this destructive criticism, if entirely made good, would, in the view of an inquiry really searching, comprehensive, and philosophical, leave as its result not less but greater reason for admiring the hidden modes by which the great Artificer works out His designs. For, in proportion as the means are feeble, perplexed, and to all appearance confused, is the marvel of the results that are made to stand before our eyes. And the upshot may come to be that, on this very ground, we may have to cry out with the Psalmist absorbed in worshipping admiration, "Oh that men would therefore praise the Lord for His goodness, and declare the wonders that He doeth for the children of men!" (Ps. cvii. 8). For "how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!" (Rom. xi. 33).<sup>1</sup> That is a noble passage phrased in noble English. It applies to the Bible the words of Paul with regard to the contrast between the Gospel and the gospeller where he says that we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us (2 Cor. iv. 7).

Such reasoning seems to be very feasible until it is thoroughly tested, and it will be found to be less convincing than one might suppose at the first glance. On the one hand, it is quite consistent and compatible with the traditional theories regarding the origin and authorship of the Biblical books. Whether there be one Isaiah, or three, or even more, there is a savour of heavenly things in the Scriptures which makes them to be a sign and a wonder in the earth. But again it must be acknowledged that the adoption of such views on the composite nature of the Scriptures has not resulted in deeper reverence or a keener sense of God's workings. On the contrary, there has been made possible an increase of rationalism and humanism which do not consort very well with the genius of the Gospel. Gladstone's little book which

<sup>1</sup>*Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture*, p. 4.

he so felicitously calls *The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture* was first published in 1890, more than fifty years ago. One wonders if he would still have written in the same strain in view of all that has happened since that date. In any case, he seems to have had serious misgivings about the critical approach to the Bible. In particular, he was most unwilling to accept any theory regarding the origin of the Pentateuch which tended to diminish, or even to eliminate, the Mosaic element. "But we are now apparently asked to sever the work from the worker, and to refer it to some doubtful and nameless person; whereas it is surely obvious or probable that the author of a work so wonderful, and so far beyond example, so elaborate in its essential structure, and so designed for public use, could hardly fail to associate his name with it as if written upon a rock, and with a pen of iron. For, be it recollected, that name was the seal and stamp of the work itself. According to its own testimony he was the apostolos (Ex. xix. 16-23 and *passim*), the messenger, who brought it from God, and gave it to the people. If the use of his name was a fiction, it was one of those fictions which cannot escape the brand of falsehood, for it altered essentially the character of the writings to which it was attached."<sup>1</sup>

There is nothing new or original about such words, nor, indeed, about all that has been said in this article with regard to Gladstone's attitude to the Bible. The value lies in the light which is thus thrown on Gladstone himself. He is a figure of endless interest, and a living epistle known and read of all who love righteousness in high places, and not least, in his beliefs about the Bible since religion was the keynote of his life. Huxley said of him that he had the finest intellect in Europe, and there were giants in the land in those days. In view of that, it is moving to recall that for him the Bible was ever and always what the lines of the hymn declare it to be:

"It gives a light to every age;  
It gives, but borrows none."

<sup>1</sup> *Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture*, p. 193.