

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU AND THE BIBLE

by JOHN R. BURNE

DR. BURNE'S study of Rousseau's attitude to the Bible was originally prepared as a circulating paper for the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research. It was written, he tells us, over a number of scattered weekends during his period of National Service. While he fears that "it would be of little interest to anybody who cannot understand French", we are sure that most of our readers will have sufficient command of French to follow the quotations from Rousseau well enough to appreciate their relevance to Dr. Burne's exposition of his interesting theme.

ALATTER-DAY enemy of Rousseau wrote at the beginning of this century that Jean-Jacques had perhaps wielded a greater personal influence than any man since Jesus Christ.¹ This is no doubt an exaggeration, but it points to a fact which is not generally realized in this country. This French thinker of two centuries ago popularized ideas which nowadays are part of the mental atmosphere and taken for granted. True, those ideas were in the air already; but he so collected them, so transformed them, so presented them that they grew, spread, and permeated the whole of modern thought.

It is Rousseau's *Emile*, for instance, from which so many modern ideas on education, such as the emphasis on self-expression, spring. Again, many of these ideas were not new; some of them may be found even as early as the *Gargantua* of Rabelais, but it was Rousseau who made them popular in the modern world.

Or again, in the political field, so careful a critic as Gustave Lanson could state: "Depuis un siècle, tous les progrès de la démocratie, égalité, suffrage universel, écrasement des minorités, revendications des partis extrêmes, qui seront peut-être la société de demain, la guerre à la richesse, à la propriété, toutes les conquêtes, toutes les agitations de la masse qui travaille et qui souffre

¹ Irving Babbitt: "The political influence of Rousseau", in *The Nation*, New York, 18.1.1917.

ont été dans le sens de son oeuvre" (*Hist. de la Litt. française*, p. 798).

His influence on Religion can have been scarcely less widespread. In some ways he may have been, as Lanson further states, "le vrai restaurateur de la religion" (*ibid.*) after a century of rationalism and doubt. It was, however, "le théisme de Robespierre, le culte de l'Être suprême" (*ibid.*) which were the historical first-fruits of this revival of interest. Furthermore, "Il a fondé toute sa politique, toute sa religion, toute sa morale sur l'instinct et l'émotion. Et ce qu'il était, il a aidé le public à le devenir" (G. Lanson, *ibid.*, p. 799). He was perhaps the real popularizer of that type of religion which is founded on an emotional premiss of the universal love and goodness of God, and which works from that basis by invoking reason as final judge.

Be that as it may, it is also possible that his ideas on the Bible could have wielded an enormous and perhaps unrealized influence on modern thought. It is therefore not superfluous to consider briefly the tenor of those ideas.

A convenient and logical starting-point for such an enquiry is Rousseau's statement of what he considered to be the main principles of the Reformation.

According, then, to Jean-Jacques, when the Reformers separated themselves from the Roman Church, they accused it of error, and, to correct that error at its source, gave Scripture a different sense from that prescribed by the Church of Rome. This they did on their own authority, saying that Scripture was quite clear on matters pertaining to salvation, and that each man had a right to interpret it for himself. (Rousseau makes no mention of the Holy Spirit.) Thus the two fundamental principles of the Reformation were to recognize the Bible as final authority or rule of belief, and to admit no other interpreter of the sense of Scripture than oneself.

Despite this individualistic basis, the Reformers were able to unite owing to their common rejection of Roman interpretation. That was the common link. The Reformation was therefore like a confederation of little states, each of which maintained its independence. "Voilà comment la réformation évangélique s'est établie, et voilà comment elle doit se conserver" (*Lettres écrites de la montagne*, Pt. I, Lett. 2). It is true that the doctrine of the greatest number of reformed Christians can be put forward as the most probable and the best authorized, because some order is necessary; but nobody is forced either to accept or to teach such a doctrine.

On these grounds Rousseau considered himself a true son of the Reformation, and unjustly persecuted. As a reformed Christian

he claimed to have the right to interpret the Bible as his own reason led him. It was this fact which caused the friction between himself and the religious authorities of his time, for his conclusions were at times far from being "orthodox" either in a Roman Catholic or in a Protestant sense.

It appears that he was a consistent reader of the Bible. There are a number of quotations from Scripture scattered in his works, and he himself claims to have read through the Bible several times. "Ma lecture ordinaire du soir était la Bible, et je l'ai lue entière au moins cinq ou six fois de suite de cette façon" (*Confessions*, II, 9). He had a great admiration for the Book, "le plus sublime de tous les livres" (*Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*) and welcomed the chastity and frankness of its language. "Il est impossible d'imaginer un langage plus modeste que celui de la Bible, précisément parceque tout y est dit avec naïveté" (*Émile*, IV).

His admiration for the Bible did not, however, prevent him from voicing objections which brought into doubt its reliability; indeed he considered himself to be perfectly justified in doing this by virtue of being a reformed Protestant. His objections therefore were most often expressed as disagreements in interpretation rather than as denials of fact. There are three subjects which show most clearly the attitude of Rousseau and which even at the time provoked a considerable amount of polemics.

Firstly may be mentioned his refusal to believe in eternal punishment for the wicked. He held that "Si l'Écriture elle-même nous donnait de Dieu quelque idée indigne de lui, il faudrait la rejeter en cela, comme vous rejetez en géométrie les démonstrations qui mènent à des conclusions absurdes; car de quelque authenticité que puisse être le texte sacré, il est encore plus croyable que la Bible soit altérée que Dieu injuste ou malfaisant" (*Lettre à d'Alembert*). Rousseau argued, in effect, that since God was loving and just, he could not allow men to suffer an eternity of punishment, for in any case it was He who chose to give or to refuse light to the individual. All this can already be seen in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, where for instance Julie states on her deathbed: "Si Dieu n'a pas éclairé ma raison au-delà, il est clément et juste: pourrait-il me demander compte d'un don qu'il ne m'a pas fait?" (*Nouvelle Héloïse*, Pt. VI, lett. 11).

But it is the passage above from the *Lettre à d'Alembert* which is significant particularly in relation to Rousseau's view of the Bible. In geometry proofs leading to absurd conclusions are rejected: if the Bible leads us to conclusions repugnant to our reason, relating to the nature of God, it should be rejected also. For Julie,

Protestantism "tire son unique règle de l'Écriture sainte et de la raison" (*Nouv. Hébr.*, Pt. VI, lett. 11), and Jean-Jacques, whose mouthpiece she is, held, as we have seen, no other opinion. But if these two elements were to clash, then reason would have the pre-eminence.

A second point which illustrates the attitude of Rousseau is that which best comes to light in the controversy between him and M. de Beaumont, the Archbishop of Paris, who issued a "*Mandement*" against the *Émile*. It was already apparent that Rousseau had, in effect, rejected the doctrine of original sin as held by the Archbishop, in the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*; but it was in *Émile* that his views were most clearly seen, and it was this later book which caused the greatest outcry. In his "*Mandement*" the Archbishop states the ground of the disagreement. " 'Posons, dit-il [Rousseau], pour maxime incontestable que les premiers mouvements de la nature sont toujours droits: il n'y a point de perversité originelle dans le coeur humain.' A ce langage on ne reconnaît point la doctrine des saintes Écritures et de l'Église touchant la révolution qui s'est faite dans notre nature; on perd de vue le rayon de lumière qui nous fait connaître le mystère de notre propre coeur" (*Mandement de Monseigneur l'Archevêque de Paris*, Para. 3).

The Archbishop therefore claims that the assumption fundamental to the whole plan of education put forward in *Émile* is at variance with Scripture and the teaching of the Church of Rome.

In his reply, Rousseau maintains that in his *Discours sur l'inégalité* man's moral development is painted in three stages. In the first, "il ne hait ni n'aime rien; borné au seul instinct physique, il est nul, il est bête". In the second "le beau moral commence à leur devenir sensible, et la conscience agit: alors ils ont des vertus; et s'ils ont aussi des vices, c'est parceque leurs intérêts se croisent, et que leur ambition s'éveille à mesure que leurs lumières s'étendent. Mais tant qu'il y a moins d'opposition d'intérêts que de concours de lumières, les hommes sont essentiellement bons" (*Lettre à M. de Beaumont*). In the third stage "la conscience, plus faible que les passions exaltées, est étouffée par elles" (*Lettre à M. de Beaumont*). Original goodness, in Rousseau's sense, would therefore imply that man was amoral rather than moral.

But then Jean-Jacques goes on to make a statement which again demonstrates his attitude to the Bible. The order infringed by Adam, he claims, was "moins une véritable défense qu'un avis paternel; c'est un avertissement de s'abstenir d'un fruit pernicieux qui donne la mort. Cette idée est assurément plus conforme à

celle qu'on doit avoir de la bonté de Dieu et même au texte de la Genèse, que celle qu'il plaît aux docteurs de nous prescrire" (ibid.). The nature of God is once more brought into play as the foundation of Rousseau's objection. Anything which clashes with the premiss of an all-loving, almost sentimental God, must *ipso facto* be rejected. The final court of appeal is therefore still reason. The point, it should be noted, is again put forward as a question not so much of fact as of interpretation.

It was, however, the question of miracles which caused the greatest clash between Rousseau and his "orthodox" critics. His remarks on the subject were clearly one of the reasons for the bitter animosity of the Pastor of his village of Môtiers-Travers, M. de Montmollin. Sarcastic references to the activities of the Minister abound in Rousseau's correspondence during the "guerre de Môtiers". Thus he wrote to his friend du Peyrou: "Notre Archiprêtre continue ses ardentés Philippiques. Il en a fait hier une dans laquelle il s'est tellement attendri sur les miracles qu'il fondait en larmes et y faisait fondre ses pieux auditeurs" (*Correspondence Générale*, Vol. XIII, p. 274).

It was for long Rousseau's contention that miracles do not provide credentials. He quotes as an instance the miracles of Aaron before Pharaoh (Exodus 7) and their imitation by the Egyptian magicians. True and false miracles are not easily distinguished by human senses, "et que peut prouver le miracle, si celui qui le voit ne peut discerner, par aucune marque assurée et tirée de la chose même, si c'est l'oeuvre de Dieu ou si c'est l'oeuvre du démon?" (*Lettres de la mont.*, Pt. I, lett. 3). The only conclusion that Pharaoh could justly draw was that Aaron was a much better magician than his own. So, as a sign from God, the miracles were without avail.

Furthermore, miracles were useless as a proof of doctrine. "Ainsi donc, après avoir prouvé la doctrine par le miracle, il faut prouver le miracle par la doctrine, de peur de prendre l'oeuvre du démon pour l'oeuvre de Dieu" (*Émile*, IV). This, says Rousseau, is clearly a vicious circle. Moreover, it is not supported by the Bible. In Deuteronomy 13, for example, a warning is given that prophets who point to false gods are to be ignored, despite signs and wonders (*Émile* IV, note).

In reply to the Archbishop, who takes up this very point, Rousseau made the very significant statement: "Oui, monseigneur, c'est dire, selon le précepte même de Moïse: Qu'on me montre des miracles et je refuserai encore de croire une doctrine absurde et déraisonnable qu'on voudrait étayer par eux. Je croirais plutôt à

la magie que de reconnaître la voix de Dieu dans des leçons contre la raison" (*Lettre à M. de Beaumont*). Once again Rousseau falls back on the primacy of reason, which makes him work from a preconceived (and emotionally inspired) notion of the character of God. In this argument therefore, directed mainly against Roman Catholicism, Rousseau always remains consequent to his fundamental position.

His attitude to the Bible, however, emerges most clearly in his treatment of New Testament miracles, a subject which he considers at some length in his *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, Pt. I, letter 3. He traces how the Jews of Christ's time were perfectly right and justified in asking this supposed Messiah for signs. "Le signe qui devait constater la venue du Messie ne pouvait pour eux être trop évident, trop décisif, trop au-dessus de tout soupçon . . ." (*Lettres de la mont.*, Pt. I, Lett. 3). Jesus, however, refused this request. "La nation méchante et adultère demande un signe, et il ne lui en sera point donné. Ailleurs il ajoute: Il ne lui sera point donné d'autre signe que celui de Jonas le prophète. Et leur tournant le dos, il s'en alla" (*ibid.*). The authentication of Jesus was his teaching. "La preuve est donc dans la parole, et non pas dans les miracles" (*ibid.*).

It follows therefore that it is not necessary to believe in miracles to have faith in Christ . . . "il est attesté par l'Écriture même que dans la mission de Jésus-Christ les miracles ne sont point un signe tellement nécessaire à la foi qu'on n'en puisse avoir sans les admettre" (*ibid.*). The position of Rousseau was not that he denied miracles, but that he was disposed to doubt them: "Il y a une grande différence entre nier une chose et ne la pas affirmer, entre la rejeter et ne pas l'admettre; et j'ai si peu décidé ce point, que je défie qu'on trouve un seul endroit dans tous mes écrits où je sois affirmatif contre les miracles" (*ibid.*).

If, in the eighteenth century, it was true that "Avec le canon, l'optique, l'aimant, le baromètre, quels prodiges ne fait-on pas chez les ignorants?" (*ibid.*), could it not be that the miracles of Jesus were miracles indeed to those who knew no better, but perfectly explicable by natural means with the growth of knowledge? "On vient de trouver le secret de ressusciter des noyés; on a déjà cherché celui de ressusciter les pendus: qui sait si, dans d'autres genres de mort, on ne parviendra pas à rendre la vie à des corps qu'on en avait crus privés?" (*ibid.*). Besides, in the case of Lazarus, for instance, can one be sure that he was really dead? How can one know that there is not some perfectly sincere exaggeration in the accounts of miracles? In any case, Jesus, "éclairé de l'esprit

de Dieu, avait des lumières si supérieures à celles de ses disciples qu'il n'est pas étonnant qu'il ait opéré des multitudes de choses extraordinaires où l'ignorance des spectateurs a vu le prodige qui n'y était pas" (ibid.).

It is noteworthy, however, that Rousseau was in fact forced to reject at any rate a literal interpretation of some of the miracles in the Gospels. "Il y en a dans l'Évangile qu'il n'est pas même possible de prendre au pied de la lettre sans renoncer au bon sens. Tels sont, par exemple, ceux des possédés" (ibid., note). He goes on, in particular, to ridicule the account of the healing of the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5, Luke 8). It should be noted that once again it is reason that is invoked as arbiter.

The whole conclusion of the matter, as far as Rousseau was concerned, was that he could respect the Bible and believe in Christ without taking miracles as proofs of anything, or indeed considering the Bible to be without error. "Nul chrétien judicieux ne peut croire que tout soit inspiré dans la Bible, jusqu'aux mots et aux erreurs. Ce qu'on doit croire inspiré est tout ce qui tient à nos devoirs ; car pourquoi Dieu aurait-il inspiré le reste ? Or, la doctrine des miracles n'y tient nullement ; c'est ce que je viens de prouver. Ainsi le sentiment qu'on peut avoir en cela n'a nul trait au respect qu'on doit aux livres sacrés" (ibid.).

But in the *Profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard*, which is an Apologia for his "natural religion", Rousseau goes further. Outside of nature, the whole record of revelation is in books, books which have to be studied, compared, tested, and which can give no certainty in the end, for they are all written by men. "Quoi ! toujours des témoignages humains ! toujours des hommes qui me rapportent ce que d'autres hommes ont rapporté ! que d'hommes entre Dieu et moi !" (*Émile*, IV).

Books, even the Bible, are unsatisfactory. What is needed is a revelation that is manifestly open to all. "J'ai donc renfermé tous les livres. Il en est un seul ouvert à tous les yeux, c'est celui de la nature" (ibid.).

Harrison College, Bridgeton, Barbados, B.W.I.