

WRESTING THE SCRIPTURES.

IN my last paper I tried, in the briefest compass, and from instances at once simple and salient, to shew that, without incessant caution, we may easily be led by ignorance of the text of Scripture, and exclusive dependence upon the English Version, not only into multitudes of minor errors, but, in some instances, to the adoption of opinions which are contrary to truth, and in others to the defence of tenable opinions by untenable applications of particular texts. I wish in this paper to offer a few slight hints upon the subject of other dangers to which the popular and controversial use of the Bible is peculiarly exposed. To give to these scattered hints their due significance it would be necessary to write much of that History of Exegesis which in the last number of THE EXPOSITOR I sketched in its broadest and rudest outlines. But my present object is far humbler. It merely is to point out different *tendencies* by which at all times the interpretation of Scripture has been led astray. Theoretically, most readers would be ready to admit that the necessity for avoiding such tendencies has been proved again and again in the history of the past; but many will perhaps declare that the progress of knowledge has now rendered such warnings superfluous. This is a great mistake. It would be easy, though it might be invidious, to prove from modern sermons, and modern commentaries, and from the daily

misuse of Scripture in party controversies, that it is a flattering self-deception to suppose that we are rescued from such liabilities to error; but any one who supposes that the religious world in general is now in possession of the true key to Scriptural interpretation has only to consider the "texts" which are quoted to refute some fixed but perhaps disputed opinion of his own, and he will not be long before he arrives at the conclusion that, in our exegetical methods as well as in other things,

Our days are heritors of days gone by.

1. We are, for instance, still liable to the dangers of Literalism.

There is a sense in which literalism is among the first duties of the Biblical interpreter. Even the instances adduced in the following pages, as well as many to which I referred in the last, are sufficient to prove that masses of erroneous and pernicious misinterpretation would have been rendered impossible, if Commentators had held fast to the rule that we ought to go to Scripture to find not what *we think*, but what the sacred writers said; that, so far as it is ascertainable, the meaning which their words must have had for their own contemporaries, and especially for those to whom they were addressed, is and must be the meaning which we are intended primarily to find in them; that we are dealing deceitfully with the Word of God when we interpret passages of Scripture into conformity with our own dogmatic bias in senses which were never attached to them by those who were as familiar as we are unfamiliar with the language, the circumstances, and the allusions of the speaker.

In *this* sense literalism—the rigid and determined exclusion of mere mystic fancies—the insistence on the grammatical, philological, historical, simple sense of the words of Scripture—the constant recollection that each writer is primarily speaking as *Judæus, ad Judæos, apud Judæos*—is of the extremest importance. When we consider all the baseless vagaries of Philonian allegory, and the influence which they exercised on the Christian schools of Alexandria, we gratefully acknowledge the services of the School of Antioch, and especially of Diodorus of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, in rescuing Scripture from a treatment so arbitrary and so artificial. The fact that these great teachers were in advance of their age cost them some suspicion and isolation, but they had the immortal honour of being the founders of the rational—by which I mean the reasonable—school of Scriptural interpretation. St. Thomas of Aquinum laid down the rule: “*Let all the senses of Scripture be based upon a single literal sense, from which alone an argument can be derived, but not from those things which are allegorically stated.*”¹ Calvin, whose dreadful theology should not blind us to his high exegetical merits, admirably remarked in his introduction to the Epistle to the Romans: “*Certainly since this is almost the one duty of the interpreter, to lay open the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to explain; in proportion as he leads his readers away from it, in that proportion does he wander from his proper aim.*” These rules of a vigorous and truthful common sense find their historical origin in the writings which emanated from the School of Antioch, and the maintenance of *such* a literalism must ever

¹ *Summa Theolog.* i. qu. i. art. 10.

henceforth be regarded as the first duty of a truthful Commentator.¹

It may be readily admitted that these great Antiochene theologians may have been as little exempt as others from "the falsehood of extremes;" and their human infirmity may sometimes have been manifested by their having carried their principles too far. Take, for instance, the estimate formed by Theodore of Mopsuestia respecting the Song of Solomon. He may have adopted a view respecting it which was unduly, because too *exclusively*, literal; and he was condemned for this view by various Church decrees, just as, a thousand years after, Castellio was driven from Geneva by Calvin for rejecting the book as uninspired. Whiston carried such opinions to a foolishly extravagant extreme when he spoke of the Canticles as having been "written by Solomon when he was wicked and foolish and lascivious and idolatrous." Yet the all but unanimous voice of the best modern criticism has long ago decided that—though any one who wills may, as a pious exercise, read the book in a typical or allegorical sense, such as that suggested in the headings of the chapters in our English Version—yet the primary intention of the Song is literal and idyllic, and that much of its primary and permanent value lies in the fact that it describes the triumph of a humble and virtuous love over all the blandishments of wealth and power. When some of

¹ Other theologians besides those quoted, have laid down the same rule; e.g. Cocceius, in the Introduction to his *Summa de Fœdere et Testam. Dei*: "Id significant verba quod significare possunt in integra oratione, sic ut omnia inter se convenient;" and Kuenen (*Criticæ lineamenta*): "Intelligere scriptorem is dicendus est, qui idem quod ille dum scribebat cogitavit, legens cogitat." See Immer, *Hermeneutik*, 26-67.

the Jewish Rabbis decided that the book "defiles the hands,"—or, in other words, that it is uncanonical,—the decision may have been due to an inadequate estimate of the sacredness of the simple lesson that God approves of a pure-hearted and faithful love.

The literalism, then, which may most briefly be described as the elucidation and acceptance of the original sense, is never dangerous; nay, it has furnished the one solid basis of all sound interpretation. But the literalism which *is* dangerous is that which sacrifices the sense to the mere sound; that kind of literalism which, either in ignorance or in wilfulness, insists on abiding by the hard and naked letter, in defiance of every rule which modifies the use of human language. "God," as Luther so admirably said, "*does not reveal grammatical vocables*, but He reveals essential things." All human language, from its very nature, from the very conditions of the beings by whom it is uttered and to whom it is addressed, is, and must be, imperfect. It is an asymptote to thought; it may approach ever nearer and nearer to the circumference of the idea which it wishes to express, but can never coincide with it. "The Law speaks in the tongue of the sons of men." The language of Scripture is full of gracious shadows—clouds which mercifully veil for our feeble vision the excess of light. Thousands of texts of Scripture, multitudes of the utterances of our blessed Lord Himself, were never meant to be taken *au pied de la lettre*; nay, they would, if so taken, stand in deadly antagonism to the very essence of his own Divine teaching. Paradox, and metaphor, and irony, and figures of speech of all kinds, and the general statement of truths applicable only to special circum-

stances, and the universal statement of rules which were never meant to exclude a multitude of modifications, are facts of human utterance which must be taken into consideration at every step. The sacred writers could not possibly frame their language with incessant reference to the assumption that theological interpretation would exclude the exercise of the simplest common sense. "We recognize," says Bullinger, "*no interpretation of Scripture as orthodox and genuine unless it has been sought from the Scriptures themselves, in accordance with the genius of the language in which they are written, and weighed with reference to circumstances,*"¹ and then only (he adds) when it coincides with the rule of faith and charity, and tends to the glory of God and the salvation of mankind. A meaning which would instantly have stamped serious words with downright absurdity in the minds of all who heard them can never be the true meaning. Where the literal sense is immoral and untenable, and where it can be shown that to adopt the literal sense would be to ignore the laws, idioms, and ordinary metaphors of the language in which the words were uttered, *there* literalism becomes the very worst kind of allegory. And in reading our English Bible it must constantly be borne in mind that the word by which another is translated may have a general resemblance to it in meaning, and yet may convey a widely different impression, and may connote an entirely different range of conceptions. This was why the Evangelists wisely transliterated a multitude of technical words, such as Pharisee, Sadducee, corban, &c., rather than represent them by imperfect equivalents. This was why they and our Blessed Lord Him-

¹ *Confess. Helvet.*, ii. 2.

self, if He spoke Greek, refused to represent by some confused analogue the purely technical Hebrew word "Gehenna," and thereby set a sacred example which our translators have neglected, and have in consequence done irreparable, though unintentional, injury to the belief of many. But the strangest thing about the unintelligent literalism which dominates uncontrolled over the largest part of popular theology is that it is so perfectly arbitrary in its application. It will fasten with fierce tenacity upon one text or set of texts, while it calmly explains away another text or set of texts, which, if understood with equal literalness, would enforce the modification, or even the abandonment, of some favourite dogma. There are probably thousands who would, with ignorant fervour, apply the name of infidel to any one who should take an allegorical view of the narrative of the Fall, although Calvin applies the phrase "rude simplicity" to the way in which Moses speaks of God making coats of skins, and Luther says that we are not to interpret "God said" as though it meant a voice in the air. They would denounce as "rationalistic" any attempt to shew the great historic truth which lies behind the simple anthropomorphism in which the Book of Genesis describes God as confounding the language of all the earth at Babel, though St. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of the literal comprehension of the passage as "Jewish folly and nonsense." And yet the very same readers will, without the slightest warrant, apply the most extravagant allegory to the interpretation of verse after verse in the Canticles, and even they would hardly suppose that God literally "*came down to see* the city and the tower which the children of men builded." It was this arbitrariness which made the

Roman Catholic controversialists say that Scripture was treated by the Protestants as "a nose of wax," which they could twist in any direction ; a sword which they could put into any scabbard.¹ It was this determination to interpret everything by purely subjective standards which led to the bitter epigram—

Hic liber est in quo quaerit sua dogmata quisque
Invenit et pariter dogmata quisque sua.

But it is in the New Testament, and most of all in the interpretation of the words of our Lord that this literalism most strangely asserts itself. It was wonderful that the youthful Origen, the most allegoric of all Christian interpreters, should yet, from unacquaintance with a Jewish metaphor, have taken with absolute literalness the one text which led him, to his own ultimate sorrow, to wrong himself for life ;² yet in this respect he was only following the arbitrary method to which almost every reader is more or less addicted. The comprehension of so simple a truth as this—that Christ expressed many of the great laws which He came to inculcate under the form of extreme and unlimited paradox—would alone have saved Europe from multitudes of errors both in practice and in theory. John Bunyan used to be distracted with agony because he took quite literally the saying, "*If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place ; and it shall remove,*"³ and therefore felt driven to test his own faith

¹ Bellarmine, *De Verbo Dei*, III. 1, § 2.

² The proper understanding of the metaphorical character of Matthew xix. 12 can be best seen by comparing the three kinds of εἰνοῦχοι there referred to with those classed by the Rabbis under the heads of eunuchs "of the sun," "by men," and "by the hand of heaven." See my *Life of Christ*, vol. ii. pp. 156, 157, and Schöttgen, *ad loc.* Matt.

³ Matt. xvii. 20.

by bidding the puddles on the Bedford roads to dry up at a word. Yet he would never have been troubled had there been any one to tell him that Jesus was but using the strong imaginative metaphor of the East, which would be perfectly intelligible to his hearers from the language of their own prophets.¹ The notion that "to remove mountains" was to be taken quite literally was one which would have only caused a smile on the face of any hearers who were accustomed to confer on any great teacher the complimentary title of "a remover of mountains." They would have understood in a moment that their Lord was only expressing the Divine truth, that difficulties vanish before the prayer of faith.² Again, on the "*Sell all that thou hast*"—a special command given to one alone, and only because he demanded an heroic test—was founded the whole system which cursed Europe for centuries with multitudes of spiritual mendicants. Yet nothing but the crudest literalism would have prevented the recognition of the truth that the command had never been intended to have a general application, and that even those who were nearest and dearest to Christ retained their possessions without blame from their Master, and with direct benefit to the general good. In almost every doctrinal chapter of the New Testament the reader will find texts which have been taken literally by some teachers or some sect, while the whole chapter may be full of other texts of which the literal meaning is either rejected or explained away. In no subject is this

¹ "Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain" (Zech. iv. 7). Comp. Jer. li. 25.

² St. Ambrose was, at least, nearer the mark than Bunyan when he said that "by this mountain is meant the devil" (Ambrose on Psa. xxxvi., p. 503).

license of private interpretation more strangely manifested than in everything which pertains to Christian eschatology. There the imagery of a parable will be paraded as decisive of one view, while the plainest literal statements will be set aside if they seem to favour another. It will be deliberately argued that the "council" and "the judgment" are to be taken literally as Jewish tribunals empowered to inflict fines and ordinary punishment for the offence of being angry or calling a man Raca; while "the Gehenna of fire" in the next clause is not to mean a Jewish punishment, but is to be taken metaphorically of eternal torments, for the slightly added vehemence of calling him "Thou fool." Nay, more; literalism and allegory will orthodoxically divide between them the clauses of the same verse, and it will be insisted that the "worm" is metaphorical in one clause, while the flame is material in the next. But perhaps one single clause may sufficiently illustrate the immense dominion which has been claimed by an arbitrary literalism. The Apostles, I firmly believe, would have held it to be impossible that a metaphor so simple, so intelligible, so universal as that which was employed by our Blessed Lord when He said, "*This is my body*," should originate a library of vehement literature and metaphysical discussion, and should lead to centuries of infuriated controversy, in which men should burn each other respectively for holding or for not holding it in a literal sense. Long ago Selden said that the doctrine of transubstantiation was an instance of "rhetoric turned into logic." By that pregnant remark he meant that Christ, when He used those words at the Last Supper, was speaking in accordance with those universally recognized laws of language

which (in the older and truer use of the word) were described as Rhetoric; and that, to take his phrase literally, and without reference to those laws, is to found syllogisms on a mistaken principle of grammatical interpretation. In all languages, "to eat" and "to feed upon" are metaphors, used alike by the refined and the ignorant, to express the most intense union, the most absorbing contemplation. Among the Jews, familiar with such forms of expression as that "Moses on Sinai was fed upon the music of the spheres," and that "The just shall eat of the glory of the Shechinah," nothing but the coarsest determination to cavil could have led to the remark made by the Galileans in the synagogue at Capernaum, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" It was a similar literalism which had, on another occasion, called forth the grave and sorrowful rebuke of Christ, "Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word."¹ On this occasion He only *repeated* his metaphor, which it was as inexcusable to misunderstand as it was to take literally the metaphors of the "leaven of the Pharisees" or the "water of life;" but to his disciples He said afterwards, with perfect distinctness, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; *the flesh profiteth nothing*: the *words* which I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life." After such an explanation, the Apostles would have thought it inconceivable that neglect of the simplest rules of utterance could lead men from spiritual interpretations into degrading and unfathomable superstitions.

2. But if a raw literalism has led to many errors, what shall we say of that spirit of Allegory in which

¹ John viii. 43.

Scriptural interpretation has positively revelled? I use the word generally for the extravagant typology, the numerical mysticism, the spiritualizing homiletics which have often gone to the lengths of irreverently sacrificing the sacred letter for the sake of forcing upon it some dogmatic or moral inference with which it has not the remotest connection. The Rabbis began the process. Among them it reached its climax in the days when Rabbi Akhiva professed to find theological or ritualistic mysteries in every turn, or curl, or twist of a Hebrew letter—in the days when a frivolous scholasticism had run to its last dregs of feeble decadence. But long before the days of R. Akhiva, Philo had given a boundless license to the mystical and allegorizing principle; and when we explore the frozen sea of his abstractions we at once find ourselves in a region “where naught is everything and everything is naught.” He handed on his methods to the Fathers as the Palestinian Rabbis also handed theirs. We find in even the second century those numerical fancies—that adoption of strange inferences derived from giving numerical values to the letters of words—of which in Scripture itself there is not a single instance.¹ Thus, even as early as the Pseudo-Barnabas we find that the 318 servants with which Abraham liberated the captives of Sodom were made a type of Christ on the Cross, because 318 may be represented in Greek by the letters $\tau\upsilon\eta$, of which τ stands for the cross, and $\upsilon\eta$ for the two first letters of the name of Jesus; and in Irenæus we find the notion that 666 (and not 616) must be the true

¹ The number of the Beast is not a case in point. It is merely an instance of a cryptograph adopted to avoid unnecessary danger. The number 666 meant “Nero Cæsar,” and to write that name openly would have involved the peril of a trial for *læsa majestas*.

reading of the number of the Beast, *because* (!) Noah was 600 years old when he entered the Ark, and the statue of Nebuchadnezzar was 66 feet high. Not to dwell on the extravagant development of typology, by which, for instance, Jacob becomes a type of Christ in seventeen particulars, and Moses in forty, and Joseph in forty-four, the Fathers sought for allegorical meanings in the plainest and simplest history until we find St. Jerome saying that to seek the literal sense is to eat dust like the serpent. Origen, whose critical contributions to the study of Scripture were of such incomparable value, marred the value of his exegetical labours by his assertion of a threefold sense in Scripture adapted to the Platonic trichotomy of man's being into body, soul, and reason (or spirit). He did not despise the literal sense, but treated it as a mere covering for the higher sense, just as the earthly nature of Christ veiled his Divine nature. His successors, Athanasius and Cyril, while they dropped the far more valuable grammatical and critical side of his labours, adopted his mystic and speculative principle of exegesis to its full extent, and used it to oppose the historical and critical school of Antiochene interpretation. "This allegorizing interpretation of the Bible made no distinction whatever between essence and form in the communication of Divine things, but regarded everything alike as having come from Divine suggestion. The followers of this mode of interpretation looked upon every word as equally Divine; they sought mysteries on all sides; they would not admit that there was any human element to be taken account of; they would not construe this element in accordance with its human individuality of character and human origin—would

explain nothing by reference to human modes of apprehension and development. Under the idea of shewing particular respect to the Bible, they undesignedly detracted from its authority; because instead of understanding its human form from the history of its human evolution, and perceiving the Divine Spirit revealing Himself there, they explained the whole as a single production, after a system foreign indeed from the Sacred Word, but preconceived and preëstablished as a Divine one by themselves, that of foisting into, and implying in, the Bible what was not really there." ¹

Two instances, one from the New Testament and one from the Old, may suffice by way of passing illustration of a method which, if unchecked, would only reduce the Bible to one vast sea of uncertainty, and would place its interpretation at the mercy of prejudice and dogmatic bias. Both instances shall be taken from Hilary of Poitiers, who however, derived them from older sources.

(a) We may not be able in every instance to see the reason which led to the Levitic distinction between clean and unclean meats. Many very nugatory reasons have been invented, but Maimonides was certainly justified in the belief that sanitary considerations had a large, if not an exclusive influence, in guiding the decision. When allegory claims the right to play a part in the explanation, and we are told that animals which divide the hoof and chew the cud are clean because the cloven hoof symbolizes the firm walk of the believer, and the ruminating process the duty of meditating on the Divine counsels, we feel at once that we are beginning to tread upon a shifting quagmire; but

¹ Neander, *Ch. Hist.* iv. 11. (E. T.)

when St. Hilary adds that "dividing the hoof" is a symbol of "believing in the Father and the Son," we feel that such wild misapplications tend only to make the Scriptures reflect every hue of fancy and every shade of belief, and we say with Cardinal Perron, that such explanations are *des gaietés joyeuses*.

Quodcunque ostendis mihi sic incredulus odi.

(β) It is quite pitiable to see how this allegorizing process has sometimes been adopted in such a way as to evaporate all poetry from the Bible. Who can read without delight the exquisitely glowing and simple passion of admiration for the works of God which breathes through the eighth and ninth verses of the 147th Psalm? But to Hilary the "clouds" are the writings of the prophets; and the "rain" the evangelical doctrine; and the "mountains which bring forth grass" are the Prophets and Apostles; and the "beasts" men; and the "young ravens" Gentiles. And he adds the remark—how false to the truth of God, how accordant with the conceit of theologians!—that to understand the verses literally is not only erroneous but irreligious—" *Hæc ita intelligere non dicam erroris, sed irreligiositatis est.*" And yet even this is bearable in comparison with the application of similar principles to our Lord's discourses. The "fowls of the air, which neither reap nor gather into barns," are, it appears, the devils, and the "lilies of the field that spin not" are angels. Of all the words which our Blessed Lord uttered few expressed a deeper and more yearning tenderness than those in which He said: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father." The words need no special explanation.

They are transparent in their beautiful meaning. But in the hands of St. Hilary they at once lose half their meaning and all their loveliness, when the sparrows become sinners whose souls and bodies become both as one, the soul by sin thickening as it were into a body, and so forth,—until we have altogether lost sight of the boundless revelation of God's mercy, extending over all his works, but concentrated on each individual man as a child in that Family of which Christ is the elder brother.

Perhaps it may be said, This style of exegesis is quite exploded. Would that it were! Has the reader never heard it in sermons? Is it even confined to the unlearned? Let any one who thinks these warnings needless turn to Bishop Wordsworth's Commentary, where he will find hundreds of specimens of it, some borrowed, and some original. Let him turn, for instance, to the story of Jael. No one will sweepingly condemn the deeply seated treachery and cold-blooded murder of Jael without making every allowance for her time and her circumstances. But if they follow the guidance of Bishop Wordsworth, they are called upon to hold, first, that Jael was supernaturally inspired to commit that treacherous assassination; secondly, that "the act itself was clearly miraculous;" thirdly, that there is a parallel between the tent-peg with which she shattered the skull of Sisera and the stake by which the Gentiles enlarge the Church; fourthly, that there is a tenable comparison (borrowed from Origen and Augustine) of this tent-peg to the Cross; fifthly, that an elaborate parallel may be drawn out between Jael and the Blessed Virgin Mary; sixthly, a discovery, that since Heber takes no part in the story, there is a

mystery in the words, "the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber, the Kenite," because "*the tent in which the Lord of all took our nature, and tabernacled in us was the Blessed Virgin, and she was the wife of Joseph.* Yet Joseph had no part *in the work by which the world was saved, and our enemy was destroyed.*" I quote these extraordinary remarks of a living prelate without comment; but surely—with the deepest and most sincere respect for his learning and goodness—I may venture to say that, be they Rabbinic, or be they Patristic, or be they what they will, they are unwarrantable fancies to which the name of exegesis cannot for a moment be accorded; that they are a mere pious play of the imagination of which the results are not in the most distant degree binding on any human being, and that however harmless and even edifying some persons may suppose them to be, they are liable to the peril of degenerating very rapidly and very perniciously into adulterating and handling deceitfully the Word of God.

(γ) Misplaced literalism and misplaced allegory are perhaps the two tap-roots which supply the constant life of Biblical misinterpretation. I will touch but very briefly on other dangers against which every expositor should be on his guard.

One is the danger of drawing extravagant or impermissible inferences from isolated expressions—what Coleridge so admirably described as "the ever-widening spiral *ergo* out of the narrow aperture of single texts." We are bound by, we cheerfully accept, all that Scripture undoubtedly teaches as the drift and tenour of its revelation; we are not bound by, and we indignantly repudiate, the self-asserted infallibility of

all the conclusions which men may choose to deduce by whole series of syllogisms from isolated expressions; nor will we ever make the home of our faith in the inverted pyramids of argument which rest their precarious apex upon a single metaphor. If any one will try the deeply instructive plan of taking some one disputed passage—as, for instance, Galatians iii. 19, 20, with its “upwards of three hundred” different interpretations;—or some one disputed parable—say that of the Unjust Steward, where the unjust steward has been taken to mean the Pharisees, the publicans, Judas Iscariot, the Apostle Paul, and even (*spectatum admissi* . . . ?) the Lord Himself!—he will have not only an adequate but a glaring proof how small is the allegiance, how small even the shadow of respect, which he owes to the attempts which are still daily made to “force the senses of men upon the words of God, the special senses of men upon the general words of God, and to lay them both upon men’s consciences under the equal penalty of death and damnation.” When Archbishop Sancroft made “*Sirs, ye should not have loosed from Crete*” the text of a sermon against Dissent, because Crete was an Episcopal Church;—or when the Jacobites referred to the pale horse of the Apocalypse as a symbol of the white horse of the House of Hanover,—they were hardly in earnest. But Innocent III. was in deadly earnest when he argued from St. Peter’s “*Lord, here are two swords*” that he possessed the temporal as well as the spiritual authority; and derived a scriptural argument for his usurpation from the remark that the Pope was the greater light to rule the day, and the Emperor the lesser light to rule the night. The extent to which the right to draw inferences has been assumed may be seen

from the misapplication of such a verse as "*I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not*" to establish Papal infallibility; of the expression "*filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ*" to support the doctrine of works of supererogation; and of the words "elect" and "predestinate" to rear the ponderous scholasticism of a pitiless and repellent theology. Not only was the right to draw inferences left without practical limits, but the rule laid down by St. Augustine was regarded as final down to the Reformation, that "all Scripture which is called the Old Testament, to those who desire to know it diligently, is handed down to us in a fourfold manner—according to history, according to ætiology, according to analogy, and according to allegory." From this rule came the proverb—

Littera gesta docet; quid credas allegoria;
Moralis quid agas; quo tendas anagogia.

The result of such developments was the multiplication of such commentaries as that on Job, in thirty-five books, by St. Gregory the Great, which, though it was the wonder of his contemporaries and of later times, is absolutely valueless for any critical or exegetical purpose. Another result was the blinking of all difficulties—the removal of which was supposed to be at once provided for by the *ἀναγωγή εἰς τὸ νοητὸν*—the invention of a spiritual sense which could, and often did, practically set aside even the historic narrative, with all the priceless lessons which its due study is always certain to suggest.

(δ) Another danger is neglect of the context. It is so common a practice to make the *words* of Scripture a sort of talisman to conjure with, that scores of instances might be selected in which the application of a text to

express a particular conclusion can only be regarded as a *verbal* argument—an argument founded on a silent interchange of meanings, like the grotesque syllogisms adduced in logical handbooks to illustrate faults of logic. There are many cases in which the practice is so far harmless that it simply furnishes preachers with expressions and illustrations, and serves to impress undoubted truths by the apparent sanction of sacred language. Thus when our Lord's words, "*there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed*" (Matt. x. 26; Luke viii. 17), are adduced to warn men of the detection of hidden sins, the truth thus enforced has ample warrant in other passages of Scripture (1 Cor. iii. 13; iv. 5, &c.); but those particular words of Christ are shewn by the context to have a very different meaning—namely, the right use and further dissemination of the light which He revealed. When "*as thy days are, so shall thy strength be*" (Deut. xxiii. 25) are quoted to illustrate the proportionate mercy of God giving aid in the exact measure in which it is required, the truth is a blessed and beautiful one, but the passage itself is rendered of very dubious meaning because it consists in Hebrew of two words, both of which are ἀπαξ λεγόμενα. "*The secret things belong unto the Lord our God*" (Deut. xxix. 29) is a verse usually quoted to discourage all inquiry into mysterious doctrines; but the context shews that the meaning is, "We know our present duty; God alone knows our future destiny." "*I have trodden the wine-press alone*" (Isa. lxiii. 3) is constantly adduced as a prophecy of Christ's loneliness in the agony of Gethsemane. The merest glance is sufficient to shew that the reference is to the hour of vengeance and of judgment. These and many other misapplica-

tions of texts might well be regarded as harmless if the habit of using Scripture words in senses alien to the original intention did not lead to a carelessness respecting them which readily lends itself to direct dogmatic abuse. Were it not for this abuse it would be sufficient to bear in mind that, though the actual words are those of prophet or evangelist, "it is the speaker or preacher who is standing behind them and adapting them to his own purpose." When the texts are made the basis of sectarian exaggerations or of disputed theological doctrines, the evil of neglecting the context is seen in its true proportions. Take, for instance, the verse, "*The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint*" (Isa. i. 5) which is always quoted by preachers anxious to enforce the doctrine of "total corruption." Nothing can be farther from the meaning of the original, which describes the results not of original depravity but of fruitless punishment. What strange conclusions as to the character of Paul and as to the language of confession have been derived from the expression, "*Sinners, of whom I am chief*" (1 Tim. i. 15), merely because it has been overlooked that he spoke under that oppression of conscience which he always felt from having been a persecutor of the Church of God. What eschatological inferences have been founded on the question of Isaiah (Chap. xxiii. 14), "*Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?*" Is it honest to quote the verse as though it referred to what are called "endless torments" when the context shews that the original reference is to the devastating fires of the Assyrian invasion? "*Where the tree falleth there it shall be*" (Eccles. xi. 3) is an expression urged more frequently than any other to prove that the fate of every human

being must be made up finally and irrevocably at the instant of death. Is it not intolerable that it should be urged to quench any conceivable gleam of hope for any poor sinner beyond the grave, when in the first place it is a metaphor, and therefore wholly unsuited for the rigid proof of doctrine; when, secondly, the metaphor, however unduly pressed, could never support the weight of inference which is laid upon it; and when, above all, it has not so much as the faintest reference to the state of man beyond the grave, but is part of an exhortation to be diligent and trustful amid the unknown workings of the Providence of God?

(e) Another fruitful source of Scripture misinterpretation is the neglect of other Scriptures. Our reference Bibles might be thought sufficient to avert the peril, but in reality they enhance it. The "parallel" passages referred to are often in no sense parallel, and can only be so regarded by taking an erroneous view of one of the two passages thus brought into juxtaposition. It would be very desirable in future reference Bibles that the passages referred to should sometimes be those which might even appear to be in direct contrast with, or even to stand in direct contradiction to, the one under consideration. Readers would thus be reminded that even an admitted truth must often be modified by the complementary and supplementary aspects of that truth; and that so limited are our human faculties that in matters of faith, no less than in matters of reason, and in dealing with the difficulties of revelation, no less than in dealing with the difficulties of nature, we must rest faithful even in the face of apparent contradictions. The insistence on one set of truths while the others are ignored can only lead to onesidedness and error.

And here our Lord has given us the aid of his own Divine wisdom, for when the devil came to Him with that "It is written"—which has been in all ages the favourite method of that evil spirit which sometimes walks in churches under the disguise of an angel of zeal and light—our Lord met and mastered him, not by disputing his "It is written," not by shewing that these were (as is usual in such cases) mere garbled and misinterpreted quotations, but by simply opposing to them an "It is written again." And when, in an instance but too typical, the Sons of Thunder, excusing their human passion under Scripture precedent, wish to flash down fire from heaven, Jesus simply warns them (in a passage which, perhaps, for this very reason has been tampered with) that the Elijah spirit is not the Christ spirit, and that the crude desire for vengeance shews how little they had realized the difference between Carmel and the Mountain of Beatitudes. The guide for moral conduct is to be found in the spirit and unity of Scripture teaching, not in this or that precedent or text. "By what law would you justify the atrocity you would commit?" asks the young soldier in a great work of fiction. "If thou art ignorant of it," replied Burley, "thy companion is well aware of the law which gave the men of Jericho to the sword of Joshua the son of Nun." Yes, "but we," answered the divine, "live under a better dispensation, which instructeth us to return good for evil, and to pray for those who despitefully use us and persecute us."

(§) To these dangers arising from literalism, allegorizing, exaggerated inference, neglect of context, and neglect of other Scriptures, we might add many more. We might, for instance, shew the immense influence of

bias, leading men to all sorts of unconscious insin-
cerities in interpretation, and causing them to wear
a veil upon their hearts—a vast system of tradition
which, with its ample and penetrating folds, covers
every region of religious thought—like the veil which
was upon the hearts of the Jews when Moses was
read in their synagogues every sabbath day.¹ Take
one broad instance. When Marcion read the Old
Testament under the influence of bias, he imagined
that it presented contradictions so flagrant to the spirit
of the New that he set it down as the work not of
God but of an imperfect Demiurge, and he wrote his
famous *Antitheses* to try and prove the thesis of an
irreconcilable opposition between the Law and the
Gospel. Thus by subjective bias he was led to the
extravagant conclusion that there is practically *nothing*
of the true New Testament—the only Testament which
he acknowledged as genuine—in the Old. On the
other hand, the opposite bias of Christians has endea-
voured to maintain that the morality of the Old Testa-
ment is as perfect and as finally authoritative as that of
the New, and that *all* of the New Testament is in the
Old; and this has led to a great mass of exegesis
which will always strike unbiassed students as unten-
able, as extravagant, and even as dishonest, while yet
they are prepared to accept heartily the old saying,
“In Vetere Testamento Novum latet; in Novo Testa-
mento Vetus patet.” A transposition of what belongs
respectively to the old and new dispensations subverts
the historical basis of both, and only leaves interpreta-
tion at the mercy of arbitrary assumptions. But when
bias avowedly reigns supreme, when some temporarily

¹ 2 Cor. iii. 15.

dominant opinion arrogates to itself the name of the voice of the Church, and lays down the Tridentine rule, "Ecclesiae est judicare de vero sensu et interpretatione sacrarum Scripturarum," then exegesis dies and theology decays. The repetition of an obsolete and unprogressive exegetical tradition becomes the shibboleth of orthodoxy, and commentaries sink into *catenæ* and *variorum* excerpts. What marked all the commentaries of the later scholastic age, it has been said, "is that only theological opinions or speculations are outwardly appended to Scripture without even an attempt at exegetical elucidation." In such ages men think that they are faithful to the Bible when they are faithful only to its utter misinterpretation. They betray it with a kiss.

Has not enough been said to shew that without great care and great humility we are all liable to the danger of "wresting the Scriptures," if not absolutely "to our own perdition," yet certainly to the injury of the truth, and therefore to the loss and damage of the Church and of mankind? In one sense we may possess the Holy Scriptures at the cost of a few pence; but to purchase the Scriptures is not to purchase a knowledge of the Word of God. "It is not," says a modern writer of genius, "to be had at that low figure, the whole long 119th Psalm being little more than one agonizing prayer for the gift of it, and a man's life well spent if he has truly received and learned to read ever so little a part of it." The very humblest, however young, however ignorant, however dull, may by the aid of God's holy Spirit learn from it enough, and more than enough, for his everlasting salvation. Without study and knowledge there are hundreds of pages of

it which we can never adequately understand, and there are perhaps many pages which we shall never thoroughly understand until a ray has fallen on them out of God's eternity; but this is certain, that without love and without humility a man may know it all by heart, and be thought of as a Master in Israel, and yet know less of the inmost life of it than a little Christian child.

F. W. FARRAR.

NOTE.—Since writing the above pages I have met with a book which, by the quotation on its title-page, furnishes a marked instance of this misapplication of Scripture. It is a volume of sermons called *Everlasting Punishment*, by the Dean of Norwich, and it explains its aim by these words, with which it is prefaced: "Ye have . . . strengthened the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him life" (Ezek. xiii. 22). I can scarcely suppress the sense of indignation with which I read this garbled misapplication of a Scripture text. It appears to me to illustrate all the worst faults and dangers which I have here endeavoured to point out, as well as the worst side of theological controversy and of the theological temper and spirit. The *object* of the quotation is too clear. It is meant to excite odium against those Christians who, in a perfectly reverent and devout spirit, have been led to the humble belief that Scripture nowhere excludes the possibility of that larger hope which many good and holy men—including canonized saints and fathers of the Church of God—have in all ages been permitted to cherish to the great comfort of their own souls, and the souls of many of God's most holy and loving children. No doubt it will be hailed by the hatred of ignorance as a good controversial missile; but—

(1) It is *garbled*. The intervening words are omitted. I suppose that even the Dean of Norwich could not say that to see the possibility of hope for some whom theologians would hopelessly condemn to endless torments, is *not* "to make the hearts of the righteous sad," unless "the righteous" *wish* their "*horribile decretum*" to be true.

(2) It is *misapplied*; for Ezekiel is speaking of immoral prophecies and of the arts by which they seduce men to fornication.

(3) It is *not true witness*; for no one has ever promised life to the wicked unless he repents.

(4) It is in all probability *mistranslated*; for the last words (and, like

the Apocalyptic scorpion, the quotation has its intended sting in its tail) should almost certainly be rendered as in the margin. The *spirit* in which it is made may be judged of by Dean Goulburn's *last* page, in which he tries hard to insinuate that any one who holds a different opinion from himself on this question must almost necessarily be "heretical" in other matters also. It is the old spirit—want of charity, want of tolerance, want of humility—which also breathes through the quotation which I have adduced from St. Hilary, in which, after setting aside the only possible explanation of a perfectly simple Scripture passage, he declares that explanation to be "not only erroneous, but irreligious." Such dicta and such quotations will soon be estimated at their true value—which is zero, or, rather, a negative quantity.

THE BOOK OF JOB.

VIII. THE THEOPHANY.

SECOND DIVINE REMONSTRANCE (CH. XL. 6—XLII. 6).

How to know God without knowing all that He is and does, how to stay himself on a Being whose ways are past finding out, is the lesson Job has still to learn. And he learns this lesson in the most singular but approved way—learns it by being shewn that even when God manifests Himself to man, man cannot comprehend Him, nay, cannot so much as comprehend any one of the works, or acts, in which He manifests Himself.

The mystery which Modern Science recognizes in the more subtle and recondite forces of Nature—in Energy, in Life, in Consciousness—was recognized by ancient thought in its more obvious, its more magnificent and impressive phenomena. But the mystery is the same wherever we find it. We may push back the dark line, or wall, at which our knowledge ends a little further; but, at the best, we soon reach it, and it