

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 Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

CHRIST'S USE OF SCRIPTURE.

EVERY careful student of the New Testament is aware that in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke there are several passages which, though not verbally quite identical, are too nearly so for us to believe that they can be independent reports. They have evidently been derived from an account of the words and actions of Christ which was committed to writing before the composition of any of the existing Gospels, and perhaps during Christ's ministry on earth. This was certainly the work of some one who was in constant attendance on Christ; very likely of the Apostle Peter, who, as we know from his first Epistle, many years afterwards regarded himself as the father of Mark, probably the Evangelist of that name.¹ This narrative must have been but fragmentary; otherwise it would no doubt have been preserved in the Church, instead of being superseded, as it has been, by the three Synoptic Gospels. Some of the passages which must have been taken from this lost original Gospel are to be found, with more or less variation, in two of the Synoptic Gospels only; others, in all the three.

One of these, which is found with no important variation in all the Synoptic Gospels, is the most remarkable instance on record of the use made by Christ of the Scriptures of the Old Testament. It occurs immediately after his answer to the foolish and captious question of certain Sadducees who asked Him who, in the Resurrection, would be the husband of a woman that had been the wife of seven men successively. He told them that their question did not admit of any such answer as they sought, because, in the life of the Resurrection, there is no such relation as marriage; but that as to the truth of the Resurrection, which they denied, and by their question were trying to

¹ 1 Peter v. 13.

discredit, they ought to have found sufficient proof of it in the writings of Moses, to which alone they looked as an authoritative guide. Our Lord's words are as follows (I quote from the Revised Version):—

“Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven. But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew xxii. 29–32).

“Is it not for this cause that ye err, that ye know not the scriptures, nor the power of God? For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as angels in heaven. But as touching the dead, that they are raised, have ye not read in the book of Moses, in the place concerning the Bush, how God spake unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living: ye do greatly err” (Mark xii. 24–27).

“The sons of this world marry and are given in marriage: but they that are accounted worthy to attain to that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: for neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses shewed in the place concerning the Bush, when he called the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living: for we all live unto him” (Luke xx. 34–38).

In some of Christ's applications of Scripture, He claims for Himself a peculiar relation to it; as in that memor-

able discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth, where He announces the fulfilment of prophecy, and Himself as fulfilling it;¹ or in the Sermon on the Mount, where He claims for Himself authority to correct, to add to, or to supersede the laws of Moses. But in the greatest number of instances where He quotes from the Scriptures, He does not speak "with authority," as fulfilling a prophecy or making a revelation, but uses Scripture, as his disciples from St. Paul downwards have constantly done, for illustration and enforcement of the truths on which He is insisting.

The passage now under consideration belongs to the second of these two classes. Christ here claims for Himself no special relation to Scripture. He is not speaking "with authority," or making any new revelation. He is neither fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah nor correcting the laws of Moses; He is telling his audience what they ought to have found in Moses for themselves.

In order fully to understand our Lord's drift in this discourse, we must remember that the Sadducees, to whom it was addressed, regarded the Prophets, as well as the Psalms and the other Hagiographia, as inferior in authority to the Books of Moses. Now it is quite true that the five books ascribed to Moses do not contain a single distinct assertion of immortality or a resurrection; and we may reasonably assume that the Sadducees, when pressed with passages from the later Scriptures which do assert it—such as that from David, "I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness,"² or that from Job, "I know that my Avenger [or Redeemer] liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and after I shall awake, though this body be destroyed, yet out of my flesh shall I see God,"³—we may reasonably assume, I say, that the

¹ Luke iv. 16, 21.

² Psalm xvii. 15.

³ Job xix. 25, 26, marginal reading, and introducing the literally correct translation *Avenger*.

Sadducees used to reply: "Those sayings are all from books of inferior authority; but shew us any distinct assertion of the Resurrection in the books of Moses, and we will believe it." To this thought of theirs Christ replied by telling them that there is more in Scripture than the mere letter; and that if they had known how to read between the lines of Moses, they would have found the doctrine of immortality there.

The case of the seven brothers and the wife was probably imaginary—what lawyers call an A B case—and had perhaps been often used in order to puzzle Pharisees and throw ridicule on the Resurrection. We do not know what the Pharisaic answer was, but we may suppose that a Pharisee would have been ready with his reasons for awarding the wife in dispute to either the first or the last of her seven husbands. Christ, on the contrary, does not condescend to answer the question at all, but explains that it is a foolish and unmeaning question which ought not to have been asked.

There is something strange in the words of rebuke: "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God." Not knowing the Scriptures! They were doubtless well acquainted with the letter of Scripture. And not knowing the power of God! They had never thought of doubting it; and, besides, what had the power of God to do with the question? These words must have seemed to them mere heated invective. But though they knew the letter of the Scriptures, they did not know the Scriptures aright; and though they never doubted the power of God, they really, though unconsciously, disparaged it, by suggesting as possible that, if it were God's will to raise the dead, He could be hindered by any difficulty about the rights of husbands.

The same answer may sometimes be appropriate still. It has been seriously maintained—maintained, I mean, not

by scoffers but by believers—that the doctrine of the Resurrection implies the gathering together, at the voice of the Archangel and the trump of God, of all the atoms of matter which constituted the body of each individual man at the moment of his death, in order that out of them the resurrection bodies may be rebuilt. To such a fancy as this we may reply in the words of our Lord and of St. Paul, “Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. Thou sowest not the body that shall be. It is raised a spiritual body.”

More remarkable still, however, is the concluding sentence of Christ's reply, in which He asserts that sufficient proof of the Resurrection ought to be found in a passage of Moses where the Resurrection, or Immortality, is not mentioned. The Sadducees, we are told, were put to silence by it.¹ They had no answer ready which was at once plausible and popular, and perhaps the novelty of Christ's argument confounded them. But they were not convinced, and we may imagine one of them saying to another on their way home:—“See to what straits the defenders of the doctrine of a Resurrection are driven, when they come to argue the question on the only sure ground of the letter of Scripture! A Pharisee would not have put himself so evidently in the wrong as this poor ignorant Nazarene has done, by quoting as decisive of the question a passage which has no bearing on it whatever.” And we may fancy the other replying:—“He does not know what a syllogism is. But if he had the faintest idea of logic, he would have seen that his argument tells quite the other way. Because God called Himself the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, after they had lain for centuries dead, it follows that God *is* a God of the dead as well as of the living.”

¹ Matthew xxii. 34.

Now if we confine ourselves to the ground of merely grammatical and logical interpretation, we cannot shew that the Sadducees would have been wrong in making such comments; and though the present writer never doubted the authority of Christ or the truth of the Resurrection, yet he well remembers being perplexed and almost offended by the logic of this passage; and the difficulty would probably be felt more generally than it is, were it not for the prevalence of an almost mechanical conception of Christ's authority. To the believer, the authority of Christ is supreme when He puts it forth. When He says, "*I say unto you, Love your enemies,*"¹ it is the believer's duty to do his best to obey, trusting that by thus doing God's will he will learn to understand the doctrine, and to see its reasonableness, if he does not see it already—and experience shews that he *will* learn to understand it and see its reasonableness. But this is inapplicable to the passage before us. Christ is not here putting forth his authority; on the contrary, He condescends to reason. He does not now preface his words with "I say unto you." He who in conversation with his trusting friend, Martha of Bethany, claimed to be the Resurrection and the Life,² here tells the unbelieving and hostile Sadducees that they greatly erred when they failed to read the doctrine of the Resurrection into a passage in Moses where it is not expressly revealed. Now if we who believe in Christ are content to accept this argument as a sound one on Christ's mere authority, we shall learn no lesson from it whatever; it will be to us only one among many assertions of the Resurrection, and will certainly not convince any one who remains unconvinced by St. Paul. What we are meant to learn by this passage—so remarkably repeated in the three Synoptic Gospels—is the lawfulness and the duty of interpreting Scripture by the spirit

¹ Matthew v. 44.

² John xi. 25.

rather than the letter, and bringing higher principles to the work than those of technical grammar and mechanical logic.

This is a lesson which the Church has not yet sufficiently learned. Worship of the letter is deeply rooted in human nature. Every teacher of those subjects which make demands on the understanding rather than the memory must, if he knows his business, feel that he has constantly to struggle against the tendency in his pupils to trust to a rule that can be remembered, rather than to a principle that can be understood and applied. In such subjects as logic and mathematics every one sees that this is a human weakness; no one would call a man a mathematician, though he might be a calculator, merely because he could apply rules without understanding why they are true: but, in religion and theology, people often make a boast of not ascending from rules to principles: to use expressions which have obtained currency, they demand "chapter and verse for everything," and pride themselves on not going "beyond the things which are written."

As this last expression occurs in Scripture, and, like many other expressions of Scripture, is habitually and grievously misapplied, let us examine it in its context. It occurs in that introductory part of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, where its author is warning his converts against the spirit of pride, boastfulness, and schism. The entire passage is as follows, quoting from the Revised Version:—

"Now these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes; that in us ye might learn *not to go beyond the things which are written*; that no one of you be puffed up for the one against the other. For who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? but if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Cor. iv. 6, 7).

The translation does not shew, what is obvious in the

Greek, that the expression "not beyond the things which are written" is quoted as being proverbial. This is implied in the use of the article introducing the quoted clause:—the Greek is *ὅνα ἐν ἡμῖν μάθητε τὸ μὴ ὑπὲρ ἃ γέγραπται*,¹ and Canon Evans² translates, or paraphrases, "That you may learn the (lesson), Not above what is written," adding, "This expression refers apparently to the moral tenor of the books of the Old Testament. No allusion to a special text. It seems to denote a sort of ethical canon of the Scriptures, and the Corinthian brethren are here exhorted not to transgress this canon, but to keep within its limits by following the specific pattern of modesty and humility adumbrated to them by Paul and Apollos. This view is strengthened by the moral drift of the citations already made from the Old Testament in this Epistle." Dean Stanley, similarly, paraphrases it by "Learn *that well known lesson*, not to go beyond what the Scriptures prescribe." If any particular passages of Scripture are alluded to (though this supposition appears quite unnecessary), they are most probably those quoted already in the Epistle, all of which tend to inculcate the virtue of humility. They are as follows, quoting not the Old Testament originals, but the Apostle's quotations of them, with his introductory words. I again quote from the Revised Version.

"For the word of the cross is to them that are perishing foolishness; but to us which are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And the prudence of the prudent will I reject" (Isa.
xxix. 14:—1 Cor. i. 18, 19).

"Christ Jesus was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption: that,

¹ & (plural) not & (singular) is the reading adopted by the Revisers.

² Speaker's Commentary on the New Testament, vol. iii. p. 270.

according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord " (Jer. ix. 24 :—1 Cor. 1. 30, 31).

" For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He that taketh the wise in their own craftiness (Job v. 13); and again, The Lord knoweth the reasonings of the wise, that they are vain " (Ps. xciv. 11 :—1 Cor. iii. 19, 20).

The proverbial warning, " Not beyond the things which are written," then, has nothing to do with principles of interpretation, but is directed, with the whole of the first four chapters of the Epistle, against the temper of boastfulness and strife.

In the second Epistle to the Corinthians occurs the remarkable saying, that " the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life " (Chap. iii. 6). This is almost the formal and logical opposite of the other saying, " Not to go beyond the things which are written." Neither of these, however, has anything to do with principles of interpretation; and the meaning of the latter is what the Apostle afterwards worked out in the earlier chapters of the Epistle to the Romans; namely, that the law, alone, is but a sentence of death, while the Gospel is a spiritual revelation, and brings life. But though not really relevant, these words may be applied with truth to our Lord's answer to the Sadducees. If read according to the mere letter, the saying that God is the God of the ancient patriarchs proves that God is a God of the dead, because the patriarchs have died. But the spirit giveth life, and the spiritual mind has the power and the right to read, between the lines of the Old Testament, the truth that God must be the God of the living, and that the patriarchs must therefore be heirs of life. Christ, in his comment on this passage, has taught us that in the interpretation of Scripture we *ought* to go beyond the things which are written;—beyond the letter to the spirit. For, let us repeat it again, He does not here say, though He might have said, " I say

unto you ;” what He implies is rather, “ You ought to have seen this for yourselves.”

The same principle is ever applicable when any attempt is made to restrict the spirit of Christianity in the name of the letter of Scripture. When we are told on the strength of the apparent grammatical meaning of texts of Scripture, or of logical inference from them, that God’s mercy is limited by his own arbitrary “ election,” or that it can extend only to those who have learned to repeat an orthodox creed, or to those who have known Christ in the present life, or to those who have repented before death ;—granting, what is too much to grant, that the interpretations are grammatically correct and the logic accurate, we still may appeal from the letter to the spirit, and say that no interpretation and no inference can be sound if they contradict the doctrine of the Friend of God, that *the Judge of all the earth will do right*,¹ or the doctrine of the Beloved Disciple, twice in these words repeated in his first Epistle,² that *God is love*.

In conclusion, What is the meaning of the saying with which, in St. Luke’s account, our Lord ends his reply : “ For all live unto Him ? ” Does it only mean that all who live, live unto God ? This makes sense, and is in accordance with the use of the word *life* in the Scriptures ; for this word is never applied to a state of separation from God, to Hades or Gehenna. But is it not rather a hint of what has been more clearly revealed through the Apostle of the Gentiles ; —that a time will come, when, all other enemies having been abolished, death shall be abolished also, and God shall be all in all ?³

JOSEPH JOHN MURPHY.

¹ Genesis xviii. 25.

² 1 John iv. 8, 16.

³ 1 Corinthians xv. 26, 28.