A guidebook to the Biblical literature

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A GUIDEBOOK TO THE BIBLICAL LITERATURE

BY

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TO

GEORGE FREDERICK GENUNG
TWIN BROTHER
IN RECOGNITION OF A LIFETIME SHARED WITH HIM
IN THE FULL WEALTH OF THAT INTIMATE RELATION
BOTH OF NATURE AND OF THE SPIRIT

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PREFACE

THIS book is meant to be just what its title names it: a guidebook to the Biblical literature, not a substitute for it. Its office is subsidiary, not principal. One does not study a guidebook for its own sake. The familiar little red-covered volumes that deck the traveled man’s shelf bear witness not to erudition in that species of literature but to intimate memories and experiences wherein the useful manual that pointed out the scene of them is forgotten. So may it fare with the guidebook herewith introduced to the reader. The desired stimulus of it, if indeed it can lay any claim to such effect, is meant to be toward the straight study of the Bible itself, as one would study a virgin object of science, without deflection, without denial, without surrogate. Its postulate is that the Bible, reverently and constructively interrogated, is its own best interpreter. It bears the same relation, accordingly, to the wealth and width of the literature to which it would direct its readers that Murray and Baedeker bear to the lands and cities and treasures of their research; and its best hopes will be met if it succeeds, in some deserving measure, in placing them at the fair and free point of view whence, surveying with open eye the rich realm of the Biblical literature, they may see and know it as it essentially is.

In essaying, on the scale and scope here contemplated, to be a guide through so vast a tract of literary wealth, the author’s most exacting problem has risen not from the difficulty or abstruseness of the subject but from its largeness, its sheer embarras de richesses. Here in a single volume is a book covering the life of many centuries which, as
GUIDEBOOK TO BIBLICAL LITERATURE

Pascal phrases it, was not made by an individual author and dispensed among the people but which itself, as it emerged and grew, made the people; that is to say, which purveyed for a nation peculiarly gifted and responsive the spiritual light and truth that it needed for the right uses of life in its successive homes and ages and conditions. Immense treasures of matter and manner must needs be noted and weighed, whether reduced to the scale of this guidebook or not; there is also to be adjusted the ever-besetting tendency, figured in the old proverb, to miss the forest for the trees. No end of values are there for the gathering, each abundantly rewarding after its kind. He that seeketh findeth, and in so rich profusion that each department of research, once explored and organized, is prone to claim the monopoly and ignore or contemn the others. Hence the grim controversies that for centuries have so wrought to cleave the Bible truth into parcels and parties,—vehement screeds of doctor and saint, with their

"great argument
About it and about,"—

controversies warrantable enough, perhaps, to myopic human nature, but generally reducible, for all their solemn sincerity, to some phase of smallness or one-sidedness. Yet, even so, they are not to be scorned; there are shreds of truth at the bottom of them; but neither are they to be emulated. The truth that is in them may be found, I am sure, in some more tolerant way, some way more consistent with comity of spirit and aim. But to find it one must ascend; must reach some point above, where the tangled lines meet and unite. The Biblical literature, after all, does make for plainness, simplicity, unity; it requires only that one shall find the master-key and consistently use it. This is why, as intimated above, I desiderate a fair and free point of view: fair, I mean, to all sides, all moods, all constituent factors,
free from subjective willfulness or torsion. I do not count myself to have attained. It would not be safe, I imagine, for anyone to do so. The quest is too high, too far-reaching. I can only avow the ideal, and keep it bright, and follow after. There comes to me often a remark of Matthew Arnold's, made for a similar though less exacting case of literary judgment. "To handle these matters properly," he says, "there is needed a poise so perfect that the least overweight in any direction tends to destroy the balance. Temper destroys it, a crotchet destroys it, even erudition may destroy it. To press to the sense of the thing itself with which one is dealing, not to go off on some collateral issue about the thing, is the hardest matter in the world." This may be rather extremely stated; but the scholar may well lay it up in mind as a self-regulative.

What my desired point of view specifically is, may perhaps be better felt, as giving tone and color to my whole treatment, than defined in categoric terms; for to call it literary is at once too broad and too narrow to be truly definitive. It is, to begin with, a station in thought and feeling where the disposition is less to criticize than to describe, less to analyze than to enjoy, less to sit in judgment than simply to inquire and learn. In other words, my attitude, if I know myself, is purely and humbly constructive. A book of this size and scale, I assume, cannot afford to waste time in exploring culs-de-sac or in recounting things that are not so. It is enough to have found these out; to make an academic demonstration of the discovery is another matter. Accordingly, I have been content to take the Scripture text as it is, in its latest and presumably most definitive edition, with more regard to the time it fits than to the time in which it was conjecturally written; content also to assume that the Biblical literature was the product not of vague tendencies and movements merely but of real personal authors who, whether one is able to call their names or not, were
what Professor Godet assumes of the Gospel writers, "men of good sense and good faith." This brings me to the most cherished center of my point of view. It has been my endeavor to place myself by the side of each Scripture author, as if his literary task were also mine; to learn his mind, share in his conception and aim, feel the intimate throb of his personal temperament and style. This for one factor of realization; there is also its inseparable complement to reckon with. An author implies an audience. We must needs appreciate their point of view, as well as that of their poets and teachers. Our quest accordingly must enlarge itself to take in the mind of a people or of an era which could respond intelligently, whether in sympathy or reaction, to the kind of literature under consideration; for a book is not a cloistered thing, it reflects, it is intimately involved with, its age. This is where the expository and the historical come into collaboration. In other words, with the study of the literature itself must be combined a study of the people whom the literature fits; and so our research must correspond in some degree to what the Germans call Culturgeschichte, a history of a people's culture, as this is reflected in the literary productions that have survived from the successive periods of its historical experience.

To the exactions of the point of view must be added the claims of balance, perspective, proportion; else there is the besetting liability, as phrased above, to leave the core of the thing itself for "some collateral issue about the thing." And, first of all, it is worth while to note, in the present stage of Biblical research, that it makes a good deal of difference whether one studies the literature for the sake of the history or the history for the sake of the literature. Both objects, of course, are legitimate and laudable; they connote, however, quite divergent interests and results, which ought to be fairly discriminated. I have pursued the latter because my taste leads me to lay the stress rather
on present spiritual values—which is to say the values that have made the literature Biblical—than on values which appeal predominantly to antiquarian interests. But the same emphasis which makes history the second interest and not the first also, when rightly distributed, puts into proper subordination the multitude of facts and guesses which are so apt to clamor for more than their due. Many a true thing may be insignificant, or only remotely relevant if at all. Especially on the size and scale of this book, such things may merit only casual mention, or indeed sink beneath the surface into silence. Accordingly, I have given comparatively little relative stress to some things that have bulked large in the higher criticism, things like documentary theories, editorial additions or glosses, conjectural sources, and the like; while I have almost entirely ignored the clutter and clutter of corrupt readings, scribal blunders, dislocations, discrepancies, and in general the pettinesses of destructive or sceptical criticism,—things which do not belong to the scale and scope of this book, and which, when projected on the background of the large Biblical theme, can elicit only the doubtful query, “Well, what of it?” When the final claims of Biblical values are made up, many things that are first shall be last; it will do no harm to weigh and discount that possibility, or in other words to sense the proportions and relations of things.

All this, however, brings us only as far as the outworks of our real quest; the heart of the matter begins here, and no teacher or guidebook can impart it. It is a fallacy to assume, whatever we think of inspiration, that we are dealing with a literature like every other; we miss a cardinal factor if we do, and our study is sterilized thereby. This is a literature unique. It holds perpetual commerce with the unseen and the divine, while also its feet are firmly on the earth moving among men’s intimate affairs. It is Biblical. It is a thing to be learned, as it were, by heart rather than by
rote. And the heart has its own means of recognition. Contemplating the majestic evolution and coördination of the Biblical theme until in one unitary body of literature it has recorded a universe of experiences and relations wherein the divine and the human natures meet and blend, the sincere heart is aware of what Virgil felt in the universe of nature:

"Spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus
Mens agitat molem et magno se corpore miscet; —"

or to use Burke's noble paraphrase: "the spirit . . . which, infused through the mighty mass, pervades, feeds, unites, invigorates, vivifies every part, . . . even down to the minutest member." That is our true, our only adequate objective—the spirit within. I do not insist on a theological or mystical name for it; that is for the reader's experience to verify. One gets the spirit of a book not by logic or memory but by a kindred response to its inherent appeal. So with this Biblical literature. The Open Sesame is not merely the academic or dogmatic or even pietistic spirit, but the strong pervasive spirit of the Book itself. With this as the inner key the Book is its own best interpreter; and the reflex of that spirit, in fitting proportion and degree, is the best illuminant of the collateral and ancillary issues that are involved with it.

The version of the Bible used as the source of quotation and reference throughout this guidebook, except in some specified cases, is the American Standard Revision of 1901.

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