SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

BY
LEON ROTH, F.B.A.

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

I HAVE FIRST to offer an apology for an unintentional plagiarism in my title. *The Interpretation of Scripture*, as you all know and as I remembered too late, is the name of the contribution to the famous volume of *Essays and Reviews* made nearly a hundred years ago by Benjamin Jowett. Jowett was then Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford; but 'owing to his having incurred suspicions of heresy by the liberality of his religious opinions, he was deprived for ten years'—I am quoting the *Dictionary of National Biography*—'of the emoluments of his office.'

Some years later, in 1870, Jowett became Master of Balliol, the College to which in 1879 Claude Montefiore was admitted as an undergraduate; and there is thus some connection, howbeit a distant and tenuous one, between at least the title of my address and the distinguished scholar and religious leader in whose honour it is being delivered.

Having established the connection, however, I shall not dwell on it, since—if I may quote the D.N.B. again—'Jowett's essay on the Interpretation of Scripture only served to increase the suspicion of heresy entertained against him.' I can only pray that you will be kinder, or I luckier.

* * * * *

In this lecture I propose inviting your attention to

a matter which, in one form or another, is always cropping up. It is an old-fashioned problem and does not bother everyone ; but it is at the bottom of most disputes on Scriptural subjects and indeed on many other subjects too. Someone expresses an opinion and backs it up with a Biblical quotation. His friend produces another opinion and another quotation. What are we to do about it? An opinion is an opinion and a quotation is a quotation. Are there any grounds for choosing between them?

As a fact we do choose between them. We follow the one and reject the other. But when it comes to justifying our choice we are almost always at a loss. We cultivate a blind eye. We look the difficulty firmly in the face, and pass on.

But the difficulty remains, and it is not a theoretical one only. We all know, and we have it too on high authority, that ' the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose ' ; but when we meet such a one—' an evil soul producing holy witness '—how can we hope to set about refuting him? For example, when he brandishes his bow and arrow, or whatever lethal weapon is in fashion at the time, and cries : ' Blot out the remembrance of Amalek ! ', is there anything we can say to dissuade him?

In this particular case I suppose there is. We can say : the verse is not applicable. Amalek is a historical figure and belongs to the past, and the past has gone. An illuminating instance of this method is provided by a curious Talmudic story. An Ammonite, we are told, came and asked to be accepted as a proselyte to Judaism. One authority said No,

and quoted the Bible : ' An Ammonite shall not come into the congregation of the Lord.' Said another : ' On the contrary, admit him. Since Nebuchadnezzar [with his policy of transfer of populations] mixed the peoples together, it is impossible to be sure which people is which ! '

According to the Talmud it was this second view which prevailed. The Ammonite *did* ' come into the congregation of the Lord.' You will note the grounds. The verse as a verse remained but it was held not to apply.

It is this type of process which I should like to discuss with you this evening. It is not exegesis, the scholarly exposition of the words. There is no attempt to modify, or to change, the accepted meaning of ' An Ammonite ' or ' not coming into the congregation of the Lord '. The *exegesis* of the verse remains as it was. It is its application, its use, the sense in which it is to be understood in practice, its *interpretation*, which is called in question.

2

I am venturing, I know, on dangerous ground. Use becomes notoriously ab-use, and the philologist raises his voice. ' Ask *me*,' he says, ' and I'll settle the issue ; and I'll settle it because I have the facts : I know the words.' Yet, for all its knowledge of the words, philology gives us, and can give us, no final answers ; and I should like for a moment to enlarge on this most important, but much neglected, point.

For words, as all agree, have different meanings ; and there are meanings which, in a specific context,

do not fit. And so the philologist, out of the many meanings which present themselves, has to choose the one he thinks *will* fit. Indeed, at times, as we all know, he has to hie very far afield in order to find any meaning to fit. As one turns over Biblical commentaries of all ages one sees, for example, Arabic roots of kindred shape brought in to clear up the obscurities of the Hebrew ; and the layman accepts the new rendering with reverent thanks until he finds that, according to other philologists, the Arabic yields yet other roots and other renderings. My point is not the flexibility of philological erudition but its essential subordination to meaning. It would appear that, in the ordinary process of the philological investigation of texts, it is the meaning of the whole which has to be determined first. Then the philologist—*c'est son métier*—will produce the linguistic girder which is deemed adequate to support it.

The most striking case in which we can see this process at work is in the attempted deciphering of inscriptions in unknown alphabets. Guesses, assumptions, hypotheses, always come first, and these are all not facts but meanings. We can do nothing unless we assume that the language expressed in the unknown signs is of such and such a type, and that the signs themselves express this, that or the other type of object—names ; numbers ; objects for sale ; military triumphs or commercial ventures ; plaques of honour ; temple inventories. The hypothetical meanings are then allowed, as it were, to grope for the words like a skeleton key groping for the wards of a lock. Often one reads, in an interim report of progress, that they

have been sustained only in part, and, as for the rest, disappointed: 'It would seem to be a variety of early Greek,' one is often told, for example, 'but in that case one would expect...'; and then possibly what one would expect has not appeared, and a new approach must be excogitated and tested.

3

My object in these remarks is not to depreciate the work of the philologist (it is indispensable) but to suggest that it has its limits. The word, even with the help of the best of lexicons, is never a fact. It is never self-explanatory. Interpretation is always necessary. Indeed, the better the lexicon and the more varied the philological possibilities put at our disposal, the more the need becomes manifest for interpretation. We have all been at times amused by the so-called 'schoolboy howlers' arising from the over-impetuous use of Latin or French dictionaries. The lexicon can be too generous; and if the philologist—rightly—protests: 'But one must attend to context and meanings,' he confirms my point.

As indeed he does in another field too, when he—again quite rightly—offers us emendations. 'In its present state,' he seems to say, 'I cannot understand this verse, and I have tried all the variants of meanings for the words of the verse and still cannot make sense of it. I suggest therefore that in this, that or the other of its words we should read x instead of y. We shall then have sense.' On which one can only observe again that he starts with the sense and then finds the words to fit it.

This procedure is perfectly right and proper. It is the natural thing to do and follows the natural facts of language. We only find it paradoxical because of the contemporary, and I hope passing, illusion that the Arts can progress only by aping the Sciences. The Sciences aver (whether with justice or not is irrelevant here) that they deal with fact and fact only. For the philologist the fact is apparently the word. He therefore proclaims his duty to concentrate his energies on words, although he knows all the time that what he has really to deal with is not words but meanings. And meanings are expressed not in single words but in collections of words ; and not only in collections of words but in question marks, and exclamations, and inflexions of voice and gesture. May I remind you of Thomas Hardy's remark about the language of Casterbridge :

> The yeomen, farmers, dairymen, and townsfolk, who came to transact business in these ancient streets, spoke in other ways than by articulation . . . The face, the arms, the hat, the stick, the body throughout spoke equally with the tongue.[1]

A distinguished philologist[2] has suggested recently an explanation of a well-known difficulty in Ezekiel on the assumption of the existence of an aposiopesis, that is, the omission of words in order to suggest the unmentionable—the kind of thing expressed in modern languages by a succession of dots. The explanation is certainly plausible but it implies that in any given context the important thing may be not the words

[1] *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, cap. ix.

[2] G. R. Driver in *Biblica*, 1954, p. 155, on Ezekiel xxiii, 43.

put in but the words *left out.* A true, and indeed important, consideration, but incompatible with the exclusive and unique pre-occupation with the single words as such.

4

The conception I wish to bring before you this evening is that interpretation is a question of meaning ; and meaning, which is *not the product but the controller* of words, has canons of its own. I have mentioned one already. It is the canon of context. Context is the whole of which the word, the sentence, the passage, is a part ; and meaning has to do with context.

One difficulty with contexts is the determination of their extent. The context is a total occasion ; but the total occasion might be held to be the isolated specific occasion, or the specific occasion within its own total history, or the total history of that occasion within the totality of history as such ; or rather, since history is not a mere collection of facts but an interpretation of facts, the context might be held to be the general interpretation of the totality of facts as arising from a study of the whole literature. This last is in effect the way which is used by most of us and which causes all the trouble. ' The general tendency of the Scriptures,' we each say, ' is such and such ; and in the light of this tendency I propose to understand this, that or the other detail.' ' Understand ? ' cries our opponent ; ' *Mis*-understand, you should say. Your interpretation is a *mis*-interpretation. You must come back to the plain sense, however

unpalatable. Look at the facts, the words!' But I retort: 'What words? *x* and *y* stand in your way? I shall consult my lexicons; or if you don't like analogies from the Arabic or the Mandaic or the Assyrian or the Ugaritic, I shall offer you an emendation. The *words*? They can always be dealt with!'

Let us take the case of 'blotting out the remembrance of Amalek'. Many of us find the injunction distasteful (I shall revert later to the nature of the distaste and its Scriptural justification). What are we to do about it? I have suggested already that we might push it back to its historical occasion. We might say: there was indeed, once upon a time, a tribe of that name, but it has long disappeared; the injunction therefore is no longer applicable. Or we can say: let us widen the Scriptural context and take into account the parallel passage in Exodus xvii. There, there is no injunction that *we* should blot out the remembrance of Amalek, only the affirmation that *God* will. We can then point out to our valorous friend who is so anxious to do the blotting out himself that, if vengeance is God's, it is not for or from man.[1] If he remains obdurate, we can call on our philologist and ask him to translate the key-word not 'remembrance' but 'remembering', and blandly alter our version from 'Blot out the memory of Amalek' to 'Blot out the *remembering* of Amalek!' We can then assure our friend that the behest of Scripture is not to remember Amalek any more.

[1] This is how I understand the *Sifré* on the passage in Deuteronomy and see no reason for Friedmann's note.

I thought I caught a gasp at that rendering, and it is indeed a little surprising. I certainly gasped when I saw it cited in one of my brother's books, and I share his regret that he was not able to trace its source. As a version I consider it an effort of genius. Its author thought in context; but the context he chose was the context not of tribal wars and border fighting—there is plenty of that everywhere to regret and forget about; it was not for that that the Law was given on Sinai[1]—but the wider context of the Law and the Prophets and the Writings in their moral directiveness. And in *that* context, the blotting out of the remembrance of Amalek must be—somehow—adjusted. We have to choose; and it is better, we may well think (nay, *must* think), to give a shock to our dictionaries than to our moral sense.

5

I shall be asked: 'Does it then amount only to this: take what you like, as you like, when you like?' I answer emphatically, No. For we are not taking what we like. We are taking what we must. We are following Scriptural directive. We are interpreting, but not imaginatively or from the air. We are interpreting the words of Scripture through the meanings of Scripture. Our moral sense has been largely framed by Scripture. When therefore we interpret Scripture according to the requirement of what we know as morality, we are interpreting Scripture by Scripture. I shall revert to this point in a moment in connection with a famous historical

[1] See *Sifré* on the words 'whom thou hast redeemed' (Deut. xxi, 8).

controversy on these matters. I content myself now with the remark that it is because of this fact that the Scriptures are so precious. They are one whole in that they point to one standard. If they were devoid of this unity they would be like the Loeb classics, a miscellaneous collection of material on different subjects assembled together by the accident of composition in (approximately) one language ; and their interest would depend on the professional interest of the reader—an architect would turn to I Kings vii or (to taste) Vitruvius, a staff-officer to Joshua vi or to the Aeneas who wrote (I gather) on Tactics. But these are professional matters and of interest to professional men. There is an interest common to all humanity, and that is the interest in man not *qua* architect or staff-officer but *qua* man ; and the interest in man as man is a *moral* interest, an interest in the ends by which he lives or—it may be the same thing—by which he thinks he lives, or hopes to live, or most important, recognises with regret that he does not live. And that is why the Scriptures are rightly conceived not as a collection or a library but as one book. It has a unity of subject and a unity of tendency as well as a self-affirmed unity of source. It contains both promise and disappointment ; both aspiration and degradation. It has hope, illimitable hope ; and with it condemnation, although not utter condemnation. It has created our idea of man as he might and should be by condemning the fact of man as he is ; for the ' might be ' of the Bible is also a fact, living in our minds and creating, or evoking, conscience. There are many horror stories in the Bible,

but they are pointed out to us, and condemned, as such. Some of us find the story of Genesis xxxiv ghastly, but so does the official summing up (Genesis xlix) : 'Simeon and Levi are brethren ; weapons of violence are their swords. O my soul, come not thou into their council ; unto their assembly, my glory, be not thou united ; for in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they houghed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce ; and their wrath, for it was cruel.'

6

May I leave these considerations for a moment and draw your attention to an incident in the history of Biblical criticism which is at the same time a turning point in the history of literary criticism in general. I refer to the polemical chapters in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in which he indignantly rejects the principle of Biblical interpretation adopted by Maimonides.

If you open the *Guide for the Perplexed* of Maimonides, you will find that its first chapters comprise a kind of Biblical dictionary ; and as you proceed further you will observe that the argument of the book as a whole largely turns around the possibilities of interpreting Scripture which are suggested in this dictionary. Detail apart, the principle is simple. There is only one truth, and that truth is by its nature everywhere the same. The words of Scripture are to be understood therefore in such a way as not to conflict with it. And this is always possible, although sometimes difficult. For words have many meanings ;

and it is the interpreter's task to find the meaning which fits. As Maimonides remarks in a phrase which became famous : ' The gates of interpretation are never closed.'

You will observe that what Maimonides is doing—and before Maimonides we have in the Jewish tradition the systematic expositions of Philo of Alexandria as well as the whole Aggadic literature—what they are all doing is only an extension of what we have noted already, a treatment of words in terms of context ; only for Maimonides—and there's the rub—the context is taken to include the general truths of physics and metaphysics. Hence Scripture is judged by what we now consider to be *extraneous* considerations ; and since ' the gates of interpretation are never closed ', we are sometimes faced with unexpected situations. It is against this that Spinoza rebels so violently and lays down the contrary canon of *internal* interpretation : Scripture can be interpreted only by Scripture.

Spinoza indeed goes even further. He insists on an even more restrictive canon. He seems indeed to be saying about the Scriptures, in his quaint pietistic way, what the modern ' intensive ' critic says of literary criticism in general : ' Away with your pre-suppositions. Fix your eyes on the narrow context. Take this or that passage and see what it implies or involves ; and then, in the light of what you find in this way and in this restricted compass, proceed to a judgment of the whole. Do not start with a judgment of the whole and in its light and with its aid interpret, or interpret away, the detail.'

In this issue modern sympathy is on the side of Spinoza ; and if we feel any gratitude at all to Maimonides, it is rather for the stimulus he gave to the opposition than for his own ideas. We now recognise, having grown used to the thought, that the Bible was not meant as a text-book of physics or metaphysics. And so we accept Spinoza's thesis that literature is to be treated as literature, science as science ; and we frown on Maimonides' allegorisations. ' Fancy seeing propositions of physics in the narrative of Genesis,' we say disdainfully ; ' It is surely as foolish as Philo's reading of the lives of the patriarchs as a description of the spirit of man in the search for salvation. Abraham is Abraham and not the individual soul of man, and Jacob is a human, all too human, being.'

For myself I like the simplicities. I prefer the plain scriptural tale of Jacob, and Joseph and his brethen, to the involved verbosities of a recently deceased European novelist. I even like my 22nd chapter of Genesis plain, without the bubble and squeak of Benjamin Britten. But this is a personal peculiarity. We are dealing here with a point of principle. Interpretation is one of the ways in which the monuments of past inspiration are brought afresh to each age as it comes. In one form or another it is both indispensable and inevitable. It is possible that Maimonides went too far. Spinoza did not go far enough. It is indeed wrong to import physics into the Bible. The Bible's concern is not with physics. But it is not wrong to import morals into the Bible, because we are not *importing* them into it at all.

They are already there. We are only bringing back what we have taken out. We are introducing nothing external or alien or strange, because it is just this which is the differentia, the distinguishing and characteristic mark, of Scripture. It is, as it were, *specialité de la maison !*

7

It is for this reason that we are justified in treating Scripture as one whole, that is, not book by book or section by section, or sentence by sentence, or, least of all, word by word. As I have said already, it is false to imagine that the interpretation of *any*thing can remain within the ambit of words. There *are* no words in the sense of atomic facts, bricks solitary and self-explanatory out of which the world of meaning arises. In the beginning was the meaning, and the meaning took on the temporary vestment of words, to manipulate and adapt the words to itself rather than itself to the words ; and if this is true of individual words and localised meanings, how much more so is it true of the great meanings of literature where words only limn out thoughts struggling for expression, thoughts which only in the widest contexts and the widest frames of reference become, howbeit fragmentarily, comprehensible. The Rabbis, who had a shrewd eye for the things that matter, were wont to say that the voice of God, which according to the Psalmist is ' powerful ' (Hebrew, ' in strength '), is heard by each in accordance with the ' strength ' of his understanding ; yet it is one voice. They tell us that the Torah was given in seventy languages, or

again, that it was given not to angels but to men and in the language of men ; yet it is one Torah. They point out that the vision of Isaiah and the vision of Ezekiel were of one and the same King ; but Isaiah, they say, being himself of the seed of kings and used to regal splendour, said simply that he saw the King on his throne, whereas Ezekiel, a country bumpkin, wrote down everything he could, reporting the sights for the folks at home. Throughout we have the suggestion that there is one light, however much it is broken up by the prisms of our understanding. Can we plain readers of Scripture see anything of that light ? I think we can ; and that because—and here is my central point—Scripture itself indicates the way.

I offer two instances.

(1) The ' first Word ' from Sinai reads : ' I am the Lord thy God which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.'

This is sometimes understood as a metaphysical affirmation of the existence of God. But *prima facie* it is not metaphysics but history. Further consideration suggests that, just as it is not metaphysics, so it is not history either. It is not a mere record of fact. It is an exhortation. To use a comprehensive word, it is morals ; and I submit to you that this is the *Scripture's own* interpretation of it, an interpretation which emerges clearly from its own words elsewhere.

I quote first from the Law of Holiness in Leviticus : ' Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure. Just balances, just weights, a just ephah and a just hin, shall ye have :

I am the Lord your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt.' Evidently, *because* 'I am the Lord your God which brought you out of the land of Egypt', *therefore* you shall have just balances. 'An accidental collocation!', you may say. But is it? Let us hear the Deuteronomist: 'Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of the stranger, nor of the fatherless; nor take the widow's raiment to pledge: but thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee hence; *therefore* (a whole and emphatic phrase in the Hebrew) I command thee to do this thing.' Or we may hear the Exodist: 'And a stranger shalt thou not wrong, neither shalt thou oppress him; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.' In this the Exodist is in complete accord with the Leviticist: 'And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not do him wrong. The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.' One could go on quoting passages of the same type and to the same effect; there are at least a dozen more of them ready to hand. The 'first Word' has thus a specific interpretation, a moral interpretation, which is given by and in Scripture itself.

A critic may rejoin that all these various passages are to be attributed to various authors and various epochs of time. But that of course strengthens my point. Not one author alone but a multitude of authors, going through all the letters of the alphabet, maybe, and (in an extended polychrome edition) all

the colours and sub-colours of the rainbow—all of them seem to have understood, and to have used, the first Word in the same determinate and striking way ; thereby offering a pointer, I venture to suggest, to us who come after, of the *Scriptural interpretation of Scripture.*

(2) My second example is the Scriptural treatment of King David.

As is well known, the Book of Kings records that the building of the Temple was planned by David but carried out only by his son Solomon ; and the Book of Chronicles, which would seem to be a kind of Revised Version of the Book of Kings, gives the reason why : David was a man of blood. That David *was* a man of blood appears from the plain narrative of the early record : ' And he smote Moab, and measured them with the line, making them to lie down on the ground ; and he measured two lines to put to death and one full line to keep alive.' What does not appear in the early record is the *condemnation* of such blood spilling. Possibly it was not approved of ; but nobody says so.

The later record *says* so. It does not attempt to blink the issue. It does not even skirt round the facts as (according to the narrative of Kings) his son Solomon did in his message to the king of Tyre. In that message the reason that prevented David from building is given as that of busy-ness : he was occupied with other things ; and the fact that these other things were war and blood-letting is mentioned only by the way. David in fact (according to the Book of Kings) just had no time to spare ! Contrast this with David's statement to Solomon in Chronicles :

'As for me, it was in my heart to build an house unto the name of the Lord my God. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build an house unto my name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in my sight.' Here we have a moral condemnation, one put indeed into the mouth of the sinner himself; a moral condemnation, we may remind ourselves, of a man who, by the time of Chronicles, represented to the people the very type and ideal of kingship and indeed of humanity. The later narrative in fact is bold enough, honest enough, moral enough, to express disapproval of that sort of national hero.

In this connection, I remind you of the superscription to Psalm 51: 'A Psalm of David: when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.' The commentators discuss learnedly whether the Psalm could have been written by David, and if not, by whom and when. But surely the essential fact which is worthy of all attention is the fact that it was ascribed to David at all. It is as if the tradition was concerned to proclaim the necessity of a fresh type, a new ideal, altogether. 'Men of blood and deceit', as other Psalms ascribed to the same David (v; lv) say, 'are abhorred by God,' 'they shall not live out half their days.' 'But I,' this last verse concludes—and surely the author of the superscription 'Maschil of David' must have borne in mind that David of the record was just such a one who dealt in deceit and the spilling of blood—'But I will trust in thee.'

In this case I may be held to be over-stressing a mere two words in a casual title which may be no more than a musical instruction. Possibly. But I cannot think so in the case of Psalm 51. The superscription is so definite, so precise, and so unexpected, that it is difficult to avoid the impression that it was deliberate. It seems to say: '*This* is the David we would have you remember, and *this* is the memorial of his name.' We have here in fact a corrective interpretation of the whole figure of God's chosen king, much as in Amos and Ezekiel we have a corrective interpretation of the whole history of God's chosen people. Scripture itself goes out of its way—or perhaps, goes *into* its own unique and extraordinary way—to point out how, for our instruction and action, it wants the facts interpreted and understood. It seems to say: 'David measured out the Moabites? Forget it. David slew his ten thousands? Forget it. The devious dealings at Nob and Ziklag? Forget them. The last charge to his son and successor? Forget it. Men of blood and deceit shall not halve their days! No, the *real* David—not the *historically* real: who cares for historical history ('and A lived X years and begat B; and A lived after he begat B, Y years, and begat sons and daughters; and B lived Z years and begat C . . .')?—No, the real King David, that is, the morally real King David, or rather, since the king melts into the man, the morally real person whom we should hold before our eyes for re-living in our own brief span—the 'man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel'—and in this description

too we have surely a ' new song ' ; a transvaluation, if not a deliberate repudiation, of the man of deceit and blood—the real David has other things to say : ' But I will trust in thee.' ' Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.' ' He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.' And then the prayer : ' Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God.'

' I will fear no evil ' ; ' deliver me from blood-guiltiness ' : the Davidic occasions are recognisably here. But they have been transformed. The chronicle has been given significance. The record has become a mere substrate on which moral form has been impressed. The ' man of blood and deceit ' has been transmuted into the ' man after God's own heart.' He fears no evil, not because of the help of his ' mighty men ' or of his own ' fingers taught to fight ', but because ' Thou art with me.' It is God now who guides him, and his ' paths ' are not of stratagem and deceit and diplomacy, but ' of righteousness ' ; and the guidance is given, and received, not for temporal power or for dynasty-breeding, but for ' His name's sake.' I shall not trouble you with parallels on these themes, which would comprise readings from the whole compass of Law and Prophets and Writings. Their importance is that they constitute a revolutionary appraisal of human ambition. They offer a new and totally different scale of values for the life of man.

8

We can now see what interpretation ultimately is and wherein its significance lies. It is—ultimately—

the determining of an ideal of life, the establishing of preference among possible ends. It is the ordering of types of action in an ascending and descending scale of better and worse, an ordering which shapes the kind of life we choose to live.

In the case just before us, the life of blood and deceit and the life of pure hands and a clean heart, Scripture leaves no doubt which is the right preference ; and it seems to be urging us, not only by precept but by offering individual examples, to abhor the one and to choose the other. In other cases its verdict is not explicit, and we have to judge for ourselves in the light of the moral sense awakened in us by those cases in which Scripture leaves no doubt. For there is choice, and we are bidden in general to choose life. Interpretation thus becomes the gateway to life, and in this wide sense is synonymous with education. We have travelled a long way from the niceties of philology, but our path has been implicit from the outset. For (to repeat) *meaning comes first* ; and it is the choice of meaning which guides our understanding of the word.

9

I notice that it is this year just a quarter of a century since the scholar in whose memory this Lectureship was instituted was awarded by the British Academy, in recognition of his many contributions to Biblical learning, its Medal for Biblical Studies, a medal itself instituted to commemorate one of the most exact and stimulating scholars of our age, the late F. C. Burkitt. I tremble to ask whether what I have

been saying would have met with the approval of these great Biblical exegetes. Yet, as Maimonides said, 'the gates of interpretation are never closed'; and I brazenly take up my text and quote (from a letter of Mr. Montefiore to Miss Lucy Cohen of January, 1893):

> When you say that you read the Bible 'looking for the parts whose sentiment or poetry you admire', this is, after all, in the last resort the most profitable way for the lay individual [There speaks the scholar, putting us in our place; but at least he *does* give us *some* place] the most profitable way for the lay individual to read it. Even if you do put some of yourself and the 19th century into it, where is the harm? If we can still (and I think we can still) use the Bible as a spiritual lever, it is a very good use to which to put it.

'A spiritual lever'—that, I think, is just right. It may not be the *best* use (Mr. Montefiore seems to be saying) to put the Bible to. The 'best' use would presumably be—but I refrain from poaching on the preserve of scholars. But even if it is not the best use, we have now authority to say that it is a 'very good one'; and in accepting the concession with gratitude, I should only ask permission to add the small gloss that the 'spiritual lever' for which we now have authority to use the Bible is the lever which, as I have tried to show, is provided by the Bible itself.

Let me read to you a well-known passage of the Talmud (*Meg.* 31a), now a part of the Sabbath Evening Service, which illustrates this admirably:

> Rabbi Johanan said, In every passage where thou findest mentioned the greatness of God, there thou findest also his humility. This is written in the Law, repeated in the Prophets, and a third time stated in the Writings.
>
> It is written in the Law, For the Lord your God, he is God of

gods, and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and revered God, who regardeth not persons, nor taketh a bribe. And it is written afterwards, He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.

It is repeated in the Prophets, as it is written, For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, and whose name is holy, I dwell in the high and holy place; with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

It is a third time stated in the Writings, Sing unto God, sing praises unto his name: extol ye him that rideth upon the heavens by his name Jah, and rejoice before him. And it is written afterwards, A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.

I'm afraid Rabbi Johanan must have been a 'lay individual'; and I can imagine the scholars wagging their fingers at him and saying: 'Now, Rabbi Johanan, in *every* passage? In *every* passage where the greatness of God is mentioned, do you find also his humility? Where is your concordance, Rabbi Johanan?' But I can see Rabbi Johanan nodding his head and saying: 'Yes, in every passage—that is, every passage I intend to see. The greatness of God is indeed linked in Holy Writ with his humility, that is, with his fathering the fatherless and caring for the foreigner; much as the greatness of man is seen by it not in breaking heads and hearts but in having a broken and compassionate heart oneself. It is therein that the Writ *manifests itself* as Holy.'

And I fancy that Rabbi Johanan might have gone yet further. I fancy he might have said that what he had to say required no citations from him

(' written in the Law, repeated in the Prophets, and a third time stated in the Writings ') since it is attested by the *self*-citation of Scripture itself. ' Let the *power* of the Lord be *great according as thou (God) hast spoken* ', we read elsewhere, ' *according as thou hast spoken, saying* : The Lord is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression.' Thus the power of God, the strength of God, the greatness of God, lies not in his physical but in his moral force. If the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose, here we have Scripture, for its own ' holy witness ', citing itself.

It is all so clear ; and yet so hard to see. You will remark that Rabbi Johanan relies on no fancy philology or extravagant allegory. The texts speak for themselves. And they have something to say both to the scholar and to the layman, something which it would be difficult to say more simply. They express the primary Jewish intuition that just as the man dear to God's heart cannot be a man of blood and deceit, so the presence of God himself and our knowledge of him means compassion and fellow feeling with the outcast. Greatness both for God and for man is in fact (*pace* Jonathan Wilde) just goodness in action. It is all so simple ; and yet so hard to see.

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But if it be indeed simple, what need, it may be asked, for Interpretation ? My answer is an old one ; and with it I conclude. *Although* it is all so simple, so clear, it is yet hard to see. Interpretation is the guiding of the eyes which enables us to see what was waiting to be seen all the time.