

The Commentaries of Principal James Morison, D.D.: an Appreciation.

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THE celebration last year of the centenary of Dr. James Morison's birth served not only to recall many interesting and stirring events in the ecclesiastical history of Scotland, but to reawaken interest in a series of Commentaries which formed one of the most important contributions of British scholarship to the interpretation of the New Testament in the nineteenth century, and which may be studied with advantage even in the changed circumstances of our own day.

The principal of these Commentaries are: *An Exposition of the Ninth Chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 1849; new edition, rewritten, with addition of tenth chapter, 1888; *A Critical Exposition of the Third Chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 1866; *A Practical Commentary on . . . S. Matthew*, 1870; *A Practical Commentary on . . . S. Mark*, 1873; *S. Paul's Teaching on Sanctification: a Practical Exposition of Romans vi.*, 1886.

Apart from the massive learning they display, the outstanding feature of these Commentaries lies in the close study of the exact words of Scripture which they exhibit throughout. In them the well-known dictum of Origen that 'there is not one jot or one tittle written in Scripture which does not work its own work for those who know how to use the force of the words that have been written' is continually finding fresh illustration. And we are not surprised, therefore, to find Dr. Morison placing in the forefront of one of his principal works the following quotation from Abraham Tucker's *The Light of Nature Pursued*: 'Come, then, thou solemn power, Philology, pioneer of the abstruser sciences, to prepare the way for their passage, . . . lend me thy needle-pointed pencil, that I may trace out the hair-breadth differences of language.'

It is, indeed, this philological sense and the desire for the minutest accuracy that lead to the attention bestowed upon various readings, and the renderings not only of the ancient versions, but of our early English translators. Wycliffe, Purvey,

and others, are all laid under contribution, often with the happiest results, in the anxiety to bring out the full force of the original.

And to the same cause we may probably trace the constant references to the conflicting views of other commentators. It is a mode of commenting which, in less skilful hands, easily becomes wearisome and confusing. We are content as a rule to know the result at which a writer has arrived after full study of all the evidence within his reach. But this did not satisfy Dr. Morison, and with characteristic modesty he has told us why. 'He assumed that his readers would really feel no particular interest in finding out *his* particular standpoint.' And, as for himself, he felt 'a genuine interest in going round among the various standpoints that have been occupied by other earnest thinkers.' It was not that he was unable to make up his own mind. But so eager was he to guard his readers from 'crotchets, partialities, and ideal pets,' that he delighted in presenting his subject from a multiplicity of standpoints.¹ And therefore it was that to the most polemical of all his works, the first edition of his *Exposition of the Ninth Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans*, he prefixed the words of Melancthon: '*Pugnabo pro Sacris, et solus, et simul cum aliis.*'

It might perhaps be thought that comment so philological and bibliographical as Dr. Morison's would be very unreadable, but this is far from being the case. Many of his books took shape first in the form of lectures delivered to large popular audiences, or underwent the still harder ordeal of the criticisms of the students of the Theological Academy, before they reached a wider public. And the result is a freshness and even liveliness, which we do not usually associate with commentaries, and a richness of illustration and citation, drawn often from very unexpected sources. The most homely figures are appealed to, if only

¹ *Critical Exposition of the Third Chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. ix.

they throw light on the points that are being discussed, or lead further on into the truth as it is in Christ.

For it is the *religious* meaning and drift of the books he is expounding that is always Dr. Morison's principal aim. For him the Bible, far from being a collection of curious and interesting texts on which scholarship might exercise its ingenuity, is the Book of God—God's voice of comfort to the broken and bruised heart, God's 'own imperative' to the sinful and rebellious will. Hence in the Dedication prefixed to the first edition of the Commentary on Rom. ix., his call to 'the Reverend the Professors of Theology in the Established and Unestablished Churches in Scotland' to devote themselves to 'the interpretation, elucidation, and vindication' of the Divine doctrines contained in this and similar chapters. 'Up, O up,' he earnestly pleads, 'to this employment!'

It was a call he had a right to make, for nobly had he led the way in his own preaching and teaching in showing that Scripture exposition is Scripture explication—the unfolding of the thoughts enfolded in the Sacred Text.

As we look back, then, upon Dr. Morison's Biblical work as a whole, we find it marked by three features.

(1) The first is *thoroughness*. He spared no pains to equip himself thoroughly for his task. And there are few more striking pictures in the history of theological study than that of the eager scholar rising about half-past three in the morning, and betaking himself through the quiet streets of Kilmarnock to the Old Manse where he kept his books, there to spend four or five hours in uninterrupted study before the distractions of the day began.

Nor did he only amass knowledge, he knew how to use it. Never for a moment does he give the impression of being crushed under the load of his varied learning. He turns all to account as a master, and with rare skill and judgment, and above all with a saving common-sense which is very refreshing, sets himself to disentangle the truth out of the cloud of sophistries with which it is so often accompanied.

(2) It was this very *independence of thought*

which led to his losing his place in the communion in which he had been brought up. 'I cannot make any compromise with regard to what I believe to be God's eternal truth,' he said at the Synod at which he practically bade farewell to the Secession Church. And though for a time he had to stand 'alone—terribly alone,' he was spared to see the reward of his struggle in a wider apprehension of God's purposes of saving grace, and to win the veneration and affection of all who knew him by the Christlike beauty of his own character and life.

(3) For of the intense *spirituality* of Dr. Morison's nature there cannot be a moment's doubt. If some of his earlier books were called forth in the heat of controversy, in defence of the 'new views' which were to cost him so dear, he never allows himself to be betrayed into bitterness or recrimination towards his opponents. And it is significant of his whole attitude that when he came to publish a second edition of his Exposition of Rom. ix., he completely rewrote and remodelled it, laying down, as he himself puts it, the sword, and taking up the sickle, 'substituting scientific and scientifically practical exegesis in place of controversial discussion' (p. viii).

It was the positive side of truth with which he was always mainly concerned, the effort to find out the mind of the Spirit as it reveals itself in the words of Scripture, and above all to hold up steadily Him in whom all Scripture centres. 'Doctrine,' so he declares, in a sermon included in the memorial volume entitled *Sheaves of Ministry* (p. 375 f.), 'in its own place is most excellent. It is indispensable. In particular the doctrine of the inspired writers is of inestimable value. . . . Doctrine is a telescope by which you can see the Saviour afar through intervening centuries and ages of ages. Doctrine is a microscope, which, when turned to the world within the heart of the Saviour, reveals the presence in it of all peoples and all persons. . . . But still it is no mere doctrine that is, or can be, our Saviour. . . . It is not so much Christianity as it is Christ that we need. It is'—and here he strikes the keynote of all his teaching—'*Christ for every man!*'