

# **HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE And WHY WE BELIEVE IT IS GOD'S WORD**

by

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## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **PROGRESSIVENESS OF THE BIBLE**

IT IS often thought that belief in the unity of Scripture carries with it the inevitable conclusion that everything in it is on the same level of spiritual value, that the teaching and authority (say) of Ecclesiastes are not essentially lower than those of (say) Ephesians. But this idea of uniform spiritual value is assuredly not a logical consequence of a belief in the unity of the Bible.

On the contrary, just as in the human body, some members are more important than others, and yet each is necessary in its place and for its purpose, so in the Bible, some parts are of less, and others are of greater spiritual importance and value.

The two truths of the Unity and Progressiveness of Scripture must, therefore, be held together, and the latter must be allowed to explain and vindicate the former.

1. The Principle - The Bible consists of two parts, Old Testament and New Testament, and in these it is possible to see the general progress of truth. The former indicates Law, and the latter Grace. The one deals for the most part with rules suited to moral childhood, the other, with principles applicable to moral maturity.

But within these two main divisions there are still further and fuller instances of progress.

GOD has revealed his will to man in many parts and in many ways (Hebrews 1:1), and it is usual to speak of these as dispensations, meaning particular methods of the divine attitude and action.

While in general we speak of the Jewish and Christian dispensations, we can and must go into further detail, and notice both in the Old Testament and in the New, the different yet connected stages of GOD's revelation to man.

Some students suggest seven of these dispensations:

- The Edenic;
- The Antediluvian;
- The Patriarchal;
- The Mosaic;
- The Christian;
- The Millennial
- The Eternal.

Even these are capable of fuller division, for the Mosaic dispensation can be distinguished as:

- The Theocracy (the time from Egypt to Samuel);
- The Monarchy (from Saul to the Captivity);
- The Return (from the restoration to Malachi).

The Christian dispensation can be similarly divided into the times before and after Pentecost.

Now in these various divisions it is often possible to distinguish GOD's manifestation of himself and of his truth at different stages. There was a gradually increasing expression of the divine character and will at successive periods, just as the people were considered ready to receive it. This means that while the revelation at every stage or dispensation was perfect for its own time, it was not necessarily suited for a following stage.

Now, however we may divide the periods, it is clear that a distinction of this kind has to be drawn.

Thus, when CHRIST said, "**I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now**" (John 16:12), He was indicating, what I am now emphasizing, that truth was progressive and not all delivered at once. For, as the Lord went on to say, "**howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.**"

Other proofs of the same gradual unfolding of the complete revelation of GOD for man, can be seen in these two instances.

In the Sermon on the Mount, CHRIST first declared the Old Testament truth, and then supplemented and deepened it by adding, "**but I say unto you**" (Matthew 5:17-48). And it is clear from Mark 16:17-20, when five miraculous signs are said to "**follow them that believe,**" that the reference cannot be to the present period of the Church (for these signs do not "**follow them that believe**"), but to that transitional period comprised in the thirty years. of the Book of the Acts, during which time the Gospel was being offered to the Jews, and when we have the record of four of the five "**signs**" plainly stated as having "**followed them that believe.**"

But in all this progressiveness of revelation, it is necessary and important to remember that it did not involve any repudiation of what had gone before. Like the repealing of a law which is in force up to the time of the repeal, the teaching for each stage was valid and obligatory until supplemented and thereby supplanted by fresh and fuller instruction.

But repeal of a law never means repudiation, only a "**disannulling**" because of a completer provision (Hebrews 7:18).

*A striking proof of this has been shown in the fact that there are traces in Scripture of later portions carrying an endorsement of previous stages.*

- Joshua confirms the law of Moses (Joshua 1:8).
- The first Psalm emphasizes the value of the law (v. 2).
- Acts refers back to the third Gospel.
- The Old Testament is frequently endorsed in the New.

Throughout the Old Testament there are, as we have already seen, traces of the gradual growth by accretion of the various books, until the Canon was complete.

All this attestation of one part of Scripture by another is a proof at once of its unity and its progressiveness. Then, at length we have the meridian of truth in the New Testament revelation.

2. The Principle Illustrated - Out of many examples of this progressiveness of revelation, two will be adduced.

*The first is the doctrine of GOD.*

In the Old Testament emphasis is rightly placed on the unity of the Godhead as against the "**gods many**" of heathenism. But in the New Testament there is the additional revelation of the Trinity, which is not only not contradictory of the Unity, but is based on it and developed out of it.

Everyone knows that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity never had the slightest connection with polytheism, but grew out of Jewish monotheism. It is significant that with all the Jewish objections to Christianity in Paul's time, no trace can be found of any opposition to his doctrine of a distinction between the Deity of the Father and the Deity of the Son, which was the germ of the fully-developed doctrine of the Trinity.

The explanation of this was that the Jewish believers, having been led by experience into an acceptance of CHRIST as a divine Redeemer (and thereby to a distinction in the Deity) found in their Old Testament anticipatory hints of the Trinity.

They realized that the unity of the Godhead was compound not simple, as the Hebrew words for "*one*" clearly indicate (Deuteronomy 6:4; Exodus 26:6-11; Ezekiel 37:16-19).

*Another illustration of the progressiveness of revelation is seen in the difference between the morality of the Old and New Testaments.*

This doctrine of the progress of revelation helps us to distinguish between GOD's temporary and permissive will and his absolute and inflexible standard.

The former is seen in the Old Testament and the latter in the New Testament, and as we study the first-named we can see in it clear indications of its temporary character. Thus, while permitting slavery, restrictions were imposed, and cruelty was prohibited (Exodus 21:16-27).

Many of the Old Testament difficulties can be solved, or at least relieved, by the consideration of this purely temporary and merely permissive character of the morality. CHRIST referred to this when he distinguished between the primal divine command about marriage, and the Mosaic toleration of divorce (Matthew 19:8).

This principle of progress in GOD's revelation is of great practical service in meeting certain current objections to the Old Testament. There are those who reject it because of its alleged cruelties, such as the slaughter of the Canaanites, or because of certain manifestations in individual life and practise not consonant with New Testament principles.

Now, while we are not to be guided today by many of the examples of the Old Testament, it is equally true that in so far as what they said and did was due to a revelation of GOD, that revelation was perfect for that time, whatever additional truth came afterward for newer needs.

We say in so far as what they said and did was of GOD, because not even in the Old Testament are we to understand that GOD necessarily approved of all that his servants said and did, even when they thought they were doing him service. But if this were the place to do it, the instance of the Canaanites, already referred to, could be justified, without much difficulty, in the light of the divine judgment on the awful depths of sin to which they had descended (Genesis 15:16).

There is another point that is too apt to be overlooked, namely, that side by side with the gradual development of GOD's revelation there was an equally gradual deterioration of Israel, so that they in their degeneration failed to realize and respond to the ever-enlarging disclosure of GOD.

And so it has been well pointed out that "there are no set-backs in the revelation made to Israel, but there are many set-backs in the religious history of Israel."

It is the failure to recognize this distinction between the divine and the human that has caused people to regard Old Testament morality as low and unworthy of GOD, when all the time the explanation has been in the failure of the people to accept the growing truth of GOD.

This is how the distinction has been put:

"In regard to the Old Testament I suggest two words of guiding principle: '**The Law of the Lord is perfect**' (that is, its quality). '**The Law made nothing perfect**' (that is, its achievement - in its office as a preparatory discipline to 'school' souls for CHRIST). These two statements can be written across the sacred Record. A perfect revelation - imperfect faith. Perfect ethical requirement - imperfect obedience."

And so, GOD revealed himself, not only at "**sundry times**" but also in "**divers manners**, to the fathers.

He taught men as they were able to bear it.

He led them step by step from the dawn of revelation up to the fulness and splendor of his manifestation "**in these last days in his Son**" (Hebrews 1:2).

A knowledge of this principle of progress in GOD's revelation of himself will enable us to avoid a twofold error:

- It will prevent us, on the one hand, from undervaluing the Old Testament by reason of our fuller light from the New Testament;
- It will prevent us, on the other hand, from using the Old Testament in any of its stages without guidance from the complete revelation in CHRIST.

We shall thereby be enabled to obtain the correct spiritual perspective from which to study the Old Testament, and to derive from it the wealth of spiritual instruction it was intended to convey to all ages (Romans 15:4).

We have thus to distinguish carefully between what may be called temporary teaching and permanent truth in the Old Testament, that is, between those elements of GOD's revelation intended solely for the immediate need, and those which are of eternal validity.

*To put it in yet another way, we have to remember the difference between what is written to us and for us.*

All Scripture was written for our learning, but not all was written to us directly.

Much of it was not addressed to Christians but to Jews, and was primarily and often exclusive for them, and is only for us today by way of application. This distinction will solve many a difficulty and the progress of doctrine is one of the master keys of the Bible.

Note - Bernard's "*Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*," will provide most helpful material for further study.

## QUESTIONS

1. Does the fact of the unity of Scripture indicate that all parts of it are of equal value?
2. What two great truths must be held together when studying the Bible?
3. What are the main divisions of the Bible? Are there any subdivisions in these main divisions? Suggest one.
4. Give one other proof of the gradual unfolding of the complete revelation. Does the idea of progressiveness of revelation involve the repudiation of what has gone before? Prove your answer.
5. How is GOD revealed in the Old Testament? Why? How is he revealed in the New Testament?
6. How is the progressiveness of revelation seen in the difference in the ethical teaching of the Old and New Testaments?
7. How may many Old Testament difficulties be solved? What practical value has this principle!
8. By what principle are the words and deeds of Old Testament characters to be judged?
9. What principle was working in Israel while GOD's revelation was unfolding?
10. What two words describe the Old and New Testaments? What error will a knowledge of this principle of progressiveness of revelation help us to avoid? Distinguish between "temporary" and "permanent truth" as used in relation to the Old Testament.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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