

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

Notes of Recent Exposition.

WHERE do we stand to-day in regard to the authenticity of the Gospel narratives? Obviously that is a vital question, as our faith has a historical basis. It is not a matter of 'spiritual values,' or of ideas, that are independent of the solid earth of history. We must know where we are in the region of historical assurance. This is the point raised and discussed in *The Gospels in the Making*, by the Rev. Alan RICHARDSON, Vicar of Cambo (S.C.M.; 5s. net). It is a very able book, with a fairly decided modernist tendency. But the author knows his subject, and moves about in it with complete mastery. And if we sometimes feel that he yields too readily to suggestions from the left, we may have perfect confidence in both his honesty and his competence.

The first thing to note is that for the past hundred years criticism of the Gospels has been *literary* criticism. It has dealt with the written sources. And we may affirm that it has reached conclusions which are accepted almost universally. These are that the earliest written sources known to us are Q, which may be dated about A.D. 50, and Mark, which may be put at A.D. 65. Both 'Matthew' and Luke used these two sources. They also used other material, the nature and origin of which we may guess at, with more or less probability, but without any certainty.

This seems a fairly solid ground of confidence. But there is something else to be taken into account.

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If we fix the approximate date of the Crucifixion at A.D. 30, it is plain that nearly a generation elapsed between the date of the Crucifixion and our earliest written narratives. What happened in these twenty or thirty years? That is the question to which criticism has recently been addressing itself. We may easily account for the absence of written records during these years. For one thing, the belief of the early Christians that the Return of the Lord was imminent would discourage the collection of narratives. And for another thing, the members of the Early Church were poor, many of them probably illiterate, and writing and writing material were costly, so costly that books were often owned not by an individual but by a community.

Now this gap between the Crucifixion and Q and Mark was the creative period in the formation of Christian tradition—the stories about Jesus circulated in oral form. And though the memory of an unliterary people and age is tenacious, and though teaching and learning were by memorizing (both these things are true), yet it is hardly likely that the tradition was not modified, enlarged, to some extent shaped, in its transmission. Even in the literary period a good deal of liberty was used by those who wrote down the gospel story. We can see this from the way Matthew and Luke handle Mark. They select, edit, rearrange, omit or expand parts of their sources.

The problem, then, is how the tradition received

the form it has in the Gospels. This is the problem which is examined in what is now known as 'Form Criticism.' It concentrates on the pre-literary age and on the 'form' which the oral tradition assumed, and why it assumed this form. It ought to be evident that in this region we are treading upon very uncertain ground. For we have no direct evidence. All our information is from literary sources. And any conclusions can only be by inference, which may or may not be probable. Form critics have to be on their guard against undue and unfounded dogmatism.

There are certain conclusions, however, which may be accepted without much doubt. It is highly probable that the tradition received its form at first from preachers and teachers. And they must have had certain needs in view. One was the need of illustration to make the message clear. Stories and selections from the teaching of Jesus would be an essential part of the equipment of both missionaries and catechists. The second need was for guidance about practical everyday problems of conduct. Christ's sayings about divorce and the tribute money would be of great practical help. The third need was of polemic, of arguments that could be used against Greek and Jewish controversialists. Christ's sayings about the Sabbath and about the 'traditions of the elders' would be helpful. It is to such needs the gospel tradition owed its selection, preservation, or formulation.

One important conclusion has been drawn from this as to the purpose of the Gospels. They were not written as biographical sketches which aimed at presenting a 'life' of Jesus. The Evangelists were not primarily biographers or historians. They were missionary propagandists. They aimed at supplying the preachers and teachers of the Church with a clearly formulated statement of the Christian message. They are interested in the historical

characteristics. It is almost impossible to write a 'life' of Jesus at all, because of the nature, the detached character, of the traditions. These are simply illustrative stories.

We can see from the speeches in Acts the form that the first preaching assumed. And from this, and from the nature of the Gospels themselves, we can see how these were written. The gospel story was formulated backwards. The main theme during these years before the existence of Q and Mark was the Resurrection. But this could not be preached without raising the question of the death of Jesus. And, because of the objections of the Jews, this assumed a very important place. We can see that from the space it occupies in the written Gospels. But inevitably the question would follow: Who was this Jesus whom God raised from the dead? And the answer to that question was found in the disconnected stories which we find in our Gospels of the acts and words of the Lord.

On the all-important matter of the authenticity of the gospel tradition the new criticism has a positive contribution to make. Where we can get back, as we often can, to the original oral tradition, we come upon something that is based on the living memory of the words and deeds of Jesus, as preserved by those who had known the Lord 'according to the flesh.' There was thus preserved a reliable outline of the story of His ministry, death, and resurrection, as well as a *corpus* of teaching as it came from the lips of Jesus Himself. Criticism is not without instruments by which it may, partially at least, disentangle the beliefs of a later age from the traditions of the earliest community of believers. And thus it can truly help us to recover genuine knowledge concerning the life and teaching of Jesus.

Church of the great imperial city of Rome (Mark), or in a cosmopolitan Greek-Syrian metropolis like Antioch (Q), or in a Palestinian seaport like Cæsarea (Luke), or in the Judæan churches of Palestine (Matthew), it is the same picture of Jesus that is presented. That is a very imposing evidence of the reliability of the picture of Jesus in our sources. And, though the new 'Form Criticism' does suggest a doubt of the trustworthiness of certain traditions at least in their present 'form,' it will be found on the whole and in the end to have made a positive contribution to our assurance.

Dr. Reinhold NIEBUHR made a reputation for himself on this side of the Atlantic by his recent work, 'An Interpretation of Christian Ethics.' He will confirm and enhance that reputation by his latest work—*Beyond Tragedy* (Nisbet ; 8s. 6d. net)—which, if it does not surpass the former in vigour of thought, surpasses it in attractiveness of style and presentation.

How shall we describe this new work? Perhaps the author's own description, though not readily understandable, is the best. The main subject, let us preface, is the Christian interpretation of history; and the particular aim is to lead the reader from the historical plane of time and sense to a hope and assurance which is 'beyond tragedy.' Here, indeed, in this last is the underlying unity of the (generally) disconnected chapters.

But let us listen to the author himself: 'The chapters of this book are sermonic essays elaborating one theme in various aspects. The theme is Christianity's dialectical conception of the relation of time and eternity, of God and the world, of nature and grace. It is the thesis of these pages that the Biblical view of life is dialectical because it affirms the meaning of history and of man's natural existence on the one hand and, on the other, insists that the centre, source, and fulfilment of history lie beyond history.'

The author's penetrative and attractive style is well illustrated in the first of these 'sermonic

essays.' The text is 2 Co 6⁴⁻¹⁰, and the reader is asked to concentrate his attention on the phrase in v.⁸, 'as deceivers, and yet true'—a particularly intriguing paradox, which every apologist of the Christian faith might well make his own.

Why must the apologist of the Christian faith be a 'deceiver'? Because of the Christian view of God and the world. According to this view, the relation of time and eternity is dialectical. The eternal is revealed and expressed in the temporal but is not exhausted in it. The relationship between the eternal and the temporal cannot therefore be expressed in simple rational or logical terms, as in pantheism. It is a dialectical relationship, and can be expressed only in symbolic terms.

NIEBUHR then proceeds to analyse the deceptive symbols which the Christian faith uses to express the dimension of eternity and time. Let us consider his analysis in reference to the doctrines of Creation, the Fall, and the Incarnation.

First, when we say that God created the world, we are deceivers yet true. Creation is a mystical idea which cannot be fully rationalized. For it relates the grounds of existence to existence, the eternal to the temporal. Since it is not a rational idea, it is a temptation to deceptions. Biblical liberalism succumbs to the temptation of insisting that belief in Creation involves belief in an actual creative activity of six days. Thus it corrupts ultimate religious insights into a bad science.

Again, when we say that man fell into evil, we are deceivers yet true. Here also we have a mythical idea which cannot be fully rationalized. For the Fall is not historical but trans-historical. The consciousness of sin and the consciousness of God are inextricably involved with each other. Since the Fall is not a rational idea, it is also a temptation to deceptions. Biblical liberalism succumbs to the temptation of insisting that belief in the Fall involves belief in the primitive myth of the garden, the apple, and the serpent.

Even a non-literalist Christian theology, which

does not corrupt religious insights into a bad science, has been tempted to speak of a perfection before the Fall, as if that too were historical. The perfection before the Fall is an ideal possibility which men can comprehend but not realize. 'Even the sophisticated dialectical theology of Barth and his school speaks of the perfection before the Fall as historical, and consequently elaborates a doctrine of human sinfulness which approaches, and sometimes surpasses, the extremism of the historic doctrine of total depravity.'

Yet again, when we say that God became man to redeem the world from sin, we are deceivers yet true. The idea of eternity entering time is intellectually absurd. This absurdity is proved to the hilt by all the theological dogmas which seek to make it a rational idea. Reason cannot assert that the Creator in coming into Creation did not lose His unconditioned character. The truth that the Word was made flesh outrages all the canons by which truth is usually judged.

Yet it is the truth. The Creator reveals Himself not only in a general revelation, that is, in the sense that His creation is His revelation ; but also in a special revelation. Christ is both the perfect man who restored the perfection of what man was and ought to be, and the Son of God who transcends all possibilities of human life. He is thus a true revelation of the total situation in which human life stands.

'There is every possibility of illusion and deception in this statement of the Christian faith. Men may be deceived by the primitive myth of the Virgin Birth and seek to comprehend as a pure historical fact what is significant precisely because it points beyond history. Or they may seek to explain the dogma of the Incarnation in terms which will make it an article in a philosophical creed. Such efforts will lead to varied deceptions ; but the deceptions cannot destroy the truth of the Incarnation.'

The remark of Middleton Murry that 'it takes most men a lifetime to know what they really

want, and the vast majority of human beings have not learned it on their death-beds' was never more obviously true than it is to-day. So many are like men on a journey who do not know their destination but follow the road blindly without inquiring where it leads to. In such circumstances it is no wonder if they are overcome at times with a sense of the futility of human effort and of human life. And so when things go wrong and the present moment seems unbearable they are tempted to escape from it all by the forbidden door.

In an interesting little book, entitled *What is the Purpose of Life?* (Rich & Cowan ; 3s. 6d. net), the Rev. Lindsay DEWAR, Principal of Bishops' College, Cheshunt, deals with this situation and the problems connected with it. The book is simple and in the main practical. It is not written for the philosopher but for the 'wayfaring man.' Its purpose, one may say, is to give first a rough sketch map of the country, and then to add directions as to the best route to follow.

Did it all happen by chance ? Huxley suggested the possibility that a race of monkeys strumming on typewriters for an unlimited time would in the end hit upon all the books in the British Museum. 'Is such a supposition really credible, whatever the mathematical theory of chance may have to say. Personally I am inclined to think that there is a catch somewhere, and that the incredulousness with which the average man greets this contention of Huxley's is justified.' Besides, it has no relevance to the creation of the world. It begins by assuming a race of monkeys at work on typewriters, but that does nothing to explain the origin of them and of the whole universe. Still further, even if, by a chance hit, the order we see in the world were engendered, how are we to explain the fact that it has remained stable, and has not, as one would expect, by the next throw of chance been dissolved again into chaos ?

The argument from design may have been unwisely stated, but the evidences in support of it are to the unsophisticated mind overwhelming. Paley's famous argument that a watch found on a

heath required us to assume a maker to account for its mechanism has been scoffed at and may be antiquated in its form. But the fact is, 'Paley's mistake was not that he went too far in claiming the existence of design in the universe, but that he did not go far enough.' The complexity is infinitely greater than that of any mere clockwork. And if it be claimed that that wonderful, and apparently purposeful, complexity arises out of the cosmic process we have still to explain how the cosmic process came to possess such a strange potency. It may be taken, therefore, as for all practical purposes certain that the world we live in is the outcome of some great design, that we are not the playthings of chance, but, on the contrary, are intended to move towards some worthy goal.

It is not enough, however, to know that there is design in the world, giving evidence of fully conscious mind behind phenomena. That, doubtless, is much, but a still more important question remains: What sort of a mind? good or evil, kind or cruel, lovingly careful or completely indifferent? Here the whole problem of evil confronts us, and its seriousness is not to be minimized. Suggestions may be made that bring some relief. How great a proportion of the evil in the world is due to human sin! Undoubtedly much is blamed against God to-day which ought to be laid at man's door. God could not stop wars by force and stay the flood of human miseries without destroying man's free will and changing His own method of Fatherly rule to a despotic dictatorship. Still the problem remains, and perhaps the most that can be said from the purely naturalistic point of view is that 'the evil in the world is compatible with the goodness of God.' In any case, the problem is one that cannot be got rid of, for there is a problem of good as well as a problem of evil. It is, in fact, the strange mixture of good and evil in the world which constitutes the problem. If the question be asked, how is there so much evil in the world if there is a God of love, the opposite question may equally well be asked, how is there so much good in the world if there is *not* a God of love?

If we take it then that the world is governed by

Intelligence and Love, that some great design of goodness is being wrought out through it, we are brought to the practical question of how we ought to live. To this question various answers are given. There is the obvious answer of the pleasure-seeker. But in practice it is found that to aim directly at pleasure is an attitude which defeats its own end. Moreover, it leads to disillusionment. 'Those whose objective is self-seeking, whether it be the gross self-seeking of the voluptuary or the more refined and philosophical self-seeking of the Epicurean, are sooner or later driven to the conclusion that life is barely worth living. This is the lesson of history, from the long-ago of Ecclesiastes to the present-day novelist, such as Mr. Aldous Huxley or Mr. Ernest Hemingway.'

There is the answer of the highbrow. Very truly did Solomon say, 'He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow, and much study is a weariness to the flesh.' Or, as William James has put it, 'Too much questioning and too little responsibility lead, almost as often as sensualism does, to the edge of the slope, at the bottom of which lie pessimism and the nightmare or suicidal view of life.' This is abundantly exemplified in the highbrow pessimism of to-day. Hear it speaking in the eloquent hopelessness of Bertrand Russell: 'The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long. . . . Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark.' This attitude has had a wide influence in our time, far beyond genuinely intellectual circles, and has given rise to what might be called 'a pseudo-highbrow attitude to life.' The average man, though intellectually lazy himself, is inclined to pay special heed to the utterances of the pundits. He is 'apt to receive the utterances of men like Mr. H. G. Wells or Mr. Bernard Shaw with something like the veneration and respect which a Christian pays to the Bible. The result is that a very large number of people adopt a kind of pseudo-highbrow attitude to life.' They are proud to call themselves agnostic, to feel that the problems of life are too

complex for solution. It makes indecision intellectually respectable, and provides a grand excuse for moral indolence.

The right answer to the question of how we ought to live can only be given by one who is a true optimist, that is, one whose optimism is grounded in his belief in a God of love. The merely dutiful person, whose supreme guide in life is conscience, may go far astray, for he makes the fatal mistake of forgetting that conscience requires not only to be obeyed, but also to be educated and enlightened. 'One of the most striking facts we encounter is that some of the worst deeds in history have been done by men and women with a clear conscience. . . . It is this capacity for self-deception which makes the merely dutiful attitude to life hopelessly unsatisfactory in practice.' Our sense of right and wrong needs to be enlightened and informed by the love of God as revealed in Christ. 'The true optimist finds in a God of love the supreme answer to the problem of life. Love, he maintains, is the only power which can give life its true worth. If we set out upon life's journey determined to follow Love, we shall find the true meaning of life; but we can only do this if we are fortified first by the conviction that Love reigns upon the throne of the universe, in other words, if we are persuaded that God is love.'

The conclusion, then, would seem to be that as the world expresses the purpose of a Mind infinite in Wisdom and Goodness, life becomes worth living in the highest sense to those who seek to enter into, and to co-operate with, that Loving Mind. And the answer to the individual question which each of us must face, as to what should be the purpose of *my* life, may be expressed by saying, 'I must seek a mode of life which will enable me increasingly to appreciate the living and the loving God. This is only another way of saying that I must make worship the aim and centre of my life. For true worship is precisely the appreciation of the Creator by the creature. In the words of the Shorter Catechism, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." How this works out in practice, wherein it differs from the utilitarian

view of life, what true worship is and how the perils of idolatry are to be avoided, and finally, what influence it should have upon the life of the body—for all this we must refer the reader to Principal Lindsay DEWAR's admirable little book.

The Rev. P. GARDNER-SMITH, B.D., Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, has issued a volume entitled *The Christ of the Gospels* (Heffer ; 8s. 6d. net), in which he offers us a study of the gospel records in the light of critical research. The book is for the most part a running commentary on the narrative of the Four Gospels, with some selection of material intended to throw the chief events into relief. The narrative of St. Mark is treated as the basic narrative.

The spirit of the author's approach to his subject may be gathered from the words that follow : 'The Gospels have been holy books for many generations, and they are holy books to-day. If, therefore, the modern student is led to question many old opinions, he will deal gently with convictions which he must respect, though he cannot share them. Not all wisdom is granted to one generation, and it is often possible that the latest views will prove on further examination to be mistaken. But reverence and respect for truth are not opposed ; the highest reverence finds expression in the most transparent honesty, and no cause, least of all that of religion, is served by those who will not learn because they do not want to, and who prefer tradition to truth.'

As a sample of the author's treatment of his subject, let us take his chapter on 'The Last Supper' and present it in summary form. It is well known that many problems arise when we read the records of this event critically.

For instance, it is an old question whether the Last Supper is to be regarded as the Passover or not. The Synoptists quite clearly represent it as such, but the Fourth Gospel expressly contradicts this view : it was the preparation of the Passover

when Pilate brought Jesus out to the people (Jn 19¹⁴). It is possible that the author of the Fourth Gospel was influenced by a desire to represent Jesus as the true Paschal Lamb, slain upon the Cross just at the time when the lambs of the old Passover were being killed ; but on the whole it is more probable that the Last Supper took place, as St. John records, on the day before the Passover.

Another point : St. Paul, it is clear, thought that the custom of the Church in celebrating the Eucharist was in obedience to the direct command of Jesus : ' This do in remembrance of me ' (1 Co 11²⁴). But why did St. Mark, who wrote at least ten or fifteen years later than St. Paul, omit the command ? It is perhaps most likely that St. Paul here adopts a local tradition which did not become world-wide until after the composition of the Second Gospel. Indeed, as our author avers, it did not win general acceptance until a time later than the composition of all the Synoptic Gospels, for it is absent from St. Matthew and from the true text of St. Luke. As to the question where St. Paul derived his tradition nothing can be said.

If the early Christian Eucharist did not depend on the express command of Jesus what then of its origin ? Probably Jesus and His disciples were accustomed to join in the sacred meal (Kiddush) which was, and still is, a feature of Jewish life. If so, the Last Supper may have been only the last occasion on which they joined in it. That the Christian Eucharist was not exclusively connected with the Last Supper is suggested by the fact that St. John, who gives much eucharistic teaching, does not record the institution of the Eucharist in the Upper Room.

In St. Luke's account of the Last Supper a serious textual problem is involved. If the reading of certain important MSS. be right, not only is there no command to repeat the ceremony, but the cup is mentioned first, and is not described as ' my blood.' It may be that in celebrating the Eucharist in memory of the Lord, the first disciples not only carried on a custom which had belonged to Christ's earthly ministry as a whole, but were by no means consistent in the matter of the character and the order of the elements of the common meal. The memory of the Last Supper, where, as in the Jewish Kiddush, the blessing of a cup comes first, would suggest that the cup should come before the bread ; but the fact that the Eucharist had always been celebrated with bread, but not always with wine, would cause the cup to be added at the end.

But it must be observed that Mr. GARDNER-SMITH makes two assumptions in this last statement which are questionable. The first is that the Lucan narrative, in which the cup is mentioned first, represents a more authentic tradition than the (earlier) Pauline narrative ; and the second is that the eucharistic reference is present in the account of the meal at Emmaus (Lk 24³⁰), and even in the account of the meal by the lakeside (Jn 21¹³).

If there is so little certainty as to the origin and significance of the earliest Christian Eucharist, it is no doubt disturbing to Christian devotion. But Mr. GARDNER-SMITH adds that Jesus would have approved of His Church continuing to do what He had so often done Himself ; and that the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, if not a fact of history, is at any rate a fact of experience.