

RECENT NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM.

I.

ITS METHODS.

IT is a consoling reflection, fitted to establish the heart and deliver it from despondency, that there has never been a time in the history of Christianity when it has not seemed to believers as though the faith were in jeopardy and like to perish outright.

Hora novissima, tempora pessima sunt: vigilemus.

has been the cry of generation after generation, and, behold, the storm has always passed! The faith has emerged stronger and brighter from the ordeal, and its exultant assailants have been put to confusion. "It took twelve men to invent Christianity, and I have demolished it single-handed," was Voltaire's "thrasonical brag"; yet Christianity is here still, and Voltaire—where is he?

Surely this is a consoling reflection, one which ought to steady us in time of stress, and embolden us to look the enemy in the face and refuse to be dismayed by his shouts of victory. The likelihood is that his triumph is premature; and it is marvellous how unsubstantial the assailants of the faith are discovered to be at close quarters. They look very terrible at their first onset; but, when they are encountered boldly and keenly scrutinized, they have a knack of dissolving into harmless shadows. One is reminded in this connection of Lucian's stinging satire on feminine beauty unaccompanied by grace of mind and heart: "Such ladies seem to me like the Egyptian temples. For in that country the shrine itself is very beautiful and large, adorned

with precious stones and gold, and garnished with inscriptions ; but inside, if you ask for the god, he is an ape or an ibis or an he-goat or a cat.”¹

It is no exaggeration to affirm that a serious challenge has been presented to faith by some recent literature on the critical problems of the New Testament, more particularly Moffatt's *Historical New Testament* and Schmiedel's contribution to the article on the *Gospels* in the *Encyclopædia Biblica*, vol. ii. It is with extreme reluctance and no little pain that the writer adds to the list the article in the latter work on *Jesus* by his revered teacher and beloved friend, the late Dr. A. B. Bruce. The contributions of that fearless and brilliant scholar to the exposition and defence of Christianity have laid the Church under a heavy and abiding debt; while his memory is cherished gratefully by generations of students who sat at his feet and learned from his lips “the truth as it is in Jesus,” and attained, under his guidance, to triumphant faith in supernatural Christianity. It is a sense of amazement amounting to incredulity that is awakened by the *Jesus* article in one who knew Dr. Bruce and enjoyed the privilege of his familiar intercourse. The tone and manner are our master's, but the teaching is none of his. It is hard to conceive how those pages could have been written by one who believed in the Incarnation, the Resurrection, or even the Sinlessness of Jesus. They depict him as nothing more than a good and heroic man, and a teacher of unique but not perfect wisdom. “The words of Jesus concerning the future show limitation of vision. In other directions we may discover indications that he was the child of his time and people. But his spiritual intuitions are pure truth, valid for all ages. God, man, and the moral ideal cannot be more truly or happily conceived.”² Such is the final appraisal; and one who remembers the author's devo-

¹ *Imag.* § 11; cf. *Clem. Alex. Pæd.* iii. 4.

² § 33.

tion to the historic Jesus and his enthusiasm for the Kingdom of God may be pardoned the suspicion that there is some explanation. That this should be their master's final message to the world would be a surprise and a grief to not a few who owe to him their establishment in the Christian faith.

It would scarcely be possible to exaggerate the seriousness of the issue which has been raised by those recent critics. The Church need not be greatly disquieted if it be alleged that the patriarchs were mythical personages, that certain prophecies were falsified by the event, or that the Pastoral Epistles were not written by St. Paul. It is assuredly possible to maintain such positions while regarding the Bible as the record of an historic revelation and acknowledging Jesus as the supreme manifestation of redemptive grace. And it is the Church's wisdom to recognize the legitimacy, if not the truth, of such positions, and not be disquieted so long as the citadel of her faith is unassailed. But this is a question of life or death, and it is not too much to affirm that, if these critics have their way, Christianity is doomed. Their contention is that the sacred records are so utterly unreliable, so honeycombed by palpable inaccuracies, and so distorted, albeit unconsciously, by the ideas and prejudices of a later age, as to be practically worthless as historical narratives. The utmost assurance that can be reached is that there lived in the land of Palestine a teacher who made a powerful impression upon his disciples; but hardly a single lineament of the historic Jesus can be discerned with any certainty through the haze of devout misconception which has gathered round him.

This discomfiting conclusion is reached by the critics along two main lines of argument. One is *the investigation of the "sources" of the Evangelic narratives*. It is needless at this late day to explain this method of inquiry, and

equally needless to vindicate its legitimacy or demonstrate its fruitfulness. The facts of the mutual dependence of the Synoptic Gospels and their derivation from earlier "sources" were already recognized in the sub-apostolic period, and the problem has been diligently investigated during the last hundred and fifty years. The result has been the vindication of their substantial historicity; and it has been widely agreed that "Mark" is the earliest of the three Gospels, and, whether as it stands or in some more primitive form, one of the main "sources" of "Matthew" and "Luke," the other main "source" being the book of *Logia*.

Such is the present position of the problem, and Schmiedel details at length the steps by which it has been reached. Then by a single stroke he demolishes the whole edifice so laboriously constructed. Even when we have got back to those sources, he remarks, we have not arrived at the goal; for those sources must have been derived from still earlier sources, and what the latter may have been it is impossible to discover. And thus, with a wave of the hand, he relegates the problem to the limbo of insolubility. "The first impression one derives from the new situation thus created is, that by it the solution of the synoptical problem which appeared after so much toil to have been brought so near, seems suddenly removed again to an immeasurable distance."¹

It seems a curious turn of dialectic to conclude that nothing has been gained because the investigation does not carry us back to the ultimate sources. The *desideratum* is to get as near the historic situation as possible, and surely it is something to have been able to approach it by even a single stage. And, considering how short at the longest is the space between Jesus and the canonical Gospels, and how little room it affords for an extended series of sources, may we not reasonably hold that, when we have pushed

¹ § 129 (b).

back that single stage, we have reached the ultimate sources and are face to face with the historic Jesus?

Consider now where we stand. If Prof. Schmiedel's contention be allowed, that the ultimate sources are inaccessible, then it follows indeed that the critical investigation of generations has been proved little better than a laborious beating of the air; but it by no means follows that the slightest doubt has been cast upon the credibility of the Gospels. The problem simply remains unsolved, and it must be approached from another direction, and the credibility or incredibility of the Gospels determined on other grounds. They must be taken as they stand and judged on their apparent merits.

The other line of argument has been elaborated by Mr. Moffatt in his *Prolegomena. The Evangelists*, it is alleged, *could not possibly paint a reliable picture of Jesus, inasmuch as they wrote after the interval of at least a generation and saw Him, as it were, through a mist.* In every historical narrative there is a double reference—the “retrospective” and the “contemporary.” It is difficult for a writer to escape from his environment, and still more difficult to escape from himself. He sees the past through the atmosphere in which he lives, and interprets it at once according to the standards of his time and according to his personal sympathies or antipathies. πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπος. It would be unjust to accept Thucydides' account of Cleon without taking account of the historian's quarrel with the demagogue; and in reading Macaulay's glowing narrative it may not be amiss to bear in mind that the historian was also a politician and could hardly treat with absolute impartiality of the contentions between the two great parties in the State. Environment and personality are the two influences which are apt to distort the historic judgment; and, where they are unsuspected and uncontrolled, there is no true vision of the past, and history

is merely, in Napoleon's phrase, "a fable agreed upon." "Consider," says Carlyle,¹ "what mere Time will do in such cases; how if a man was great while living, he becomes tenfold greater when dead. What an enormous *camera-obscura* magnifier is Tradition! How a thing grows in the human Memory, in the human Imagination, when love, worship and all that lies in the human Heart, is there to encourage it. And in the darkness, in the entire ignorance; without date or document, no book, no Arundel-marble; only here and there some dumb monumental cairn. Why, in thirty or forty years, were there no books, any great man would grow *mythic*, the contemporaries who had seen him, being once all dead."

It is precisely thus, according to those recent critics, that it has fared with Jesus. "To realize," says Mr. Moffatt,² "that the central materials of the gospels were mainly drawn up and collected during the three or four decades which followed the death of Jesus, and that the gospels themselves were not composed until the period 65-105; to realize these facts will show—(i.) that the gospels are not purely objective records, no mere chronicles of pure crude fact, or of speeches preserved verbatim; (ii.) that they were compiled in and for an age when the church required Christ not as a memory so much as a religious standard, and when it revered him as an authority for its ideas and usages; (iii.) that they reflect current interests and feelings, and are shaped by the experience and for the circumstances of the church; (iv.) that their conceptions of Christ and Christianity are also moulded to some extent by the activity and expansion of the church between 30 and 60, by its tradition, oral and written, and by its teaching, especially that of Paul." The Jesus of the Gospels is not the Jesus of history, but an idealized figure, partly distorted by ignorant misconception, partly glorified by devout reverence; and,

¹ *Heroes*, i.

² p. 45, n. .

if we would get at the true Jesus, we must clear away the mist which has gathered about Him. "To the historical student who is engaged in working back, by aid of sources, to the facts, the Christ of the Apostles is the forerunner to the Jesus of history. . . . Personally he left no written statement or expression of his views and deeds. For these, as well as for the sense of his personality, we are absolutely dependent upon the reminiscences of an after age, together with the impression produced by him on one or two men of exceptional ability who subsequently joined his cause. . . . These are the indispensable record of the ways by which the early Christian faith was formed, transformed, expressed and propagated."¹

The question is, How does Jesus emerge from the ordeal of reconstructive criticism? Prof. Schmiedel leaves us in no manner of uncertainty. There are nine passages and only nine which he allows to be "absolutely credible."² Here they are:—(1) Mark x. 17 f.: "Why callest thou me good? none is good save God only." (2) Matt. xii. 31 f.: that blasphemy against the son of man can be forgiven. (3) Mark iii. 21: that his relations held him to be beside himself. (4) Mark xiii. 32: "Of that day and of that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son but the Father." (5) Mark xv. 34 = Matt. xxvii. 46: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (6) Mark viii. 12: "There shall no sign be given unto this generation"—a refusal to work miracles. (7) Mark vi. 5 f.: Jesus was able to do no mighty work (save healing a few sick folk) in Nazareth and marvelled at the unbelief of its people. (8) Mark viii. 14–21: "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod"—an evidence, according to Schmiedel, that "the feeding of the 5000 and the 4000 was not an historical occurrence but a parable." (9) Matt. xi. 5 = Luke vii. 22: the answer to the Baptist,

¹ Moffatt, p. 9.

² § 139.

where Schmiedel argues that the final clause "counteracts the preceding enumeration" and proves that "Jesus was speaking not of the physically but of the spiritually blind, lame, leprous, deaf, dead."

What manner of image is suggested by these nine *logia* which Schmiedel pronounces "the foundation-pillars for a truly scientific life of Jesus"? They amount to nothing more than a handful of negations, a brief series of emphatic repudiations by Jesus of supernatural attributes and powers which had been ignorantly imputed to Him. Truly, if this be all the available material, it is little that is known of the historic Jesus, and that little not worth knowing. *ὦ Ζεῦ διόπτα*, cries Dikaiopolis in the comedy¹ as he holds up his ragged garment and surveys it ruefully; and, viewing this tattered remnant of the goodly Evangelic record, one might echo the exclamation.

Such are the methods of those recent critics, and such the results they attain. There are several considerations which suggest themselves and seem worthy of earnest attention.

1. *We have heard all this before.* Those critics are simply old enemies with new names. Their methods and conclusions are those of Strauss, Baur, and Renan.

Consider Schmiedel's treatment of the miraculous narratives.² Some of them he regards as originating in "figurative speech." The feeding of the multitudes is just the saying "Blessed are they that hunger, for they shall be filled" turned into a narrative. In Mark i. 17, Matt. xiii. 47-50 he sees the germ of the miraculous draught of fishes. There are other miracles whose origin he finds in Old Testament passages: "For the raisings of the dead cp. 1 K. 17. 17-24, 2 K. 4. 17-37; for the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, cp. Ex. 16. 1-18, Nu. 11. 4-9, 2 K. 4. 42-44; for the walking upon the water Ps. 77. 20 [19],

¹ Aristoph. *Acharn.* 410.

² §§ 142-4.

Is. 43. 16, Job 9. 8; for the stilling of the storm, Ps. 107. 23-32; for the healing of the withered hand, 1 K. 13. 6; for the healing of the dumb man, Wisd. 10. 21." This is precisely Strauss's Mythical Theory.¹

In his discussion of "tendency" in the Synoptists² Schmiedel reproduces the Tübingen hypothesis in its crassest form. "In Lk. 5. 1-11 (call of Peter) the mission to the Gentiles is hardly mistakable: the other boat which is summoned (5. 7) to aid Peter in landing the multitude of fish, is that of Paul and his companions, whilst James and John (according to 5. 10) figure as the comrades of Peter, and the astonishment and apprehension they share with him (5. 8f.) signify that until now they had not grasped the divine command of an extended mission."

The truth is that those recent writers are not advanced critics but reactionaries. They have reverted to positions which were abandoned a generation ago, and it is surely less than fair that we should be challenged to fight over again a battle which has already been fought and won. The utmost deference is due to so competent and unprejudiced an investigator as Wendt, and it is well to recall the verdict he has pronounced in his monumental work *Die Lehre Jesu*:³ "The idea that the severely critical consideration of the Gospels, which examines these writings according to the same principles as other written historical sources, would render problematical the historical figure of Jesus, or at all events would derogate from the ideal loftiness and purity of His life and teaching, we must at this day pronounce as simply obsolete. Critical inquiry has led, though not immediately in its first attempts, yet gradually and in course of time, to results whereby the historical picture of Jesus has lost nothing, but only gained."

2. It may seem a daring charge to bring against writers who claim to treat the sacred records on rigidly scientific

¹ *Das Leben Jesu*, Einl.

² §§ 108-14.

³ Engl. trans. ii. p. 400.

principles and allow themselves to talk contemptuously of others, but assuredly *they not unfrequently exhibit a most unscientific spirit.*

Consider Schmiedel's selection of his nine "absolutely credible passages." On what principle is it made? He alleges none, but it is obvious that he has chosen them because they seem to disprove the sinlessness of Jesus, His divinity, His omniscience, His miraculous power, and reduce Him to the common level of humanity. It is surely supreme audacity for such arbitrary procedure to pose as scientific.

It is difficult to suffer patiently the rejection of certain passages on the ground that they cannot be "primitive" according to the critics' *a priori* and subjective judgment of what is primitive and what is not. Mr. Moffatt brands Matthew xxviii. 16-20 as "a later appendix."¹ "Besides the conception of Jesus as the source of authoritative rules and regulations for the church, and the idea of Christ's spiritual presence (5. 20=18. 20), which can hardly be primitive, there are three notes of a late period in this passage." If it be true that Jesus rose again and appeared to His disciples, then it was fitting that He should give them, not indeed "authoritative rules and regulations for the church," but such counsels as are mentioned here. If it be true that He ascended, then His spiritual presence is a fact, and why should He not have proclaimed it on the eve of His departure? If, however, the Resurrection and Ascension be mere *Aberglaube* of a later age, then of course those sayings cannot be primitive. There are besides, Mr. Moffatt informs us, three notes of a later period in this passage. (1) "The universal mission (vers. 19, 20) can hardly have been known to the first disciples, or else they lived for years in flagrant disobedience to their Master's solemn command." It was, however, the way of the disciples, as

¹ pp. 647-8.

they appear on the Evangelic pages, to be somewhat slow to take in their Master's words, and somewhat slow to obey them even when they had taken them in. It was just on the back of His announcement of the doom which awaited Him at Jerusalem that they fell a-disputing which of them was the greatest (Mark ix. 30-4; Luke ix. 43-50; Matt. xvii. 22-xviii. 5). (2) "The incipient Trinitarianism." Of course this cannot be primitive if Trinitarianism be merely a *θεολογούμενον* of a later age; but it is remarkable that in one of the nine passages which Schmiedel recognizes as authentic *logia* of Jesus (Mark xiii. 32; cf. Matt. xi. 27), there occurs a quite Pauline collocation of *the Father* and *the Son*. (3) "The use of the baptismal formula belongs to an age subsequent to that of the Apostles, who employed the simple phrase of baptism into the name of Jesus (*εἰς χριστόν, ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι* 'I. X.)." It should be observed, however, that the shorter phrases are equivalent to "Christian Baptism," and where they are employed (Acts ii. 38, viii. 16; Rom. vi. 3; Gal. iii. 27), the ceremonial formula would have been out of place.

A flagrant example of this subjective and truly unscientific method is the treatment accorded to that golden verse 2 Corinthians viii. 9. There is not a shadow of documentary evidence against it, and its absence would greatly weaken the Apostle's argument, yet Mr. Moffatt has bracketed it, apparently as an interpolation, without a word of explanation. Schmiedel's handling of the passage is simply grotesque. He accepts it as authentic (*quot homines tot sententiæ!*), but he finds in it an evidence how little St. Paul knew and how little he cared to know about the historic Jesus. "The details of the life of Jesus had so little interest for Paul that, for example, in 2 Cor. 8. 9 in order to induce the Corinthians to contribute liberally to the collection for the poor in Palestine he is able to adduce no other feature in Jesus than the fact of his

having become man.”¹ No stronger argument for self-sacrifice than the thought of the Lord of Life coming down from His throne of glory to suffer and die for our redemption! What Schmeidel means by this extraordinary language is that as early as St. Paul’s day the facts of the life of Jesus had perished, and what have been received as facts are simply late fictions. “All that can be said to be certain is this, that it is vain to look to the church fathers for trustworthy information on the subject of the origin of the gospels.”

3. In perusing the erudite pages of those recent writers one is constantly reminded of the maxim of Heraclitus *πολυμαθίη οὐ διδάσκει*. Erudition is a good gift, yet other gifts are requisite for the effective study of any authors and especially of those who have written of our Lord and His Gospel; and, if these be wanting, no erudition, however ample, can deliver a man from what Mr. Moffatt, with equal delicacy and modesty, styles the “leprosy of incompetence.” It is primarily essential to a sound judgment on the Gospels that they should be understood; and after a perusal of their laborious dissertations it is impossible to entertain a very exalted opinion of the insight of those writers. One feels that, had their faculty for exegesis been at all commensurate with their wealth of learning, their critical conclusions would have been very different. It may be that the Fourth Gospel dates from the first quarter of the second century; but to see in the words “Ye shall die in your sin” (viii. 21, 24) “the epitaph of Judaism written by Christianity as the first century closed,”² is simply a wild vagary of an unexegetical mind. Still less respect is due to the discovery in Matthew vii. 22, xiii. 41, xxiv. 12 of the Evangelist’s “antagonism to the libertine tendencies of Gentile Christians in Asia Minor.”³

Prof. Schmiedel’s article contains some marvels of

¹ § 147.

² Moffatt, p. 496.

³ *Ibid.* p. 23.

exegetical blindness. Let a single instance suffice. He quotes Luke xi. 41, "give for alms," as an evidence of the alleged Ebionitic "tendency" of the Third Gospel.¹ He takes no account of the words, τὰ ἔνοντα, and it would have been awkward for his argument had he done so. Observe what our Lord says: The Pharisees abounded in almsgiving, but it was all vainglorious ostentation. "Ye cleanse the outside of the cup and the platter, but the inside of you is full of rapacity and churlishness. . . . Give for alms the things that are within (τὰ ἔνοντα)." So far from the passage teaching the Ebionitic doctrine that "beneficence wins salvation," it means the precise opposite. What it enjoins is that inward charity which is the true alms. It is no exaggeration to say that Schmiedel's article fairly bristles with misinterpretations, and in not a few instances the exposure of the exegetical blunder is the refutation of the critical conclusion.

4. *It is surely unreasonable that those writers should so confidently trumpet forth their destructive conclusions while frankly acknowledging their utter lack of finality.* The obvious result of Schmiedel's investigation is that whatever seemed to have been settled has been again unsettled, and the whole problem has been thrown back into the crucible. He acknowledges as much, and consoles himself and his readers with the reflection that "for science it is not altogether amiss if from time to time it is compelled to dispense with the lights it had previously considered clear enough, and to accustom itself to a new investigation of its objects in the dark."² If this be indeed the condition of critical science, it may perhaps be prudent to receive with a certain measure of reserve its pronouncements, be they ever so confident, on the incredibility of the Evangelic records and the impossibility of attaining any certain knowledge of the historic Jesus.

¹ § 110.

² § 129 (b).

“Tendency-criticism,” says Mr. Moffatt, “has become a detected idol.”¹ Yet it is only a generation ago that the tendency-criticism was dominant and seemed to many to have dealt Christianity its deathblow. It is but yesterday that the cry “Back to Christ!” was in wellnigh every mouth, and now Mr. Moffatt pronounces it “a natural and wholesome reaction,” yet one which “has gone quite far enough.”²

The truth is that every generation has its cry. The certainty of yesterday is discredited to-day, and the certainty of to-day will just as surely be discredited to-morrow. The history of New Testament criticism is the record of the rise and fall of a thousand theories, each influential and seemingly final for a brief space and each abandoned in its turn; and the New Testament has outlived them all, as it will outlive their successors to the end of time.

ἐξηράνθη ὁ χόρος,
καὶ τὸ ἄνθος ἐξέπεσεν·
τὸ δὲ ῥῆμα Κυρίου μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.

Surely the lesson is plain. Were it duly laid to heart, it would deliver the critics from overweening dogmatism and the Church from vain alarm. When Massinger's Marcellia heard Francisco's treacherous accusations against the absent Duke, she exclaimed—

Lies so false and wicked,
And fashioned to so damnable a purpose,
Cannot be spoken by a human tongue.
. . . If thou wouldst work
Upon my weak credulity, tell me, rather,
That the earth moves; the sun and stars stand still.

She could conceive no stronger attestation; yet, ere many generations had passed, it was discovered that the earth *does* move and the sun *does* stand still. It is unwise to pin one's faith to a theory. Especially in the domain of

¹ p. 10.

² p. 39.

critical investigation one never knows what a day may bring forth. Not once but often has it happened that some discovery, some simple observation, has let in a flood of light, accrediting what had seemed incredible and putting to shame what had been most surely believed.

DAVID SMITH.

THE CHRISTIAN PROPHETS AT PHILIPPI.

PROFESSOR RAMSAY, who has done so much in recent years to elucidate the Acts of the Apostles, especially upon the geographical and political sides of that unique history, has recently enforced his remarks on *The Church in the Roman Empire* by a paper in the *Contemporary Review* on "St. Paul the Statesman." I propose in the following pages to carry still further his main idea, clear and suggestive and convincing as it is, and to show that while St. Paul was a statesman and a patriot he was first of all a Prophet, and that his prophetic office had made him both statesman and patriot. Perhaps I may say that several of the following contentions require, and I trust will shortly receive, a fuller exposition than the limits of the present paper permit.

In the course of his "Second Missionary Journey" St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. i. 5) that his gospel came unto them not in word only but in power and in the Holy Spirit and *in much fulfilment*. This last is a unique expression, and the occasion of it was unique. The function of the Prophets was, in the words of 1 Peter i. 10, to "seek out and to search out diligently what time, or (failing that) what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ, which was (from time immemorial) in them (as a historic body), was making clear." The Christian Prophets searched the Scriptures in order to find *fulfilment*. Their prophetic spirit indeed "searched all things, yea, the deep things of