

Prolegomena to the Epistle to the Romans—A Word to Students of Theology.

BY PROFESSOR ADOLF DEISSMANN, D.D., HEIDELBERG.

ON a winter day in one of the early years of the Emperor Nero, a stranger from Asia was seated in the house of his host at Corinth. Before him lay some leaves of papyrus, a reed-pen and ink, and at his side the Greek Old Testament in the Septuagint version. He set himself to write. From the metropolis of New Greece his thoughts hurried over sea and land to the mightiest city of the globe, where Cæsar sat enthroned the legislator of the world and adored by millions as a god, where there was an influx of everything of name in science and art, whither came the gold of Arabia and the purple of Phœnicia, the amber of the German coasts and the ivory of Africa, where all the roads in the world found their junction, and the gods of the West met with those of the East. In his opening sentences the stranger wrote down the name of this city, the holy, dreaded, fateful name of the eternal Rome.

True, it was not the official Rome, not the Rome of palaces and temples, of barracks, warehouses, and schools, that occupied his thoughts in that winter hour. What he wrote was no memorial to His Imperial Majesty, no commission to this or that merchant, no speech for the forum, no philosophical pamphlet which, graced with the name of some Mæcenas of the capital, should form the subject of conversation in learned circles. What he wrote was a *letter*, a plain unpretending letter, of which the great Rome was not meant to hear at all. An unnamed brother was to deliver it, and it was to be read in the quiet circle of humble, unknown people. Slaves, artisans, women will press around the elder who will read the letter aloud. The ship, by which the messenger voyages to Italy, may even be lost and with it the letter—who will care much? Or the modest house where the letter is to be kept at Rome may be devoured by the flames—who will miss the letter? It would merely have shared the fate of some of those letters which the same writer had sent to his Corinthian associates, it would simply have disappeared like them, without a trace left behind.

But the Providence that rules the world did not

mean that such things should happen. The letter crossed the Ionian and Tyrrhenian seas, arrived at Rome, and there survived even the Neronic conflagrations. The original, indeed, has disappeared, but, from the first, one had made copies of it and exchanged these for copies of other letters by the same writer. In this way the brethren in Asia made acquaintance with what was written originally only for the Roman brethren. In the days of Trajan and Hadrian the letter which was sent decades before to Rome, was in all probability read at Ephesus and Antioch, perhaps at Jerusalem. Within less than a century of that Corinthian winter, the letter forms part of a book which thousands of scattered adherents of the faith here and there reverence as a sacred book, as Holy Scripture, and which, amidst the raging sea of heathenism and the storm of persecution, supplies them with the strength of inward endurance, against which the storm and the billows are powerless.

So decade followed decade and century century. The letter embodied in that Sacred Book was read, and ever re-read. It had been translated into all languages. Some of its words had even found their way outside the circles of the learned, and impressed themselves deeply on the heart of the people. Two of the greatest men that the last two thousand years have seen lived through the crisis of their life bending over its pages, one of them at the threshold of the Middle Ages, the other at the gateway of the Modern Era: Augustine read with sparkling eye the sentences of this letter, Luther discovered with earnest panting the wonders of Divine grace in it. Then the fathers of the evangelical churches began to explore the letter, and for three and a half centuries evangelical students have assembled for its exposition. A whole library of writings has been composed on this letter, and although at the present day it is perhaps less read in its own city Rome than in Japan, it yet belongs, like few other texts, to the literature of the world.

That the letter to the Romans would have a

fate bound up in this way with the history of the world, was not, and could not have been, anticipated, by Paul. In this instance, as in that of all the Pauline letters, the parabolic saying of the Master about the grain of mustard seed found a remarkable fulfilment: small and inapparent the beginning, great, incalculably great, the effect!

How are we to explain the mighty influence exerted by the Epistle to the Romans upon the Christianity of so many centuries, and especially upon such heroes of religion as Augustine and Luther? How came a writing that took its rise under such simple conditions, to be fifteen centuries afterwards the Magna Charta of evangelical Protestantism?

In the first place, it might be said, the Epistle to the Romans is the most œcumenical of all the Pauline letters. Compared with Second Corinthians, it is relatively impersonal, generally intelligible; it lacks the numerous allusions and intimate relations which so seriously obstruct the understanding of that other Epistle (2 Co).

But it is self-evident that the main ground of the powerful influence exerted on Christendom by the Roman Epistle lies not in this formal characteristic, but in the object itself. It was the religious power concealed in the Epistle that made such a deep impression on Augustine and Luther; it is this which so deeply impresses still every evangelically disposed conscience. We stand upon volcanic soil in reading this Epistle. Paul wrote it, indeed, under conditions of greater outward and inward calm than many of the rest of his letters, but it too was written by him with his heart's blood. It contains confessions of a struggling prophetic soul; fire, holy fire, glows between its lines. This holy Divine flame is what warms and interpenetrates us. The deep understanding of human misery, the terrible shuddering before the power of sin, but at the same time the jubilant rejoicing of the redeemed child of God, this is what for all time assures to the Roman Epistle a victorious sway over the hearts of men who are sinful and who thirst for redemption. I fully understand the meaning of what an older clergyman has often told me, that the hour when as a student at Halle he apprehended, while listening to Tholuck's lectures on Romans, the sense of *ταλαίπωρος ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπος*, was for him a decisive moment in his inward life. That is one instance

out of many, but it authenticates the germinal power of the thoughts on faith contained in our Epistle, a power not to be destroyed by any lapse or change of time.

True, these great thoughts need to be understood. Although the Epistle to the Romans does not belong to the specially difficult texts of the N.T., yet one must first find the way to its understanding. I know a theologian who once, when quite young, and when the questions of eternity for the first time pressed heavily upon his conscience, betook himself in his deep distress to the Epistle to the Romans in Luther's translation. Here he hoped to find the answer to the questions that oppressed him, and he began to read. But he did not get beyond the early chapters. His experience was like that of the Ethiopian eunuch who read in the prophet Isaiah and understood not what he read. There lay upon the text a veil woven out of theologically sounding concepts which met him ever and anon. Instead of leaving the obscure passages to themselves meanwhile and reading on joyfully, he gave up his search, and his questions remained for the time unanswered. Yes, the Epistle to the Romans needs study. And when one has once worked his way through it, it must often be read over again. One dives every time a little deeper into the sea of its thoughts, and returns each time with a new precious pearl.

Exegetical lectures are meant to guide in such essays at diving. Away, then, with fear of the sea into which we are to plunge! The prejudice is widely diffused that the Epistle to the Romans can be understood only by specially advanced readers. When I myself was a student, I felt that a wall was built up around the Epistle keeping back all approach to it. But Paul wrote not for advanced readers, for pale scholars and philosophers, he wrote for humble, plain people, but for people who at the same time brought with them a heart when the Epistle was read to them. And although perhaps every hearer did not understand every detail (where is the learned exegete who understands every turn in the apostle's language?), yet those first hearers and readers in any case apprehended one thing—the spirit of the letter, its tone, and disposition.

And as these first hearers and readers of Romans were meant to understand the Epistle, so must we seek to interpret it. The eighteen centuries be-

tween then and now we must think away, we must forget that we have before us a printed text on modern paper. With all the appliances of linguistic and historical science the text must be comprehended as a relic of the time of Nero. Finally, we must look over the writer's shoulder and read from the fresh strokes of his pen what so moves him inwardly that he gives thanks, prays, laments, rejoices.

Yet our task is not yet complete when we have reached a purely historical understanding. Necessary as is the grammatical exegesis, and rigorously as we must carry it through in opposition to the dogmatical exegetes, it is not sufficient by itself. The Epistle to the Romans is not only an ancient, it is also a religious text. But a religious text can be thoroughly understood by us only if we bring to it a religious appreciation. Hence we must bring to our task of exposition not only grammar, lexicon, and concordance, but also our heart. Congenial sympathy and impressionableness are necessary. Even an æsthetic text we can understand only if

we have an understanding of the beautiful. One may have a thousand times understood the letter of Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Goethe, but the true understanding begins only when the clapping of the wings of their genius falls gently upon our ear for the first time. So must we learn also to reproduce psychologically the venerable religious texts of the classical period of our religion. Only he who brings with him a tender appreciation of the great facts of the inner life will hear the breath of the Roman Epistle and be able to look into the heart of the great apostle.

Historical interpretation and religious reproduction do not exclude one another, but go together. Historical interpretation takes, as it were, the Epistle to the Romans out of our printed Bibles, and puts it again in the hands of those to whom it was first addressed; religious reproduction gives it back to us and admits us to the great congregation of eighteen centuries, for whom the apostle, without any possible presentiment of it, wrote during those winter days at Corinth.

At the Literary Table.

THE BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

THE CHRONICLES OF JERAHMEEL. By M. GASTER, PH.D. (*Royal Asiatic Society*. 8vo, pp. cxii, 341, with MS. Facsimiles.)

This is the volume for 1899 of the new series of the Oriental Translation Fund. What is it? It is a translation of a unique Hebrew MS. belonging to the Bodleian Library. Who wrote or copied the MS., when it was written or copied, and where,—these are matters which Dr. Gaster discusses with sumptuous fulness in his Introduction, and dare not be attempted here. The contents of the MS. may, however, be indicated. It is a collection of apocryphal and pseudo-apocryphal books dealing with the history of the world from the Creation to the death of Judas Maccabæus. Its method of writing the history of the world is not our method. We try to get at the facts, it prefers the fictions. It has a most sublime disdain of facts and all their ways, using them only as pegs to hang its amazing clothes of imagination upon; and the clothes carry the pegs away. So, though its heroes are

mostly the familiar heroes of the Bible, their sayings and their doings are not recorded there. Take the death of Moses. 'The angel Samael, the wicked, was the chief of the Satans. Every hour he used to dilate upon the coming death of Moses, saying, "When will the moment arrive at which Moses is to die, so that I may go and take away his soul?" . . . At length God addressed Samael, the wicked, saying, "Go thou and bring to me the soul of Moses." Then clothing himself with anger, girding himself with his sword, and enveloping himself with eagerness, he set out to find Moses. . . . When he looked on Moses he was exceedingly terrified, and trembled as a woman in travail, so that he could find no courage to speak to Moses, until Moses himself said, "Samael, there is no peace to the wicked, saith the Lord; what dost thou here?" "I have come here to take away thy life" . . . "I am," said Moses, "the son of Amram, who was born circumcised. On the day of my birth I found