

## Reviews.



*The Life of Ernest Renan.* By Madame JAMES DARMESTETER (A. Mary F. Robinson). London: Methuen and Co.

ONE might venture to call this work a biography of superlative excellence. As a literary product, and as a history of its hero, it equally fulfils its purpose. The authoress possesses every requisite for her task. She is an Englishwoman, and versed in French ways; a friend of Renan and of his religious ideas; a critic and a creator. The net result of these abstract qualifications is an "appreciation" of which it is hard to speak too highly. Not that the work is without some minor blemishes of style. To say that a man "compulsed a mass of documents" is possibly a misprint; but we must own that we spent some time in solving the problem of what "contraniteny" meant. To say that Renan was "officially destituted" of a post is possibly a Gallicism; but what sort of science is "Balistic" science? These are not the only misprints and uncouth words; and a defect of a different sort is an occasional tendency on the part of the authoress to indulge in vague platitudes and sounding commonplaces, as if she had lost her way in the immensity of her subject. But when all has been said, the book is a singularly appropriate and charming delineation of a great man.

And what award will posterity mete out to Ernest Renan? It seems almost likely that he will fall between two stools. He has written works on religion from the standpoint of a scientist; but the scientists say that he is not exact, and the orthodox will have none of him. The devout are not inclined to read his "Vie de Jésus," with its dilettante iconoclasm and its cheerful destruction of beliefs; and the scholarly agnostics doubt the scientific accuracy of a book which is so idealistic, and pays so little attention to the theories of erudite Germans. The fact is, that Renan aimed at writing a life which should represent our Lord as He ought to be according to Renan. This, we take it, is the sum and substance of what is expressed in different phraseology by Madame Darmesteter:

"Ever since his year of spiritual crisis, Renan had pondered in his heart a Life of Jesus unlike any yet written, which, while hiding nothing of the textual errors and apocryphs of the Gospel as we possess it, should set in high and clear relief the Divine character, the exquisite inventions in moral sentiment of the Founder of Christianity."<sup>1</sup> At any rate, that is the impression left on one's mind after reading the Life, beautiful and picturesque as its idealism undoubtedly is. The writer's attitude is not clear. It is certainly not Christian, inasmuch as he denies the divinity of Christ; but neither is it that of the freethinking historical student. Hence it is that Renan's future position as a thinker is not assured.

But people will always read him for his style, one might say. Well, true, if you once admit that people read books for their style alone, for Renan's literary art is supreme, arrests attention, and compels admiration. No one can help the mere pleasure of delight in the matchless grace and subtle perfection of his sentences. To our mind, some of his latest work is his best. We think that the "Histoire du Peuple d'Israel," his last work, is in some respects his finest; and we quite agree with Madame Darmesteter when she remarks that the chapters on Philo and the Essenians, which adorn the fifth volume, although it was published posthumously, are among the most vivid and the purest which we owe to

Renan's singular genius. How just, too, is the criticism which she permits herself on Renan's habit, sometimes attractive, but more often irritating, of associating objects which belong to different spheres of thought. He compares Jeremiah to a journalist of the type of Félix Pyat, Ezekiel to Victor Hugo, Hosea to a Cromwellian pamphleteer, the Book of Jonah to "La Belle Hélène"; and other instances will occur to our readers where some ephemeral modernity is serenely equalized with an age-long fact of history. This is not true art. And to refer to another point of similar nature, Renan's famous portraiture of St. Paul as a "bizarre little Jew," with halting speech, bent shoulders, and piercing eyes under shaggy eyebrows—how vivid it is, and yet with how little warrant! Such descriptions are glittering, but filmy; and it may be doubted whether even Renan's incomparable literary style will preserve his works to the attention of future times. His "Origins of Christianity," at all events, and the Life of Christ are but religious historical romances, and, as we have said, they will satisfy neither Christianity nor free-thought.

Yet no one would deny that Renan was a scholar as well as a wonderful *vulgarisateur*. After his death his wife found a slip of paper on which was written: "Of all that I have done, I prefer the 'Corpus.'" There spoke the man of learning. The "Corpus Semicarum Inscriptionum" is not a book, but a handbook—a collection of all Semitic inscriptions on monuments hitherto discovered. Perhaps Renan's own remark will be endorsed by posterity, and men will rather study the facts collected by the scientist than the brilliant essays of the man of letters.

It is as a portrait of the man himself that Madame Darmesteter's Life is most attractive. Very sympathetically and clearly she portrays the many aspects of his complex character. There is the Kelt, dreamy, melancholy, and mystic, yet with an undercurrent of obstinacy beneath the gentle surface. But what a different Kelt from Lamennais! and what a difference between the ways in which each regarded the faith he had lost! Where is the bitter anguish, the passionate despair, of a Lamennais? Instead of all this, there is a serene, if occasionally wistful, acquiescence, which makes one inclined to doubt whether what was parted with so easily was ever very strongly held, and a calm disregard of the pain and perplexity caused to others by his writings, which makes one wonder if he altogether realized how dear faith is to faithful souls. We see Renan as the industrious scholar, with a genius for languages, and a gift of popularizing his knowledge. The chapter on his mission to Phœnicia, accompanied by his beloved sister Henriette, is beautifully told, and her whole influence on the youth and the man is very clearly brought out. Indeed, it is by no means unlikely that but for her Renan might have remained, like Malebranche, in the bosom of the Catholic Church. All his life he was the *curé manqué*. He never lost his fondness for the sensuous, æsthetic side of religion, nor a kind of vague yearning after religious sentiment. He was especially, for instance, attracted by the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, whom he called the "only Christian since Christ." And "St. Francis will save him," cried a Capuchin friar.

The story of his abortive attempt at a political life is told well, and with great discrimination. The authoress does not shrink either from depicting the curious change in Renan's disposition in late life, when he was the favourite of women of society, and wrote the "Abbesse de Jouarre." Strictly pure in his own life, he yet maintained the superiority of instinct over chastity. His curious impressionability to different ideas, and rapidity in expressing them, justify Challemeil-Lacour's remark, that "Renan thinks like a man, feels like a woman, and acts like a child."

W. A. PUKTON.

## BAMPTON LECTURES FOR 1897.

*Aspects of the Old Testament.* The Bampton Lectures for 1897. By R. L. OTTLEY, M.A. London: Longmans, 1897. Price 16s.

We have read this book with deep interest. As an elaborate plea for accepting the latest conclusions of the Higher Criticism it could hardly be bettered; the tone is admirable throughout, and the spiritual standpoint of the writer is in noticeable contrast with the ill-concealed and often half-avowed Rationalism of the majority of the critical schools of the present day. Yet we must, from some points of view, regret its publication. The author, learned in all the lore of the Continental critics, has allowed himself to be dominated by theory, which, however brilliantly contrived, is not necessarily to be taken for the established facts of scientific research; he lays far too great stress upon the merely literary aspects of Biblical criticism, though—to do him justice—he allows more weight to archaeology than many of the extremists are prepared to sanction. Of any independent research on Mr. Ottley's part we do not find much trace, in these brilliant and persuasive lectures; rather, his object has been to present, in as attractive a form as possible, the views of the German critics, divesting them of their most objectionable features, and so rendering them palatable to English readers. And herein we cannot but discern a chief danger in the book as a whole. You push to its logical and legitimate extent the hypothesis of Kuenen or Well-hausen, and the "supernaturalism" of the Old Testament Scriptures must be given up; you cannot any longer regard them as differing in kind from those other Oriental Scriptures with which the labours of Max Müller, and other workers in the field of comparative religions, have of late made us acquainted. But Mr. Ottley stops short of driving matters to a logical conclusion, and the result is a book which, while full of unproved theory and unverifiable assumptions, is replete with fine thoughts finely expressed; while, on occasions, some passage rises to a height of genuine sublimity, the style reserved and chastened, and never insulting our feeling by any display of tawdriness or affectation.

It is interesting to note what Mr. Ottley regards as the central idea, the master-thought, of the Old Testament; he is, perhaps, justified in affirming (p. 115) that "it is belief in the providence and direct action of the living God." On the question of Sacrifice he, of course, follows the lead of Robertson Smith; and, indeed, in most matters his obligations to that great scholar's works, specially the "Religion of the Semites," are immense. We observe with pleasure that, so far as the "crux" (as it is to some) of Old Testament anthropomorphism is concerned, Mr. Ottley regards the objections that have been formulated as of little value or weight. How can man, we may ask, hope to bring the thought of God into living contact with our own hearts, *except in terms of human selfhood?*

The first lecture is entitled "The Christian Church and the Higher Criticism," the last "The Old Testament and Christianity"; and in these we have summed up the conclusions of the distinguished lecturer. The book is one to be reckoned with we have already hinted. Certainly, as we have already remarked, no more persuasive presentation of the theories that pass current under the title of "The Higher Criticism" has yet been put forward in this country. Time alone can show where the truth and falsehood of the extremes of criticism lie; but this we know—that Truth must prevail in the end. And Truth cannot contradict Truth.

E. H. B.