

Modern Biblical Criticism.

SOME THOUGHTS SUGGESTED BY A RECENT BOOK.¹

It is, we think, to be lamented that those who themselves adhere to a tradition which was long universal in the Christian Church, and which has lasted for nineteen centuries without being disproved, should feel compelled to lavish words of undue appreciation on the works of those who seek to overthrow that tradition. There are, no doubt, various reasons for this course. First of all, the critics of the critics feel a little daunted by the positive way in which the modern critic enunciates his dogmas. Just as the medieval world of the West—and also of the East sometimes—fell down abashed before the voices of Councils and Popes, so are men of less courage than sincerity inclined to make needless submissions to men who speak authoritatively in the name of the “irreversible conclusions of modern scientific criticism.”

It is, of course, a bold thing to fly in the face of that science which is now everywhere triumphant, and a modest man who is not a great scientist naturally shrinks from the conflict. Yet on the threshold of this inquiry a question lies which ought to be oftener asked. Is the boast justified that the critical conclusions of the hour are really scientific at all? Has not the habit of dogmatic pronouncement passed over from medieval Popes and Councils to the modern critic? And is it not the Church which, happily for us all, has now come to prefer the course of modest, reasonable, and impartial inquiry?

There lies before us as we write the Romanes Lecture of the year, delivered by no less a master in science than Professor J. J. Thomson. He quotes Roger Bacon as saying: “Argument may conclude a question; but it cannot make us feel certain, *except the truth be also found to be so by experience.*” In other words, no method of research can be regarded as truly scientific unless its results can be tested by observation. Therefore, before the critic can impose the results of processes upon us, he *must apply them to given cases.* Till he has thus shown that his methods are satisfactory, he must refrain from representing them as proved.

Now, this is just what the modern critic does *not* do; and until he has done so he has no right to represent his methods as scientific. The Old Testament critic, before he can authoritatively assign passages, verses, and fractions of verses to “J E” or “P” or “D,” or any other of the creations of what may, after all, prove to be his imagination, must apply them to given cases, such as Beaumont and Fletcher, to Erckmann and Chatrian, to Dickens and Wilkie Collins, and to the King’s Speech. When, and not before, he can separate into their constituent elements the various “sources”

¹ “The New Testament in the Twentieth Century.” A Survey of Recent Christological and Historical Criticism of the New Testament. By the Rev. Maurice Jones, B.D., Chaplain to the Forces. London: Macmillan and Co. Price 10s. net.

of these "documents," he may come to us with confidence, and insist on our acceptance of the very intricate and involved critical scheme of the Pentateuch which he has placed before us.

Another feature of genuine scientific research is this: One of its most necessary characteristics is that its conclusions are never "irreversible." They are perpetually being modified. Every genuinely scientific inquirer eagerly invites fresh information in order to make his conclusions more certain. Thus little boys and girls were authoritatively told, years ago, how the earth was ninety-five millions of miles distant from the sun. That was the nearest approach to the truth that was then possible. Now we know that that distance was three million miles too great. We all of us in past days, again, recognized that the longest day had long been declared to fall on June 21. We now allow that the precession of the equinoxes has lately put June 22 in its place. And Sir J. J. Thomson tells us how recent discoveries have dethroned the molecule and the atom from their position as the most minute particles in the universe, and have put the electron in their place. Instances can be given when the critical world was far less serenely calm than the world of genuine science when its conclusions appeared to clash with recent discoveries. And the day before this review was written we were told of an early Babylonish document which certainly ought, if correctly described, seriously to modify the critical conclusions in regard to the *genesis* of the Pentateuchal narrative. Will our critics welcome, as Sir J. J. Thomson most cordially does, such revolutionary discoveries? Or shall we have another outburst of bitterness and violence in consequence of their appearance?

Another characteristic of true scientific research is its determination to welcome every conceivable mode of approaching a subject. The modern Biblical critic does exactly the reverse. He persists in ignoring every line of inquiry but his own. He approaches every question from the standpoint of subjective analysis. Archæological discovery, the laws of historical probability, the researches of competent scholars in days past, are sometimes quietly ignored, and sometimes absolutely and authoritatively superseded by the canons of criticism which the latest school of critics evolves and employs. Thus the argument from undesigned coincidences, so ably urged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Paley, Lardner, and Blunt, as putting the writers of the New Testament into the witness-box and testing their veracity, is never even mentioned by the modern critical "scholar." So, too, the long and learned historical inquiry, backed up by investigation of internal evidence, examination of style, and so forth, which has been going on during nineteen centuries, from the days of Irenæus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Eusebius to those of great scholars such as Lightfoot, Westcott, and Salmon in England, whose ashes are scarcely cold among us, and in Germany of the learned Theodore Zahn, is often as entirely ignored at this moment as if such men had never lived. It is no better to quote, as Mr. Maurice Jones does, an authority such as Irenæus on behalf of St. John's Gospel, and never to tell us that Irenæus testifies to his having known Polycarp in his youth, and that Polycarp was the disciple of St. John. It is a matter of course that the palpable fact of the appearance in every one of

the Epistles of the doctrine of the indwelling in man of the Incarnate God, which was generally well known, though never written down until St. John's Gospel appeared, is equally ignored, though it proves that the silence of the Synoptists in regard to this great doctrine can only be accounted for on the ground that they desired to lead the world step by step from the Man Christ Jesus to the Eternal Word of the Father, who took our nature upon Him "for us men and for our salvation." Clement of Alexandria tells us—and Clement, beside being himself a competent judge on such points, had sources of information which are lost to us—that it was the fear lest the Church should allow the evidence for the basis of the Gospel message to perish which led the disciples to urge St. John to put the Lord's esoteric teaching on record before he died. Happily for us, he consented to do so.

Finally, the question of the possibility of foisting writings on the Church which, if they were not genuine, were impudent forgeries and nothing less, is an important element in the inquiry. Now, documents such as the Acts of the Apostles and the various Epistles have been handed down to us, which depict to us a body of men connected by the closest ties, and constantly circulating intelligence in all the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean, beside a steadily increasing number of similar communities in the West. Heathen authorities corroborate the statement that such communities existed, and the writings of the numerous Gnostic sects attest the vast intellectual ferment which the doctrines contained in St. John's Gospel had made in the philosophic circles of that day. Can any impartial person contend that it would be easy to obtain credence for forgeries so shameless as the Gospel of St. John and the Second Epistle of St. Peter must have been on the hypothesis of the modern critic, in a community which eagerly sought for authentic information about One whom they had been taught to worship as Divine, and which had such excellent opportunities of verifying it when given? As those who in the past have dealt with the evidences for Christianity have reminded us, those evidences are cumulative. Can anyone venture to call that criticism "scientific" which ignores every line of research but one, and that one the utterly unsatisfactory one of internal criticism, backed up by a bold endeavour to discount the value of the testimony we have by denying the genuineness, as one critic or other does, of every Christian treatise of the first century which has come down to us? If the history of any other nation or religion were treated as that of Christianity has been by the modern school of criticism, all history whatever must long since have disappeared.

The partisans of the modern German school of criticism will no doubt defend Mr. Jones on the ground that he does not necessarily endorse the conclusions which, as a historian, he records. This is true. But if they go on to contend that there is no need to notice the sound and sober criticism of the great thinkers and divines mentioned above, because the author's work is confined to the first fourteen years of the twentieth century, we are unable to agree with them. The mere fact that a wave of hostile criticism has set in at the beginning of the present century does not entitle its historian to treat his subject as though the consistent traditions of nineteen centuries, and the able summaries of them which appeared during the two last of these

centuries, could fairly be ignored. Mr. Jones calls his history a "survey." But in a "survey" a writer is bound to tell his readers how these novel ideas stand when compared with the universal verdict of the ages before they appeared. He is not entitled to treat them as discoveries. They are nothing of the kind. They are mere surmises, which are loaded with a heavy weight of improbability from the fact that they are directly opposed to the unwavering decisions of the Catholic Church. No article of the faith of that Church is so firmly established as that of the authority and accuracy of the documents which have handed down the history of the Old Covenant, and of those which contain the foundations of the better Covenant which was revealed by Jesus Christ. Nor can Mr. Jones escape blame if, while maintaining, as he does, the genuineness of most of the books of the New Testament, he does so, not as profoundly convinced that the criticism he records is unsatisfactory, but as the sentimental advocate of what he mournfully confesses to be almost, if not quite, a lost cause.

Take, for instance, the sentence with which he concludes his history of the current theories of the "Fourth Gospel." He says: "After weighing all the arguments very carefully, I must confess that the authorship of the 'Fourth Gospel' still remains for me an open question, but that what little bias I may have is on the side of St. John" (p. 389). Is this the sort of vindication of a tradition of nineteen centuries which should come from one who has duly weighed the evidence in its favour to which we have already called attention? If the "Fourth Gospel" be not genuine, what becomes of all the doctrinal portions of the Epistles? Even if his subject strictly confines him to the first fourteen years of the present century, Mr. Jones ought to have found some place for a protest against the tendency of modern criticism to rest on one-sided and insufficient premisses. Step by step those who used to insist with an utterly unwarrantable affectation of infallibility that the "Fourth Gospel" was a product of the second half of the second century, borrowed entirely, and none too ably, from Philo, have been driven to the admission that the Gospel was written at the latest within ten years of the death of the Apostle St. John. Is it *quite* beside the point if an inquirer be asked to consider the question how a spurious writing, professing to emanate from the "disciple whom Jesus loved" with a special and peculiar love, and who leaned on the Sacred Breast of his Master at the Last Supper, could have been received by the members of a society bound together by such ties as St. Luke, in the Acts, represents the Christian Church in his day to have been bound, or how men in the position of Polycarp and Irenæus could have been induced to accept it? Thousands of Christians must have seen the Apostle in his later sojourn at Ephesus, have eagerly drunk in his reminiscences of the Person and doctrine of the Eternal Word, made flesh "for us men and for our salvation." And are we to be asked to give up such evidences as this—or even, with Mr. Maurice Jones, to let the genuineness of the Gospel remain as "an open question"—in consequence of a criticism which palpably, on the face of it, "ministers questions rather than godly edifying which is of faith." Can we excuse the author of a "survey" of the latest utterances on an incomparably great question, if he tries feebly to rest in a half-way house between God's truth faithfully handed down in the

Divine Society which He has created, and the latest denial of the doctrine which that Society has ever been the appointed "witness and keeper" ?

Mr. Jones does not himself always deal fairly with the traditional critic. Take the Second Epistle of St. Peter as an instance. Mr. Jones *does* just refer to Zahn in a footnote. But he does not even remotely allude to the strong argument of Zahn that the Epistle is either genuine or a deliberate forgery (see 2 Pet. i. 13-18, and the reference, most natural on the part of the Apostle of the Circumcision, to the letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles; and *cf.* Gal. i. 18-ii. 21). Mr. Jones is not afraid to say that "in the matter of style the contrast between the two letters is complete." This is a very bold assertion, and rests on no ground whatsoever. There is doubtless a difference of style between parts of the two Epistles, but it is due to the difference of subject. It would be impossible for anyone to pen the severe invectives in the Second Epistle against the false disciples, and the vigorous and forcible account of the end of the world, in the same language as that found in the rest of the two Epistles. The argument, if it proves anything, proves too much; it proves that the Second Epistle is the work of two authors. The same difference of subject has led some critics to the *tour de force* which attributes St. Paul's two Epistles to the Thessalonians to two different hands. But a really careful study of the Greek of the two Epistles of St. Peter and that of St. Jude shows that the order of the Greek in all three of them is far more artificial and inverted than in any other book in the New Testament. We venture to commend this view of the subject to the attention of scholars. It has hitherto attracted far less attention than it deserves.

The chapter on St. Paul and the mystery religions speaks of the "valuable results" of "the study of comparative religions." This age is greedy of novelty, and we are of opinion that the value of these "results" has been as much exaggerated as the labours of authors of past days have been underrated. And the list of "literature" on the subject is characteristically reticent about contributions on the traditional side—such, for instance, as those of that competent scholar, Dr. St. Clair Tisdall.

In what we have said, we have never charged Mr. Jones with going all the way with the twentieth-century critics. He often gives a very fair résumé of the arguments on both sides. And, of course, the critics mentioned above as taking an altogether different view of the situation are all dead, except Zahn. But this shows the absurdity of isolating fourteen years of a century from everything which has gone before. The dead are not always wrong; and Mr. Jones ignores a good many living scholars. Moreover, progress in research must build on the past, not dig it up and fling it away. And if Mr. Jones sometimes says things such as "If the 'Christ myth' theory is true, and if Jesus never lived, the whole civilized world has for 2,000 years lain under the spell of a lie," or expresses a doubt whether St. Paul could "have remained as one of the representatives of primitive Christianity" and "an honoured member of their community"; if he denies that St. Paul Hellenized Christianity, as some critics represent him as doing, Mr. Jones very often treats us to utterances far less reasonable. It is simply absurd to say, for instance, that St. Paul "knows nothing of the eating and

drinking of the Body and Blood of Christ; he *only speaks* (!) of the eating and drinking of the Bread and of the Cup" (p. 154). No one who had not culpably forgotten 1 Cor. x. 15-17, and xi. 23-29, could possibly have written as Mr. Jones has done on the subject. It is true that he is here contending that St. Paul is unjustly accused of supporting the doctrine of some Oriental religions that the believer was taught that he "ate the god." As no Christian theologian of repute, from St. Paul downward, has ever taught such a doctrine, it seems unnecessary to quote anyone to refute it. And it certainly cannot be refuted by misquoting St. Paul. The favourite notion, again, that an early historical document called "Q," apparently accepted by our author, has been disinterred from the débris of the Four Gospels, simply disappears in face of the fact, well known to missionaries in the East, that Christian converts unable to read or write frequently commit whole books of the Bible to memory, and that the "personal equation" will account for minor variations. Mr. Jones, once more, gives the arguments *against* the genuineness of 2 Thessalonians, but does not put the case fairly in the opposite direction. No one could carefully compare 1 Thess. iv. 13-v. 5 with 2 Thess. ii., or 1 Thess. iv. 9-12 with 2 Thess. iii. 6-12, without recognizing the close connection between the two Epistles. And generally it is impossible to help feeling that, while in this volume the twentieth-century position is always ably and clearly stated, the force of the traditional position is far too often more or less ignored.

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Publications of the Month.

[Insertion under this heading neither precludes nor guarantees a further notice.]

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL.

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY. By the Rev. C. L. Drawbridge, M.A. (*Robert Scott*. 5s. net.) "Library of Historic Theology" Series. An evidential work of great value.

HOLY COMMUNION, THE. A Manual, Historical, Doctrinal, and Devotional. By the Right Rev. J. Denton Thompson, D.D., Lord Bishop of Sodor and Man. (*Longmans, Green and Co.* 1s. net.) Second edition of a most helpful work.

BIBLE READINGS FOR CLASS AND HOME. By the Rev. Canon Joynt, M.A. (*C. J. Thynne*. 1s. net.) Second edition of a very precious little volume, valuable alike in its devotional and practical aspects.

PRIEST AS CONFESSOR, THE. By the Rev. A. H. Baverstock, M.A. (*Cope and Fenwick*. 2s. 6d. net.) A book on "hearing confessions," a work which in the author's view "calls for a scientific equipment." [See "The Month," p. 808.]

SERMONS AND ADDRESSES.

STUDIES IN THE SPIRIT AND TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY. By the Rev. W. Temple, M.A. (*Macmillan and Co., Ltd.* 3s. 6d. net.) Twenty University and other sermons.

AUSTRALIAN SERMONS. By the Right Rev. A. V. Green, LL.D., Bishop of Ballarat. (*Macmillan and Co., Ltd.* 3s. 6d. net.) Forty-four sermons preached to country congregations. The Bishop modestly disclaims anything "new or remarkable" about them, "but," he adds, "they are Australian."