

THE REPROACH OF THE CRETANS.

“Cretans are always liars, evil wild-beasts, idle bellies.”—*Titus* i. 12.

MANY a reader of St. Paul must have been inwardly troubled by this sentence. It is a charge of the severest possible kind, couched in rough and almost savage terms; and it is applied in the most sweeping style to a whole people, and that a people amongst whom, as De Wette remarks, the Gospel had found such favourable acceptance that in a few years several Churches had been founded, Churches so important that Titus, one of the Apostle's oldest and most trusted fellow-labourers, was appointed to take charge of them. One is inclined to think this a hard and unwarrantable judgment in the mouth of the Apostle. True he pronounces on the Gentile world at large, in the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, a judgment far more terrible and scathing than this; but there he proceeds with a measured judicial solemnity and exhibits a profound moral insight which compel us to feel that his words are “words of truth and soberness.” It must be confessed that the words before us leave a different impression. There is something harsh and crude, not to say rasping and vindictive, about them that ill becomes the lips of St. Paul. Such a dictum, moreover, is as difficult to reconcile with the exquisite tact and courteous regard to the susceptibilities of his readers which the writer of the Corinthian Epistles shews, as with the kindness and large-hearted charity which were characteristic of the Apostle. We cannot suppose, nor do the tone and spirit of the Pastoral Epistles generally indicate, that old age and imprisonment had so weakened the judgment or soured the temper of St.

Paul as to make it possible for him to borrow a rude and vulgar sarcasm, such as this appears to be, in order to fling it at a people to whose chief pastor he is writing, and in a letter which, as he might expect, would be published before long to them and to all the world.

Moreover, we cannot readily imagine that any Cretan poet would have penned such a censure on his fellow-countrymen; or that, if he had done so, it would have gained the general credence and currency implied in St. Paul's use of it, according to the common supposition. At any rate the evidence by which it is fathered on Epimenides deserves to be narrowly scrutinized; especially as he is a poet only known to us by traditions of a highly mythical character, and of whom it is questionable whether any written remains were extant in St. Paul's day. There is, no doubt, considerable testimony in ancient writers to the truth of the accusations here levelled against the Cretans; otherwise it would hardly have been so generally and gravely supposed that the Apostle endorsed them. By diligent research a mass of evidence has been gathered to the depraved character of the inhabitants of Crete, and to their repute as liars in particular. But it is to be feared that there is scarcely any nation, ancient or modern, often referred to in literature, which could not be made to appear in a painfully unfavourable light, if a collation were made of all the bitterest censures passed on them by poets and satirists.

On the whole, this passage has seemed to the writer one of serious difficulty, passed over by orthodox interpreters with far too much ease and complacency; and assuredly it has called forth objections on the part of those opposed to the genuineness of the Epistle which are not at all easy to combat. The question may not be one of cardinal importance, nor are the objections referred to of such a character that, supposing them to be well grounded, they

could be set up by themselves against the proofs, clear and sufficient as it seems to us, of the Pauline character and authorship of the Letter. Still the passage, so far as it goes, and taken as it generally is, as a verse of some well-known Greek poet of Cretan origin, quoted by St. Paul as a true description of the Cretan national character, is certainly apt to scandalize the thoughtful and sensitive reader; and to scandalize him the more if he understands how constantly in the Apostle's utterances courtesy and prudence go hand-in-hand with moral earnestness and courageous fidelity.

It is, therefore, worth while to consider whether the conventional interpretation is after all sufficiently well grounded; whether some other explanation cannot be furnished more suitable to the context of the passage and the design of the Epistle, and more in harmony with the manner and spirit of St. Paul. Heinrichs and Matthies, amongst the earlier German commentators of this century, started some enquiry of this sort, but do not seem to have followed it up with sufficient thoroughness. It has been resumed by Ludwig Lemme, a recent writer in the *Studien und Kritiken*,¹ to whose pages I must refer for the more detailed critical discussion of the points involved.

(1) It is to be observed, first of all, that this quotation occurs in a context (Verses 10-16) relating immediately and only to *heretics*, not to the Cretans generally, nor to the people of Titus' charge specifically. The Apostle concludes his directions as to the appointing of elders or "bishops" (Verses 5-9) by insisting on orthodoxy as an essential qualification for this office:—"holding," he says, "to the faithful word. . . . that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to *convict the gainsayers*." He then proceeds to describe these "gainsayers," "unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers (specially they of the circum-

¹ *Studien und Kritiken*, 1882, erstes Heft, Ss. 133-146.

cision), whose mouths must be stopped, . . . teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake." Again he continues, in the 15th Verse: "All things are pure to the pure, but to them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure, but both their mind and conscience is defiled. They profess to know God, but by their works deny him, being abominable and disobedient and to every good work reprobate." It is in the midst of these very distinct descriptions and vehement denunciations of a certain class of men, marked by the same features as those delineated in the two Epistles to Timothy, "wicked men and sorcerers" (*goëtes*, 2 Tim. iii. 13), that the words of the twelfth Verse occur: *One of themselves, a prophet of their own, hath said, Cretans, etc.* Looking at the connexion of the words as they stand and their natural implication in an unprejudiced way, one would at first sight presume that he who coined this remarkable hexameter was one of these 'unruly men' and "vain talkers," who "taught things which they ought not," and "whose mouths must be stopped."

(2) It is a strange and unusual thing, if such be indeed the case, that the Apostle should use the word *prophet*, so sacred and specific in its New Testament application, of a Gentile poet and soothsayer, a heathen *vates*. It is true that the half-mythical Cretan Epimenides has this and other similar epithets assigned to him by classical writers; and it is not to be wondered at, therefore, that the Greek Fathers supposed him to be referred to here. But in view of such passages as 1 Corinthians xii. 28, xiv. 1, 22-25; Ephesians iii. 5; Romans i. 2, xvi. 26, to find St. Paul applying the word in a loose popular sense, in which the inspiration of the Jewish prophet and the Greek bard should be covered by the same term, is one of the last things we should have expected. In his sermon at Athens (Acts xvii. 28), he cites with grace and propriety "certain

of your own *poets*”; and it is hard to see why he should have gone out of his way to dignify an obscure and somewhat fabulous Gentile soothsayer of six hundred years before with the lofty title of a *prophet*. There is no other instance in the New Testament of any similar extension of the use of this or similar words. Nor do the qualifying words, (a prophet) of *their own* (*ἰδίος αὐτῶν*, *their own especial prophet*), account for this total departure from the sacred and exclusive signification of this most important Biblical word. And it cannot be pleaded that the sentence itself is one that speaks for any great prophetic insight or high inspiration on the part of its author, whoever he may have been.

(3) When we come to examine the testimony of ancient writers as to the origin of the verse, we find it the more doubtful the more closely it is scrutinized. Clement of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Jerome, Epiphanius, Theophylact, ascribe it to *Epimenides the Cretan*, and subsequent writers have in the main repeated their opinion. Theodoret, on the other hand, refers the first part of the verse to Callimachus an Alexandrian poet (*floruit* 260 B.C.), a native of Cyrene, and a poet admired by Horace and Quintilian, in whose Hymn to Zeus we still read :

“The Cretans are always liars ; for indeed, O king, thy tomb
The Cretans built, but thou hadst not died, for thou ever art.”

The same reference is given by an unknown Latin commentator on St. Paul's Epistles, whose work has passed under the name of Jerome ; and the latter writer himself says : “There are those who think that this verse is taken from Callimachus, and they are partly right.” It is scarcely likely that these writers would have fallen back on so defective and halting a reference as that to Callimachus, if there had been definite and well-established ground for quoting Epimenides. The Pseudo-Ambrose, who often

shews himself well-informed, ignores both Epimenides and Callimachus, and suggests that "some Cretan, improved by the discipline of the Lord, had thus expressed a true judgment on the uninstructed Cretans." The testimony to the authorship of Epimenides may be practically reduced to that of Clement of Alexandria, Chrysostom, and Jerome. Jerome, however, speaks in a manner which shews that he was relying on *hearsay*, and knew nothing positive respecting the work of Epimenides to which he refers: "This verse *is said* to be found in the Oracles of Epimenides, a Cretan poet." Chrysostom, in his comment on the passage, *ascribes to Epimenides the very lines of Callimachus above quoted*, and supposes St. Paul to be referring to them, embarrassing himself not a little in doing so. His evidence is clearly of no critical value. Clement affords us no means of testing the validity of his judgment on the point, but it is given quite incidentally, and in a passage¹ where he is seeking to shew how large was St. Paul's acquaintance with Greek literature, and how many were the points of connexion between the best heathen and Christian thought; and he may easily have caught at and given currency to a popular assumption which fitted in so well with his argument. He is confessedly not distinguished for critical accuracy in details. And it appears that the case for Epimenides rests substantially on his single testimony. On the other hand, we have no clear evidence from any other source as to the existence of any written works or traditional sayings of Epimenides extant in St. Paul's day. No classical writer that we are aware of quotes him. The account given of him by Diogenes Laertius, and repeated in our Classical Dictionaries, shews that he had already passed into the region of the mythical and unhistorical. Add to this, that the grammatical form of the word *ἀπρηταί* (*idle*) shews that, in its present guise, at any

¹ *The Miscellanies*, chap. xiv.: On the succession of philosophers in Greece.

rate, the verse belongs to the later Greek. (Liddell & Scott; Winer, p. 80).

The real state of the case was probably something like this: From a want of close attention to the context and to the Biblical sense of the word *prophet*, it had been taken for granted that the Apostle was quoting some ancient Cretan poet. The name of Epimenides was the only one that suggested itself in this character, and it was naturally conjectured that the line might be his. This conjecture, once started, speedily grew into a certainty. A later writer, seeing the name suggested by an earlier one, might easily take the hypothesis for an assertion, or at least would imagine it was based on some positive knowledge. There were no works of Epimenides extant to contradict the imputation, and the point was one on which a commentator would be expected to have something to say. At the same time the first three words, *Cretans (are) always liars*, were perhaps sufficiently proverbial to suggest an ancient popular origin for the whole verse; and they had actually been used in the well-known lines of Callimachus. Jerome's careful hesitation shews how little positive ground there was for referring the verse to any known Greek writer; and Chrysostom's inaccuracy in the matter is of such a kind as to throw the gravest doubt on the whole patristic testimony as to the source of the quotation.

(4) Setting aside Epimenides, therefore, as a candidate for the authorship of this verse, and with him the whole assumption that the "prophet" we are in search of must have been a classical poet, let us see what alternative explanation suggests itself.

The Gnostics of Crete claimed a place within the Church, or they could scarcely have been called "unruly" and "disobedient" (Verses 10, 16); it is on their account especially that the "bishops" to be appointed must be "able to exhort in sound doctrine and to convict the gainsayers" (Verse

9); and that Titus himself must "speak the things that become sound doctrine" (Chap. ii. 1). They are of those whose advent St. Paul had already foreseen, men arising from the Church itself, "speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts xx. 30); and respecting whom St. John afterwards said, "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 John ii. 19). They claimed, in fact, to possess the true Christianity, the true knowledge of God (Verse 16; 1 Tim. vi. 20). The Cretan branch of this movement was, in part, under Jewish leadership (Verse 10), though the parenthetical remark, "specially they of the circumcision," does not at all imply that the party was so distinctively Jewish that the sentence of Verse 12 (directed against *Cretans*) could not be fairly retorted upon its members. What is more likely than that a professedly Christian sect, containing a strong Jewish element, and revolting against orthodox doctrine and Apostolic authority, would have a *prophet of its own*? "Many false prophets," writes St. John, at a time when the heretical movement whose earlier developments are apparent in the Pastoral Epistles had grown to much larger proportions, "are gone out into the world;" again, in addressing "the angel of the Church in Thyatira," the Son of Thunder launches his bolt against "the woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess" (Rev. ii. 20). If there were, as it seems so natural to suppose, amongst the "vain talkers and deceivers" infesting the Church in Crete, one who claimed this character and who was put forward by his party as a "prophet," in the proper Christian sense of the term, we can understand the Apostle's language, and each of the words introducing Verse 12 appears necessary and appropriate; far more so, we think, than if understood to point to the following "Cretans." *One of them said* (*i.e.* one of the persons just described), *their own prophet*,—who bears this name amongst them and is their special organ of Divine illumination. The word

prophet on this view still remains within the circle of its proper Biblical use, and is applied with a sarcastic force characteristic of St. Paul.¹ The quotation itself enables us to judge of the nature and worth of this pseudo-prophet's inspiration. That he expresses himself in a hexameter is not to be wondered at, if the first part of the line was already popularly current in this form. The rest of the verse may possibly have been an imitation of a somewhat similar line of Hesiod, with which it has been erroneously identified.

And such language as this might very well come from the lips of teachers who made great professions of asceticism, as did the early Gnostics against whom the warnings of the Pastoral Epistles are directed (1 Tim. iv. 3; compare Col. ii. 20-23); and who, for all that, were in many cases men of corrupt minds and immoral life (Verses 15, 16), and accustomed to use violent and abusive language (Verse 10; 1 Tim. vi. 3-5; 2 Tim. iii. 2). The double-edged saying of Verse 15, "All things are pure to the pure," is evidently directed against a spurious moral rigorism, inculcated by men to whom, in reality, "nothing is pure." To such men, we venture to think, the sentence under discussion may most fitly be ascribed, rather than to a venerated Greek poet like Epimenides, or a gracious and noble-minded Apostle of Christ like St. Paul.

(5) But then, in any case, the Apostle endorses the sentence and makes it his own, it may be replied: he says, "This witness is true." We must bear in mind, however, that from Verse 9 onwards, it is the heretical party in Crete that he has in view. On them, and them only, his eye is intently fixed, and to them the eye of his reader is directed from first to last throughout this passage. He has brought heavy charges against them in Verses 10 and 11,

¹ Compare the *overmuch apostles*, 2 Cor. xi. 5, xii. 11; also 1 Cor. iv. 8, viii. 1.

and then immediately cites their own leading spokesman and professedly inspired representative as *his witness*; and he claims, with entire moral propriety, the violent indictment brought by this "prophet" against his Cretan fellow-countrymen as *a self-accusation, a just description of his own party, and a "true testimony" to what the Apostle has affirmed respecting them.*¹ So the would-be prophet is "judged out of his own mouth," the "engineer" is "hoist with his own petar." We are at once reminded of the Apostle's words in Romans ii. 1, "Wherein thou judgest the other, thou condemnest thyself," and we see that he still retains much of his old dialectic skill and power of retort. That the "testimony" here given is a testimony bearing upon the character of the Cretan heretics seems to be clear from the words that follow: "For which cause reprove *them* sharply, that they may be sound in faith," words applicable to "the gainsayers" of Verses 9-11, and 15, 16, and to no others. The language of Verse 14, especially when compared with 1 Timothy i. 3, 4, iv. 7; 2 Timothy iv. 3, 4, helps to support this more precise reference of the foregoing words to the heretical party with which Titus had to deal in Crete.

This line of interpretation seems at least to be well worth canvassing. If it can be vindicated and well-established, whether in the exact form sketched out in this Paper, or under some other modification, it will enable us to avoid some serious objections to which the traditional exegesis lies open, and will disclose to us, in Verses 10-16 of this Chapter, a more vivid and connected representation of the heretics of Crete than the Epistle otherwise appeared to contain.

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¹ For similarly reflexive use of the word *testimony*, compare 2 Cor. i. 12; Luke xxi. 13; John v. 31, 36, viii. 13, 14.