

*SOME NEW SUBJECTS OF THEOLOGICAL STUDY.*<sup>1</sup>

I.

IN pleading for Comparative Religion as an essential element in the equipment of a theologian, I am to some extent forcing an open door. But perhaps it will not be superfluous if I try to gather together some of the reasons which, in my opinion, make it a matter of urgency that all universities should follow the lead which has already been given them by some. The lead has indeed been given, we might almost say, by the man in the street as clearly as by university senates. Nothing is more conspicuous in the keen debates about religion which are chronic among the intelligent artisans of Lancashire, than the prominence of this subject in the minds of those who oppose Christianity. *The Golden Bough* (at second hand) is the weapon of street-corner secularists; and it is not the fault of Mr. Blatchford and other able men of his school if Professor Frazer's great work is not to-day as veritable a bogey to the uninstructed orthodox as Darwin's *Origin of Species* was fifty years ago.

Before dealing with this side of the subject, I want to bring forward some other reasons why the Science of Religion is becoming indispensable to students of theology. I would note first that it is increasingly necessary to our interpretation of the Bible. Our commentaries are beginning to show the influence of the new methods. Israel is no longer a people that dwells alone. Babylon and the Bible is a subject that within our recent memory has been discussed in royal palaces, and engaged the alert attention

<sup>1</sup> From an inaugural address delivered on October 8, 1909, at Liverpool University, to the members and students of the Board of Theological Studies. The first part dealt with the work of the Board at Liverpool and the Faculty at Manchester; and the claims of Sociology as a subject for theological students were urged.

of the most brilliant and versatile man whom Europe has seen on a throne for generations. Many will think that this particular motive has been overdone, and will call to mind that key to all the mythologies which George Eliot so unfortunately refused her Mr. Casaubon permission to leave with us. Even so it is not likely that the combination of Babel and Bible will sink into an alliteration and nothing more; and for the very purpose of doing away with the extravagances which we may think we recognise in some of the "religious-historical" theories of to-day we need a full equipment in the history of religion. The same is true of other extreme uses that have been made of Comparative Religion in a field that very moderately orthodox Christians do not like to see invaded. A vast amount of ingenious learning has been spent on the curious parallels to the Gospels which may be dug out of folklore and mythology. The fascination of discovery in such fields is very easily understood; and it is not to be wondered at if some really learned men and a good many clever ones have been able to prove with great plausibility that Jesus of Nazareth is a purely mythical figure. I need hardly say that among scholars this fantastic conclusion has achieved very little approval. Indeed, it is to one of the most advanced critics living that we owe the acutest demonstration of the impossibility of such a doctrine to any one who possesses the historic sense. Professor Schmiedel's argument from the famous nine "Pillar" passages has been rather ungratefully received and seriously misunderstood by the orthodox generally, including not a few whose failure to apprehend his purpose is rather surprising. It is therefore perhaps not an unwarrantable digression if I remind you how irrefragable a confutation of the extreme school we may find in the Gospel passages which simply could not have been invented by early Christian writers, because they go directly

counter to all the dogmatic tendencies which developed so strongly in the later decades of the first century. But this, by the way. More to my present point is the reminder that an adequate knowledge of the facts and principles of Comparative Religion is necessary for those who would defend the Gospels in the market-place to-day against a very widespread tendency to follow such writers as Loisy in the doctrine that though Jesus is a historical character, we know very little about Him. Between the fantastic theorists who resolve everything into myth and the moderate scholars who accept the Synoptist narrative as mostly accurate history, there are endless gradations of opinion ; and it is clearly vital for theologians to be equipped for work on this fundamental subject. I would illustrate by referring to one thorny subject of debate, lying as I personally believe quite apart from the foundation doctrine of the Christian creeds, but touching a dogma that is held very firmly by the large majority of Christians. What is the historical worth of the first two chapters of the New Testament ? The rise, late in the first century, of the doctrine of the miraculous birth of Jesus is being very confidently assigned nowadays to the influence of Gentile ideas. I shall not venture to predict what the outcome of the debate will be. It is not the story in itself which gives trouble to many thoughtful Christians to-day, but the silence of the New Testament about it as a whole. The discussion, therefore, within the Church is entirely a discussion concerning the mutual relations of our earliest sacred documents, and the position of an ancient dogma in regard to the fundamental teachings of Christianity. But, of course, for the Science of Religion the issue is wholly different. It has nothing to do with the truth or falsehood of the dogma, but only with the history of its origin. There might be discovered a perfectly clear genealogy of the

idea, tracing it through ages of development in many distant lands—and it might be linked with an objective historic fact all the same. Of course, such a genealogy would be very prejudicial to its acceptance by unbiassed people. Now it is only by scientific methods that we can deal with such possibilities ; and on the purely scientific ground, I would point out, there are a good many problems which have not been solved, and we ought to essay them ourselves. Are these pagan parallels sound, and is there a satisfactory bridge constructed for bringing them into the early Christian *milieu* ? On both of these queries I cannot feel that the last word has been said. Some of the Gentile parallels look extremely plausible when they are set down by an exponent who aims at emphasising the similarity. But when expounded in the original words of their source, or impartially paraphrased by some one who is not thinking of the parallel, the resemblance vanishes into the absurd. I have seen the Virgin Birth of Jesus compared with that of the future son of Zarathushtra in Parseeism, the *Saoshyant* who is to come to redeem the world from the power of the fiend. It is safe to say that there is absolutely nothing in common except the bare fact that the birth is miraculous. And then as to the bridge. Is anything clearer than that the first two chapters of Matthew are entirely steeped in Judaism—that no one but a man bred in the Jewish atmosphere could possibly have written them ? And do we find as a matter of history that Gentile mythology, where it came so near compromising the Jewish idea of God beyond all endurance, was readily accepted and used by Christians of such a stamp and such a spiritual upbringing as the author of our first Gospel ? I do not say there is no answer to my question about the bridge, nor am I going to pronounce for the *pro* or the *con* upon the doctrine as a whole. Either way I see immense difficulties, which make me heartily

glad that the fundamental creed of Christendom is not really concerned in it. But I just use this as an example of the work that lies before us in the necessary process of putting our doctrines on a truly historical and scientific basis.

From the New Testament let me turn to the Old, where our new science has much more to do, though, of course, not in such vitally important matters. It is not too much to say that Comparative Religion has restored us the Old Testament as a sacred literature which twentieth-century Christians can accept and understand. For it is to this science that we owe our modern conception of the progressive growth of the religion of Israel. Records and doctrines which are morally impossible as the last word of Revelation become intelligible when set among its earliest steps. *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*, is the final verdict of Rome's great poet-philosopher on the dreadful story of a father's slaying his child on the altar to win divine help for his army. And our first impulse as we read the Hebrew counterpart of the old Greek story is to echo the verdict of Lucretius and marvel that an inspired Book should harbour such a tale. And yet as we listen again to the words that are spoken by "the daughter of the warrior Gileadite," as we look at the heroism that made Jephthah willing thus to give his all to set his country free, we begin to feel that the horror and pity of human sacrifice was overruled to produce something that was not bought too dearly even at such a price. Our twentieth-century life can be enriched and purified by an example that was only made possible for us by the existence of what, to our eyes, is a foul and hideous superstition. Not here alone in the upward progress of the race have there been birth-pangs ere the new life has come.

And this leads me on to remind you of the light which

the Science of Religion has to throw on the whole history of the ways of God with man. The new science may fairly be regarded as one of the inevitable outcomes of the attitude which Darwin's life-work did so much to establish—the view that all phenomena are alike to be regarded as produced by the working of fixed laws, existing even if not yet formulated in terms of our understanding. If man's body is the resultant of a slow age-long process of minute differentiations, it naturally occurs to students of his mental development that the same general lines are likely to be recognisable here. New factors will be brought in, just as the new factor of life had to be brought in with the passage from inanimate things to plants and animals. But man's language, his institutions, his intellectual development, are likely to be traceable to the working of definite laws if only we can discover them, crossed, of course, by the new factor of the human will that has laws of its own. Is man's religious development to be the great exception to this all-embracing principle? It is hard to say it is, when we have for decades now been accustomed to the thought that evolution enhances rather than destroys our conception of the Fact of God. We no longer regard special creations as bound up with the very fabric of our Theism. Are special revelations to go the same way?

To say yes to this question would clearly be a long step to take at once. Indeed, I who am no scientist should need assurance first that even special creation is finally and absolutely barred out as impossible by the consensus of natural sciences. But, however that may be, I would plead that *a priori* we might expect Revelation to proceed upon the lines of the constitution of man, created, as we can still believe he was, by the fiat of a Power that has been immanent with him in all his later history. And here we note the striking fact which Comparative Religion estab-

lishes afresh with every new body of observed phenomena. All the world over and in all periods of human history we find the most extraordinary resemblance between religious doctrines and practices, where communication is totally out of the question. Coincidences so minute as to seem proof positive of contact between two widely separated peoples are shown beyond possible doubt to be simply illustrations of the wonderful unity of human nature, so that everywhere similar conditions tend to produce similar results. The inference must be that religion—and we must define it in the most inclusive way—is a natural outgrowth of the human mind, born with its very first beginnings and growing with man's upward progress as inevitably as any faculty he possesses. That this sentence does not concentrate the whole philosophy of religion into a few words, I need not stop to admit. There are complex factors of growth and of degeneration that have to be studied in their own way. But all this is as scientific a study as that of the Science of Language, into which there enter not a few factors at present incalculable, simply because we cannot yet reduce to rule the whole working of the human mind. I only claim that the scientific investigation of this highest factor in human development should be taken up with earnestness and decision by all who hold Religion dear. And I humbly record my own conviction that our synthesis, when we have made it by the help of all this new knowledge and these new principles and methods, will be one in which the essential truths of the Christian Faith will stand firmer than ever before. A faith that welcomes reason as an ally, and knows not how to fear the growth of knowledge, will only gain by the appropriation of treasures yet unclaimed.

## II.

The primary subject of study in a Theological Faculty

will necessarily be the interpretation of the Greek Testament. The grounds of this primacy need hardly be set forth here. Men will continue to debate and to differ irreconcilably as to the history and the value of that little library, but there is no sign of their flagging in their concentration upon it as a subject in which both sides will find of necessity their main battleground. I can hardly, therefore, be asking attention to a trivial subject if I speak of a new method which promises to contribute much valuable material for the exegesis of a Book that still offers problems enough for the twentieth century to solve.

That the New Testament was written in Greek is a fact which the man in the street may be presumed to know. But what is Greek? Cynewulf's *Crist*, Chaucer's *Prologue* and Browning's *Paracelsus* are all written in English, but even the Englishman finds that the generic name here covers three very different species. Now the history of Greek covers just about twice as many centuries as that of English; and yet the prevailing assumption of our scholarship has been that the first half of this immense period is to be treated as practically a unity. This would be all right if it meant that scholars studied each separate period carefully and kept the characteristics of each age apart just as they would keep those of the ancient Boeotian, Ionian or Laconian dialects. But, unfortunately, it has been tacitly assumed till our own day that there is but one norm of Greek, the Greek of the period in which Attic reached its perfect development as the very masterpiece of human linguistic evolution. The Greek of later centuries than the fourth B.C. is accordingly treated as a mere poor relation of the Attic. Where it differs from Attic it is assumed to differ for the worse—its developments are degenerations, and its novelties are only so much "solecism." Now in our English parallel we can recognise readily enough that

something has been lost in five hundred years. A musical ear will appreciate the bathos when we pass from

And smalé foulës maken melodye  
That slepen al the night with open yē

to

And small fowls make melody  
That sleep all the night with open eye.

But is Tennyson's English to be called "bad" because that of Shakspeare or of Chaucer is recognised as classical?

The worth of Hellenistic Greek as a subject of serious study for its own sake is a discovery of the present generation. Great philologists like Albert Thumb, now of Strassburg, have realised that the whole development of Greek from Homer to the modern peasant's patois is to be scanned in every period without the disturbing factor of judicial decisions as to its goodness or badness. And, naturally, this impartial study has brought to light much excellence that was lost when the eye was dazzled by constantly gazing on Plato and Demosthenes. Together with this study of Hellenistic for its own sake, there has come an extraordinary augmentation of the materials on which the Greek scholar must work. Vast collections of late inscriptions have accumulated, and have been subjected to minute investigation. And out of the sands of Egypt have come forth the long-buried writings that show us the very talk of common people upon common things, unconscious that any other eye than their correspondent's would ever scan their ill-spelt casual scrawl. Simultaneously with the publication and the study of the non-literary Greek papyri, capable scholars have been at work upon the Greek of mediaeval and modern times, as taken from the lips of the people. And Hellenists who have surveyed this long history of spoken Greek from ancient to modern times have found that the development reveals to us what is practically a

new language. It is the *lingua franca* of the early Roman Empire. It stands quite apart from the language of literature. To a greater or less degree that was always artificial, recalling by a conscious imitative elaboration the great models of the classical period. The unapproachable beauty of the Attic literary style was exchanged for something which does not pretend to compete with it. But it has merits of its own to compensate for its losses. Greek is as lucid, as subtle, as copious an instrument of thought as it ever was. It adapts itself to its manifold humbler uses with unfailing resource. It can convey the short and simple annals of the poor as vividly and as lucidly as once it told the massive story of statesmen and orators and men of renown. And we find that in the days of its supposed decline Greek has made new and vaster conquests. It has stepped out from the narrow limits of Hellas and established itself quietly as the language of the civilised world.

Now, for eighteen centuries past there has been one product of the later Greek which has engaged the attention of scholars. Not a few of them have pulled wry faces over the "badness" of the Greek in which the New Testament books were written. But its subject-matter compelled attention; and as for its bad Greek—well, an excuse could be found for that. It was written by men of imperfect culture, who had moreover the great disadvantage of thinking their sentences out in a Semitic dialect before they painfully wrote them down in Greek. Hence the uniqueness of the Biblical Greek. Theologians even found a special appropriateness in the fact that no profane literature defiled the sacred tongue. It was, as the pious Richard Rothe said, "a language of the Holy Ghost," and we must not expect it, therefore, to condescend to ordinary human rules.

I must not tell over again the story, familiar now to all students of theology, of Adolf Deissmann's discovery and

its consequences for our views of New Testament Greek. Some Greek papyri from Egypt, scanned by chance one day as copied in a friend's hand, suggested irresistibly their close relationship with the Biblical idiom. And soon we came to see that the Holy Ghost spoke in the language of common life as understood all over the Roman Empire. The Book was written in a hitherto unique dialect, simply because its writers neither knew nor cared whether they wrote literature, caring only to make themselves understood by the humblest and least lettered of men.

I have thus briefly sketched the outlines of the new views of Biblical Greek in order to urge the necessity of a new plan in our preparations for New Testament study. The preponderant authority hitherto in the debates on the interpretation of difficult texts has always been the man of classical learning. His presuppositions have been drawn first from the Attic literature with which he began his Greek study as a boy. He has, indeed, read writings contemporary with the Apostles or later than their time. But these were all modelled on those same great masterpieces which Cambridge Senior Classics like Lightfoot and Westcott copied when they wrote Greek prose for their pupils at Trinity or at Harrow. Plutarch and Philo and Lucian belong to the Hellenistic period, but they can only be used as evidence for the real Hellenistic vernacular by those who know how to cut themselves loose from classical associations and start frankly from the other end. Among the comparatively few points in which we can already see the need of an advance upon the English Revised Version of the New Testament, are those which come from our improved knowledge in this particular. The Revisers were thinking of classical Greek when they put in the scrupulous margin that tells us we really ought to read "Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three, and the *greater* of these is

love." But our new vernacular evidence shows us that in the speech of the people—and therefore in the plain Greek of Paul—there was no longer any distinction drawn between comparative and superlative. Westcott now and then seems to have successfully tempted his colleagues to call up from the shades the uneasy ghost of a purposive idea that he was always seeing in clauses introduced by the old final conjunction *that*. And we have now realised that in Hellenistic speech *that they should know* was a complete equivalent of the infinitive *to know* in all its senses. Similar things happen in the interpretation of words, where the correct classical sense is sometimes presented instead of the later developed meaning recognisable in our new or newly interpreted evidence. Some of this evidence was accessible to the Revisers, though most of it was not. They had the invaluable notes of the old purist grammarians, who in days when the classical Attic was long extinct, made desperate efforts to revive it in literary style. These *modistes* of literature are perpetually working themselves up into a frenzy about the "incorrect," the "shocking," the "solecistic" words and forms and constructions that people would use instead of the right and proper Attic. We can see that whether they are right or wrong in their instructions as to the correct Attic that nobody had spoken for centuries, they tell us infallibly enough what people were saying in their own day. And with our new lights we seize on their forbidden fruit and count it great spoil. If they say "Never, never, never use such a word to mean so-and-so," we immediately infer that the word probably does mean this in the New Testament. The classical bias of the scholars of the past sometimes made them miss this. They describe Apollos as "learned" (Acts xviii. 24) instead of "eloquent," the version their predecessors took from Jerome. The very fact that the Atticist Phrynichus con-

demns the latter should have made them suspicious of the rendering they accepted at his hands. In the Parable of the Sower we read of "the *deceitfulness* of riches" in all our versions alike. But our useful Atticist (Moeris this time) expressly tells us that this word meant *pleasure* in Hellenistic, *deceit* in Attic; and Deissmann is probably right in urging that we must give up the familiar version.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it seems likely enough that *pleasures* in Luke's paraphrase must be taken as pointing this way. These two examples will serve to show how the already existing evidence may come to be read differently in the light which has come from our new witnesses. I cannot stay to illustrate the decisive evidence which we get from these, the often rude and ill-spelt letters of Egyptian peasants, and other vernacular documents of the kind. I believe Deissmann's latest and greatest book, *Light from Anatolia*, will be in our hands before long; and those who have studied it already in the German will be quite content that the case for the new light should be left with his skilful exposition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See "Lexical Notes," *s.v.* (EXPOSITOR, July, 1908).

<sup>2</sup> The remainder of the address was a plea for the study of Hellenistic as a separate subject from classical Greek, not only as a degree subject at the Universities (as already at Manchester), but especially for candidates for the ministry. These, it was urged, may begin with the far simpler and easier Hellenistic, and only go on to classical Greek if they have time. The substance of this concluding section coincided with the latter part of the essay on "N. T. Greek in the light of modern discovery," *Cambridge Biblical Essays*, pp. 502-505.