

The Seat of Authority in Religion.

BY JAMES MARTINEAU. LONGMANS & CO.

I YIELD to the Editor's request that I should give him my impressions of Dr. Martineau's book, though I fear that, as I explained, it can be only impressions: the pressure of other engagements prevents me from undertaking a closer review.

For the same reason, I shall hope to be forgiven if I take the book rather from my own standpoint, and reply to the question, not so much how it may affect others, as how it affects a position like my own. This narrowing down of the subject will at the same time greatly simplify it. I shall not feel called upon to discuss conclusions with Dr. Martineau where I agree with him.

The book may be said to consist of three parts: (1) a criticism of competing theories of authority; (2) a particular criticism of that theory which rests its beliefs primarily on the Bible; (3) a reconstruction, independent of this, and in a large degree negative, of an object for personal religion. I feel myself absolved from any detailed discussion of (1) and (3), though on opposite grounds: I agree with too much of what is said under (1); I differ too widely from the premisses involved in (3). The real debate between us reduces itself to the area covered by (2). Within this area the real battle would have to be fought; and it would be a battle, not so much in regard to the methods of which Dr. Martineau makes use, as in regard to the application of that method to particular concrete questions of criticism.

I will not say that the preliminary argument is not needed, and that it may not have its use in certain quarters; but it is at least, I venture to think, much less needed now than it was twenty or thirty years ago. Among students of theology there are probably few who would wish to exempt the Bible from searching examination. Whatever they may think of the kind of examination applied to it by Dr. Martineau, they are not opposed to examination in the abstract. They would conduct it freely and frankly, without reservation. They will approach the Bible (if they are challenged to do so) "like any other book." All they would claim is, not to have the question foreclosed for them, *how far* it is like any other book. They would let it speak for itself. They would give it a patient and respectful hearing; and if, or in so far as, it appears to differ from other books, they will recognise the fact, and assign to it a greater or less degree of authority accordingly.

I do not wish to speak in terms of blame. We

owe Dr. Martineau far too great a debt, in other ways, for that; and the causes which have made his book what it is lie near enough to the surface, and are not peculiar to him, individually. But I should be obliged to say that the hearing which he has given to the Bible is certainly not patient, and is some way short of respectful. And to that fundamental defect I should attribute what seems to me to be his failure to obtain any sound and permanent results. He takes the whole problem, or series of problems, to be far easier than it is; and the consequence is that he proposes a number of off-hand solutions which cannot possibly stand. I find no signs in the book of that close and concentrated study which alone can satisfy the conditions of biblical criticism at the present day.

The key-note is struck in the preface. It appears that the book takes up recasts and continues an unfinished series of papers which came out in a monthly periodical between the years 1872 and 1875.

"So great in the interval had been the gain of historical research, in regard especially to the growth of the Church in the first two centuries, that it was impossible to resume my task till I had overtaken the movement in advance by following the footsteps which led to the higher point of view. This recovery of a true position is now rendered comparatively easy by the striking improvement, in condensation, in critical fairness, and literary form of modern theological authorship: so that, under such guidance as that of Scholten, Hatch,¹ Pfeiderer, Holtzmann, Harnack, and Weizsäcker, even a veteran student may find it possible, with no very wide reading, to readjust his judgments to the altered conditions of the time."

There is an air of easy satisfaction in this paragraph—a sort of looking round on the works of criticism, and finding them all very good—which I am afraid is not a hopeful sign for getting at the *real* truth, the *veritas veritatum*, a treasure which lies deeper underground, and is not to be come at in such comfortable and expeditious ways. I regret to see Dr. Martineau numbering himself among those who imagine that all that is necessary to solve the most perplexing of human problems is to go to a few of the latest German writers—not to weigh and test their hypotheses, and explore all round

¹ It will be remembered that Dr. Hatch's utterances on biblical criticism are confined to his articles in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

their data, but simply to take their conclusions ready-made, translate them into English, and spread them broadcast as a new gospel.

The process in the hands of Dr. Martineau is not only a very hasty, but a most one-sided, one. It is the old story: *advertunt eventus ubi implentur, negligunt ubi fallunt*. Any thing that makes for his thesis is eagerly accepted, whatever tells against it is ignored. The names which Dr. Martineau chooses are all more or less on his own side of the question. Even the works which go with these names do not seem to me to have been digested and assimilated. I cannot admit for a moment that the real state of present scholarship is represented. It is essentially the criticism of twenty years ago. There is a new patch or two on the old garment (like Vischer's theory of the Apocalypse), and that is all.

Have we had no prophets in Israel all this time whose words are worth listening to? Is it safe to treat of the Christianity of the first two centuries, and wholly neglect Bishop Lightfoot? Is it safe to dispose of the genuineness of the Fourth Gospel without a word of allusion either to Dr. Ezra Abbot or to Dr. Westcott—we might add, even to his own late colleague, Dr. James Drummond—and not only without a word of allusion to them, but with pretty clear indications that they have either not been read or have made no impression? Is it safe to revive an old theory¹ of Keim's and Scholten's (that the Ephesian tradition of St. John turns upon a confusion between the Apostle and the Presbyter) without a hint of the weighty protests which have been raised against it? Is it safe to take up the Paschal Controversy without a sign of any acquaintance with Schürer's elaborate and decisive monograph? Is it safe to touch upon the Acts, and take no account of the accumulating corroborations which that much-enduring book has received in recent years?

One or two contrasts strike me as I am writing. Let any one who is impressed with Dr. Martineau's book turn from his treatment of the Fourth Gospel—I will not say to the "Bampton Lectures" of the present year, though, when they are published, he will find in them a great deal that is instructive, but to Schürer's survey of the Johannean question in a recent volume of *Giessener Vorträge*.² I hope before very long to return elsewhere to this truly judicial and valuable essay, and to do my best to bring out the real advance which it marks. Or again, let him turn from the section on the Acts to an article by Professor Ramsay ("St Paul at Ephesus"), which touches incidentally on that book, in the current (July) number of the *Expositor*. The reader will there have brought

home to him the difference between fact and theory, and will see the directions in which really fruitful and abiding work is being done.

To sum up briefly my opinion of Dr. Martineau's book. From the critical side, from which alone I have dealt with it, I honestly do not think it an important book. It is not a book that need be read. To speak quite frankly, it is in my opinion a book which is better left unread. It is what I should call a dangerous book—not at all in the sense that it contains heretical doctrine, for that one is, of course, prepared—but because the attractiveness of its style is out of all proportion to the solidity of its substructure. Dr. Martineau is not only a very skilful writer, but he is also a very confident one; and confidence is apt to be catching. To the student who brings with him a large grain of salt, and who will test each proposition as it arises, and ask what is the ground for the dogmatic assertions which are made so repeatedly as to what is, and what is not, an anachronism at any given time, the book will do no harm: the criticism of it may, in fact, be a good intellectual exercise; though, so far as positive results are concerned, I suspect that he would be much better employed in reading *Types of Ethical Theory* or *A Study of Religion*. But the general reader, who comes to the book with only a smattering of knowledge, and has not the time or the opportunity to test what is put before him, will be apt to be carried away by the glow and enthusiasm of an eloquent pen into positions at which he would never arrive by sound and circumspect reasoning.

W. SANDAY.

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¹ I commend the pages (pp. 194, 195) in which this is stated as a sample of the *cocva lger* in criticism.

² Giessen, 1889.