INTERPRETATION OF THE LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH.

THE great claim which modern biblical criticism makes for itself is that it has made the early history of the Christian Church live once more before our eyes. By means of an "improved translation" it has got to the heart of the biblical writers; it has shown us that the men and women of the Bible are of flesh and blood, that they had ideas, passions, politics, theories of life and of the universe; and so we are told that, thanks to this improved translation, "the past woke up, lived and moved, and what it said came to you with a new accent, the accent of truth."[1]

The slightest acquaintance with modern accounts of the life of our Lord or of the early history of the Church, or with modern commentaries, is sufficient to show that to a considerable extent this claim is justifiable. In two points at least these writings contrast favourably with the works of previous generations, in philological exactness and in historical vividness. The relations of Hellenistic Greek have been more exactly determined, the life-history of each word traced, the peculiarities of each writer classified, every detail of every sentence placed in the balance and weighed. No doubt the process is often wearying; the *débris* left by previous commentators has to be cleared away before the exact lines of the foundations which have to be reconstructed can be seen; but in the end the patient student feels that he has been safely guided past false clues that might have led him astray, and that he now does see

[1] Mrs. Humphrey Ward, in the *Contemporary Review*, March, 1889, p. 457.

what those foundations really imply. To vary the metaphor—the Alpine climber, as he makes his way through the thick rows of pine trees in some frequented part, is a little annoyed at the number of sign-posts which will not leave him to find out his own way for himself; but when, following their guidance, he has reached the top, and the whole expanse of country lies before him, such that it could only be seen from that one point alone, he is grateful that he has not been allowed to diverge on any of the many side-paths, which seemed so clearly right at the moment, and yet which would have lost him the completeness of the view.

Again, exact verbal statistics have been collected. These have revealed to us in the synoptic gospels the existence in some form or other of previous materials used by the writers, and so have thereby strengthened the evidence for the early date and historical trustworthiness of the central core of the gospel narrative: they have revealed to us an amount of verbal differences between the various groups of St. Paul's epistles: now these can be no accidents, there must be real and living facts to account for them; and thus, alike to those who have accepted and to those who have denied the Pauline authorship, the real meaning of the epistles, and the circumstances of the moment which prompted each have grown more clear and vivid. Perhaps no better instance could be given of the way in which this careful verbal study leads into the very heart of a writer's meaning than Pfleiderer's study of the Epistle to the Ephesians,[1] in which he rejects indeed the Pauline authorship, yet expounds the central truth in a way most helpful to those who accept that authorship.

Side by side with this philological exactness stands the greater historical vividness. Modern criticism has not only weighed and distinguished words, it has weighed and distinguished character and individuality. It insists that

[1] *Paulinismus*, ii., p. 162.

every actor in the drama shall be a living human being, with his own distinct life. Within the Church the more rigid conservative element of the Jewish Christians, "all zealous for the law," stands out in clear contrast to the eager, innovating champions of liberty, the Gentile Christians. Within the circle of the apostles, the characters of St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John, and, in a less degree, St. James, are stamped with such strong features, that no one could confuse their utterances or possibly mistake the epistle of any one of them for the work of any of the others; there are clearly marked varieties in their teaching; there is a real and true Paulinism which, in its recognition of the elements of true religion in the Gentile world, in its demand for a rational dogmatic expression of the universal significance of the life and death of the Lord, in its clear conception of the subordination of the individual to the whole body of the Church, stands apart from the teaching of the other apostles, and yet is, no less than theirs, a real presentation of the truth as it is in Jesus, and capable, without undue strain or violence, of being combined with them in a higher synthesis.

These are clear and invaluable gains; yet, while ungrudgingly welcoming them, we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that much of such criticism is vitiated by a narrow conception of life, and falls short of being a full and adequate presentation of the richness of the spiritual life which was so striking a characteristic of the early Church. Philologists have been sometimes criticized for discussing only the features of language, to the almost total neglect of the life of language. The same danger is possible, and far more serious, in dealing with literary and spiritual phenomena. One student never gets behind the philological interest of a book; another is absorbed in its literary interest: but few reach to the living human soul, with its hopes and fears. Of these few, some form their conception of life entirely in

the study and through literary spectacles, without contact with its hard realities. All such are doomed to comparative failure. "To feel and honour a great character in his works, it is necessary for the critic himself to be a somebody, to have a character of his own." These are Goethe's words. "He who would interpret the work of a master must summon up all his powers and must be *alive* at as many points as possible." These are the words of one of our best living critics.[1] If these are true, the qualities needed for a real appreciation of the great moving forces of the world must be higher, severer, rarer than is often supposed.

Two points may be singled out in which a purely literary criticism has ignored the facts of life. It has at times ignored the weaknesses of human life and character; at other times its many-sidedness. Due allowance is often not made for weakness; a traditional belief in the verbal inspiration of the documents or in the infallibility of a Christian saint is often made the groundwork of a critical attack by those whose reason has rejected both the one and the other. If a book of the Bible is to be treated as any other book, it must be so treated honestly; the same kind of evidence for facts must be regarded as adequate as would be in dealing with a pagan historian. But this is often not done. Differences in minor details which are not greater than those in Herodotus, Æschylus, Thucydides, and Demosthenes, or even in different parts of Herodotus himself, about the number of ships engaged in the battle of Salamis, are held sufficient to discredit the historical character of the gospels; or again inconsistencies in an apostle are treated as fatal to historic truth. For instance, St. Peter refuses to eat with Gentile Christians at Antioch; consequently, the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles that he ate with Cornelius and that he supported the compromise

[1] Prof. Dowden, *Transcripts and Studies*, "The Interpretation of Literature," an essay well worth the study of a student of the Bible,

at the Council of Jerusalem are treated as inaccurate. The answer is particularly easy in this case, as St. Paul himself represents St. Peter as inconsistent with his own principles; but even were this not so, what ignorance of life is implied in the criticism! What large portions of nineteenth century history will have to be proved unreal, how many speeches to be rejected as unauthentic, if the possible inconsistency of a statesman is not taken into account as a factor in history!

But more often does this literary criticism show itself blind to the many-sidedness of a great personality or of a great truth. The criticism which would limit St. Paul's genuine writings to the four epistles of the third missionary journey rests upon no external evidence whatever. It is based mainly on the postulate that, given a teacher with striking features of character and of style exhibited vividly in one great conflict of his life, it follows that he is to be always living on that level and in that mood. St. Paul is thus limited to one set of experiences and expressions; he is the champion of justification by faith, the eager controversialist against the Judaizers—that and nothing else. Yet contrast with such a limitation the variety of style and of character revealed even within this group of epistles. Within the four corners of one epistle, what a change of vocabulary, of structure, of tone is to be seen in the central section of 2 Corinthians as compared with the earlier and later sections! or, to extend our view to the whole group, what a change from the broken, halting sentences of Galatians ii. to the irregular, manual-like jottings of Romans xii., or the clear, terse, almost rhythmical lyrics of the psalm of the love of man in 1 Corinthians xiii., or that of the love of Christ in Romans viii.! And as we pass to his character —how are we to fix and fasten such a restless, flashing, varying, many-coloured kaleidoscope? At one moment the active, undaunted missionary, checked by no perils of land

or sea, not ashamed to preach the gospel even in Rome; at another speaking with fear and trembling before a few believers, neither wise nor noble nor mighty, in Corinth: thrilling now with the note of triumph, now with the cry of despair: the shrewd, practical, worldly-wise director, who arranges the details of the women's head-dress and of the collection for the saints; yet in a moment is speaking with tongues more than they all, whether in the body or out of the body he knows not, the seer of revelations and visions of the Lord: boasting of all his national privileges, and pouring contempt on every boast: placing himself before his converts as the object of their imitation—himself who can do nothing, nay, who cannot do that which he wills, and does that which he hates: yearning for his converts with the strange pangs of a mother for her unborn child, and yet pouring out upon them the flood of his irony and sarcasm: quick to punish and hand over to Satan; as quickly melting to forgiveness: ready to be anathema from Christ Jesus for his brethren's sake, and yet himself anathematizing all who love not the Lord Jesus: the opponent of the law, who yet establishes the law: the champion of freewill, who does not shrink from the strongest assertions of predestination: the assertor of the personal responsibility of each individual to God, and of his absolute dependence upon the whole body.

Such a style and such a character will surely leave room for the affectionate tenderness and simplicity of the Thessalonian or Philippian letters; for the eucharistic majesty and insistence on Church unity of the so called letter to Ephesus; for the vigorous polemic, the wide-soaring, eagle gaze of the Colossian letter; for the personal affection and practical wisdom of the pastoral group. A similar criticism applied to the three great controversies of St. Augustine's life would eliminate two of them in favour of a third; and yet a greater than Augustine is here.

So to take one instance of the many-sidedness of truth, of the need of being *alive* at all points to deal with it. Place the Epistle of St. James side by side with that to the Romans; treat them by verbal literary tests: it seems almost impossible to resist the conclusion that they not only contradict each other, but that one writer is consciously contradicting the other. But add to the mere verbal test the historical surroundings; realize how this question of the relation of faith to works was a common theme, alike in rabbinical and Alexandrine discussions; and it will appear at least possible that the two writers should have treated of the same theme, and used the same illustrations, each in perfect independence of the other.

Yes, but even if they are not consciously antagonistic, are they not irreconcilable? To answer this we must pierce deeper still, behind the historical circumstances into the realities of spiritual life. Realize, on the one hand, the danger which besets every orthodox believer of resting on an empty profession of faith; on the other hand, the danger which besets the active, consistent Christian of self-complacency, of looking to himself rather than to God as the source of his strength. Combine the prophet's demand for reality in religion with the theologian's insight into the value of the true motives of action and his jealousy for God, and the difficulty vanishes. It is only the student, not the preacher, not the parish priest, not the director of consciences, who finds it difficult to reconcile the teaching of St. Paul with that of St. James.

The critic whose interpretation is to be complete must therefore give us an "improved translation" which shall interpret literary, historical, and spiritual facts. Like Elijah, he must stretch himself three times upon the child ere it will revive. But when we try to reach to the deepest of all these facts, the spiritual life, we are met by a real difficulty. Such facts very often are scarcely mentioned

in the historian, much more do they escape discussion in incidental and controversial documents like the epistles. They lie so deep that their existence is presupposed. It is as true of these deep principles of life as it is of doctrine, that "their importance is likely to be in the inverse ratio of the number of passages in which they are directly taught."[1] The historian is often more occupied with the external relations of his country than with the secret forces of national life; and the Christian Church jealously guarded its deepest secrets from the rude gaze of the outside world. Yet we cannot be wrong in emphasising two of these spiritual factors, which have often been strangely ignored or minimised.

I. The first is the strength of the sense of brotherhood implied in the existence of the Church. It is obviously true that the first outburst of the spiritual life tended to intensify individuality: the gifts of the Spirit, the sense of the indwelling presence of God making each man partaker of the Divine nature, the consciousness of intimate intercourse in prayer between the Christian and his Lord, all tended in this way. The Church from the first was the meeting-place of strong individualities; but from the first it was also their home, their family, controlling them with the discipline of love. Each individual was made to feel that he was the member of a body, bound to consider the rights and feelings of the other members, bound to use his own gifts to profit withal. The reality of the struggle between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the reality of the differences of character and of teaching between the apostles, imply that behind the struggle and behind the individualities there lay a force and a life which could combine varieties and harmonize conflicting characters. It is in time of conflict and of jarring that we feel the compelling force of family life or of a college tradition, checking wilfulness and caprice, and disciplining each

[1] Dale on *The Atonement*, p. 21.

member into thoughtfulness and willing subordination. So in the early centuries of Christianity, it is far less rational to hold that the conception of a catholic Church was a compromise developed out of conflicting elements, than that it existed from the first in its real essence, with power to control and calm the conflict.

It is a significant fact, and one that is strange to merely literary and academic minds, that the earliest historian of the Church makes no mention of the literary documents of his time, not even of the epistles of St. Paul. They are not of primary importance to him. That which did seem important was a great conception of the Church existing from the first, of a body filled with the Spirit of God so as to be of one heart and one mind, dealing with difficulties and perplexities, the scene of moral evils and of intellectual disputings, yet ever maintaining the unity from which it started, *the* Church throughout all Judæa and Galilee and Samaria, the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood.[1]

II. Further, any attempt to picture the real spiritual life of the early Christians must throw into stronger relief than is often done the personality of the Lord Himself. In a friendly review of Pfleiderer's *Das Urchristenthum*, Professor E. Schürer complains that he, like Baur, "has overlooked nothing less than the chief fact, the creative personality of Jesus Christ." "Nowhere does it appear that the positive contents of the proclamation of Jesus Christ had any influence at all on the time that followed."[2] Such a criticism shows how far it is possible to slip away from the true centre of a position. The epistles of St. James, of St. Peter, of St. John, and even of St. Paul, are full of references, more or less conscious and declared, to the positive contents of the Lord's teaching. His persona-

[1] Acts ix. 31 (Rev. Ver.), xx. 28.

[2] *Theologisches Literarzeitung*, 1888, p. 516.

lity was creative even to St. Paul, who had probably not seen Him in His earthly life. He is the sphere in whom he thinks, and acts, and commands, and entreats, and rebukes; the Lord to whom he pours forth his prayers, who speaks to him in clear utterance; the pattern life on whose meekness and gentleness he strives to mould his own impetuous temper; the object of knowledge; the goal which he longs to reach. St. Peter tells how those who had not seen Him love Him, and rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory; St. John still enjoys fellowship with Him, real as when he had heard and seen with his eyes and handled with his hands, a fellowship which is the source of fellowship with the Father and the security of fellowship with the brethren. The writer of the Acts, when he says that his former narrative contains that which Jesus *began* to do and to teach, implies that it is the same Jesus who continued to inspire his actions and the teachings of His apostles. No attempt therefore to interpret the life of the early Church can be adequate which does not give due emphasis to these two factors, the combining force of the sense of brotherhood, and the inspiring force of the personality of the Lord. If

> We live by admiration, hope, and love,

an account of early Church life must show what Christians admired, what was the object of their hope, what the object of their love.

> Love, hope, fear, faith—these make humanity,
> These are its sign and note and character.

If Browning is right in this, he who would depict the life of humanity at a time when it was confessedly stirred to its depths must be able to show us a power which could draw forth all and each of these true qualities. No presentation short of this can satisfy us. No qualifications short of

these can make the true interpreter. He will need philological exactness to be loyal to his authorities; he will need historical imagination to picture the scene in living reality; he will need, above all, a spiritual sensitiveness, able to feel the real importance of that with which he deals. "For the searching into Holy Scripture and true knowledge there is a need of life, of spiritual beauty, and an unsullied soul, and virtue modelled upon Christ, that the mind, guided by it along its path, may be able to touch and lay hold of that at which it aims; . . . for without a pure mind, and an imitation of the life of the saints, none could really grasp the teaching of the saints." [1]

W. Lock.

ON THE MORAL CHARACTER OF PSEUDONYMOUS BOOKS.

I.

In the great mass of the world's literature, the productions that have borne names other than those of their real authors are many, and possess a peculiar interest. The task of discovering their secret stimulates curiosity; and the necessary research has often exercised the highest powers of learning and criticism, and given occasion to keen controversy. The literary history of pseudonymous books is in many cases very curious, and the circumstances of their origin have often thrown fresh light on obscure portions of history. Even to the literature of inspiration the interest derived from such questions is not wanting. For among the canonical writings of the Old and New Testament there are some which, by the mistakes of copyists, editors, or others, have been ascribed to those who were not their

[1] Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, cap. lvii.