

CHAPTER I.

EARLIER CRITICAL THEORIES.

WITH the exception of the Alogi in the second century, an obscure and insignificant sect, who, on internal grounds, assigned the authorship of the Fourth Gospel to Cerinthus; and of Faustus,¹ the Manichæan in the fourth century who suggested that the titles of the Gospels *According to Matthew, According to Mark*, and so on, designated not the authors but the authorities from which the actual writers derived their materials, —the genuineness of the Four Gospels may be said to have passed without question down to the close of the eighteenth century.

It is the Fourth Gospel which has had to sustain the most formidable attacks of negative criticism. The assault was opened in 1792 with a book on 'The Dissonances of the Evangelists,'

¹ August., *Contra Faustum*, xxxii. 2. Cf. xxxii. 16, 19, 21, 22; xxxiii. 6-8.

by Edward Evanson, a man of little scholarship and less critical judgment, who rejected the Fourth Gospel because of the discrepancies, as he alleged, between it and the other Gospels, especially St Luke. An attack from such a quarter could scarcely expect to prove of any great effect, but it was sufficient to break in upon the unanimity of acceptance which the Gospels had uninterruptedly enjoyed from the beginning, and it fastened upon points which raise difficulties even for believing critics. The next attack was made, again upon the Fourth Gospel, in 1820 by Bretschneider, a German pastor of scholarship and repute, with a volume entitled 'Probabilities Concerning the Nature and Origin of the Gospel and Epistles of the Apostle John.' He maintained that the Johannine discourses were largely imaginary, and that the author was not the Apostle, nor a native of Palestine, nor a Jew, but rather some Christian of Alexandrian training, who wrote this Gospel in Egypt, whence it was taken to Rome and put in general circulation by the authority of the Roman Church. His treatise called forth replies, by which, strange to relate, this impugner of the genuineness of the Fourth Gospel was convinced, so that he became a powerful advocate of the Johannine authorship.

From this time forward, however, the genuine-

ness and the credibility of the Gospels were freely called in question. That great movement of the human intellect called the *Aufklärung*, which German historians declare to have been for significance and strength of influence only second to the introduction of Christianity and to the Reformation, was then in full tide, and its principles were being applied to the Biblical history. Narratives containing the supernatural and the miraculous were held to be contrary to reason, and had to be explained away or altogether set aside. Of this rationalistic criticism H. E. G. Paulus, Professor of Theology, first at Jena and latterly at Heidelberg, was a conspicuous example. Already in 1800 he had published a 'Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels,' explaining away the miracles of the Gospel history; and in 1828 he published a 'Life of Christ.' He does not dispute the historical character of Jesus, but he sets himself, by all sorts of exegetical devices and interpretations, to get rid of the miraculous element in the Gospel history. He admits the occurrences of a miraculous character related in the Gospels to be facts, but he insists that they are only natural facts whose real causes the eye-witnesses and narrators had no proper means of ascertaining. Under the naturalistic treatment of Paulus the 'Life of Christ' is transformed into that of a wise Rabbi, who performed no miracles,

but from love to men executed innumerable works of charity, with the help of medical skill and in virtue of a measure of good fortune attending his exertions. He reduces the Gospel narratives to a tissue of paltry deceptions and ridiculous trivialities, and his character of Christ is a miserable caricature of the reality. A great deal of the coarser rationalism and scepticism of more recent times, along with some that would resent being called coarse, is animated by the same spirit, and proceeds by methods little different. As a serious attempt to account for the Gospel narratives and the Person of Christ it is no longer to be reckoned with.

Seven years after Paulus had given to the world his 'Life of Christ,' David Friedrich Strauss published his 'Leben Jesu.' He was at the time Tutor in the Theological Seminary at Tübingen, and he leaped into notoriety at once by the publication of his work. Although more thoroughgoing in his scepticism than Paulus, he rejected entirely his rationalistic exegesis. He saw that no straightforward exposition could remove the miracles from the Gospel history, so deeply and firmly are they embedded in the narratives of the Evangelists. He accordingly framed his famous mythical theory to account for the Gospels and the Person of Christ. A good and holy Jew named Jesus, who had

gathered round Him a band of enthusiastic and credulous followers, was in course of time metamorphosed by them into the Divine Christ, whose figure the Evangelists set before us. In their enthusiasm and devotion they imagined numerous fictions regarding Him, and by-and-by they mistook their own inventions for realities and ascribed them to Jesus, with no intention to deceive. The fruitful mind of the early Church thus created myth after myth. Spontaneous impulse had by the end of the first century brought into existence the materials of our present Gospels. At last three unknown authors arranged these materials and produced the Synoptic Gospels. In the scheme of Strauss the Gospel of Matthew was adopted, not as the work of the Apostle of that name, but as the most original and relatively credible of the three, although it too had undergone many revisions. Sixty years later arose another great unknown, whose character must have been a strange compound of mysticism, enthusiasm, and imposture, but who produced the Fourth Gospel and palmed it off upon the Church as the work of the Beloved Disciple. Strauss has a poor opinion of the Fourth Gospel, and especially of the discourses of Jesus which it records. But he maintains its absolute unity, comparing it to that of the seamless coat of which it speaks. Strauss's mythical theory has

entirely failed. The whole picture of Christ as exhibited in the Gospels is as remote as possible from the exaggerated and fantastic creations of mythology, and the universality characteristic of the picture is far above and beyond the local and national features which usually mark the myth. No fictitious growth such as Strauss postulates could have given us, even if the interval of time and circumstances had otherwise allowed, the Figure which is the supreme and ineradicable miracle of the Gospel history, the Person of Christ. Strauss's 'Life of Jesus' gave rise to a vast and varied literature when it was first published for the learned world, but when in 1864 he reissued it in more popular form for the German people it attracted comparatively little attention.

Great as was the excitement created throughout the Christian world by the assault of Strauss, his attack was in itself feeble and superficial in comparison with that of Baur, who had been his master at Tübingen before his 'Life of Jesus' was written. Baur was Professor of Historical Theology at Tübingen from 1826 to 1840, when he elaborated the system in which he professed to account in scientific fashion for the origin and early history of Christianity. The chief importance of his work, and of the critical school which he founded, lies in the elaborate investiga-

tion which he made into the origin of the New Testament and into the history of the Apostolic and the post-Apostolic age, with their variously constituted parties. With Baur, as with Paulus and Strauss, the rejection of the supernatural in every form was an axiom. He found the elements of the Christian religion in conceptions and ideas already current in Judaism and heathenism, and he traced the phenomena of Christianity to them as the products of a natural development. Paying little heed to the external evidence attesting the existence and use of the New Testament Scriptures, Baur believed himself able, by a study of the literature of the Apostolic and the post-Apostolic age, to exhibit the true course of the development of Christianity.

Primitive Christianity, as Baur conceives it, is Ebionitic in its character, distinguished from Judaism proper only by the place it assigns to the Crucified Jesus, in whom it sees the promised Messiah who will come again to perfect His kingdom. Of this stage the first Apostles, Peter and James and John, are the leading representatives, and they still observe circumcision and the other requirements of the Law.

In opposition to this narrow and conservative Ebionite type is the Pauline conception of Christianity, which is universal in its character, asserting freedom from the Law, and claiming

for Jesus pre-existence, oneness with the Father, and generally the attributes of Godhead. In the opposition which he claims to have discovered between St Paul and the Three, Baur finds the pivot for his reconstruction of the entire Christian history. Not only is this opposition seen in the differences between St Paul and the Judaizing Christians of the Apostolic age, but it continues down into the second century, where it is to be clearly recognised in the so-called Clementine literature—the Clementine Homilies and Recognitions in which St Peter, and St Paul in the character of Simon Magus, are leading and opposing figures.

In the face, however, of Gnostic error threatening both the Petrine and the Pauline wings of Christianity, and of persecution on the part of the Roman State, a synthesis of these opposing tendencies is brought about, and their contending voices are silenced in the unity of the Catholic Church, which is attained by the third quarter of the second century.

To these three stages of the development of Christianity Baur assigns the various New Testament books, as well as other works not included in our canon. To the first belongs the Apocalypse, which he considers to be Ebionitic in character and accepts as the genuine production of St John. To the second belong the four

principal epistles of St Paul,—Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians,—in which the radical opposition between St Paul and the Judaisers is so clearly marked. To the last stage, running well into the second century, belong the rest of our canonical books, including the Four Gospels, which by their conciliatory character, as Baur conceived, were manifestly produced to heal the divisions of an earlier time. Of the Gospels, Baur, like Strauss, as we have seen, considered St Matthew the most authoritative, because it betrays least of party feeling. Whilst St Matthew, written about 130 A.D., is Judæo-Christian in its spirit, St Luke, written about 100 A.D., is universal, after the fashion of St Paul, and St Mark, written later than St Matthew, is of a mediating tendency. The latest of the Gospels, as Baur infers from its highly developed Christology, is that bearing the name of St John, which was not written till about 150 A.D. The Four Gospels were not the work of companions of Jesus, but the productions of men nearly a hundred years after His death, written in the interests of conciliation, and all of them “tendency” writings.

Baur’s scheme of early Church history tore up Christianity by the roots, and swept away even the testimony of the Apostolic Fathers. For a time it seemed as if the very citadel of Christi-

anity had been taken, and the theory and school of Baur became dominant, and remained in power throughout Germany for some decades. Those who did not accept the results of his investigations, and still upheld the genuineness and credibility of the Gospels, were stigmatised as apologists and traditionalists.

The reaction against the extreme conclusions of Baur and his School was sure to come. Within the circle of his immediate adherents differences began to show themselves. Hilgenfeld, now the last survivor of those first followers, early detached himself from Baur's main propositions, and so did Ritschl, who showed in 1857 that there was no fundamental difference between St Paul and the primitive Apostles. Weizsäcker, Baur's successor in Tübingen, declared it to be a mistake to suppose that in the post-Apostolic age there were only Paulinists and legalising Jewish Christians. Professor Harnack, in an early essay,¹ has pointed out that Baur and the Tübingen School had an eye only for ideas and intellectual conceptions, and laid far too little stress upon those vital relations embracing the facts of spiritual experience and motive forces thus brought into play, which the speculative critic has no plummet to sound and no calculus to estimate. "New life," says Harnack, "creates

¹ Reden und Aufsätze, ii. 221.

new opinions—not only new opinions new life. Much more attention is therefore now directed to the social life, the public worship, the morality, and the discipline of the early Christians than was ever the case with the Tübingen School.”¹

In the overthrow of his imposing scheme of reconstruction, the admission which Baur had made of the genuineness of the four principal Epistles of St Paul played an important part. From these Epistles the essential facts and doctrines of Christianity can be deduced as they are set forth in the Gospels and the other books of New Testament Scripture, and their testimony has been found wholly antagonistic to the superstructure which he erected upon them.

We have already noticed that Baur paid scant attention to the external evidence on behalf of the early circulation and use and authority of the Gospels. The fresh investigation of the early Christian literature in the first and second century, to which Baur's revolutionary theories

¹ A recent writer effectively emphasises this in his own way. “The greatest personalities in political history, in philosophy, in literature, and in science, with the results they have achieved, have not obviously been the product of their environment, and if they have been due to evolution, it has certainly not been an evolution so simple and straightforward in its *modus operandi* as that which here accounts for the origin of the Christian religion. It has had its surprises—its Shakespeare from Stratford, its Napoleon from Corsica, its Lincoln from the backwoods; but there must be no surprises of any kind in the New Testament.”

gave an impulse, became one of the most powerful weapons in the hands of the defenders of positive Christianity. In this field an incalculable debt of gratitude is owing to Westcott, Lightfoot, and Sanday among English scholars, and to Zahn and Harnack among Germans, for their laborious researches and their successful vindication of the traditional dates of the Gospels, and for the materials they have collected in defence of the genuineness and credibility of the record. In this connection acknowledgment must be made of discoveries of manuscripts of the Gospels and other documents filling up gaps in the early Christian literature, whereby fresh links in the chain of proof have been found and the case for accepting the Gospels made, as many are glad to believe, irresistible. By the progress of patristic studies, by the discovery of fresh literary materials, and by a thorough re-examination of the sacred writings themselves, notably the Epistles of St Paul, the Tübingen theory of early Church history and literature has been completely overthrown. "I am far from disparaging the historical importance which belongs to the Tübingen School," says Professor Harnack in the essay already quoted. "But as regards the development of the Church in the second century, it may safely be said that the hypotheses of the Tübingen School have proved themselves every-

where inadequate, nay erroneous, and are to-day held by very few scholars." No doubt the influence of Baur is still at work in the critical and theological sphere in Germany and elsewhere, and there still are, as we shall see, scholars who call in question the grounds of the reaction from his extreme conclusions. But the return to tradition, so far as the chronology and authority of early Christian writings are concerned, is now justified as the assured result of much scholarly and laborious research, and the view of the books held from the beginning is not likely, after the failure of Baur, ever to be successfully challenged.