

CHAPTER II.

SOME RECENT CRITICISM.

IT was upon the external attestation of the Gospels and other books of the New Testament that Baur's great scheme of the reconstruction of the early history and literature of Christianity most notably made shipwreck. Driven from the external evidence, his critical descendants have taken refuge in the internal, where subjective considerations have freer scope to cast doubt upon the credibility of the Christian documents. Accepting our Gospels as they stand, the more extreme wing of the successors of Baur have set themselves, by an abuse of critical analysis, by misleading analogies from the study of Comparative Religion,¹ and by an abundance of arti-

¹ There is a considerable school of thinkers who assure us that all early religions are born in an atmosphere of myth, mystery, and legend, from which they gradually emerge into something more orderly, historical, and tangible. So the narratives of the Virgin Birth of our Lord, His Miracles, His Resurrection and Ascension,

ficial assumptions, to reconstruct the Gospel history on a purely naturalistic basis. In this reconstruction we find only a humanitarian Christ, and in some extreme theories Christ disappears altogether, and Christianity is left to be produced by a sort of spontaneous combustion. Bethlehem is not the place of His birth, which is more likely to have been Nazareth or somewhere in Galilee. It was not at Jerusalem, nor anywhere in Palestine, that the belief in the Resurrection was cast in its final mould by the evangelical Easter legend, but at Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians. There Gentile Christians, who had been wont in their heathen state to celebrate the worship of Adonis, the Master, transferred the idea and the worship to a new Master, Christ. We have been accustomed to believe that Jesus was condemned and suffered death because He claimed to be the Messiah

are the legendary setting of the Christian religion. But the proposition thus laid down is a mere hypothesis, and the deduction to the disadvantage of the Christian faith is extremely precarious. The story of Buddha in ancient and genuine Buddhist literature is not mythical nor miraculous. The myths and miracles and supernatural elements, notably the so-called Christian-like elements in Buddha's life, came in nearly a thousand years later. Buddhism passed downwards from philosophy and the search for the Way into myth and idolatry and superstition and atheism; not upwards from myth to truth. The same might be said of Confucianism and Taoism. See "Taoism," by Archdeacon Moule, in 'Church Missionary Review,' October 1907.

and the Son of God. No, say the latest critics, His Messianic claim was the invention of the first believers and was attributed to Him, like the Resurrection, as the result of reflection and discussion among themselves. We have been accustomed to regard the Four Gospels as biographical or historical records enshrining the portrait of our Lord as He appeared to men in the days of His flesh. In this, according to these critics, we have been mistaken. They are not so much histories as apologetic and theological treatises, exhibiting a development which begins with St Mark and reaches its culmination in St John. Even St Mark's Gospel, which is recognised as the oldest of all, and has been regarded as specially marked by vividness and circumstantiality, is now declared to belong to the history of dogma. It is not easy to meet theories of such pure subjectivity, nor to answer arguments and speculations so elusive and dissociated from facts. But they all offer us in the end a Christ who is an ideal figure destitute of historical reality, or a Christ who is a mere man and who never rose again from the grave. That such a Christ should have mastered the mind and soul of St Paul, as we see from his Epistles and his work as a pioneer of the Gospel; that such a Christ should have become the foundation of the Church and of Christendom—these

are miracles greater than those at which unbelieving critics take offence.

Of theories of the Gospels, that which has perhaps attracted most attention in this country of recent years is contained in the article "Gospels" in the 'Encyclopædia Biblica,' and is the work of Professor P. W. Schmiedel of Zurich.¹ On the subject of the credibility of the Gospels he admits the dictum that when a profane historian finds before him a historical document which testifies to the worship of a hero unknown to other sources, he attaches first and foremost importance to those features which cannot be deduced merely from the fact of this worship, and does so on the simple and sufficient ground that they would not be found in this source unless the author had met with them as fixed data of tradition. The same fundamental principle may be applied to the Gospels, for they are all of them written by worshippers of Jesus. In the application of this principle there are, first and foremost, two great facts to be recognised,—that Jesus had compassion for the multitude, and that He preached with power, not as the Scribes. Schmiedel having laid down this

¹ The article is divided between Professor Schmiedel and Dr Edwin A. Abbott, the latter of whom deals mainly with the external evidence. It is with the Synoptic Gospels that Schmiedel is concerned in this article. He deals with JOHN separately, under the head of the Gospel by him.

principle, proceeds to examine some of the leading points in the Synoptic Gospels, and devotes a large amount of attention to the miracles. As regards miracles, he does not say they are impossible, but as his examination goes to show that all of them, notably the great miracle of the Resurrection, are incredible, the result is that they must be rejected.

“The foregoing sections,” he goes on to say, “may have sometimes seemed to raise a doubt whether any credible elements are to be found in the Gospels at all.” He, therefore, desires to lay emphatic stress upon certain passages which form the foundation pillars for an absolutely scientific life of Jesus. The absolutely credible passages are nine in number—five about Jesus in general, and four about His miracles. As they conform to the criterion of historical credibility already referred to, and are not of a kind to glorify the “hero” Jesus, Schmiedel considers that there is no good reason for refusing them credence. He is aware that a dogmatic motive may be imputed to him, but he calls attention to the statements as at least facts in the record. The five sayings attributed to Jesus are: “Why callest thou Me good? None is good save God alone” (Mark x. 18); “Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against

the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him" (Matt. xii. 32); "Of that day or that hour knoweth no man, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mark xiii. 32); "When His friends heard it, they went out to lay hold on Him, for they said, He is beside Himself" (Mark iii. 21); and "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Mark xv 34). The four passages relating to miracles (Mark viii. 12, Mark vi. 5, Mark viii. 14-21, Matt. xi. 5) are taken by Schmiedel as showing that in reality our Lord gave no countenance to the working of miracles, and declined to perform them; but in order to reach any such conclusion he has to adopt the method of interpretation which we have reprobated in Paulus. In the last reference (Matt. xi. 5), where Jesus, in His answer to the messengers of John the Baptist, follows the enumeration of miracles—sight given to the blind, strength to the lame, hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead—with the statement that the poor have the Gospel preached to them, Schmiedel declares that Jesus was then speaking not of the physically but of the spiritually blind, lame, leprous, deaf, dead. Such exegesis is the expedient of despair.

To suppose, as it is easy to do, on a cursory reading of Schmiedel's article, that those nine passages were all that he found credible in the

Gospels would be to do him some injustice. He admits that the purely religious-ethical utterances of Jesus offer a field for credible passages, and they are to be accepted so long as they do not violate the axiom of historical credibility already laid down. "Here," he says, "we have a wide field of the wholly credible in which to expatiate, and it would be of immense advantage for theology were it to concentrate its strength upon the examination of these sayings and not attach so much importance to the minute investigation of the other less important details of the Gospel history." Moreover, he claims that these nine passages at least prove the real existence of Jesus, and satisfy us that the Gospels contain a few absolutely trustworthy facts concerning Him. "If passages of this kind," he says, "were wholly wanting in them, it would be impossible to prove to a sceptic that any historical value whatever was to be assigned to the Gospels; he would be in a position to declare the picture of Jesus contained in them to be purely a work of phantasy, and could remove the Person of Jesus from the field of history, all the more when the meagreness of the historical testimony regarding Him, whether in canonical writings outside the Gospels, or in profane writers such as Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny, is considered."

Professor Schmiedel concedes that Jesus is a historical figure. But the Christ whom he leaves to us after his manipulation of the Gospel records is not the Christ of St Paul, or of the Apostles, or of the early Church. A Christ who never rose from the tomb could never have kindled the faith in which martyrs died, and a Christ who was only the weak and fallible man whom Schmiedel makes Him out to be could never have won the trust and the love and the adoring worship of Christians. Schmiedel's critical procedure in reaching his negative conclusions is marked by the most arbitrary assumptions and an unlimited subjectivity. His assumption that miracles are incredible is one which vitiates his whole treatment of the Evangelists, and prevents him from recognising in them veracious narrators of facts or anything else than blundering craftsmen in the field of literature. He finds contradictions and discrepancies where the open-minded reader sees just those natural variations which are a proof of reality and truth. In many instances the objections he takes are positively childish and trivial, and one wonders how he can account for writings characterised by so many obvious defects and obscurities having attained to the dignity of literature at all. Schmiedel is bound to have great difficulty in showing how the disciples came to deify a man who had just been

crucified; and he and all who agree with him, in rejecting the Resurrection and in asserting the mere humanity of Jesus, find it difficult to show how the Church arose so early as it did, and Christianity became the religion of the Empire.

This is a difficulty which presses hard upon Professor Pfleiderer of Berlin, whose views of Christianity and the Gospels have become well known in this country. His position as Gifford Lecturer in Edinburgh University has given his views a currency and a prestige beyond what their merits deserved. Not only his Gifford Lectures, but his 'Primitive Christianity' (in a second edition) and 'Christian Origins' are circulating in an English dress. It seems doubtful whether he would admit so much of the historical in the Gospels and in the Person of Jesus as Schmiedel. He opens his 'Primitive Christianity' with the somewhat ambiguous and not very hopeful sentence: "However much we may regret that we have so little certain knowledge regarding the first beginnings of Christianity, the fact itself can hardly be disputed." "We have no historical knowledge," he says, "of the childhood and youth of Jesus, for the narratives in Matthew and Luke are religious legends of no historical value." The baptism of Jesus, with which St Mark opens his Gospel, followed by St Matthew and St Luke, is self-evidently not history

but legend, "one of the first steps in the development of the Christ-speculations of the Christian congregation." "The Gospel passage by which Christ is supposed to have made bread and wine at the last supper the symbols of His dead body and shed blood" belongs to the utterances which have been subsequently put into His mouth. These words originated in the Apostle Paul's mystical teaching of the sacrificial death of Christ and its sacramental celebration in the Communion. This is just the doctrine of Strauss and Baur sixty years ago. Pfleiderer, indeed, still maintains that St John's Gospel was written in the second century, as late as 140 A.D. "In order to estimate correctly the true value of this Gospel, we should not seek in it a historical work, which it did not at all mean to be. It was rather a didactic way of writing which had clothed its theological thoughts in the form of a life of Jesus." This character he attributes to the Gospel, and this late date he assigns to it in the teeth of the undoubted references to St John's Gospel in the literature of the second century before 120 A.D. Of the miraculous he will have none. The Resurrection is to him as incredible as it is to Strauss or Schmiedel, but his attempts to explain the acceptance of it by the first disciples are as impotent as theirs. Seeing that he ascribes the creation of the character of Jesus to theological

reflection and the workings of the early Church consciousness, it is not easy to see how there came to be on his principles any Christianity to discuss. How, again, are we to bridge the gulf which yawns broad and deep between such a Jesus as Pfeleiderer gives us and the Christianity which is the one creative force known to the Roman Empire a century or even half a century later? To this question he has no answer. "He heaps up laboriously," says Dr Albert Schweitzer¹ in his clever but unsatisfying volume on the History of the Writing of Lives of Christ, "wood, hay, stubble, but where the fire is to come from to kindle the mass to the faith of the primitive Church he is unable to make clear."

The *ne plus ultra* of negation at the present time has been reached by Kalthoff, who laboured as a pastor in Bremen, North Germany, till his death in the end of 1906. He denied altogether the historical existence of Jesus. He was not the first to have gone to this extreme, for Bruno Bauer, more than fifty years ago, had reached the same depth, and he had been followed by Pierson and Naber and some of the more irresponsible critics of the Dutch school. Nor was Kalthoff altogether singular in his extreme conclusions among modern writers, for J. Macdonald Robertson, in his 'Christianity and Mythology,'

¹ Von Reimarus zu Wrede, p. 311.

and William Benjamin Smith, an American scholar, writing in Germany under the patronage of Schmiedel, in his 'Der vorchristliche Jesus,' have both denied the historical existence of Jesus. In his 'Christusproblem,' published in 1902, and his 'Entstehung des Christentums,' 1904, Kalthoff sets forth his views regarding the origin of Christianity. In his view, Christianity arose out of the impact of Jewish Messianic expectations and worldly ambitions upon the discontent and social misery of Rome under the Emperors. There is no problem of the life of Jesus, only a Christ problem. Jesus of Nazareth never lived, or, if he was one of the numerous Jewish Messiahs who met the death of the cross, at least he never founded Christendom. The history of Jesus given in the Gospels is in reality only the history of the rise of the portrait of Christ; in fact, the history of the Church coming into existence. Kalthoff fell out with the modern conception of the historical Jesus because he could find no way through from the life of Jesus to primitive Christianity. If, then, we cannot find our way from Jesus to the early Church, why, he reasoned, should we not try to find the way from the early Church back to Him? Himself a keen social reformer, Kalthoff presented a secularised Christ, as he called Him, to the men of his generation: a Christ who was intended to

infuse new vitality into the old type of Christ conceived by the Church. It was this Christ, without any semblance of historical reality, which, according to his view, became the foundation upon which the Church is built and the fountainhead from which Christianity flows. It is hard to believe that any man holding office in the Church of Christ could in his sober senses have framed such a conception of Christendom, Christianity, and Christ. Yet his extravagances serve as a *reductio ad absurdum* of theories regarding Christ and the Gospels, which are supported by names more worthy of respect, but which leave us in the end where he leaves us, with an ideal figure destitute of historical reality. As to the whole tendency and principles of such criticism, we may quote the words of a recent Gifford Lecturer of the University of Edinburgh, an English scholar of great learning and practical sagacity. In his lectures on 'The Knowledge of God,' Professor Gwatkin¹ says: "Critical methods like these will turn any history into romance. As feats of paradox they are altogether admirable; but when they are laid before us as the ripest results of modern historical research, we are compelled to make our protest in the name of truth and sanity against this astounding licence of reckless theorising, forced in-

¹ ii, 52.

terpretations, contempt of evidence, and systematic disregard of common-sense."

There is one feature common to almost all those extravagant critical theories. They place the Gospels late in the early Christian history, in order that there may be room, in the interval between Christ and the time of their composition, for the exercise of theological reflection and for the interaction of Christianity and pagan influences, for the accretion of miraculous and legendary incidents, and for that transformation of the early and more simple Christian tradition which is one of the fundamental assumptions of the negative critics. Pflleiderer,¹ for instance, is not out of place when he dates St Mark's Gospel about 70 A.D.; but when he places St Luke in the beginning of the second century, and St John in its fourth decade, and asserts that St Matthew is not the work of a single author, but that "generations of early Christianity"² worked at it, we see the pressure of the pre-suppositions under which he labours.

The contention of the present course of lectures is, that the Four Gospels are authentic and trustworthy productions of the Apostolic age,—that they have come down to us practically unchanged from the hands of their Apostolic authors, and that their influence can be traced, individually

¹ Christian Origins, p. 222.

² Ibid., p. 243.

and collectively, from a very early time, moulding the spiritual life, and intellectual development, and social and missionary activities of the rapidly extending Christian Church. There may be critics so bent on the rejection of the supernatural that they will, even after this contention is established, refuse to admit the credibility of the Gospel histories; but we may confidently leave their objections to be dealt with by the intelligence and common-sense of mankind. Let it once be shown that the Four Gospels are contemporary records and contain a sober and consistent history of the life, teaching, and work of Christ, and many questions now in dispute will be brought nearer to a settlement, if not finally answered.

We begin our investigation of the early Christian literature with the close of the second century, to ascertain how the Four Gospels were regarded in the Church at that epoch of its history.

We shall then, working backwards, trace the Gospel collection of Four, following the earliest indications of its existence and use, upwards, as we believe, to the very threshold of the Apostolic age.

We shall also, in the same order, investigate the traces of the use and influence and authority of the individual Gospels, devoting attention to some of the special problems in the external evidence which have not yet received a final settlement at the hands of the critics.