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THE

CHURCHMAN

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ART. I.—EXTREME CRITICISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

IT is surely time that some sort of protest were raised against the audacity of a certain kind of criticism, and a warning given as to its inevitable consequences. Of course, it must be premised that, supposing the criticism to be valid and sound, it would be folly to talk of its consequences. "Buy the truth, and sell it not," is a maxim of unimpeachable wisdom, and we do not believe that, truth being good in itself, the consequences of truth can be other than good likewise. But it is time to ask, What is the function of criticism, and what are its necessary limits? Is it the function of criticism to throw overboard all the harvest of the past, and to start afresh without a rudder or a compass on the ocean of unlimited speculation? Because, if that is so, then it is absolutely certain that we can be certain of nothing else, and our knowledge will chiefly consist in knowing that there is nothing that we can know. The course that criticism is now taking with regard to the Old Testament is of a revolutionary and subversive character, and it is based on principles no less imaginary and subjective. When the bulk of the Psalms are relegated to the Maccabæan period, and all, or nearly all, the narrative portions of the Bible regarded as not historically true, it is surely time to ask, What are the grounds for these assumptions? and if they can be substantiated, what do they leave us? Is it only in the loss of antiquarian interest that the narratives of David and Elijah suffer if they are regarded as Greek or Roman myths? Is it only an unreal and imaginary value of which the Psalms are deprived if, instead of being supposed to be David's, they are assigned to the period of the Maccabees? Because, if this is so, we may perhaps console ourselves for what we lose by per-

suading ourselves that we have laid hold on truth. But is it so? and is it possible to determine whether or not it is so? As Bishop Butler says, "there is a presumption of millions to one against the story of Cæsar or of any other man"; and judged in this way, there is, of course, a presumption of millions to one against the story of David or Elijah. But as he also says, this presumption is nevertheless "overcome by almost any proof"; and the proof of the story of David and Elijah lies in the character of the records in which it is contained. The evidence for the story of David is interwoven in the national literature; and if we choose to except such a narrative as that of his encounter with Goliath, which stands alone, and is not confirmed in the same way by reference and allusion, it is, nevertheless, arbitrary to do so. For what is the rational course in such a matter? We must either say that this narrative throws discredit on the rest of the books of Samuel in which it is contained, or that the general character of these books is our voucher for the credibility of that narrative. It would seem, therefore, that this narrative cannot stand or fall merely on its own merits, but it must depend upon our estimate of the records at large. To reject these records on *a priori* grounds, however, is not worthy of the name of criticism, but is rather to be deemed prejudice or presumption. Undoubtedly the story of Elijah or of David's conflict with the giant is in the highest degree improbable in itself—it does not pretend to be otherwise; but if on this ground only it is to be rejected, it is hard to say what history may not in like manner be condemned whenever it transgresses the narrow line that separates the probable from the improbable.

The previous question we have to answer is, What is our general estimate of the documents in which these records are contained? If they are to be treated on the same footing as the mythical records of other early nations, then, of course, their doom is sealed; but it is not sealed by criticism, but by prejudging the question at issue. There is ground for distinguishing between the Scripture records and the corresponding records of other nations, and on that ground their testimony comes to us with higher claims upon our acceptance; but if these claims are not admitted, we have already foreclosed the question which was brought into the debate. The real question is, Have we valid ground for treating the Scripture narrative as an exception to other records which make similar demands on our credulity? For example, have we any valid ground for making a distinction between the stories of Herodotus and Livy, and the marvellous narratives in the books of Samuel and Kings? This must largely depend upon whether we approach them in the spirit of belief

or unbelief. The stories in Herodotus and Livy rest simply and solely upon the authority of those who relate them. There are no subsidiary reasons which render them credible. Now, in the case of the Old Testament it is quite different. The New Testament is, to a large extent, our voucher for the Old. We mainly receive the Old on the authority of the New; and the essential difficulty in the case of the New Testament is one which has already presented itself and been surmounted in the New. For this difficulty is neither more nor less than the difficulty of the marvellous, the miraculous, and the supernatural. It is not one book of the New Testament, but it is virtually all, in which this difficulty confronts us. For nearly every one of the Epistles practically assumes that basis of miracle for which the Gospels and the Acts are our direct authorities. The question, therefore, really turns upon whether or not we are believers. For it is impossible to believe in the New Testament and not accept a foundation of miracle. It is impossible to believe in Christ and not believe in His resurrection. It is impossible to believe in His resurrection and not believe in miracle; and it is impossible to believe in miracle and to decline to believe on that ground in the rest of the Gospel history. And if we believe in the general framework of the Gospel history, we cannot consistently reject narratives which were as sacred to the writers of the New Testament as their own narratives are to us, and which are at once raised to a higher position in the scale of credibility on account of their relation to the New Testament, and to the message of the New Testament, which is inseparably interwoven with the miraculous and the supernatural.

The very central fact of Christ being the Mediator of a Divine message, which is that of the New Testament, presupposes an essential miracle which not only opens the door to series of other miracles, but is not itself to be conceivably substantiated without them. If, therefore, in the Old Testament we meet with such narratives as those of David and Elijah, we cannot treat them with no more deference than we do those of Herodotus or Livy, because, in consequence of our acceptance of the central message of the New Testament, they stand upon a different footing from the first. It may be a matter of uncertainty how far they are able to endure the critical tests which on other grounds we apply to them; but there is unquestionably strong *a priori* ground for accepting them as we have received them. If, for example, the narratives can be shown to be absolutely contradictory in certain details, this must of necessity tend to modify our estimate of them so far. But even here two facts have to be borne in mind—first, that apparent contradictions may con-

ceivably be capable of complete explanation if we were acquainted with all the circumstances; and secondly, it may be a question how far the essential truth of any narrative may be vitiated or destroyed by inconsistency in matters of detail. It seems, then, that there are sufficient reasons for withholding our unfeigned assent to some of the more audacious of the assertions of that which arrogates to itself the exclusive right to the name of criticism.

But there is another and further question which demands our careful consideration, and this is, how far the acceptance of the more extreme, unconditional, and arbitrary assertions of criticism is consistent with a corresponding hearty acceptance of the Gospel message. And here I am disposed to think it will be found that the same spirit which rejects the Old Testament record on presumably critical grounds of a slender and subjective character, will, in all consistency, be compelled before long to reject also the narrative of our Lord's miracles, and will find itself unable to stop at that of His own resurrection. We have heard it asserted that the parable of Dives and Lazarus is no part of our Lord's teaching. Then, I would ask, how do we know that the conversation with Nicodemus really took place, or yet more, supposing it did not take place, how can we be quite sure that we can treat the statement in John iii. 16 as anything else than an unauthorized and ideal statement on the part of the writer of the Fourth Gospel? There can be no possible interest for *Christians* to open such questions as these, which it is simply impossible to close. Nay, more; if we are to withhold our belief in the narratives of the crucifixion or the resurrection till we have succeeded in making such a harmonious adjustment of those narratives as will commend itself to the universal acceptance of mankind, one thing, at least, is certain, that we shall never become believers. Thus the question really resolves itself into an antecedent one, What, and how much, are we to believe? There is absolutely no point at which we may not apply the solvent of destructive criticism, because there is no point at which we may not say, "I will not, and cannot, believe this or that." For ourselves, we are disposed to adopt a more earnest and practical view of the matter. With us it is not so much a question how much or how little shall we believe, but, rather, how shall we believe in the central and essential message of Scripture in such a way that we may have valid and substantial ground for "joy and peace in believing"? God knows there is enough to test faith and to strain it to the point of breaking, whether on the broadest or the narrowest basis. God knows there is sufficient reason, which may be stated with great cogency, for disbelieving everything, even the being and nature of God

Himself. And God knows also that this is the special trial of our age, which in this respect strongly resembles that of which our Lord said, "Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" There is doubtless a melancholy satisfaction in finding out our own and other people's mistakes; but there will, one could imagine, be little pleasure in discovering that we have made the great mistake of all. And the great mistake of all is to convince ourselves and others that there is so much cause for disbelieving the whole environment of truth, that we come to disbelieve even the truth itself. It is unquestionably more important and more blessed, in an age of general uncertainty and unbelief, to get people to rally round the standard of the Cross and to help them to believe to the saving of the soul, than it is to show that there is less ground than we thought there was for believing any one of the articles of the Christian faith, that some are certainly less certain than others, and that so many are uncertain that we can scarcely be sure of any. Above all, it seems to be more than ever necessary to remind the younger clergy, and those who are contemplating admission to the office of the ministry, that one of the preliminary questions which they must answer before they are ordained, and to which, it is to be presumed, they will never as long as they continue to hold their orders give any answer but one, is this: "Do you unfeignedly believe all the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament?" and the answer is: "I do believe them."

STANLEY LEATHES.

ART. II.—ARCHBISHOP TAIT.

PART II.

THE simple and straightforward extract from the diary of Archbishop Tait, written immediately after his reception of a letter from Lord Palmerston offering him the See of London, must make a most favourable impression upon everyone who reads it. There is evidence of a natural misgiving, but at the same time it is clear that a strict sense of duty, so remarkable a feature during the whole of Tait's career, determined him to accept an office which he had not coveted, but which all his friends thought him well fitted to adorn. The letters received from Dean Stanley, the present Master of Balliol, Lords Lingen and Coleridge, and from a very different man, Mr. Golightly, must have brought to the mind of Tait an almost overwhelming sense of the responsibility he was about to