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Professor A. B. Davidson.

BY PROFESSOR JOHN SKINNER, M.A., D.D., WESTMINSTER COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

IN the November of 1877 it fell to Professor A. B. Davidson to deliver the Inaugural Lecture of the session in the New College, Edinburgh. The present writer, a second year's student who had learned the rudiments of Hebrew elsewhere, then saw and heard him for the first time; and he can still recall the curiously mistaken, but distinct and memorable impression which his first sight of the great teacher made upon his mind. As he stood at the desk, and announced with quiet passionless incisive tones the subject of his discourse, he looked like a doughty champion of criticism, at a time when criticism was fighting for its life,—a resolute, fearless, somewhat truculent, and wholly redoubtable personage, who would go great lengths in the pursuit of truth, and strike hard in its defence. There must have been some truth in that impression, crude and evanescent as it was; for a trace of it lurks in Sir George Reid's portrait. Yet within a few weeks it was dissipated in the genial atmosphere of the class-room, and was replaced by that more engaging and enduring vision, of the kindly eyes and the refined and sensitive features, which lives in the hearts of all his pupils.

Professor Davidson was then at the height of his popularity, and wielding the marvellous ascendancy over the minds of his students to which so many eloquent tributes have been paid. His influence does not appear in the least degree to have declined since then, but it can hardly have increased. It is no doubt possible to convey to the outside world some idea of his unique power as a lecturer and a teacher, and of the subtle and stimulating influences that played on the minds of his hearers, and silently revolutionized the thinking of many of them. So far as that can be done, it has been done by the distinguished men who during his life or since his death have tried to express what they have owed to him. The immediate effect of his lectures has never been more powerfully described than by the late Professor Elmslie, in a passage much too long to quote here,¹ but worth referring to, because it has been strangely misunderstood as evidence of the negative

and destructive tendency of Dr. Davidson's teaching. Apparently it has been supposed that the 'emancipation' and 'disimprisonment' of which the writer spoke could only mean dismissal into the arid regions of Rationalism and Natural Theology. Nothing could be farther from the truth. His work was eminently constructive, and in the best sense edifying. No man was ever more careful to exhibit the essential continuity of his teaching with the forms in which the traditional view of Scripture had been wont to express its inner meaning in the past. It is true, of course, that the traditional doctrine was transformed in his hands, but it was not treated with contempt or rejected as worthless. It was rather treated as a seed, containing a living principle of truth which could be made to fructify even in minds where it had hitherto lain dormant. Many a lecture would start from some unpromising fragment of Typology, or a seemingly discredited Messianic interpretation, and into this he would breathe a new significance, and finally leave the idea firmly lodged in the mind as something not tenable or defensible merely, but a luminous and unassailable truth. Such was the effect produced, not once or twice, but many times; and each time the willing hearer was left with a deeper conviction of the reality of the religion of Revelation, and a fresh inspiration to the service of God. Of him, in his own department, and in relation to the theology of his time, it might truly be said that he came not to destroy but to fulfil.

But when we pass from description to analysis, and come to ask where the secret of his influence lay, we realize how hopeless is the attempt to give any adequate account of the singular effectiveness of his teaching. It is difficult to say whether natural endowments, or scholarly training and equipment, or observation of human life, or moral and religious sensibility, had the most to do in forming his mind into the subtle instrument of thought which it was. All these contributed their shares, and worked harmoniously to one result. The most that can be said is, that somehow he had attained an unrivalled insight into the spirit of the Old Testament religion, and possessed a

¹ See *Expositor*, 3rd series, vol. vii. (1888), p. 33 ff.

remarkable power of expressing it. It is instructive to remember, in this connexion, what his own idea of his calling was. He has told us that he considered his work as a professor to be essentially a form of preaching; that is, of course, preaching as he himself understood it. In point of fact, between the lectures he delivered to his class and the sermons he addressed to the public, there was no fundamental difference. In the pulpit, as in the chair, he was scrupulously truthful in exegesis, faithful to the exact historical sense of the Scripture he was expounding, and disdainful of all subjective and arbitrary conceits that obscured the true meaning of the passage. His method appeared to be first to lay bare his mind, with all its native susceptibilities and its acquired faculties, to the impression of the idea or scene or character which was his theme; and then to reproduce the message which it conveyed to his own heart. When his imagination kindled, and the stream of rich poetic language came charged with spiritual emotion and deep human sympathy, one felt that this was not done to impress the audience; it was the genuine response of his own nature to the truth which he had discovered in the Scripture. That was his method: the only method accordant with 'the right idea of Scripture, which is the reflexion of the presence of the living God in human history.' And that, too, was doubtless the chief source of his power both as a preacher and a teacher; he made himself a transparent medium, through which the light of the divine revelation was flashed on the hearts and consciences of men. It was not so much his voice that spoke, as the spirit of the Old Testament that found an organ in him; it was the voice of the living God, whose shining track down the ages of history it was his lifelong work to explore.

It will be an interesting chapter of Dr. Davidson's biography (if it can be written) which tells how his mind was first drawn towards Oriental study, and what impulses stirred into activity the peculiar qualities of intellect that gave him so vivid a perception of the genius of the Hebrew literature. Only once has the writer heard him touch on that matter, when he made the characteristic, if not very sensational, disclosure, that his interest in Hebrew was first awakened, while he was teaching a country school, by a volume of prose composition of T. Kerchever Arnold which came into his hands. It might be fanciful to suggest that in

that now forgotten work he had found the key of the magic casement which looked out on that strange new world of thought whose radiance was to be the master light of all his seeing. But he was a born grammarian; and it is just permissible to indulge the fancy that even then the forms of ancient speech had for him a fascination which was the foretaste of an inspiration hardly as yet divined by the scholarship of his age and country. At a somewhat later period, it is rumoured that he gave his days and nights to the study of Ewald. *Se non è vero è ben trovato.* For, in spite of glaring dissimilarities, the two scholars had much in common. Not to speak of their personal influence over their pupils,—which in degree was remarkable in both, though probably very different in kind,—there are some striking mental affinities between the Edinburgh Professor and the 'Lehrer ohne Gleichen' of Göttingen. Both have been accused of a defect in critical method (whatever that may mean); and both had a profound conviction of the religious value of the Bible for modern life. Of Davidson it might truly be said, as Wellhausen has said of Ewald, that in him the fruits of philological science reveal themselves 'um so mächtiger, weil mit einer urwüchsig religiösen Anlage zusammentreffend und daraus selbstständig wiedergeboren.' Scholarship reborn in a religious mind!—that is no inapt characterization of Davidson's idiosyncrasy amongst the intellectual leaders of his day. From Ewald, also, he might have learned a certain 'genetic' way of looking at things, which was half the charm of his thinking. His grammatical sense seemed to conceive of 'the language' as a living organism, growing under phonetic laws, arraying itself naturally in parts of speech, and adjusting itself, as if by conscious effort, to the expression of thought. The same turn of mind, carried into higher regions, gave him his singular faculty, often remarked upon, of 'getting at the heart of a subject,' by some intuitive perception of the inner principle of its development. To listen to his exposition of an historical idea was like seeing the mango tree grow by the art of the Indian juggler. The evolutionary process of an age was compressed into an hour; the idea germinated, and put forth its branches and produced leaves and flowers before our eyes; and if the effect was in one sense magical, it was nevertheless real, for it left the mind with a true impression of the creative

thought which had moulded the institutions and literature of the Old Dispensation.

How intense and living his own feeling for the Old Testament was, is best seen from the fact that he never lost his interest in its study, never reached finality in his researches, never ceased to be a learner. The Old Testament he has described as 'the most unintelligible of books'; and to his latest years he would speak freely of the 'surprise' with which he read this thing or that in the prophets. The stimulus of his training consisted very largely in the openness and freshness of mind which he brought to his work. Each day he seemed to come prepared to think out the subject afresh, and to reveal the working of his own thought upon it. He readily welcomed suggestions from the class; some he would dismiss abruptly and decisively enough, on others he would dwell, as if there might be something in them! It was the example of a master at work in his calling; but a master who constantly appealed to the intelligence of his pupils, and sought to make them fellow-labourers in the great and delicate art of interpretation.

His theological standpoint was determined by his profound sense of the unity, and the uniqueness, of the Bible Revelation. His interest in the New Testament was hardly less keen and scholarly than in his own special province; and in the Bible as a whole, he found the complete expression of the knowledge of God on which the religious life is based. He was very chary of admitting the intrusion of foreign influences in the religion of Israel, preferring to explain all its developments in the light of its own fundamental principles. Nor was his attitude towards modern scientific and philosophical speculation much more sympathetic, when they encroached on the sphere of religion, and confused the deeper intuitions of the spirit. Philosophy has one view of the world and the Bible has another, and these can no more conflict than the statement that the world is round conflicts with the other statement that it is green. But religion lives upon the scriptural view, and that view he expounded with a directness and a force that were at times startling. Criticism was to him no concession to an alien and irreligious tendency of mind; it was a product of the true religious spirit; it was the effort of exegesis to be historical, 'just that we may trace God's historical fellowship with

mankind.' But when science professed to explain away such moral mysteries as death and sin, his resistance was scornful and uncompromising. And he had no overweening anxiety to 'harmonize' the dictates of religion with the teachings of science; he was not afraid of a paradox. 'It is no sign that you are wrong,' he would say, 'when you come to a precipice in religion': adding, however, in a characteristic aside, 'it's a sign that you're wrong *if you go over.*'

With all his religious idealism, and all his refinement and scholarly self-repression, there was visible in his work at all times the play of a strongly marked and racy individuality. The caustic humour of his northern birth could not be hidden; and sometimes it made strange play with the abstruse matters that emerged in a critical discussion. One might have trembled for the effect on rigid dogmatists of some of his more daring sallies: as when he compared the Satan of the Book of Job to a sheep-dog, over-officious in his calling; or declined to settle a difference of opinion between the same Satan and Professor Budde, having too much respect for the acuteness of both; or twitted Wellhausen for saying that Jahveh was a Being subject to unaccountable humours, by hinting that His servant in Göttingen was hardly the man to throw stones. No one was ever hurt by these rapier thrusts, and few misunderstood them. They did not disturb the fundamental seriousness, the absolute intellectual sincerity, of his work. And it counted for much in the influence he exerted that men had unbounded faith in his veracity, and knew that his matured conclusions were uttered without reserve or fear. If he did not speak out everything that passed through his mind, he taught nothing that was not the genuine expression of his own thinking. He has been blamed for excessive reticence in the disclosure of his views, especially his critical views; and it is true that he both hated controversy and showed considerable adroitness in keeping out of it. But when one considers that for forty years this man was in his place, quietly disseminating principles whose vitality none knew better than himself, retracting nothing and explaining nothing, though he witnessed the theological transformation he was bringing about, one will be little disposed to speak of diffidence or timidity: one will rather admire the high courage, the simple loyalty to truth, which enabled him,

through good and ill report, to hold on the even tenor of his way.

What Dr. Davidson was to his intimate friends, the writer, who knew him but slightly and chiefly in his later years, cannot tell. He did not go out of his way to form personal attachments with his pupils; and probably few were ever admitted to the sanctuary of his inmost thoughts. But it can truly be said that even a slight acquaintance with him was more than most men's close companionship. There was always something elusive about his personality; and intercourse with him involved a series of surprises. But every fresh

glimpse of his nature revealed something that was attractive: he was so genuine and unassuming and kind, so ready to help, so generous in his appreciation of other men's work. Even more than the charm of his conversation, one loves to think of his genial homely ways, his simplicity of mind, his humility, his wondering what made people so good to him, his sympathy with common folk, his fondness for little children: these and a hundred kindred traits of character will long be talked of by many firesides, when men name with reverence and affection the greatest teacher they have known.

'Prayer in Early Christendom.'

BY THE REV. CANON E. R. BERNARD, M.A., SALISBURY.

A NEW book on this subject has recently appeared in Germany.¹ It is a book of much interest and of permanent value. The matter is well arranged, and the style lucid and attractive. The aim which the author sets before him is not merely critical or antiquarian investigation, but something deeper as well. He studies the prayer of early Christendom as an expression of its special religious life. Hitherto, he says, there has been a reluctance to enter on this aspect of the subject. There have been preliminary questions to be settled, and, further, it is a subject which requires special delicacy in its treatment. It may be said without hesitation that the author has this delicacy of sympathy and appreciation. The tone of the book throughout, and especially of the part of it which relates to the prayer life of Christ, is reverent and full of feeling. The critic speaks, but it is the devout critic.

On the other hand, it is clear from the first that the writer is a disciple of Harnack, and the book is dominated by a conception of the Person of Christ similar to his, appreciative, enlightening, as far as it goes, but, as we believe, wholly inadequate. The Fourth Gospel is regarded as emanating from the circle of the disciples of St. John. The narratives of the Synoptists are very freely criticized; and the Pastoral Epistles,

¹ *Das Gebet in der ältesten Christenheit.* Von Eduard Freiberrn von der Goltz. Leipzig, 1901.

which afford so much light on the subject of early prayer, are dated in the generation after St. Paul.

Considering the extent to which our knowledge of the inner life of Christ depends on the Fourth Gospel, it might be supposed that the refusal to acknowledge the historical character of that Gospel would vitiate the whole inquiry. But this is by no means the case. He grants that the writer had access to oral or written sources of information of the highest value. So far does he go in this direction that he loses scarcely anything of importance by his formal abandonment of the Johannine authorship. One may almost say that he privately forms a conception of the character and aims of Christ from a study of this unhistorical document, and then coming back to his source, naïvely confesses that although the narrative is unhistorical, yet it is an admirable presentation of what Christ really was.

The strongest instance is the sympathetic treatment of the prayer in Jn 17. It is, he says, a free composition by the author of the Gospel. It is quite impossible to say how much of it is genuine. It defies analysis. [Cp. p. 234, where he says the author forgets in 17³ that he is representing the Lord as the speaker.] And yet he proceeds to say (p. 31), 'One cannot fail to recognize that nowhere else in the New Testament is the inner relation of Jesus to His Father, and to