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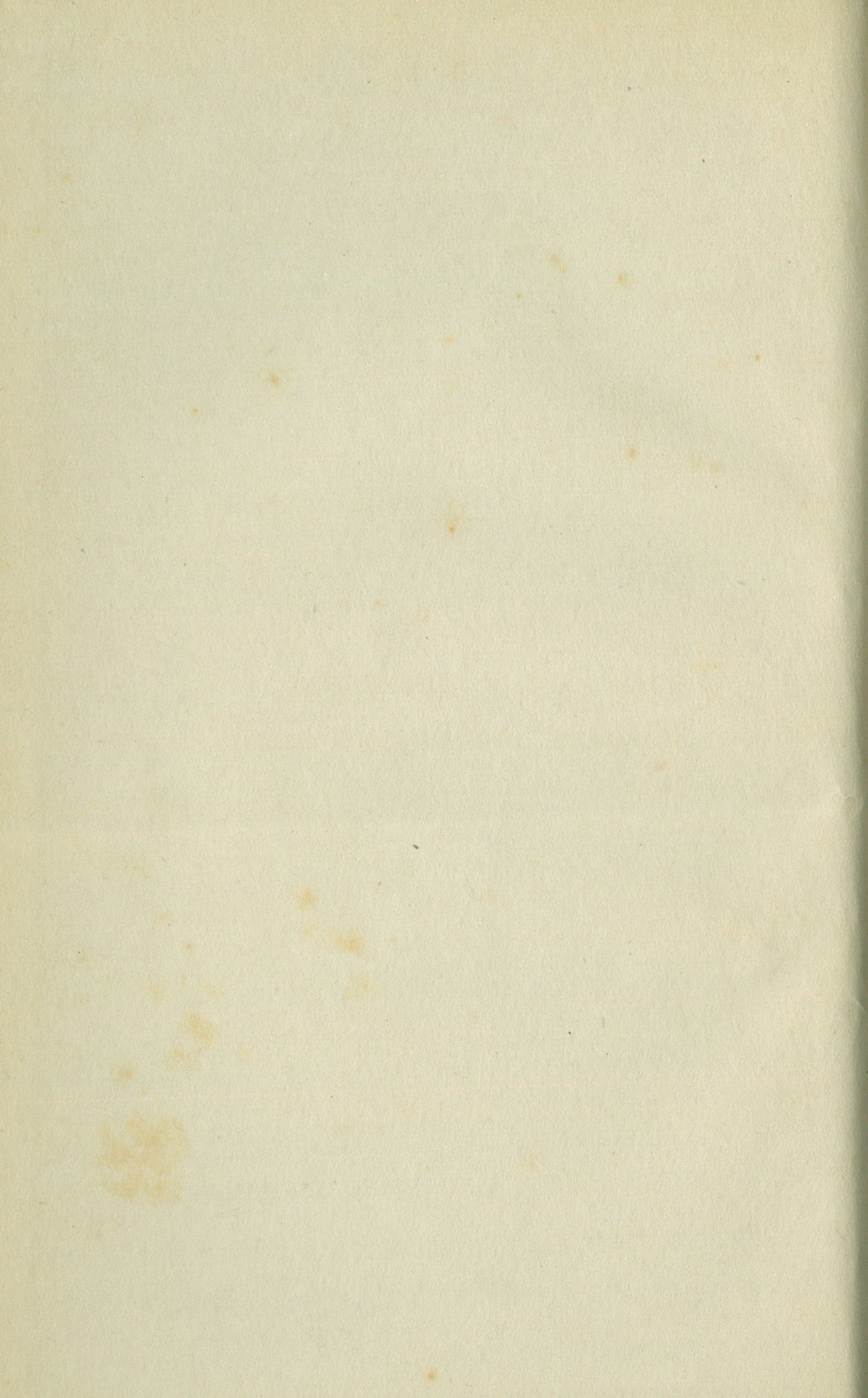
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*IN PREPARATION*

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**THE JESUS PROBLEM**

A RE-STATEMENT OF THE MYTH THEORY



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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# THE HISTORICAL JESUS

## A SURVEY OF POSITIONS

BY  
JOHN M. ROBERTSON

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## PREAMBLE

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THE problem of the historicity of the Jesus of the Gospels has been discussed by me in large sections of two bulky books, which in other sections deal with matters only indirectly connected with this, while even the sections directly devoted to the problem cover a good deal of mythological and anthropological ground which not many readers may care to master. The "myth theory" developed in them, therefore, may not be readily grasped even by open-minded readers; and the champions of tradition, of whatever school, have a happy hunting-ground for desultory misrepresentation and mystification. It has been felt to be expedient, therefore, by disinterested readers as well as by me, to put the problem in a clearer form and in a more concise compass. The process ought to involve some logical improvement, as the mythological investigation made in CHRISTIANITY AND MYTHOLOGY had been carried out independently of the anthropological inquiry made in PAGAN CHRISTS, and the theory evolved may well require unification. In particular, the element of *Jewish* mythology



calls for fuller development. And the highly important developments of the myth theory by Professor Drews and Professor W. B. Smith have to be considered with a view to co-ordination.

To such a re-statement, however, certain preliminary steps are necessary. The ground needs to be cleared (1) of *à priori* notions as to the subject matter; (2) of mistaken opinions as to a supposed "consensus of critics"; and (3) of uncritical assumptions as to the character of the Gospel narratives.

Writers who have not gone very deeply into problems of normal history, however they may have specialized in the Biblical, are still wont to assert that the historicity of non-supernatural data in the Sacred Books is on all fours with that of the subject matter of "profane" history. Indeed it is still common to hear it claimed that the Resurrection is as well "attested" as the assassination of Julius Cæsar, or even better. In exactly the same tone and spirit did the traditionalists of a previous generation assert that the stoppage of the sun and moon in the interest of Joshua was better attested than any equally ancient historical narrative. Those who have decided to abandon the supernatural reduce the claim, of course, to the historicity of the Trial and Crucifixion; but as to these they confidently repeat the old formulas. Yet in point of fact they have made no such critical scrutiny of



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even these items as historians have long been used to make, with destructive results, into many episodes of ancient history—for instance, the battle of Thermopylæ and the founding of the Spartan constitution by Lycurgus. Men who affect to dismiss the myth theory as an ungrounded speculation are all the while taking for granted the historicity of a record which is a mere tissue of incredibilities.

It has been justly remarked that serious risk of error is set up even by the long-current claim of naturalist critics to “treat the Bible like any other book.” Even in their meaning the phrase should have run: “like any other Sacred Book of antiquity”; inasmuch as critical tests and methods are called for in the scrutiny of such books which do not apply in the case of others. But inasmuch, further, as the Christian Sacred Books form a problem by themselves, a kind of scrutiny which in the case of other books of cult-history might substantially reveal all the facts may here easily fail to do so.

The unsuspecting student, coming to a narrative in which supernatural details are mingled with “natural,” decides simply to reject the former and take as history what is left. It is the method of the amateur mythologists of ancient Greece, derided by Socrates, and chronically resuscitated in all ages by men seeking short cuts to certitude where they have no right to any. If the narrative of the Trial



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and Crucifixion, thus handled, is found to be still incredible in point of time-arrangement, the adaptor meets the difficulty by reducing the time-arrangement to probability and presenting the twice redacted result as "incontestable" history. All this, as will be shown in the following pages, is merely a begging of the question. A scientific analysis points to a quite different solution, which the naïf "historical" student has never considered.

He is still kept in countenance, it is true, by "specialists" of the highest standing. The average "liberal" theologian still employs the explanatory method of Toland; and anthropologists still offer him support. Thus Sir James Frazer, by far the most learned collector of mytho-anthropological lore in his age, positively refuses to apply to the history of the Christian cult his own express rule of mythology—formulated before him<sup>1</sup> but independently reiterated by him—that "all peoples have invented myths to explain why they observed certain customs," and that a graphic myth to explain a rite is presumptively "a simple transcript of a ceremony"; which is the equivalent of the doctrine of Robertson Smith, that "in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth," and of the doctrine of K. O. Müller that "the mythus sprang from the

<sup>1</sup> See *Christianity and Mythology*, 2nd ed. p. 179, note.



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worship, and not the worship from the mythus." What justification Sir James can give for his refusal to act on his own principles is of course a matter for full and careful consideration. But at least the fact that he *has* to justify the refusal to apply in a most important case one of the best-established generalizations of comparative mythology is not in this case a recommendation of the principle of authority to scientific readers.

General phrases, then, as to how religions *must* have originated in the personal impression made by a Founder are not only unscientific presuppositions but are flatly contradictory, in this connection, of a rule scientifically reached in the disinterested study of ancient hierology in general.

It is a delusion, again, to suppose, as do some scholarly men, that there is such a consensus of view among New Testament scholars as to put out of court any theory that cancels the traditionalist assumption of historicity which is the one position that most of them have in common. As we shall see, the latest expert scholarship, professionally recognized as such, makes a clean sweep of their whole work; but they themselves, by their insoluble divisions, had already discredited it. Any careful collection of their views will show that the innumerable and vital divergences of principle and method of the various schools, and their constant



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and emphatic disparagement of each other's conclusions, point rather to the need for a radically different theory and method. A theory, therefore, which cancels their conflicts by showing that all the data are reducible to order only when their primary assumption is abandoned, is entitled to the open-minded attention of men who profess loyalty to the spirit of science.

There is need, thirdly, to bring home even to many readers who profess such loyalty, the need for a really critical study of the Gospels. I have been blamed by some critics because, having found that sixty years' work on the documents by New Testament scholars yielded no clear light on the problem of origins, I chose to approach that by way (1) of mythology, (2) of extra-evangelical literature and sect-history, and (3) of anthropology. The question of the order and composition of the Gospels, in the view of these critics, should be the first stage in the inquiry.

Now, for the main purposes of the myth-theory, the results reached by such an investigator as Professor Schmiedel were quite sufficient; and though at many points textual questions had to be considered, it seemed really not worth while to discuss in detail the quasi-historical results claimed by the exegetes. But it has become apparent that a number of readers who claim to be "emancipated"



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have let themselves be put off with *descriptions* of the Gospel-history when they ought to have read it attentively for themselves. A confident traditionalist, dealt with hereinafter, writes of the "pretentious futilities into which we so readily drop when we talk about them [the Gospels] instead of reading them." The justice of the observation is unconsciously but abundantly illustrated by himself; and he certainly proves the need for inducing professed students to read with their eyes open.

Early in 1914 there was published a work on *THE HISTORICAL CHRIST*, by Dr. F. C. Conybeare, in which, as against the myth hypothesis, which he vituperatively assailed, a simple perusal of the Gospel of Mark (procurable, as he pointed out, for one penny) was confidently prescribed as the decisive antidote to all doubts of the historicity of the central figure. The positions put were the conventional ones of the "liberal" school. No note was taken of the later professional criticism which, without accepting the myth-theory, shatters the whole fabric of current historicity doctrine. But that is relatively a small matter. In the course of his treatise, Dr. Conybeare asserted three times over, with further embellishments, that in the Gospel of Mark Jesus is "presented quite naturally as the son of *Joseph and his wife Mary*, and we learn quite incidentally the names of his brothers



and sisters." Dr. Conybeare's printers' proofs, he stated, had been read for him by Professor A. C. Clark. I saw, I think, fully twenty newspaper notices of the book; and in not a single one was there any recognition of the gross and thrice-repeated blunder above italicized, to modify the chorus of uncritical assent. A professed Rationalist repeated and endorsed Dr. Conybeare's assertion. Needless to say, not only did Dr. Conybeare not mention that Joseph is never named in Mark, he never once alluded to the fact that in the same Gospel Mary is presented as *not* the mother of Jesus; and the brothers and sisters, by implication, as *not* his brothers and sisters.

When aggressive scholars and confident reviewers thus alike reveal that they have not read the Gospels with the amount of attention supposed to be bestowed on them by an intelligent Sunday-school teacher, it is evidently inadvisable to take for granted any general critical preparation even among rationalistic readers. Before men can realize the need for a new theoretic interpretation of the whole, they must be invited to note the vital incongruities (as apart from miracle stories) in each Gospel singly, as the lay Freethinkers of an earlier generation did without pretending to be scholars.

Those Rationalists are ill-advised who suppose that, in virtue of having listened to latter-day publicists



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who profess to extract a non-supernatural "religion" *from* the supernaturalisms of the past, they have reached a higher and truer standpoint than that of the men who made sheer truth their standard and their ideal. Really scholarly and scrupulous advocates of theism are as zealous to expose the historical truth as the men who put that first and foremost; it is the ethical sentimentalists who put the question of historic truth on one side. The fact that some men of scientific training in other fields join at times in such complacent constructions does not alter the fact that they are non-scientific. The personal equation even of a man of science is not science. On these as on other sides of the intellectual life, "opinion of store is cause of want," as Bacon has it.

Some of us who in our teens critically read the sacred books first and foremost to clear our minds on the general question of supernaturalism, and then proceeded to try, with the help of the documentary scholars, to trace the history of religion as matter of anthropology and sociology, had the experience of being told by Professor Huxley, whose own work we had followed, that we were still at the standpoint of Voltaire. Later we had the edification of seeing Huxley expatiate upon topics which had long been stale for Secularist audiences, and laboriously impugn the story of the Flood and



the miracle of the Gadarene swine in discursive debate with Gladstone, even making scientific mistakes in the former connection.

In view of it all, it seems still a sound discipline to treat all opinions as for ever open to revision, and at the same time to doubt whether the acceptance of any popular formula will place us in a position to disparage unreservedly all our critical predecessors. If we find reason to dismiss as inadequate the conclusions of many scholars of the past, orthodox and heterodox, we are not thereby entitled to speak of the best of them otherwise than as powerful minds and strenuous toilers, hampered by some of their erroneous assumptions in the task of relieving their fellows of the burden of others.

It is precisely the habituation of the professional scholars to working in a special groove that has so retarded the progress of New Testament criticism. The re-discussion of the historicity question that has followed upon the modern exposition of the myth-theory has involved the reiteration by the historicity school of a set of elementary claims from the long-discredited interpolation in Josephus and the pagan "testimonies" of Suetonius and Tacitus; and Professor W. B. Smith has had to meet these with a detailed rebuttal such as used to be made—of course with less care and fullness—on the ordinary English Secularist platform forty or even seventy



years ago. Less advanced scholars once more begin to recognize the nullity of the argument from the famous passage in the ANNALS of Tacitus,<sup>1</sup> which was clear to so many unpretending freethinkers in the past; and to other *Gelehrten vom Fach* it has to be again pointed out that the *impulsore Chresto* of Suetonius, so far from testifying to the presence of a Christian multitude at Rome under Nero—a thing so incompatible with their own records—is rather a datum for the myth-theory, inasmuch as it posits a cult of a Chrēstos or Christos out of all connection with the “Christian” movement.

The passage in Josephus was given up long ago by hundreds of orthodox scholars as a palpable interpolation, proved as such by the total silence in regard to it of early Fathers who would have rejoiced to cite it if it had been in existence. The device of supposing it to be a Christian modification of a different testimony by Josephus is a resort of despair, which evades altogether the fact of the *rupture of context* made by the passage—a feature only less salient in the paragraph of Tacitus. But even if there were no reason to suspect the latter item of being a late echo *from* Sulpicius Severus, who

<sup>1</sup> That is, even supposing the *Annals* to be genuine. Professor W. B. Smith speaks of a contention “of late” that they are forged by Poggio Bracciolini, but refers only to the work of Ross, 1878. The thesis has been far more efficiently maintained in a series of works by Hochart (1890, etc.), which are worth Professor Smith’s attention.



is assumed to have copied it, nothing can be proved from it for the historicity of the Gospel Jesus, inasmuch as it does but set forth from a hostile standpoint the ordinary Christian account of the beginnings of the cult. Those who at this time of day found upon such data are further from an appreciation of the evidential problem than were their orthodox predecessors who debated the issue with Freethinkers half a century ago.

I have thought it well, then, to precede a re-statement of the "myth-theory" with a critical survey in which a number of preliminary questions of scientific method and critical ethic are pressed upon those who would deal with the main problem aright; and a certain amount of controversy with other critical schools is indulged in by way of making plain the radical weakness of all the conventional positions. The negative criticism, certainly, will not establish in advance the positive theory: that must meet the ordeal of criticism like every other. But the preliminary discussion may at once serve to free from waste polemic the constructive argument and guard readers against bringing to that a delusive light from false assumptions.

A recent and more notorious exhibition of "critical method" by Dr. Conybeare has satisfied me that it is needless to offer any further systematic exposure of the nullity of his treatise, with which



I had dealt at some length in *THE LITERARY GUIDE*. His memorable attack upon the Foreign Secretary, and his still more memorable retraction, may enable some of his laudatory reviewers to realize the kind of temper and the kind of scrutiny he brings to bear upon documents and theories that kindle his passions. All that was relevant in his constructive process was really extracted, with misconceptions and blunders and exaggerations, from the works of a few scholars of standing who, however inconclusive their work might be, set him a controversial example which he was unable to follow. In dealing with them, I have the relief of no longer dealing with him. As to the constructive argument from comparative mythology, anthropology, and hierology, attacked by him and others with apparently no grasp of the principles of any of these sciences, objections may be best dealt with incidentally where they arise in the restatement of the case.

For the rest, I can conceive that some will say the second year of the World War is no time for the discussion even of a great problem of religious history. I answer that the War has actually been made the pretext for endless religious discussions of the most futile kind, ranging between medieval miracle-mongering and the lowest forms of journalistic charlatanism, with chronic debates on theism



and on the military value of faith and prayer. The newspaper discussions on theism, in particular, reveal a degree of philosophic *naïveté* on the theistic side which seems to indicate that that view of the universe has of late years been abandoned by most men capable of understanding the logical problem. When dispute plays thus uselessly at the bidding of emotion there must be some seniors, or others withheld from war service, who in workless hours would as lief face soberly an inquiry which digs towards the roots of the organized religion of Europe. If the end of the search should be the conviction that that system took shape as naturally as any other cult of the ancient world, and that the sacrosanct records of its origin are but products of the mythopœic faculty of man, the time of war, with its soul-shaking challenge to the sense of reality, may not be the most unfit for the experience.



# THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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## CHAPTER I

### THE SNARE OF PRESUPPOSITION

HE who would approach with an alert mind such a question as that of the historic actuality of the Gospel Jesus would do well to weigh a preliminary warning. Though after four hundred years of chronic scientific discovery all men are supposed to know the intellectual danger of a confident and foregone rejection of new theories, it is scarcely likely that the vogue of such error is at an end. After all, apart from the special experience in question, and from the general effect of the spread of "science," the average psychosis of men is not profoundly different from what it was in the two centuries which passed before the doctrines of Copernicus found general acceptance. Not many modern novelties of thought can so reasonably be met with derision as was the proposition that the earth moves round the sun.

Let the ingenuous reader try to make the supposition that he had been brought up in ignorance of that truth, and without any training in astronomy, and that in adolescence or mature years it had been



casually put to him as a non-authoritative suggestion. Would he have been quick to surmise that the paradox might be truth? Let him next try to imagine that he had been educated by an eccentric guardian in the Ptolemaic creed, which accounted so plausibly for so many solar and stellar phenomena, and that until middle life he had been kept unaware of the Copernican heresy. Can he be sure that, meeting it not as an accredited doctrine but as a novel hypothesis, he would have been prompt to recognize that it was the better solution? If he can readily say Yes, I know not whether his confidence is enviable or otherwise. Reading in Sylvester's translation of the *DIVINE WEEKS* of Du Bartas, which had such vogue in the days of James VI, the confident derision and "confutation" of the heliocentric theory, I really cannot be sure that had I lived in those days I should have gone right where Bacon went wrong.

To a mere historical student, not conscious of any original insight into the problems of nature, there ought to be something chastening in the recollection that every great advance in the human grasp of them has been hotly or hilariously denounced and derided; and that not merely by the average ignoramus, but by the mass of the experts. It was not the peasants of Italy who refused to look through Galileo's telescope—they were not invited to; it was the academics, deep in Aristotle. It was not the laity who distinguished themselves by rejecting Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood; it was all the doctors above forty then living, if we



can believe a professional saying. And it was not merely the humdrum Bible-readers who scouted geology for generations, or who laughed consumedly for decades over the announcement that Darwin made out men to be "descended from monkeys." That theory, as it happened, had been unscientifically enough propounded long before Darwin; and, albeit not grounded upon any such scientific research as served to establish the Darwinian theory in a generation, yet happened to be considerably nearer rationality than the Semitic myth which figured for instructed Christendom as the absolute and divinely revealed truth on the subject. A recollection of the hate and fury with which geologists like Hugh Miller repelled the plain lesson of their own science when it was shown to clash with the sacred myth, and a memory of the roar of derision and disgust which met Darwin, should set reasonable men on their guard when they find themselves faced by propositions which can hardly seem more monstrous to this generation than those others did to our fathers and grandfathers.

It is difficult, again, without suggesting contempt of that scholarship which as concerning historical problems is the equivalent of experimental research in science, to insist aright upon the blinding tendency of pure scholarship in the face of a radically innovating doctrine. Without scholarly survey no such doctrine can maintain itself. Yet it is one of the commonest of experiences to find the accredited scholars among the last to give an intelligent hearing to a new truth. Only for a very few was skill



in the Ptolemaic astronomy a good preparation towards receiving the Copernican. The errors of Copernicus—the inevitable errors of the pioneer—served for generations to establish the Ptolemaists in theirs. And where religious usage goes hand-in-hand with an error, not one man in a thousand can escape the clutch of the double habit.

Hence the special blackness of the theological record in the history of culture. In the present day the hideous memory of old crimes withholds even the clerical class as a whole from the desire to employ active persecution; but that abstention—forced in any case—cannot save the class from the special snare of the belief in the possession of fixed and absolute truth. Since the day when Tyndale was burned for translating the Sacred Books, English Christians have passed through a dozen phases of faith, from the crassest evangelicalism to the haziest sentimentalism, and in all alike they have felt, *mutatis mutandis*, the same spontaneous aversion to the new doctrine that disturbs the old. Who will say that the stern Tyndale, had he ever been in power, would not have made martyrs in his turn? The martyr Latimer had applauded the martyrdom of Anabaptists. The martyred Cranmer had assented to martyrdoms in his day, though a man forgiving enough in respect of his own wrongs. And if the educated Christians of to-day have reached a level at which they can recognize as old delusions not only the beliefs in relics and images and exorcisms, once all sacrosanct, but the “literal” acceptance of Semitic and Christian myths and



miracle-stories, to whom do they think they owe the deliverance? To their accredited teachers? Not so.

No false belief from which men have been delivered since the day of Copernicus has been dismissed without strenuous resistance from men of learning, and even from men of vigorous capacity. The belief in witchcraft was championed by Bodin, one of the most powerful minds of his day; Glanvill, who sought to maintain it in England after the Restoration, was a man of philosophical culture and a member of the Royal Society; and he had the countenance of the Platonist Henry More and the chemist Boyle. So great a man as Leibnitz repulsed the cosmology of Newton on the score that it expelled God from the universe. It was not professional theologians who invented the "higher criticism" of the Pentateuch, any more than they introduced geology. Samuel Parvish, the Guildford bookseller, who discovered in the days of Walpole that Deuteronomy belonged to the seventh century B.C., is not recorded to have made any clerical converts; and Astruc, the Parisian physician who began the discrimination between the Jehovistic and Elohist sources in Genesis in 1753, made no school in his country or his time. Voltaire, no Hebraist, demonstrated clearly enough that the Pentateuchal tale of the tabernacle in the wilderness was a fiction; but three toiling generations of German specialists passed the demonstration by, till a Zulu convert set the good Bishop Colenso upon applying to the legend the simple tests of his secular arithmetic. Then the experts began slowly to see the point.



## CHAPTER II

### MODES OF CONSERVATIVE FALLACY

To all such reminders the present-day expert will reply, belike, that he does not need them. He, profiting by the past, can commit no such errors. And yet, however right the present members of the apostolic succession of truth-monopolists may be, there is an astonishing likeness in their tone and temper over the last heresy to that of their predecessors, down to the twentieth generation. Anger and bluster, boasting and scolding, snarl and sneer, come no less spontaneously to the tongues of the professional defender of the present minimum of creed than they did to those of the full-blooded breed of the ages of the maximum, or of Calvin and Bonner. From the defence of the "real presence" of the God to that of the bare personal existence of the Man is a long descent; but there is a singular sameness in the manner of the controversy. As their expert ancestors proved successively the absolute truth of the corporal presence in the wafer, or the humanity of the Son against those who dubbed him merely divine, or his divinity against those who pronounced him merely human, or the inerrancy of the Gospels against the blasphemers who pointed out the contradictions, or the historic certainty of the miracles and the Virgin Birth and the Resur-



rection and the Ascension against the "materialists" who put such Christian myths on a level with Pagan, so do the expert demonstrators of the bare historicity of the now undeified God establish by vituperation and derision, declamation and contempt, the supreme certainty of the minimum after all the supernatural certainties are gone. Even as Swiss patriots undertook to demonstrate "somebody" and "something" behind the legend of William Tell when it had ceased to be possible to burn men at the stake for exposing the apple-myth, so do the descendants of the demonstrators of the real presence now go about to make clear the real existence.

I speak, of course, of the ruck of the vindicators, not of the believers; and Professor Schmiedel and M. Loisy, I trust, will not suspect me of classing them with men many of whom are as hostile to them as to the thesis which those scholars seek by rational methods to confute. Professor Schmiedel has even avowed that a proof of the non-historicity of the Gospel Jesus would not affect his inner religious opinions; and such high detachment has been attained to by others. That civilized scholars credit, and might at a pinch maintain in debate, the historicity of the Gospel Jesus as calmly as they might the historicity of Lycurgus against its impugnors, I am well aware. And to such readers, if I have the honour to obtain any, I address not a warning but an appeal. There is an attitude towards the problem which incurs no reproach on the score of tone and temper, and which will naturally recommend itself all the more to men of real culture, but



which yet, I think, only illustrates in another way the immense difficulty of all-round intellectual vigilance. Let me give an example in an extract from a rather noteworthy pronouncement upon the question in hand:—

Of Paul's divine Master no biography can ever be written. We have a vivid impression of an unique, effulgent personality. We have a considerable body of sayings which *must be genuine because they are far too great to have been invented by His disciples*, and, for the rest, whatever royal robes and tributes of devotion the Church of A.D. 70-100 thought most fitting for its king. The Gospels are the creation of faith and love: faith and love hold the key to their interpretation. (Canon Inge, art. "St. Paul" in *Quarterly Review*, Jan., 1914, p. 45.)

I am not here concerned to ask whether the closing words are the expression of an orthodox belief; or what orthodoxy makes of the further proposition that "With St. Paul it is quite different. He is a saint without a luminous halo." The idea seems to be that concerning the saint without a nimbus we can get at the historical truth, while in the other case we cannot—a proposition worth orthodox attention. But what concerns the open-minded investigator is the logic of the words I have italicized. It is obvious that they proceed (1) on the assumption that what non-miraculous biography the Gospels give is in the main absolutely trustworthy—that is to say, that the accounts of the disciples and the teaching are historical; and (2) on the assumption that we are historically held to the traditional view that the Gospel sayings originated with the alleged Founder as they purport. It is



necessary to point out that this is not a licit historical induction. Even Canon Inge by implication admits that not all the Gospel sayings have the quality which he regards as certifying authenticity; and on no reasonable ground can he claim that the others must have been "invented by the disciples." The alternative is spurious. No one is in a position to deny that any given saying may have been invented by non-disciples. In point of fact, many professional theologians are agreed in tracing to outside sources some tolerably fine passages, such as the address to Jerusalem (Mt. xxiii, 37; Lk. xiii, 34). The critics in question do not ascribe that deliverance to inventive disciples; they infer it to have been a non-Christian document. Many other critics, again, now pronounce the whole Sermon on the Mount—regarded by Baur as signally genuine—a compilation from earlier Hebrew literature, Biblical and other. Which then are the "great" sayings that could not be thus accounted for? Without specification there can be no rational discussion of the problem; and even the proposition about the exegetic function of "faith and love" affects to be in itself rational.

The plain truth would seem to be that Canon Inge has formed for himself no tenable critical position. He has merely reiterated the fallacy of Mill, who in his *Three Essays on Religion* (pp. 253–54) wrote:—

Whatever else may be taken away from us by rational criticism, Christ is still left; a unique figure, not more unlike all his precursors than all



his followers, even those who had the direct benefit of his personal teaching. It is of no use to say that Christ as exhibited in the Gospels is not historical, and that we know not how much of what is admirable has been superadded by the tradition of his followers. The tradition of followers suffices to insert any number of marvels, and may have inserted all the miracles which he is reputed to have wrought. But who *among his disciples or among their proselytes* was capable of inventing the sayings ascribed to Jesus, or of imagining the life and character revealed in the Gospels? Certainly not the fishermen of Galilee; as certainly not St. Paul, whose character and idiosyncrasies were of a totally different sort; still less the early Christian writers, in whom nothing is more evident than that the good which was in them was all derived, as they always professed that it was derived, from the higher source. What *could* be added and interpolated by a disciple we may see in the mystical parts of St. John, matter imported from Philo and the Alexandrian Platonists and put into the mouth of the Saviour in long speeches about himself such as the other Gospels contain not the slightest vestige of, though pretended to have been delivered on occasions of the deepest interest and when his principal followers were all present; most prominently at the last supper. The East was full of men who could have stolen (!) any quantity of this poor stuff, as the multitudinous Oriental sects of Gnostics afterwards did. But about the life and sayings of Jesus there is a stamp of personal originality combined with profundity of insight which, if we abandon the idle expectation of finding scientific precision where something very different was aimed at, must place the Prophet of Nazareth, even in the estimation of those who have no belief in his inspiration, in the very first rank of men of sublime genius of whom our species can boast. When this pre-eminent genius is combined with the qualities of probably the greatest moral



reformer, and martyr to that mission, who ever existed on earth, religion [*sic*] cannot be said to have made a bad choice in pitching on this man as the ideal representative and guide of humanity..... Add that, to the conception of the rational sceptic, it remains a possibility that Christ actually was what he supposed himself to be—not God, for he never made the smallest pretension to that character, and would probably have thought such a pretension as blasphemous as it seemed to the men who condemned him—but a man charged with a special, express, and unique commission from God to lead mankind to truth and virtue.....

*Ein historischer Kopf hatte er nicht*, is a German economist's criticism of Mill which I fear will have to stand in other fields than that of economics. The man who wrote this unmeasured dithyramb can never have read the Gospels and the Hebrew books with critical attention; and can never have reflected critically upon his own words in this connection. The assumption that "the fishermen of Galilee" could not have attained to thoughts which are expressly alleged to have been put forth by an untaught carpenter of Galilee is on the face of it a flight of thoughtless declamation. Had Mill ever critically read the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, he must have been aware that the main precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, which are presumably among the unspecified objects of his panegyric, were all there beforehand. Had he taken the trouble to investigate before writing, he could have found in Hennell's *Inquiry* (1838), which popularized the old research of Schoettgen; in Nork's *Rabbinische Quellen und Parallelen* (1839); and in



*Les Origines du Sermon de la Montagne* by Hippolyte Rodrigues (1868), a copious demonstration of the Jewish currency of every moral idea in the Christian document, often in saner forms. And he ought to have known from his own reading that the doctrine of forgiveness for injuries, which appears to be the main ground for the customary panegyric of the Sermon, was common to Greeks and Romans before the Gospels were compiled. From the duty of giving alms freely—which is repeatedly laid down in the Old Testament—to that of the sin of concupiscence and the wrongness of divorce for trivial causes, every moral idea in the Sermon had been formulated alike by Jews and Gentiles beforehand.<sup>1</sup> And if it be argued that the *compilation* of such a set of precepts with a number of religious dicta (equally current in non-Christian Jewry) is evidence of a special ethical or religious gift in the compiler, the answer is that precisely the fact of such a compilation is the disproof of the assertion in the Gospels that the whole was delivered as a sermon on a mountain. A sermon it never was and never could be; and if the compiler was a man of unique character and qualification he was *not* the Gospel Jesus but the very type of which Mill denied the possibility!

That the Gospel ethic is non-original becomes more and more clear with every extension of relevant research. THE TESTAMENTS OF THE TWELVE

<sup>1</sup> See the collection of illustrations in Mr. Joseph McCabe's *Sources of the Morality of the Gospels* (R. P. A., 1914), and his excellent chapter on "The Parables of the Gospel and the Talmud."



PATRIARCHS, written between 109 and 106 B.C. by a Quietist Pharisee, is found to yield not only origins or anticipations for pseudo-historic data in the Gospels but patterns for its moral doctrine. Thus the notion that the Twelve Apostles are to rule over the tribes in the Messianic kingdom is merely an adaptation of the teaching in the TESTAMENTS that the twelve sons of Jacob are so to rule.<sup>1</sup> There too appears for the first time in Jewish literature the formula "on His right hand";<sup>2</sup> and a multitude of close textual parallels clearly testify to perusal of the book by the Gospel-framers and the epistle-makers. But above all is the Jewish book the original for the doctrines of forgiveness and brotherly love. Whereas the Old Testament leaves standing the ethic of revenge alongside of the prescription to forgive one's enemy, the TESTAMENTS give out what a highly competent Christian editor pronounces to be "the most remarkable statement on the subject of forgiveness in all ancient literature. They show a wonderful insight into the true psychology of the question. So perfect are the parallels in thought and diction between these verses [*Test. Gad*, vi, 3-7] and Luke xvii, 3; Matt. xviii, 15, 35, *that we must assume our Lord's acquaintance with them.* The meaning of forgiveness in both cases is the highest and noblest known to us—namely, the restoring the offender to communion with us, which he had forfeited through his offence..... We now see the importance of our text. It shows that pre-

<sup>1</sup> *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, ed. by R. H. Charles, 1908, pp. lxxx, 97, 122, 213, 214.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* pp. lxxx, 213.



Christian Judaism possessed a noble system of ethics on the subject of forgiveness.”<sup>1</sup>

Here the tribute goes to a Pharisee ; in another connection it redounds to the other butt of Christian disparagement, the Scribes. As our editor points out, the collocation of the commands to love God *and* one's neighbour is even in Luke (x, 25-27) assigned not to Jesus but to a Scribe. But this too is found in the TESTAMENTS. “That the two great commandments were already conjoined in the teaching of the Scribes at the time of our Lord we may reasonably infer from our text,<sup>2</sup> which was written 140 years earlier, and from the account in Luke.”<sup>3</sup> And here too, a century before the Christian era, we have a Jewish predication of the salvation of the Gentiles,<sup>4</sup> in the patronizing Jewish sense.

It is only for men partly hypnotized by sectarian creed that there can be anything surprising in these anticipations. The notion that Sacred Books contain the highest and rarest thought of their respective periods is a delusion that any critical examination of probabilities will destroy. Relatively high and rare thought does *not* find its way into Sacred Books ; what these present is but the thought that is perceptible and acceptable to the majority, or a strong minority, of the better people ; and it is never purified of grave imperfection, precisely because these never are. Perfect ethic is the possession of the perfect people, an extremely rare species. The

<sup>1</sup> *Id.* pp. xciii-xciv.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* Test. Iss. v, 2 ; Dan. v, 3 ; Iss. vii, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* p. xciv.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* p. 210 sq.



ethic of the TESTAMENTS, which is an obvious improvement on that of average Jewry, is in turn imperfect enough; even as that of the Gospels remains stamped with Jewish particularism, and is irretrievably blemished by the grotesquely iniquitous doctrine of damnation for non-belief.

Such asseverations as Mill's, constantly repeated as they are by educated men, are simply expressions of failure to comprehend the nature and the possibilities of life, of civilization, of history. The thesis is that in a world containing no one else capable of elevated thought, moral or religious, there suddenly appeared a marvellously inspired teacher, who chose a dozen disciples incapable of comprehending his doctrine, and during the space of one or many years—no one can settle whether one or two or three or four or ten or twenty—went about alternately working miracles and delivering moral and religious sayings (including a doctrine of eternal hell-fire for the unrepentant wicked, among whom were included all who refused to accept the new teaching); and that after the execution of the teacher on a charge of blasphemy or sedition the world found itself in possession of a supernormal moral and religious code, which constituted the greatest "moral reform" in the world's history. The very conception is a chimera. In a world in which no one could independently think the teacher's moral thoughts there could be no acceptance of them. If the code was pronounced good, it was so pronounced in terms of the moral nature and moral convictions of those who made the pronouncement. The very propa-



gandists of the creed after a few generations were found meeting gainsayers with the formula *anima naturaliter Christiana*.

Christianity made its way precisely because (1) it *was* a construction from current moral and religious material; and because (2) it adopted a system of economic organization already tested by Jews and Gentiles; and (3) because its doctrines were ascribed to a God, not to a man. Anything like a moral renovation of the world it never effected; that conception is a chimera of chimeras. While Mill, the amateur in matters of religious research, who "scarcely ever read a theological book,"<sup>1</sup> ascribed to Christian morality a unique and original quality, Newman, the essentially religious man, deliberately affirmed with the Rationalists that "There is little in the ethics of Christianity which the human mind may not reach by its natural powers, and which here or there.....has not in fact been anticipated."<sup>2</sup> And Baur, who gave his life and his whole powers to the problem which Mill assumed to dispose of by a dithyramb, put in a sentence the historic truth which Mill so completely failed to grasp:—

How soon would everything true and important that was taught by Christianity have been relegated to the order of the long-faded sayings of the noble humanitarians and thinking sages of antiquity, had not its teachings become words of eternal life in the mouth of its Founder!<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bain, *J. S. Mill*, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to W. S. Lilly, cited in his *Claims of Christianity*, 1894, pp. 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Das Christenthum.....in die drei ersten Jahrhunderte*, 1853, pp. 35-36. (Eng. trans. i, 38.)



And a distinguished Scottish theologian and scholar has laid it down that

there is probably not a single moral precept in the Christian Scriptures which is not substantially also in the Chinese classics. There is certainly not an important principle in Bishop Butler's ethical teachings which had not been explicitly set forth by Mencius in the fourth century B.C. The Chinese thinker of that date had anticipated the entire moral theory of man's constitution expounded so long afterwards by the most famous of English moral philosophers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Flint in "St. Giles Lectures" on "The Faiths of the World," 1882, p. 419.



## CHAPTER III

### ILLUSIONS AS TO GOSPEL ETHIC

STRICTLY speaking, the whole problem of the moral value and the historical effects of Christianity lies outside the present issue; but we are forced to face it when the question of the *truth* of its historic basis is dismissed by a professed logician with a rhetorical thesis to the effect that "religion cannot be said to have made a bad choice in pitching on" the personality of which he is challenged to prove the historicity. Mill answers the challenge by begging the question; and where he was capable of such a course multitudes, lay and clerical, will long continue to be so. For Mill the problem was something extraneous to his whole way of thought. Broadly speaking, he never handled a historical problem, properly so called. Other defenders of the historicity of Jesus, in turn, charge a want of historic sense upon all who venture to put the hypothesis that the Gospel Jesus is a mythical creation. The charge has been repeatedly made by men who can make no pretence of having ever independently elucidated any historical problem; and in one notable case, that of Dr. J. Estlin Carpenter, it is made by a scholar who has committed himself to the assertion of the historicity of Krishna. Such resorts to blank asseveration in such



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matters are on all fours with the blank asseveration that the Gospel Jesus, in virtue of the teachings ascribed to him, is a figure too sublime for human invention.

The slightest reflection might obtrude the thought that it is precisely the invented figure that can most easily be made quasi-sublime. Is it pretended that Yahweh is *not* sublime? Is the Book of Job pretended to be historical? The Gospel Jesus is never shown to us save in a series of statuesque presentments, healing, preaching, prophesying, blessing, denouncing, suffering; he is expressly detached from domestic relationships; of his life apart from his Messianic career there is not a vestige of trace that is not nakedly mythical; of his mental processes there is not an attempt at explanation save in glosses often palpably incompetent; and of his plan or purpose, his hopes or expectations, no exegete has ever framed a non-theological theory that will stand an hour's examination. Those who claim as an evidence of uniqueness the fact that he is never accused by the evangelists of any wrong act do but prove their unpreparedness to debate any of the problems involved. A figure presented as divine, in a document that aims at establishing a cult, is *ipso facto* denuded of errancy so far as the judgment of the framers of the picture can carry them. But all that the framers and redactors of the Gospels could achieve was to outline a figure answering to *their* standards of perfection, free of what *they* regarded as sin or error. Going to work in an age and an environment in



which ascetic principles were commonly posited as against normal practice, they guard the God from every suggestion of carnal appetite; and the dialecticians of faith childishly ask us to contrast him with ancient Pagan deities whose legends are the unsifted survivals of savage folklore. As if *any* new Sacred Book in the same age would not have proceeded on the same standards; and as if the religious Jewish literature of the age of Christian beginnings were not as ascetic as the other. But inasmuch as the compilers of the Gospels could not transcend the moral standard of their time, they constantly obtrude its limitations and its blemishes. Had Mill attempted anything beyond his dithyramb, he would have been hard put to it to apply his ecstatic epithets to such teachings as these:—

Repent ye, *for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law [of Moses].

Whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of the hell of fire. [Compare Matt. xxiii, 17: "Ye fools and blind"; and Luke xii, 20: "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee."]

Whosoever shall marry her [the woman divorced without good cause] shall commit adultery.

Give to him that asketh thee.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth. Seek ye first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things [that were to be disregarded] *shall be added unto you.*

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. [Compare the warning against saying, Thou fool.]

Go not into any way of the Gentiles, and enter not into any city of the Samaritans.

Whosoever shall not receive you,.....as ye go



forth out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.

I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves.

Think not that I come to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword..... He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.

It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you [Chorazin and Bethsaida; because of non-acceptance of the teacher].  
.....It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.

Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

*Therefore* speak I to them in parables, *because* seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

In the end of the world the angels shall.....sever the wicked from the righteous, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire.

In vain do they worship me, *teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.*

Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? [retort for the employer who pays the same for a day's work and for an hour's].

If ye have faith and doubt not.....even if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou taken up and cast into the sea, it shall be done.

And his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely.....And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; *that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles.*

I say unto you that unto everyone that hath shall be given; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the



tormentors.....So also shall my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not everyone his brother from your hearts.

When such a mass of unmanageable doctrines is forced on the notice of the dithyrambists, there promptly begins a process of elimination—the method of Arnold, to which Mill would doubtless have subscribed, denying as he did that Jesus ever claimed to be the Son of God. Whatever is not sweetly reasonable in the Gospels, said Arnold, *cannot* be the word of Jesus; let us then pick and choose as we will. And justly enough may it be argued that we have been listening to different voices. It cannot be the same man who prohibited all anger, vetoing even the use of “Thou fool,” and then proceeded to vituperate Scribes and Pharisees in the mass as sons of hell; to curse a barren tree; and to call the erring “Ye fools and blind”—any more than it was the same man who said, “I am meek and lowly in heart,” and “A greater than Solomon is here,” or annulled precepts of the law after declaring that not a jot or tittle of it should pass away. But with what semblance of critical righteousness shall it be pretended that in a compilation thus palpably composite it was *the* teacher who said all the right things and others who said all the wrong, when as a matter of documentary fact the better sayings can all be paralleled in older or contemporary writings? That challenge is never so much as faced by the dithyrambists; to face it honestly would be the beginning of their end.

Some seem prepared to stake all on such a teach-



ing as the parable of the Good Samaritan, which actually teaches that a man of the religiously despised race could humanely succour one of the despising race when religious men of the same race passed him by. Is the parable then assimilated by those who stress it? Can they conceive that a Samaritan *could* so act? If yes, why cannot they conceive that a Samaritan, or another Jew than one, could put forth such a doctrine? Here is a story of actual human-kindness, paralleled in a hundred tales and romances of later times, a story which, appealing as it does to every reader, may reasonably be believed to have been *enacted* a thousand times by simple human beings who never heard of the Gospels. Yet we are asked to believe that only one Jewish or Gentile mind in the age of Virgil was capable of drawing the moral that the kindly and helpful soul is the true neighbour, and that the good man will be neighbourly to all; so rebuking the tribalism of the average Jew.

When, fifteen years ago, I wrote of "the moderate ethical height of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is partly preceded in Old Testament teaching [Deut. xxiii, 7—an interpolation; cp. the Book of Ruth]," Dr. J. E. Carpenter indignantly replied: "The field of Greek literature is open; will Mr. Robertson take the Good Samaritan and from Plato to Plotinus find his match?" And the Rev. Thomas James Thorburn, D.D., LL.D., in his later work *JESUS THE CHRIST: HISTORICAL OR MYTHICAL?* (1912), wrote (p. 68):—

Dr. Estlin Carpenter has invited (we believe, in



vain!) Mr. Robertson to produce an equal to this same parable out of the whole range of Greek literature, which undoubtedly contains the choicest teaching of the ancient world.

Dr. Thorburn in his bibliography cited the first *and* second (1912) editions of PAGAN CHRISTS; he thoughtfully omitted, in launching his "we believe, in vain!", to ascertain whether there had been a second edition of CHRISTIANITY AND MYTHOLOGY, in which any reply I might have to make to Dr. Carpenter might naturally be expected to appear, that critic having challenged the proposition as put in the first edition. A second edition *had* appeared, in 1910, and there I had duly given the simple answer which the two learned Doctors of Divinity, so conscious of knowing all Greek literature from Plato to Plotinus, were unable to think of for themselves. The field of Greek literature, as Dr. Carpenter justly observes, is open; and it would have been fitting on his part to perambulate a little therein. The demanded instance lay to the hand of unlearned people in so familiar an author as Plutarch—in the tale of Lycurgus and Alcander. As Dr. Thorburn and Dr. Carpenter, however, must be supposed to have been ignorant of that story, it may be well to tell it briefly here.

Lycurgus having greatly exasperated the rich citizens by proposing the institution of frugal common meals, they made a tumult and stoned him in the market-place, so that he had to run for sanctuary in a temple. But one of his pursuers, a violent youth named Alcander, caught up with



him, and, striking him with a club as he turned round, dashed out one of his eyes. Lycurgus then stood calmly facing the citizens, letting them see his bleeding face, and his eye destroyed. All who saw him were filled with shame and remorse. They gave up Alcander to his mercy, and conducted Lycurgus in procession to his house to show their sympathy. He thanked them and dismissed them, but kept Alcander with him. He did him no harm, and used no reproachful words, but kept him as his servant, sending away all others. And Alcander, dwelling with Lycurgus, noting his serenity of temper and simplicity of life and his unwearying labours, became his warmest admirer, and ever after told his friends that Lycurgus was the best of men. In one version of the tale Lycurgus gave back his freedom to Alcander in presence of the citizens, saying, You gave me a bad citizen; I give you back a good one.

If our Doctors of Divinity are unable to see that this represents a rarer strain of goodness than the deed of the Good Samaritan, they must be told that they are lacking in that very moral judgment upon which they plume themselves. Forever sitting in the chair of judgment, defaming all who dissent from them, they are ethically less percipient than the cultured laity. Thousands of kindly human beings, I repeat, have succoured wounded strangers, even those of hostile races; and the tone held over the Gospel parable by some Christians is but the measure of their misconception of human nature. Their sectarian creed has bred in them a habit of



aspersing all humanity, all character, save the Christian, thus stultifying the very lesson of their parable, the framer of which would fain have taught men to transcend these very fanaticisms. They will not be "neighbours" to the pagan to the extent of crediting him with their own appreciation of magnanimity and human-kindness; they cannot even discuss his claim without seeking arrogantly to browbeat his favourers. Forever acclaiming the beauty of the command to forgive injuries, they cannot even debate without insolence where they know their sectarian claims are called in question. And I shall be agreeably disappointed if they proceed to handle the tale of Lycurgus and Alcander without seeking to demonstrate that somehow it falls below the level of the Gospels, where, as it happens, the endurance of violence and death by the God-man is in effect presented as God-like. But for that matter, even the oft-cited saying "Father, forgive them," occurs only in Luke of all the Gospels, and, being absent from two of the most ancient codices, betrays itself as a late addition to the text. It may be either Jewish or Gentile. For Plutarch, the Spartan tale is something edifying and gratifying, but he makes no parade of it as a marvel; and in his essay OF PROFITING BY OUR ENEMIES he speaks of the forgiveness of enemies as a thing not rarely to be met with:—

To forbear to be revenged of an enemy if opportunity and occasion is offered, and to let him go when he is in thy hands, is a point of great humanity and courtesy; but him that hath compassion of him when he is fallen into adversity, succoureth him in



distress, at his request is ready to show goodwill to his children, and an affection to sustain the state of his house and family being in affliction, who doth not love for this kindness, nor praise the goodness of his nature? (*Holland's translation.*)

Had that passage appeared in a Gospel, how would not our Doctors of Divinity have exclaimed over the moral superiority of Christian ethic, demonstrating that it alone appealed to the heart! In actual fact we find them denying that such passages exist. The most disgraceful instance known to me appears to implicate an Austrian theologian. In the "Editor's Forewords" to the Early English Text Society's volume of QUEEN ELIZABETH'S ENGLISHINGS there is a note on Plutarch's DE CURIOSITATE, à propos of Elizabeth's translation of that essay:—

In *De Curiositate*, as well as in his other writings, Plutarch proves himself to be a true Stoic philosopher, to possess first-rate moral principles and great fear of God.....His religious views sometimes remind us, like those of Seneca, of Christian teaching; but here there is always one important omission—viz., the commendation of charity or brotherly love; *of this Christian virtue the stoic, so virtuous in his own relations, knows absolutely nothing.*

At the close of the "Forewords" the Editor, Miss Caroline Pemberton, mentions that "The comments on the writings of Boethius and Plutarch are by Dr. J. Schenk, of Meran, Tyrol." To Dr. Schenk, then, must apparently be credited the high-water mark in Christian false-witness against paganism. Either he did or he did not know that Plutarch in other writings had given full expression to the ethic of brotherly love. If he did not know,



he was not only framing a wanton libel in sheer ignorance but giving a particularly deadly proof of his own destitution of the very virtue he was so unctuously denying to the pagan. A man devoid not merely of charity but of decent concern for simple justice poses as a moral teacher in virtue of his Christianity; even as the professional encomiasts of the parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrate their own blindness to its meaning, playing the Levite to the Pagan.

Plutarch, so much better a man than his Christian critic, was in turn no innovator in ethics. As every student knows, such doctrines as those above cited from him are far older than the Christian religion. Five centuries before the Christian era Confucius put the law of reciprocity in the sane form of the precept that we should not do unto others what we would not that they should do unto us. Are we to suppose that the rule had been left to Confucius to invent? Christians who cannot conform to it are not ashamed to disparage the precept of Confucius as a "negative" teaching, implying that there is a higher moral strain in their formula which prescribes the doing to others what we would wish them to do to us. There, if any difference of code be really intended, we are urged to confer benefits in order to have them returned. If no difference is intended, the disparagement is mere deceit. In the ancient Hindu epic, the *Mahâbhârata*, it is declared that "The Gods regard with delight the man who.....when struck does not strike again," and that "The good, when they



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promote the welfare of others, *expect no reciprocity.*" How long are we to listen to the childish claim that moral maxims which in India were delivered millenniums ago by forgotten men were framable in Seneca's day only in Syria, and there only by one "unique and effulgent" personality, whose mere teaching lifted humanity to new heights? Had no nameless man or woman in Greece ever urged the beauty of non-retaliation before Plato?

If clerics cannot rise above the old disingenuous sectarian spirit, it is time at least that laymen should. The more historic comprehension a man has of the ancient world, of Plutarch's world, with all its sins and delusions, the less can he harbour the notion of the moral miracle involved in the thesis of the unique teacher, suddenly revealing to an amazed humanity heights of moral aspiration before undreamt of. And any considerate scrutiny of the *logia* of the Gospels will inevitably force the open-minded student to recognize multiplicity of thought and ideal, and compel him to seek some explanation. An effort to detach a possible personality by the elimination of impossible adjuncts is the next natural step.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE METHOD OF BLUSTER

FOR anyone who will soberly and faithfully face the facts there must sooner or later arise the problem, Is there *any* unifying personality behind this medley of many sets of doctrines, many voices, many schools? Even if it were possible to piece together from it a coherent body of either ethical or religious thought, and jettison the rest, is there any reason to believe that the selected matter belongs to the Gospel Teacher with the Twelve Disciples, crucified on the morning after the Pass-over under Pontius Pilate? When the crowning doctrine of sacrament and sacrifice is seen to be but the consummation of a religious lore beginning in prehistoric and systematic human sacrifice, and traceable in a score of ancient cults, is it possible to claim that the palpably dramatic record of Last Supper, Agony, Betrayal, Trial, and Crucifixion is a historic record of a strange coincidence between cult practice and biography? And if that goes, what is left? If, says Loisy, the condemnation of Jesus as pretended Messiah by Pilate "could be put in doubt, one would have no motive for affirming the existence of Christ."<sup>1</sup> And it can!

<sup>1</sup> *Jésus et la tradition évangélique*, 1910, p. 45.



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Some, assuming to settle the problem by rhetoric, in effect stand for a "personality" without any pretence of establishing what the "personality" taught. And this inexpensive device will doubtless long continue to be practised by the large class who insist upon solving all such problems by instinct. An example of that procedure is afforded by an article headed "A Barren Controversy," by the Rev. Frederick Sinclair, in a magazine entitled FELLOWSHIP, the organ of the Free Religious Fellowship, Melbourne, issue of March, 1915. The controversy is certainly barren enough as Mr. Sinclair conducts it. His religious temper is of a familiar type. "It is a hard task to prove the obvious," he begins; "and no obligation is laid on us to examine and refute the evidences alleged in support of this or that cock-and-bull theory." We can imagine how the reverend critic would have shone in the sixteenth or the seventeenth century, disposing of the Copernican theory, which so presumptuously assailed "the obvious." True to his principles, he does not hamper himself by meeting arguments or evidence. "Mythical theories about Christ have about as much scientific value and importance as the theories of the Baconians about Shakespeare. They.....are products.....of that perverted credulity which will swallow anything, so long as it is not orthodox; and they are best met by the method of satire adopted by Whately in his 'Historic Doubts' on Napoleon." And yet our expert renounces that admirable instrument in favour of the simpler procedure vulgarly known as



“bluff.” He is in reality a good example of the psychosis of the very Baconism which he contemns, and which he would probably be quite unable to confute. An æsthetic impression of “reality” derived from a hypnotized perusal of Mark, and a feeling that only one man could deliver such oracles, are the beginning and end of his dialectic and scholarly stock-in-trade; even as a consciousness that Bacon *must* be the author of the Plays, and that the actor Shakespeare *could not* have written them, is the beginning and end of the ignorant polemic of the Baconists.

To do him justice, it should be noted that Mr. Sinclair warns his readers both before and after his case that his handling of the theme and their preparation for estimating it leave a great deal to be desired by those who care to see applied “the method of careful criticism.” Still, he is satisfied that it is “adequate to the particular question we have been considering.” And this is how Mr. Sinclair has considered:—

Anyone who will pay this controversy the compliment of a few hours' consideration is advised to bring his own judgment to bear on it in the following way: Let him begin by taking a copy of St. Mark's Gospel, which is the earliest of the four, in either of the English versions, and read it through, pencil in hand, striking out all the miraculous or quasi-miraculous stories. Then, gathering up what remains, let him read it, first as a whole, then singly, episode by episode, always keeping the eye of the imagination open, dismissing as far as possible any prepossessions, and letting the author make his own impression, without the interfering



offices of critic or commentator. Having done this, let the reader ask of himself of each story: Is this a story which *seems* to belong to actual life, to be told of a real human being, with distinct individuality, or is it rather a *literary invention*, designed to *add* something to a *conventional* figure? Does the narrative move with the freedom and variety of life, or does it fit into a *conventional, symmetrical design*? Does the writer's style and method arouse the suspicion of *literary artifice*? Must one say of this or that story that its reality is the reality of life, or of an art which *cunningly counterfeits life*?

The open-minded reader, I trust, will hardly need to be told that what is here done is to set a false problem and ignore the real issue. Mr. Sinclair either cannot understand that issue or elects to evade it. Probably the former is the explanation. No critic of the Gospels, so far as I remember, ever suggested that any of them "cunningly counterfeits life"; and certainly no one ever pretended that Mark<sup>1</sup> exhibits a "conventional, symmetrical design," though Wilke argued that it "freely moulded the traditional historical material in pursuance of literary aims," and B. Weiss praises its literary colouring. It is a heap of unreal incident, fortuitously collocated,<sup>2</sup> and showing nothing approaching to symmetrical design. "Conventional" raises another question; in this as in all the Gospels there is plenty of convention.

<sup>1</sup> It should be explained that in using, for convenience sake, the traditional ascriptions of the four Gospels, I do not for a moment admit that these hold good of *the* Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John of the tradition. In not one case is that tradition historically valid.

<sup>2</sup> The Rev. A. Wright (*N. T. Problems*, 1898, p. 15) pronounces it "completely unchronological." Sanday acquiesces (*id.*, p. 177).



Let us but follow for a little the simple method of selection prescribed by Mr. Sinclair, and see what we get. What we are to make of Mark i, 1-9, is far from clear. It sets forth the advent of John as the fulfilment of a prophecy—*i.e.*, a miracle; and it describes his mission in the baldest conceivable summary, save for the sentence: "And John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leathern girdle about his loins, and did eat locusts and wild honey." Is this "convention" or "reality"? I am not inclined to call it "literary artifice," unless we are to apply that description to the beginning of the average nursery tale, as perhaps we should. What must strike the inquiring reader is that if we were to have a touch of "reality" about the Baptist we should be told something about his inner history, his antecedents, and what he preached. What we *are* told is that "he preached, saying, There cometh after me he that is mightier than I.....I baptized you with water; but he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

If this part of the narrative has not been "struck out" by Mr. Sinclair's neophytes as plainly belonging to the miraculous, the next five verses presumably must be. The non-miraculous narrative begins at v. 14:—

Now, *after that John was delivered up*, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and *believe in the Gospel* [not a word of which has been communicated].

And passing along by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a



net in the sea; for they were fishers. And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. And straightway they left the nets, and followed him. And going on a little further, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending the nets. And straightway he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after him.

This "episode," for Mr. Sinclair, "seems to belong to real life, to be told of a real human being with distinct individuality." For critical readers it is a primitive "conventional" narrative, told by a writer who has absolutely no historic knowledge to communicate. Of the preaching of the Saviour he has no more to tell than of the preaching of the Baptist. Both are as purely "conventional," so far, as an archaic statue of Hermes. Of "the freedom and variety of life" there is not a trace; Mr. Sinclair, who professes to find these qualities, is talking in the manner of a showman at a fair. The important process of making disciples resolves itself into a fairy tale: "Come and I will make you fishers of men; and they came." A measure of "literary artifice" is perhaps to be assigned to the items of "casting a net," "mending the net," and "left their father in the boat with the hired servants";<sup>1</sup> but it is the literary art of a thousand fairy tales, savage and civilized, and stands for the method of a narrator who is dealing with purely

<sup>1</sup> Such details, imposed on an otherwise empty narrative, suggest a pictorial basis, as does the account of the Baptist. Strauss cites the Hebrew myth-precedent of the calling of Elisha from the plough by Elijah.



conventional figures, not with characters concerning which he has knowledge. The calling of the first disciples in the rejected Fourth Gospel has much more semblance of reality.

If the cautious reader is slow to see these plain facts on the pointing of one who is avowedly an unbeliever in the historic tradition, let him listen to a scholar of the highest eminence, who, after proving himself a master in Old Testament criticism, set himself to specialize on the New. Says Wellhausen: "The Gospel of Mark, in its entirety, lacks the character of history."<sup>1</sup> And he makes good his judgment in detail:—

Names of persons are rare: even Jairus is not named in [codex] D. Among the *dramatis personæ* it is only Jesus who distinctively speaks and acts; the antagonists provoke him; the disciples are only figures in the background. But of what he lived by, how he dwelt, ate, and drank, bore himself with his companions, nothing is vouchsafed. It is told that he taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath, but no notion is given of the how; we get only something of what he said outside the synagogue, usually through a special incident which elicits it. The normal things are never related, only the extraordinary.....The scantiness of the tradition is remarkable.<sup>2</sup>

The local connection of the events, the itinerary, leaves as much to be desired as the chronological; seldom is the transit indicated in the change of scene. Single incidents are often set forth in a lively way, and this without any unreal or merely rhetorical devices, but they are only anecdotally related, *rari nantes in gurgite vasto*. They do not

<sup>1</sup> *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, 1905, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 47.



amount to material for a life of Jesus. And one never gets the impression that an attempt had been made among those who had eaten and drunk with him to give others a notion of his personality.<sup>1</sup>

Wellhausen, it is true, finds suggestions of a real and commanding personality; but they are very scanty, the only concrete detail being the watching the people as they drop their offerings into the collecting-chest! "Passionate moral sensibility distinguishes him. He gives way to divine feeling in anger against the oppressors of the people and in sympathy with the lowly." But here too there is qualification:—

But in Mark this motive for miracles seldom comes out. They are meant to be mainly displays of the Messiah's power. Mark does not write *de vita et moribus Jesu*: he has not the aim of making his person distinguishable, or even intelligible. It is lost for him in the divine vocation; he means to show that Jesus is the Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Then we have a significant balancing between the perception that Mark is not history, and that, after all, it is practically all there is:—

Already the oral tradition which he found had been condensed under the influence of the standpoint from which he set out. He is silent on this and that *which he can omit as being known to his readers—for instance, the names of the parents of Jesus (!)*. Nevertheless, he has left little that is properly historical for his successors to glean after him; and what they know in addition is of doubtful worth.....

Why is not something more, and something more

<sup>1</sup> *Id.* p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 52.



trustworthy, reported of the intercourse of the Master with his disciples? It would rather seem that the narrative tradition in Mark did not come directly from the intimates of Jesus. It has on the whole a somewhat rude and demotic cast, as if it had previously by a long circulation in the mouth of the people come to the rough and drastic style in which it lies before us.....Mark took up what the tradition carried to him.

Such is the outcome of a close examination by an original scholar who takes for granted the historicity of Jesus. It is a poor support to a pretence of finding a lifelike narrative.

If the reader under Mr. Sinclair's tutelage will at this point vary his study somewhat (at the cost of a few extra hours) by reading samples of quite primitive folk-lore—say the HOTTENTOT FABLES AND TALES collected by Dr. Bleek, in which the characters are mostly, but not always, animals; or some of the fairy tales in Gill's MYTHS AND SONGS OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC—and then proceed to the tale of TOM TIT TOT, as given by Mr. Edward Clodd in the dialect of East Anglia, he will perhaps begin to realize that unsophisticated narrators not only can but frequently do give certain touches of quasi-reality to "episodes" which no civilized reader can suppose to have been real. In particular he will find in the vivacious TOM TIT TOT an amount of "the freedom and variety of life" in comparison with which the archaic stiffness and bareness of the Gospel narrative is as dumb-show beside drama. And if he will next pay some attention to the narrative of Homer, in which Zeus and Hêrê are so



much more life-like than a multitude of the human personages of the epic, and then turn to see how Plutarch writes professed biography, some of it absolutely mythical, but all of it on a documentary basis of some kind, he will perhaps begin to suspect that Mr. Sinclair has not even perceived the nature of the problem on which he pronounces, and so is not in a position to "consider" it at all. Plutarch is nearly as circumstantial about Theseus and Herakles and Romulus as about Solon. But when he has real biographical material to go upon as to real personages he gives us a "freedom and variety of life" which is as far as the poles asunder from the hieratic figures of the Christian Gospel. Take his Fabius Maximus. After the pedigree, with its due touch of myth, we read:—

His own personal nickname was Verrucosus, because he had a little wart growing on his upper lip. The name of Ovicula, signifying sheep, was also given him while yet a child, because of his slow and gentle disposition. He was quiet and silent, very cautious in taking part in children's games, and learned his lessons slowly and with difficulty, which, combined with his easy obliging ways with his comrades, made those who did not know him think that he was dull and stupid. Few there were who could discern, hidden in the depths of his soul, his glorious and lion-like character.

This is biography, accurate or otherwise. Take again the LIFE OF PERICLES, where after the brief account of parentage, with the item of the mother's dream, we get this:—

His body was symmetrical, but his head was long out of all proportion; for which reason in



nearly all his statues he is represented wearing a helmet; as the sculptors did not wish, I suppose, to reproach him with this blemish.....Most writers tell us that his tutor in music was Damon, whose name they say should be pronounced with the first syllable short. Aristotle, however, says that he studied under Pythocleides. This Damon, it seems, was a sophist of the highest order.....

The "biographer" who so satisfies Mr. Sinclair's sense of actuality has not one word of this kind to say of the youth, upbringing, birthplace, or appearance of the Teacher, who for him was either God or Supreme Man. Seeking for the alleged "freedom and variety of life" in the narrative, we go on to read:—

And they go into Capernaum; *and straightway on the sabbath day* he entered into the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching: for he taught them as having authority, and not as the scribes. *And straightway* there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit—

and straightway we are back in the miraculous. Mr. Joseph McCabe, who in his excellent book on the SOURCES OF THE MORALITY OF THE GOSPELS avows that he holds by the belief in a historical Jesus, though unable to assign to him with confidence any one utterance in the record, fatally anticipates Mr. Sinclair by remarking that "If the inquirer will try the simple and interesting experiment of eliminating from the Gospel of Mark all the episodes which essentially involve miracle, he will find the remainder of the narrative amazingly paltry." To which verdict does the independent reader begin to incline? Thus the "episodes"



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continue, after three paragraphs of the miraculous:—

And in the morning, *a great while before day*, he rose up and went out, and departed into a desert place, and there prayed. And Simon and they that were with him followed after him; and they found him, and say unto him, All are seeking thee. And he saith unto them, Let us go elsewhere into the next towns, that I may preach there also; for to this end came I forth. And he went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out devils.

It would seem sufficient to say that Mr. Sinclair, with his "freedom and variety of life," is incapable of critical reflection upon what he reads. In the opening chapter we have not a single touch of actuality; the three meaningless and valueless touches of detail ("a great while before day" is the third) serve only to reveal the absolute deficit of biographical knowledge. We have reiterated statements that there was teaching, and not a syllable of what was taught. The only utterances recorded in the chapter are parts of the miracle-episodes, which we are supposed to ignore. Let us then consider the critic's further asseveration:—

It will be observed that certain *distinct* traits appear in the central figure, and that these traits are not merely those of the conventional religious hero, but the more simple human touches of anger, pity, indignation, despondency, exultation; these scattered touches, *each so vivid*, fuse into a natural and intelligible whole. The Jesus of Mark is a real man, who moves and speaks and feels like a man (!) — "a creature not too bright or good for human nature's daily food"—