

JESUS THE PHILOSOPHER.

THE GREAT TEACHER WAS A MAN IN MIDDLE LIFE AND OF
PHILOSOPHICAL TEMPER RATHER THAN A RE-
LIGIOUS ENTHUSIAST BARELY TURNED
THIRTY YEARS OF AGE.

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WITH a thousand-fold more books written about Jesus than of any other figure in history, and with hundreds of thousands of preachers and teachers giving their lives to the study of his life, it at first seems venturesome to suggest any revolutionary teachings about the Great Galilean; but let us remember that theology holds its cramping hand on the minds of these many preachers and teachers, and over the authors of these many books. It is as recent as 1863 that the first book was written about Jesus, which treats him as an historic, and not as a theological, figure. Renan's *Life of Jesus* was the first attempt to interpret Jesus as an historical figure, and it had tremendous influence in reviving interest in Jesus as a real man among men. What we speak of as the Reformation made no study of Jesus; even as a theology, it created no Christology; it accepted the views of the church without question. Writers and teachers of the Reformed churches were theological rather than scientific in their aims, and we could expect no new light to come forth from their work.

Renan sketches the figure of Jesus as he found it in older writings, and he gives us a young, enthusiastic, religious leader of rare personal charm, who easily drew about himself sincere disciples. This Jesus was a poet, a dreamer, a seer, a sort of larger Shelley. In the main, scientific lives of Jesus since Renan, have followed his outline. The only variation has come from the socialistic lives of Jesus, where we see Him as a fiery, young revolutionist; a man of utter unselfishness, devoted to the ideal of freeing the oppressed; in the hands of this class of writers Jesus becomes a larger Robert Emmet, ready to go to the cross for the poor and weak.

Jesus was a poet, a dreamer; He was unselfish and willing to die for the poor and weak; and He was more than these things—He was a wise, well-balanced teacher; a man of over forty years, who had watched life closely, brooded, reflected, learned wisdom by patience and experience, and thus we have in Him not only the supreme literary genius, the hero to honor, we have in Him the teacher from whom we may learn forever; the philosopher who tells us of ourselves and our problems.

No one reading the gospels would for a moment think that the sayings therein collected and attributed to Jesus, were the words of a young man. They are not. They give us the mature thinking of a man of mature years; they are not unlike the words of the greater moralists and philosophers of classic Greece and Rome. The calm, patient treatment of the situation which Jesus uses in the incident recorded in Luke vii. 36-50, is that of the man of middle life rather than that of the young man. Most of what Jesus says is entirely un-natural if we think of him as a young man.

Again it is an un-natural thing for a young man to gather about himself a group of older disciples. All the teachers of ancient Hebrew-land, of Greece and Rome, were men of mature years, who gathered disciples who were younger. Probably the only disciple in Jesus' group, that was near His own age, was Peter; this perhaps accounts for the position of authority which Peter held.

And again Jesus is more than all other of ancient teachers, closely associated with women; they supported Him, were His friends and followers; His relations with these women seem to be such as we would find in a man of forty-five, rather than in a man of thirty.

The enthusiasm of radical German scholarship for the views of Weiss and Schweitzer quite led astray the scientific scholarship of the Christian world. These men held the view that Jesus was an enthusiastic exponent of Jewish Apocalyptic conceptions—that His own conception was to announce Himself as the Messiah and that the eschatological kingdom was at hand. It is evident that the Jewish followers of Jesus who originated the churches, shaped a gospel to preach, and edited the gospel records in the form we now have them, did believe that Jesus was the Messiah. But a careful and critical selection from the gospel-records of the words and ideas of Jesus, does not verify any such view. The original form of Matthew, as best we may reconstruct it, has no messianic con-

ception, but is a collection of lofty, moral philosophy and religious trust. And in Mark, which is probably little changed by later hands than the author, there is very little which connects Jesus with the Apocalyptic Messiah. And one of the sayings of Jesus, brought down without change apparently, (Mark xii-35) shows that Jesus rejected messianic conceptions as the Jews held them, and did *not* regard Himself as the Messiah. Such history of Palestine as we may find, and especially the works of Josephus, show to us that in Jesus' day there were varying streams of lives meeting in the best thought of the serious-minded. Roman religion, Persian cults, Greek philosophy, all had sent their ideas into the general stream. While the Hebrews refused to mingle their religious ideas with those of Romans and oriental cults and Greek mythology, yet how far they accepted Greek philosophical views is seen by the work of Philo and the Wisdom literature.

Jesus went with this group. He sought to modify prevailing Messianic conceptions; He thanked God that the larger light had been given Him, (Matt. xi. 27-29); He was a wandering philosophical teacher; His first followers were disciples, and while later followers taught Him as the Messiah, and put Messianic claims into their accounts of His sayings, it is quite evident from the writings of Justin the Martyr, and the Gospel of John, that there were many of His followers who still upheld Jesus the Philosopher, rather than Jesus the Messiah.

Freeing our minds from the theology of the early disciples, the church of the centuries, the pre-conceptions of modern critics, we find that an unprejudiced reading of the records, would seem to indicate that Jesus was a man who had reached middle life at least. Let us now examine the direct question of His age as we may find light thrown upon it in these records. The only direct reference to His age which is made either by Himself, or by a contemporary, is when in a controversy with the Jews, they rebuke Him by saying, "Thou art not yet fifty years old". Such a statement is unnatural unless Jesus were in the decade between forty and fifty: had he been under forty they would not have thus spoken. All gospel accounts state that Jesus took up the work of John, began his public ministry, when John was cast into prison for protesting against Herod's marriage to Herodias. Recent dates in Latin history seem to fix that marriage as in the year 34. Accordingly Jesus ceased to be the village rabbi, and became the itinerant teacher soon after.

Pilate was recalled in 37, hence Jesus could not have been crucified later than 36, and we can put the time of His public ministry between 34 and 36.

A date for Jesus' birth as early at least as 8 B. C. has a growing number of supporters. Only by putting the birth early can we establish the historic character of the account in Luke. Luke says the birth of Jesus was "when Quirinius was governor." Roman history puts Quirinius in Syria 10—8 B. C. Or taking Jewish history and reckoning back from the service of the priests as we have it for the year 70 A. D. reckoning back to the course of Abijah, to which Zacharias belonged, and to whom came the first intimation of the events leading up to Jesus' birth a few months later, we come to July in the year 9 B. C. Clement of Alexandria puts the birth of Jesus as in the year 9-8; Tertullian says it was when Sentius Saturninus was governor: Sentius was for a while co-governor with Quirinius, and displaced him in the year 8 B. C. Thus it is evident that the early fathers accepted the early date for Jesus' birth.

Accepting this early date for the birth of Jesus we can not get away from the fact that Jesus in the days of His ministry was over forty years of age. Looking further into the testimony of the fathers as to the age of Jesus during His ministry we find that Irenaeus says that Jesus was forty years of age when He sent out the disciples, and Clement working out a careful chronology accepts the statement without question. How then arose the popular error of thinking Jesus was barely turned thirty at the time of His ministry. It comes from the statement of the gospel that Jesus was about thirty years of age when He was baptized by John. Believing John's ministry to have been unimportant and of a few months duration, the rest followed. Dean Alford carefully points out that the general statement "being about thirty years of age", admits of much latitude either way; that Jesus might have been thirty-two or twenty-eight. The gospel-record gives much prominence to John, and Jesus pays him splendid tribute. Jewish estimates give good space to the work of John, and Josephus indicates his ministry covered a considerable time. Hence the truth seems to be, that John's ministry covered a space of perhaps ten years; that Jesus was baptized and became a follower of John when about thirty, during which time He was a follower of John, and that in 34 when John was imprisoned, He moved to Capernaum and entered His ministry.

This would throw light upon Clement's statement that the ministry of Jesus was over ten years in duration.

Again there are instances in the records where Jesus appears to be older than His disciples. At the well of Samaria He rests and waits while His disciples go into the village for food; he was unable to bear His cross where younger men carried the heavy beams; He died on the cross in a few hours; all of which things shows Him to have been a man past the vitality of thirty years of age.

We may thus safely conclude that Jesus was no youthful reformer; he was a man of mature years and experience; a far-seeing, prophetic soul; in fact a philosopher who walks with Socrates, Lao-Tze, Buddha, Confucius, Seneca, Zoroaster—only He is far ahead of them all. He stands unique among the greater teachers of mankind. His insight was clearer, His teachings more scientific, His ethics more lofty, His views more definite, His literary style superior to all other teachers, ancient or modern. The clearness of definition in those short moral epigrams which we call beatitudes, the beauty and appeal in the parables, the alertness in discussion, the power of his moral judgments to stand unquestioned after centuries—these stamp Jesus as the greatest of moralists. Franklin, Jefferson, Goethe, Emerson, Carlyle, Thoreau were all right in speaking of Jesus as the great moral philosopher. Jesus lived a limited experience, but He faced all the great questions of human life; and while His wisdom has its limits, yet His mind was so keen and His insight so deep, that He never faltered from speaking eternal truth about the bigger things of life. In the intellectual courts of the world Jesus must be accepted as the wisest we have known, and the wisest men among us in various generations have been those who most closely followed Him; Benedict, Francis, Fox, Tolstoy, these men have been our wisest leaders. Looking at Jesus as a man, and not as a theological entity, we must admit that His philosophy is the truest, and has power to best influence men, and when men accept it they live human life at its best.

We protestants in our ignoring the Apocrypha, forget that ancient Hebrewism developed a philosophical movement as well as a religious movement. The "Wisdom" literature which grew with great power after the return from the exile, was largely a philosophic movement, in which the thoughts of foreign philosophers modify the ancient Hebrew religion. The book of Sirach is dis-

tinctly the work of a philosophical moralist; and the fourth book of Maccabees shows us a pious Hebrew giving heed to philosophy. In the Greek translation of the Apocrypha the words of Plato "nous" and "sophia" are used. The controversy which raged in Germany over the Apocrypha, was finally decided against admitting the books into the evangelical canon, because they were philosophical. Andre, the French scholar, said (1903) "The wisdom writings are the first attempt at a systematic Jewish philosophy". Philo was profoundly influenced by the work of philosophical writers, and if Philo—why not Jesus? We may conclude then, that in the time of Jesus, intellectual Hebrews were turning philosophy to become the handmaid of religion. The "Wisdom" writings were bringing an influence down alongside the work of the prophets and the olden code. Jesus became the fairest flower of this movement. He not only reached higher in idealism and trust than any of the olden prophets, but he reached down deeper into the soul in his philosophical thinking, and hence his teachings become for the world of men, not only our highest development of religious aspiration, but they are as well, our truest philosophy of life.