

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELE

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VOL. XXXVII (No. 12)

DECEMBER, 1923

No. 811

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## The Open Court Publishing Company

122 S. Michigan Ave.

Chicago, Illinois

Per copy, 20 cents (1 shilling). Yearly, \$2.00 (in the U.P.U., 9s. 6d.)

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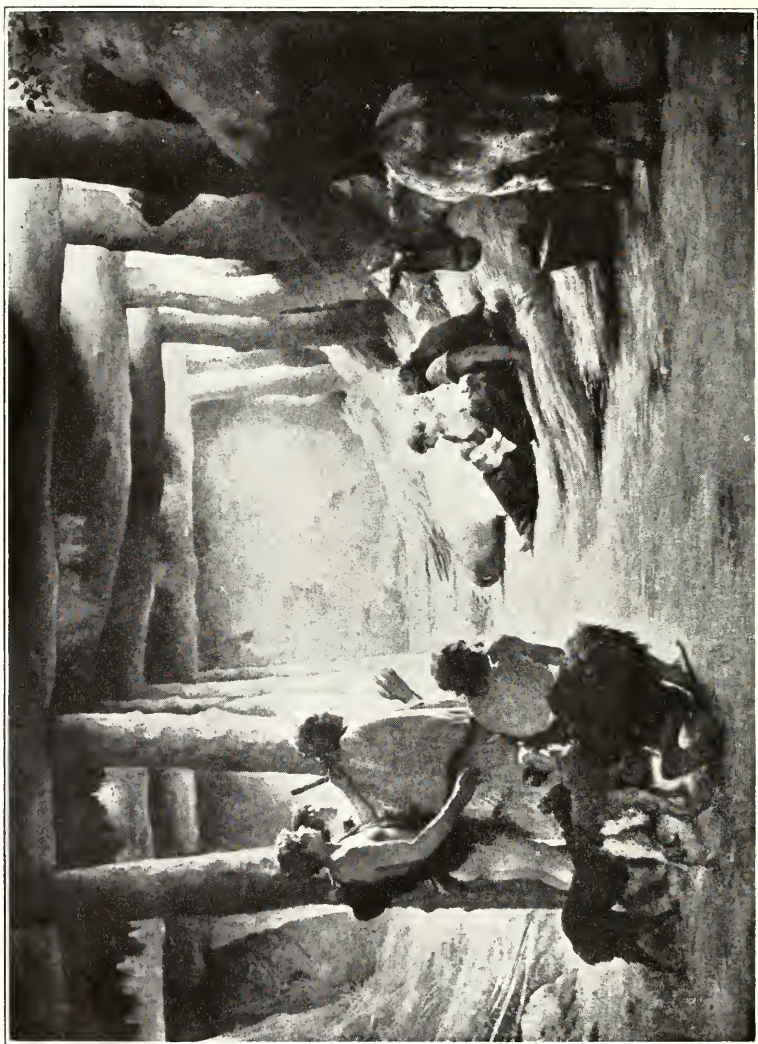
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THE NATIVITY

*Frontispiece to the Open Court.*

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## CHRISTMAS? OR EPIPHANY?<sup>1</sup>

BY WILLIAM BENJAMIN SMITH

MIDWAY in this, our mortal life, says Dante, I found me in a forest dense and dark; and then he tells us in immortal rhyme of all that he saw and heard and felt in that savage and lonely wood. Even so, the man that would speak or write of Christmas must find himself at once entangled in a deep erroneous wood, amid trees some towering erect, some outstretched and fallen, amid vines and brush and copse (and all manner of undergrowth), and yet a forest of exquisite foliage and fragrant flowers, of foaming torrents and slow-winding streams, of hills and vales and glens, and withal where even the wariest foot may stumble or go astray. For it is the forest of the human spirit in all its toil and moil, its struggles and aspirations and aberrations, as lured by hopes and scared by fears, veering hither and thither under the winds of contrary doctrines, now guided aright by its inborn sense of truth and beauty and justice, now lost in a hopeless maze where swamp-fires beckon it this way and that. No man can thread this labyrinth alone, by the unaided powers of his single intelligence. Fortunately, the adventurous task has attracted the interest and energies of some of the finest and best equipped intellects of recent years, and they have blazed out paths through the wilderness and set up signboards for all future explorers. Certainly, much remains yet to be accomplished before the survey can be called satisfactory, much less complete; but it is just as certain that much has been done correctly and finally, and the great trail has been justly, though dimly and roughly, sketched. It is most of all to Hermann Usener, and after him to his continuators, Hans Lietzmann and Arnold Meyer, and incidentally to the English master, John G. Frazer, that our thanks for this service are due. It is the purpose of this address to arrange and appraise some of the results obtained.

<sup>1</sup> Address delivered before the *Forum* of New Orleans, 8th January, 1922.

to set them in proper perspective, to exhibit their consequences, to determine their significance for the history of Soul.

In last analysis it is only this Self-study, this history of Soul, that can have interest for the soul—a proposition that must be assumed, for it can not be proved in this context,—and the main, if not the exclusive effort of the Spirit is to understand its own experience. It is this all-important fact that gives dignity and significance to the operations of Mind, to the sublime endeavor to know, not only for the power of knowledge, but also for the mere sake of knowing. The rawest material of Experience seems to be given in the Dream, and in dreaming is laid bare the nature of soul-activity in its elementary simplicity. In sleep you are unconscious and dissociated from your fellows; suddenly you have a soul-experience of this kind or that, a feeling, a thrill, perhaps a pain. At once you proceed to interpret, to try to understand it after the manner of men, of your native soul-activity; you make an image or construct, you arrange it in a certain way, you compose it of elements of your past experience still preserved as actual or possible memories, and this image or construct thus built up backwards to explain your sensation is what you call your dream. Thus, a young man dreams he is in Washington, in the Senate chamber, listening to their pow-wows; a grave and reverend senator is trying to kill a bill by talking against time; he has not much to say, but he says it at endless length, prolonging and repeating his monosyllables, thus: “a-n-d, a-n-d.” The dreamer wakes from his slumber (exactly the opposite of the ordinary effect of such senatorial eloquence); a dog is barking at his window, proclaiming bow-wow-wow in perfect senatorial rhythm. The dreamer has had the soul-experience symbolized as hearing a sound; he explains it to himself by the image or construct of the senator speaking. In similar but far more elaborate fashion, not in dissociation, but in association with our fellows, we go through waking life explaining our experience through images, constructs, or symbols, and the constructs that hold for us all alike we call real objects or realities; such as do not hold for our fellows but only for ourselves we call subjective fancies.

Now this universal fundamental activity of explanation or rationalization extends through all history—from the simplest dreaming or perceiving to the most comprehensive calculations in Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. In Science we are especially concerned with constructs or explanations upon which we can *all agree*, which accordingly embody the most common fundamental activities of all

souls, everywhere alike. Our present concern, however, is with another realm of such construction, of images or explanations more or less individual and peculiar, not serving alike for all folk and all ages, but only for some time and some races, to be gradually displaced and supplanted by others more general and more representative of universal elements in human experience.

A very wonderful example of such a system of explanatory constructions is found in Mythology in all climes and all ages, varying from race to race, from North to South, from continent to island, baffling in the unending multiplicity of its forms, fitful and many-hued as an iridescent garment fluttering in the sunlight, and yet woven of one thread without seam from top to bottom. All mythology is attempted explanation, it is unsuccessful effort at rationalization. We are not now concerned with such endeavors to understand the processes of nature, but rather with essays at explaining rituals and customs, generally religious. It is in the interpretation of these latter that the most gifted myth-making peoples have reveled and exploited their ingenuity to the highest degree. Some religious rite or custom held in the deepest reverence and supposed to be affected with magic power to bring the brightest happiness, or, in case of neglect or improper observance, the direst calamity upon the State, has descended to a people through centuries, perhaps millenniums, and they have lost all sense of its origin and primal significance, about which not only do they know nothing whatever, but they have no means of information, no possibility even of inquiry, for its sources are more inaccessible even than the Nile's, hidden under immovable mists that have settled over remote ages of which no record has been kept. Yet, in the presence of this mysterious ritual, the human spirit, after it has attained a certain development, cannot rest content with ignorance. By the law of its being it must explain to itself the inexplicable custom, even as the dreamer explains to himself the sensation that aroused his consciousness in sleep, or as the man of science explains a physical event by constructing a scientific theory. The myth-maker invents a tale, sometimes extremely crude, it may be revolting, sometimes extremely ingenious deep-thoughted and beautiful, in which the rite appears as a sacred commemorative service: by its proper observance the folk will please the divine powers concerned and win favor and prosperity; by neglect or false observance, they will provoke the wrath of deities and draw down ruin upon their own heads. Myth-making is conservative of established institutions.

Such is the general truth, very easy to illustrate by examples. In the worship of Dionysos, one of the most widespread in the classic world, the most revolting feature was omophagy, or raw-flesh-eating: the god-intoxicated mystae would rend some animal, man or beast, and madly devour the pieces still quivering with life. Of course, in the worship of a benignant and philanthropic deity—for Dionysos, as originally personifying the luxuriant vegetative power of nature, was a mild man-loving and civilizing and wholly beneficent god,—such an insanely savage element must have sorely puzzled the thoughtful devotees, and more and more as their manners softened in the post-Homeric and even the Homeric age. It was not easy to eliminate this repulsive feature, descended from remotest times and deep-interwoven in the texture of Dionysiac rites; nothing remained then but to explain it some way, to rationalize or half-rationalize it by a myth, an invention of the popular imagination. It was fabled that Zeus had loved Persephone, that the issue of their union was a Thracian divinity, Zagreus (which means *Dismembered*), that Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus, persuaded the Titans to attack the young Zagreus and tear him to pieces and devour him, that Athena saved only his heart and gave it still pulsing to his father (Zeus), who restored it to divine life in the person of Dionysos. Now it was a wide-spread notion that the worshipper must some way repeat in his own person the experience of his worshiped god, a notion that finds frequent recognition or expression in the New Testament and in the Christian consciousness even of today. As Zagreus-Dionysos was torn to pieces, so must his devotee be torn, and in the early days it seems likely that some devout follower of the god was actually lacerated and eaten raw by his fellows; in time, this savagery was abated and some wild beast was substituted for the human victim. Naturally, as the myth was the output of the common consciousness, it assumed various forms, and even in art there are at least *four* different *types* of Dionysos. Our familiar conception of him as Bacchus, “the jolly god” of wine, reeling and shouting in drunken frolic, is a deep degeneration. All that needs note here especially is that the myth of Zagreus-Dionysos-Bacchus is an out-and-out invention of Greek fancy, a dream of the Hellenic soul, to render half-intelligible an ancient rite in the worship of a great God of Vegetation, a rite whose actual nature and origin were irrecoverably lost in the darkness of remote antiquity.

To come somewhat nearer home, we might instance the Pass-over, still sacredly observed by a most highly-intelligent and excel-



lent body of citizens, everywhere in the civilized world. There is abounding evidence that the sacrifice of the first-born was a very notable characteristic of early Semitic worship. Nor were the parents that gave up their darlings to the flames by any means feelingless monsters. They loved their children perhaps quite as much as we love ours. But they firmly believed the first-born belonged to their god, as distinctly taught in the Old Testament, and when sacrificed it passed through the fire into eternal union with the Deity Himself. In writing of the benignant "Reaper whose name is Death," Longfellow has said:

"And the mother gave in tears and pain  
The flowers she most did love;  
She knew she would find them all again  
In the realms of light above."

So doubtless the mothers in Carthage and Tyre and Sidon and Moab and Ammon and Canaan and early Israel. The supreme virtue of Abraham is shown in his perfect readiness to sacrifice his only son to Yahveh. But as the centuries circled away, the tenderer feelings prevailed more and more; all manner of excuses and pretexts were devised for escaping the stern exactions of the ancient faith; the hooded executioners, who sometimes at stated seasons passed from house to house as angels on their bloody mission, were perhaps willingly deceived by marks of blood upon the door-posts; various substitutes were devised and offered and accepted; gradually the tender-minded triumphed over the tough-minded, though again and again, especially in times of great national stress and peril and under the influence of neighbors racially allied, the Israelites reverted with frenzied zeal to the ways of their fathers and kinsmen. The change from the rite of the ancients to the milder manners of later days marked a giant step forward in the soul-history of the people, but was accomplished by devices and ceremonies that soon became more or less unintelligible to the masses, for their historic sense was forgotten; and so arose the problem of making them understandable, a problem that was also solved as in a dream, by creative fancy, by inventing a destroying Angel, who slaughtered the first-born of the Egyptians but passed by the blood-marked doors of the Hebrews. As a dream, though a purely imaginative construction designed to explain some intrusive disturbing sensation or experience in sleep, is yet a mosaic composed of fragments of previous experience, so too the myth-maker's invention need not be purely fanciful in its constituents but may use historic or half-historic mate-

rials lying ready at hand. We, however, are not concerned with tracing out or bringing to light any quasi-historic elements that may possibly be imbedded in such constructive fancies.

Enough of such illustrations, which overhang and even encumber every pathway through the fields of mythology. We come now to the matter immediately in hand, the early Christian consciousness and its efforts at self-understanding. In the beginning we must dismiss all notions of a single local miraculous origin of the Christian movement, which we must regard not as a self-inclosed eddy, but as a large and integrant part of the general history-current as it flowed round and over the Mediterranean shores. Never perhaps in the history of earth was there such intense sustained and universal religious arousement. The Greek culture had compassed the circuit of the Midland Sea, bringing beacons and torches into the intellectual night of so many centuries, and teaching the inherent and abiding dignity and worth of the individual soul as well as the universal Fatherhood of God and the common Brotherhood of Man; then came the Roman Peace leveling the walls of prejudice that divided humanity into so many hostile camps, bringing all men and therewith all cults and religions face to face and making so many divinities ridiculous. The worships hitherto prevalent, with all their priests and mummeries, had been in general state-religions designed to promote the commonweal, to bring peace and plenty to the citizens and the State. Plainly and undeniably they had all failed, unless perhaps the Roman, and the religious thought of the day was turned from the Community to the Individual: Religion was now to be made a personal matter as never before; the Soul was to be brought into direct personal contact and union with the universal spirit divine and so in a manner deified and lifted above and beyond the misery and turmoil of the general earthly plight. Such a longing for personal Salvation had seized the Greek-Roman-Jewish heart as never before in history. Far and wide as the bounds of the Empire, the aspirations of men, their hopes, yearnings, and strivings went up to heaven in prayers and songs and rituals and incantations. As already said, the local divinities had manifestly failed, and the way lay open for any new divinity that might promise healing and salvation to the longing and almost despairing soul. To this situation the general mind responded by the production and propagation of a number of so-called Mystery-Religions, all aiming alike at redemption, salvation, glorification and even deification of the individual Soul. Such were the cults of Adonis and Attis and Mithra and

Cybele and Isis, Osiris, Serapis, as well as Orphism and the Eleusinian and other mysteries. Into their details we cannot enter now, but it must be noted that they all maintained an air of tolerance or indifference but never of open hostility toward the prevailing national or municipal cults. In the first stanza of his "Universal Prayer" Pope invokes:

"Father of all! In every age,  
 In every clime adored,  
 By saint, by savage, and by sage,  
 Jehovah, Jove, or Lord."

Exactly such was the prayer and the attitude of the Mystic nearly two thousand years before. He held it was one and the same God whom all men worshiped, and like Pope he actually invoked this one God in the same prayer under a perfect host of names, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Assyrian, Chaldean, Egyptian, Phrygian, Parthian, and what not. The new Mystery was not intended to supplace the elder community-cults, but was superadded as a peculiar personal element thereto; much as if a man should join the Masons or the Knights of Pythias without prejudice to his standing as a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Anglican.

But there was one new religion that allowed no such fatal tolerance, no such weak-kneed Liberalism. It was a Jewish-Greek faith, which has since then conquered the European world under the sign of the Cross and in the name of the Savior, the Jesus. It was the happy lot of this Religion to spring up in Hellenistic circles, i. e., among the Jews, not of Judea but of the Diaspora, of the Dispersion among the Gentiles. Naturally these Jews had fallen in some measure under Greek influence, they had been somewhat liberalized, but they had no thought of surrendering their Monotheism, their especial pride and their just boast, nor of identifying their Jehovah, their Eternal, with any Pagan divinity, whether Jove or Zeus or Marduk or Osiris. On the contrary, all such heathen gods they rejected without distinction as Demons, and to cast out these demons, to overthrow the whole system of idolatrous Polytheism, was for the Jew in the Dispersion the supreme mission of his Race, which he strove to fulfill without any compromise and with the utmost ardor. The New Testament bears unimpeachable witness to his zeal, in the famous saying: "Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte." This proclamation of the One God was the quintessence of the earliest Christian propaganda, which first took this name Christian in Antioch (Acts xi:26) but undoubtedly had grown gradually into

the definite form assumed in that heathen metropolis. This inmost nature of the new faith is revealed most vividly in the Revelation of John xiv: 6-8): "And I saw another angel flying in mid heaven, having an Eternal Gospel to proclaim unto them that dwell on the earth and unto every nation and tribe and tongue and people, saying with mighty voice, Fear God and give Him glory, for come is the hour of His judgement, and worship Him that made the heaven and the earth and sea and fountains of waters." Such is the very earliest definition of Eternal Gospel, and it could hardly be more explicit and unequivocal: It is Monotheism pure and simple: Fear God and give Him glory, and worship the All-Creator. The Heathen were worshipping Heaven and Earth and Sea and fountains of waters, under the names of Zeus and Jove, of Ge and Tellus, of Poseidon and Neptune, and a hundred others; Eternal Gospel commands them to worship not these created things but the One God who created them all. This seems clear and unmistakable, but the Apocalyptist will make assurance double sure and so continues: "And another, a second angel, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, that hath drenched all the nations with the wrath-wine of her fornication." When we remember that Idolatry and Adultery are almost exchangeable terms in the Old Testament, at least in the poetic and prophetic portions, that worship of false gods was always denounced as unfaithfulness to the true God and hence described as harlotry, it becomes clear as day that this Babylon, elsewhere described as the great Harlot, can be nothing more, nothing less, nothing else, than the system of Polytheism, the established worship of the Roman Empire; the triumph of the Eternal Gospel of Monotheism meant of course the final downfall of the whole idolatrous system. The language of an Apocalyptist could hardly be clearer, and it seems well-nigh impossible for any open-eyed person to err in the interpretation of this capital passage.

As a protest against the prevailing idol-worship, this Eternal Gospel was essentially Religion and not Morality, a point at which Liberalism with all its learning has gone hopelessly astray. Such a protest would not spring up in only a single soul; already it had been voiced many, many times by prophets and philosophers, by Jews and by Gentiles. At that time it was present everywhere in the Roman Empire, articulate or inarticulate,—at least, wherever the Jew had gone and carried his militant proselyting Monotheism. The general Gospel movement was accordingly as wide-spread as the Jewish Dispersion itself. No wonder that Paul, in his Gentile mis-

sion as narrated in Acts, meets such ready reception wherever he goes and often finds Christians already there before him. The Christian congregation gathered here and there like clouds on a summer sky. Watch closely and you will detect the cloud suddenly issuing from the spotless blue as a faint almost indiscernible haziness, gradually deepening into a distinct wisp, then growing into a mass of cloud.

No art can make it: it must spring  
Where elements are fostering.

So sings the poet of the birth of love. So, too, the rise of an early Christian church or congregation. Even though a nucleus was supplied by some preached word of some traveling evangelist, the case was not really altered. Only "in heaven's spot and hour" could it really germinate and be born, where the minds of the hearers were already prepared. So we must view the early church as emerging slowly, almost insensibly, here and there, almost everywhere on the wide canopy of the Roman world. Of course, no record was kept of such imperceptible beginnings, even as none is kept in our modern madly documentary age of the initial stages of our great historic movements. Who can tell when even such a palpable thing as a political party took its origin, and where? We may be told it originated in a meeting of certain founders in a certain room in a certain town on a certain day of a certain year; but that historic event was but the flowering of buds that had long been swelling; all the proceedings, the speeches, the resolutions, the whole program had long been tossed about in the minds of the founders before thus finding expression and crystalization. So with every great historic movement, preëminently so with the birth of Christianity. Its father was the ethic-philosophic Hellenic consciousness, as it had been formed in the schools of Athens, under the influence of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their successors, of Zeus, Chrysippos, and other Stoics, of Antiochus and Poseidonios, of the Porch and the later Academy; its mother was the Jewish consciousness in the Dispersion, with its priceless Monotheism, its hatred of Idolatry, its ideals of morality, and at the same time its overgrown fantastic conceit about its mission and destiny in the world, its election by God to especial honor and exaltation and universal dominion, about its shoot of Jesse, its Messiah, its Son of Man, its Son of God, its catastrophic end of history and its Final Judgement. We know, indeed, comparatively little of the Infancy of this prodigious Birth, still less of its prenatal stages; but it would be absurd to say it had no infancy, that it never

grew and developed in the womb of time, but was a fatherless and motherless Melchizedec; nay, we may be sure it did not leap Athena-like, full-grown, full-armed from the head of its father nor the heart of its mother. The indications of this long period of gestation and preparation, though minute and sporadic, are none the less numerous and indisputable. Some of them are assembled in the two books, *Der vorchristliche Jesus* and *Ecce Deus*; there are many others yet remaining to discover or marshal and move into action.

Undoubtedly the earliest Christians, the Protochristians, did not at all foresee the development of the movement they were setting under way, they were very far from having any well-mapped plan of propaganda or any recognized code of practice. The earliest manual of practice that has reached us is the so-called *Didachê* or Teaching, afterwards called *Teaching of the (Twelve) Apostles*. Of course, the notion of the Twelve Apostles was an after-thought. Like nearly all such early documents, this *Didachê* is a compilation; in its present form it may date from the second half or fourth quarter of the first century (of our era), though some of the elder portions may be much older. Naturally, no records had been kept of earliest stages, and the later but still early Christians were perhaps as much puzzled as we are to understand some marks of the movement that was sweeping them along in its current. They obeyed the primal instinct of their nature and tried to make understandable by inventing explanations. As everything in history was understood as the working of some personal agency, they felt bound to embody and express the great religious reformation under the form of the personal career of a God. The consciousness of all the human world around them was literally full, to overflowing, of such personal histories. Every deity in the whole pantheon had had such a career on earth; even the sublime Yahveh of the Jews, though withdrawn into the silent recesses of heaven, had yet walked in the Garden of Eden, and conversed with Adam and Eve, had appeared unto Moses and many other patriarchs and prophets, and had graciously deposed himself as a man among men. It would fly in the face of all precedent if the new Religion should not be marked at its birth by a Theophany, the appearance of a god in human form, an idea with which both Jews and Greeks were as familiar as we are with taxes or the League of Nations. Precisely how this Theophany should be effected was another question, to which each might freely return his own answer; to be sure, not all answers would be equally plausible, poetic, or persuasive. It was a case for the survival of the

fittest. Perhaps no two New Testament writers entertained quite the same notions at this point. Their manifest differences are today admitted and irreconcilable. But such discrepancies did not much disturb the Protochristian consciousness, which knew it was feigning facts in order to rationalize and recommend the doctrines set forth, which was concerned wholly with edification and not at all with scientific verification.

Bearing in mind that we are dealing with a free play of explanatory fancy, let us consider some of the Gospel representations. Some very early documents, not descended to us in their entirety, seem to have fastened attention almost wholly on the sayings of the new god or the new manifestation of the One God. Such was a collection of Logia or Logoi or Sayings of the Jesus, i. e., of the *Saviour*, and the object of the new crusade was to *save* the world from the Sin of Idolatry. These sayings began, each one probably, with the words *ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει*, "The Jesus says," exactly like the prophetic formula in the Old Testament, "Thus saith Yahveh," after which follows of course the prophet's own discourse. Recently there have been dug up in Egypt a number of these Sayings, each beginning with "The Jesus says." Our three Synoptists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, seem to have drawn heavily upon some such collection of Sayings, which the critics designate by the letter Q, a document that has itself not yet been recovered, though the use of it by the Synoptists is not doubted. In this document there seems to have been very little history or narrative, probably hardly anything further than the occasional invention of an incident as the setting or framework for some Saying, precisely as we habitually invent a little story as introduction to some witticism or funny remark. Certainly, there was no intent to deceive in any of these inventions: it was simply a rhetorical device to give vividness and color to the Saying and impress it on the memory. It is especially remarkable and significant that the settings of all these Sayings adopted from Q into our Gospels seem to be Galilean solely, never suggesting Judæa or Jerusalem. In this early conception the new god Jesus appears as a Teacher, an Enlightener, a Light to lighten the Gentiles, as in fact Matthew declares (iv: 15, 16): "Galilee of the Gentiles, the People that sat in darkness hath beheld a great light, and on them that sat in the region and shadow of death, on them hath arisen a light." Here seems to be a very early conception of the Jesus-God, involving very little personification or historic incident. The writers or propagandists simply proclaimed their new doctrine under the name

of the Jesus, as the prophets had proclaimed theirs under the name of Yahveh. At a somewhat later epoch the *Gentile* notion of a Dying and Redeeming God forced its way forward and crowded back the original Jewish notion of the Teacher. The scene of the death was laid in Jerusalem, and it was combined with the earlier Galilean scenery by means of a visit from Galilee to Jerusalem at Passover. The seam in the Gospel narrative is not hard to detect. Naturally, this modified conception of the Jesus required far higher personification and historization, and this is supplied in the Gospel of Mark, which is widely supposed to be the earliest. It begins with a Baptism of the Jesus, by John, in the Jordan, when he beholds the heavens rent asunder and the spirit descending like a dove *into* him and a voice from heaven proclaims: "Thou art my son the beloved, in thee I delight," or as Luke puts it, in a much earlier form, "Son of mine art thou, this day have I begot thee." The early Christian recognized in this story the creation or establishment or birth of the Jesus as Son of God, and his revelation as such to the world. Mark says nothing whatever of any previous history of the Jesus. For him the Gospel begins with this incident. He tells nothing of any parentage of the Jesus, whose career begins precisely here at his baptism and his appointment, establishment, or begetting as Son of God. Such is the earliest surviving attempt to envisage, objectify, and historize the revelation of the new God and the new religion. In certain fragments saved from the lost Gospel "according to the Hebrews," a Gospel highly esteemed by early Christians, a similar symbolism is presented, and accented by the additional statement that a great light flashed round the place at the instant of baptism, which seems to symbolize the coming of Light into the world, the light of the new doctrine of universal Monotheism, proclaimed in the Eternal Gospel. Naturally the confusion of the new doctrine or cult with the new God it proclaimed was unavoidable.

But the question as to the physical birth and origin of the Jesus became necessary and unescapable so soon as the notion of the historic person was firmly established or even fully introduced. Mark's Gospel does not indeed recognize any such physical birth, nor does the mystic Fourth Gospel, called John's. This latter opens with pure Hellenistic philosophizing: "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God." This notion of the divine Logos (or Word) was one of the oldest best-known and most generally recognized ideas in Greek-Jewish-Egyptian religious speculation. To think that it acquires any special warrant or



significance by adoption into this late Gospel, is to think like a child. The Evangelist continues: "And the Logos became flesh and tented among us, and we beheld his glory, a glory as of the *only*-begotten of the Father." It is not possible to attach any clear conceptions to such sonorous words; we are moving in the misty realm of the Greek mystery-religions, but it seems evident that John has not in mind any physical birth of the Jesus in affirming that the "Logos tented among us and we beheld his glory." He then passes on to the so-called Witness of John the Baptist, given in two forms, one interpolated. He denies that the Baptist was the true Light, and seems to hint, though the text is corrupt, that the Logos alone was the true Light. The thought-relations in this exordium are very obscure, but it would appear that the writer knew no way of working into his scheme any such historic element as a physical birth of the Jesus and accordingly gives no hint thereof.

Other minds, however, were not content with such reserve. They seem to have felt that if there was an historic man, Jesus, then there must have been a birth and infancy, moreover, a pre-natal history as well: they were not satisfied with a sudden unanticipated apparition of the Jesus. Even Mark and John represent the Baptist as foretelling the approaching advent of the Mightier One. If he really so prophesied, his reference was of course to God Himself, for in the Old Testament passages it is Jehovah and Jehovah alone that sends his messenger to prepare his way before him. Most likely, however, both Mark and especially John have freely invented this preparatory Witness of the Baptist, feeling a need for some such evangelic preparation for the Manifestation of the Saviour. As already said, this device did not satisfy such as Matthew and Luke, who felt that there must have been a physical birth, and bravely attacked the difficult problem of making it *worthy* of the new Savior-God. This is indeed a problem that has vexed the myth-makers of all climes and all ages: how make the origin or birth of a god fitting for the god himself? It seems self-evident that the problem admits of no satisfactory solution; it is like squaring a circle, doubling a cube, or trisecting an angle. The mytho-poetic efforts at solution have been pathetic in their failures, almost always silly, and often revolting or even disgusting. The attempts of Matthew and Luke are perhaps as good as could be made, as little offensive, even when not supplemented by the much later dogmatic fiction of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.

It is noteworthy that the two inventions forming the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke are entirely independent of each other, are indeed directly contradictory and utterly irreconcilable, being developed from wholly inconsistent and sharply opposed premises. Matthew regards Bethlehem in Judæa as the home of Joseph and Mary, and their later residence in Nazareth as an accident due to the malice of Herod, to escape whose bloody persecution they had fled from Bethlehem to Egypt, and when about to return to Bethlehem they had been warned in a dream and had turned aside and settled in Nazareth of Galilee; Luke, on the contrary, regards this Nazareth as the home of Mary and Joseph and ascribes the birth in Bethlehem to the accident that Joseph and Mary, citizens of Nazareth in Galilee, had gone up to Bethlehem in Judæa, to register for taxation, because Joseph's ancestor David had lived in Bethlehem a thousand years before! A more ridiculous conceit can hardly be found in literature; and yet distinguished scholars by willful suppression and distortion of facts even now-a-days strive to defend it! They forget that they cannot prove Luke's account correct without thereby proving Matthew's grossly fictitious, which seems worse than robbing Peter to pay Paul. In fact, the story in Luke, though much superior to that in Matthew as a romantic novelette, and more congenial to modern sentimentality, is far inferior in majesty, propriety, and internal coherence. The two stories, both fictive in every particular, are excellent examples of the means and ends of myth-making in general. Besides furnishing an edifying account of the birth according to Micah's prophecy of a Davidic Messiah in the Davidic town of Bethlehem, they both wished to explain the puzzling fact that early Christians were called Notzrim or Nazoreans. Both derive the word from a supposed town called Nazara or Nazareth, but they relate this town to the ancestry of Jesus in thoroughly inconsistent ways. There was no such town as Nazareth, and even if there were such, the Protochristians would not therefore have been called Notzrim or Nazoreans. Nearly twenty years ago in an essay on the meaning of this term, I showed that in origin it was connected with the Semitic root N—S—R, signifying keep, watch, guard, defend. This derivation has been widely accepted but also repeatedly and violently assailed, as very recently by Professor Moore in the huge first volume of the "Beginnings of Christianity"; still later, however, it has been accepted and adopted in slightly varying forms by the two highest authorities in the world, by Zimmern and Lidzbarski; so we may smile at the ill-nature of the Harvard

professor, and rest assured that the broad-spread epithet Notzri or Nazorean has naught to do with the imaginary village of Nazareth.

Well, then, we find in the New Testament two widely diverse views as to the origin of the Savior-God, the Jesus,—and these correspond to the two Feasts of Epiphany and Christmas. In the earlier conception the Jesus appears on the stage suddenly, unannounced, and is ordained and begotten Son of God at the moment of baptism, the moment of spiritual birth, while of physical birth no account whatever is taken. The Second and Fourth Gospels present this theory, the Fourth in a slightly more developed form. On the other hand, the First and Third Gospels retain the story of the spiritual birth and ordination at Baptism, but prefix two mutually exclusive accounts of a physical birth. These two pre-histories, as they are called, are generally recognized as much later appendices to the Gospel story: when they were prefixed, no man can say: since they are sharply contradictory in conception and content, one at least must be mere fancy: in fact, they are both pure imaginations: Luke's more picturesque, romantic, and sentimental; Matthew's more sculpturesque, dignified, and appropriate.

These two theories of the Jesus-birth, the earlier spiritual theory of Mark and John, and the later physical theory of Matthew and Luke, divided more or less distinctly the allegiance of the Christian world for hundreds of years. The earlier spiritual view expressed itself popularly and ritually in the celebration of the Feast of Epiphany on the 6th of January. The word Apparition is the exact Latin for the Greek Epiphany, which denotes the appearance, manifestation, or revelation of a god. Two such Epiphanies are recorded in the New Testament, one at the Baptism in Jordan, the other at the Transfiguration on the Mount: at both a voice from heaven proclaims, "Thou art my Son the beloved: in Thee I delight," or in the elder form still preserved in Luke and the Gospel according to Hebrews, "this day have I begot thee." This form is clearly the primitive: it states boldly and vividly the early conception that the Jesus was then and there made or appointed (begotten) the Son of God: the later form, "In thee I delight," is weak and meaningless, quite impossible as an original, but it had to displace the elder nobler form when the notion of the begetting of the Jesus as Son of God was transferred from the Jordan and Mount Tabor to the chamber of the Virgin Mary. It may be of interest to note that there are at least *eighteen* instances, among the old Christian writings, of the adoption and expression of the elder and sublimer con-

ception. We rarely think now-a-days of the Transfiguration, unless gazing on Raphael's brilliant painting in the Vatican, but it held first place in early Christian thought as capital proof of the godhead of the Jesus. In the so-called Second Epistle of Peter we read (1:16-18): "For it was not fabricated myths we followed in making known to you the glory and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, but eye-witnesses were we of his majesty; for he received honor and glory from God the Father, when such a voice was borne to him from the majestic glory, "My Son my beloved is this, in whom I delight"—and this voice we heard borne from heaven while with him in the holy mount." This testimony of an "eye-witness" we may properly value on remembering that it was given nearly one hundred and fifty years after the Transfiguration.

Naturally, we ask, why did this witness retire into the background? Because it was crowded back by the similar witness at the Baptism. Extremely noteworthy the fact that this Epiphany celebrated at first both the Birth and the Baptism of the Jesus, thus regarded as one. Physical birth and begetting are far apart, but spiritual begetting and spiritual birth may well be regarded as the same. When the Spirit descended as a dove and *entered into* the Jesus (as the elder form says, not *rested on him*, as the later and weaker form puts it), there and then he was begotten and born the Son of God—so thought the ancient. Hence, the original celebration of the Birth and the Baptism as one.

It is remarkable what opposition the establishment of the Birth-feast encountered at the hands of early orthodox Christians. Until the close of the Fourth Century the only authoritatively recognized Church festivals were Easter and Pentecost; church-fathers resented birthday celebrations as too much like keeping the natal days of detested Roman Emperors. How then did Epiphany establish itself as both Birth-and-Appearance Feast, and why on the 6th of January? Let not the answer surprise you: We owe it all to those excellent fanatics and mystics, the Gnostics, to whom we also owe the beginnings of church Hymnody and church Theology and church commentary and ecclesiastic literature in general. And the land to which we owe it all is that never-failing realm of wonders, Egypt. Allow me to read from the great historian of heresy, Epiphanius (Haer.), an account of the celebration of a Birth-feast on the eve and morn of January 6, the oldest record extant, presenting the celebration in the earliest form yet discovered. In Alexandria, he tells us, is "a so-called Koreum, a great temple, the sanctuary of

the Kore, i. e., the Maiden (whence the familiar English name Cora); there they hold vigil the whole night long, with songs and flute-playing, which they offer to the image of the goddess; and when the night-feast is ended, after cock-crow, they descend with torches into a subterranean sanctuary, and bring up thence an image carved of wood, sitting naked upon a litter; it has a mark on its brow, a cross of gold, and on each hand another such mark, and on each knee another, and the five crosses are all alike of gold. This statuette they carry seven times round the central space of the temple, to the sound of flutes and hand-clapping and hymns, and at the end of the march they carry it back into the subterranean chamber. But if you ask them the meaning of this mysterious ceremony, they return this answer: At this hour today, Kore, that is, the Virgin, has given birth to the Aion." This Aion is a Greek word meaning Age or Time; it passes over into English as Aeon,—we say unto aeons of aeons, unto ages of ages, that is, forever; in fact, aion becomes *aeuum* in Latin, to reappear in such Latin-English words as co-eval and medieval, and even in the familiar English *aye*, meaning *ever*. The phrase "unto aeons of aeons" is a literal Greek translation of a Hebrew phrase for eternity, applied particularly to God, who is also called the Ancient of Days. Hence, Aion came to designate Deity and was regularly used in Egypt and among the Gnostics as a name for God, quite as we speak of Him as the *Eternal*. Here, then, we have an Epiphany celebration of the Virgin-birth of the God. You will say that it was pagan celebration. Yes, but it was also deeply dyed in Christianity, as the sign of the Cross clearly proves. Moreover, it was held at the same time as the orthodox Christian festival, and hence is used by Saint Epiphanius to prove that the 6th of January, the 11th of Tybi, was surely the day of the physical birth. In 1886 there was dug up at Faiyum, the ancient Arsinoë, in Egypt, a strip of papyrus that had been used by many hands (so the finger-prints show) as we use hymn-books; on it was written the part of the liturgy that the people or the choir sang in response to the minister's chant or reading. This oldest liturgy in existence dates back over sixteen hundred years. It is written in rather Egyptian Greek and may be translated thus:

"He that was born in Bethlehem,  
 And reared in Nazareth,  
 And dwelt in Galilee —  
 We saw a sign from heaven, of the star that appeared.  
 Shepherds night-watching  
 Wondered, then falling on their knees they said,  
 Glory to the Father, Alleluia,  
 Glory to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,  
 Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia."

The date of the strip, i. e., the date of the festival is Tybi 10-11, i. e., January 5-6. There can then be no doubt that the Virgin birth of Jesus was celebrated at the same time and largely in the same manner as the Virgin birth of the Aion,—of course, with difference in details:

If now you ask why this particular day was chosen, the answer need not linger. January 6 was the day of Dionysos, fabled as born of Persephone, who was also called Kore. Moreover, the conflicts of Dionysos with various Kings, as Pentheus and Lykurgos, the opposition he encountered in introducing his man-loving worship into the ancient world, formed the subject of many stories and even theatrical representations. The last and in some respects the greatest tragedy of Euripides, the *Bacchae*, deals with the strife of Pentheus against the god, who is arrested and brought before the king to be tried and condemned. We, to be sure, think of Dionysos as a mere wine-bibber, a revel-making deity, but such was not at all the Greek conception, which made him the Friend of Humanity, the most beneficent philanthropic power on earth, which he made to teem with vegetative life. He was also full of wisdom, he was the source of divine inspiration. When brought before Pentheus he deports himself with surpassing dignity, with imperturbable calm, with mysterious beauty and oracular awfulness of expression. The Gospel writers, particularly John, seem to have taken a hint from this notable representation and have depicted the Jesus before Pilate in a strikingly similar manner. Were I to exhibit before you the Gospel dialogue in one column and the Euripidean dialogue in a parallel column, you would hardly fail to be struck by the resemblance. Well, then, it seemed not at all inappropriate nor repellent to the Gentile-Christian consciousness to celebrate the birth-feast of the Jesus on the day that had for centuries been consecrated to Dionysos.

Remember, however, and never forget, for it is of decisive importance, that in the oldest form the birth was solely spiritual and not

physical, it consisted in the Epiphany or Manifestation, especially at the Jordan-baptism, but even this Baptism was a comparatively late, though also a comparatively early, invention. It was unknown to First-Century Gnostics till as late as about 120 of our era; the philologic-historic proof of this statement cannot be set forth here, but it seems decisive. One small but significant detail may be mentioned. The great church-father Irenaeus tells us<sup>2</sup> that Saturnilos of Antioch held that "the Savior was unbegotten, bodiless, and formless, but *appeared* as a man in semblance." Observe that the word *appeared* is in the Greek *epiphēnēnai*, which is just a verb-form of the noun Epiphany. Now Saturnilos was of Antioch, where the Disciples were first called Christians; he dates back very far, perhaps into the first century, he may have known Peter and Paul, and his testimony is very weighty. True, he was afterward reckoned a heretic, but that was because the Church had grown away from the original doctrine. The heretics were left behind on the old stand-points, and the movement was from the spiritual to the physical birth. In passing, however, it should be added that it was natural for the Semitic or Jewish Christians to speak of birth from the Spirit, because their word for Spirit (*ruach* in Hebrew, *rucha* in Aramaic) is feminine; hence in a fragment of the Gospel according to Hebrews' we find the Jesus saying: "This instant my mother the Holy Spirit took me by one of my hairs and bore me aloft unto the mighty mountain, Tabor." We can now see clearly that the Holy Trinity was originally the Holy Family, of Father, Son, and Mother. When the Gospel passed over completely to the classic tongues all this had to be altered; for Spirit was not feminine in Greek but neuter (*to pneuma*) and masculine in Latin. Hence the Eternal-Womanly was excluded by grammar from the Holy Trinity, but it reasserted itself victoriously in the worship of the Virgin, the human woman taking the place of the Divine Spirit as Mother.

At every point of our winding path some new object of interest catches the eye, but we must hurry on. We have seen the early notion was that of the Jesus revealed to the world suddenly as the divine power, the Logos or Word, clothed in light for the seeing eye. Says John, "He pitched his tent among us, and we beheld his glory." Considerably later the same idea was symbolized by the story of the Jordan-Baptism, at which the Godhead enters into the Jesus as a dove, and the Voice Divine proclaims: "Son of mine art Thou; this day I have thee begotten." As the notion of a physi-

<sup>2</sup> I. xviii, Harvey, l. p. 197.

cal birth began to prevail in the Christian consciousness, this story had to be modified. The Dove was described not as entering but as resting upon him (which destroys the sense), and the full-laden words: "This day I have thee begotten" were turned into the empty "In thee am I well-pleased." Such is the growth of Scripture and Dogma. Gradually the notion of the physical birth dominated more and more, as the notion of the Jesus-Man asserted itself in rivalry with the primitive notion of the Jesus-God. Gradually then the Appearance-festival of Epiphany was turned into the Birth-festival, at first a spiritual birth, but by degrees taking on physical characteristics. Still this Appearance-Birth-Epiphany was celebrated on the night of 5th-6th January, the 10th-11th of the Egyptian Tybi,—Epiphanius in 375 has no doubt that the Jesus was born that night. He tells us that the miracle of turning water into wine was wrought the same day of the year and finds proof in the fact that the miracle is repeated at various fountains, as that of Cibyra in Caria, where at precisely the same hour as at Cana the well-water turns into wine, as likewise at the Gerasa fountain in Arabia. To show that there really can be no mistake about it, he assures us he had drunk from that fountain himself and his brothers from the Gerasa fountain. He does not say the water turned to wine when he and they quaffed it, by no means! He merely says they had drunk from those fountains. One is reminded of the marvel narrated by the lamented Jack LaFaience, of the dog that brought back six ducks when only three had been shot; if any one doubted, the narrator exclaimed, "What? You no believe? You come to my house, I show you ze dog." It should be noted that the accuracy of Epiphanius at this point has been most impudently impeached by J. Casaubon but triumphantly vindicated with great learning by Herbert Rosweylus.

More important is the further statement of the Saint that the same thing happens regularly in Egypt on the same 11th of Tybi, for which reason they draw up all they can and can all they draw up. Here is a kernel of truth. The rise of the Nile begins a little before the 11th of Tybi and its waters were thought purest then: they were bottled and stored away and carried to distant lands for libations and lustrations in the temples of Isis. So we learn from Aristides Rhetor. Quite similarly St. Chrysostom discourses about Epiphany. On its eve the springs and rivers were blessed and their waters stored away for lustrations and baptisms, and he adds that such waters kept for three years and even improved with age, like wine. We might go on heaping up such testimony, but enough! per-



haps, too much already. January 6 was Epiphany, the Day of Apparition, of Manifestation, of Lights, of Baptism, of Spiritual Birth, because it had been the Day of Dionysos and of Blessing the waters of the Nile.

But as the notion of physical birth of the Jesus-Man grew more and more conspicuous in the Church, there was felt a steadily increasing need for a feast-day devoted exclusively to that wonder. Earlier speculators had fixed upon the 28th of March for purely astronomic reasons connected with the original creation of the world at the Vernal Equinox. But in the Fourth Century and earlier another consideration had come to the front. The worship of Mithra, popularly identified with the Sun, had spread from Persia over the Roman world, particularly among the soldiery, it had received the sanction and adhesion of illustrious Emperors, it was in many respects a noble, manly, and inspiring faith, by odds the most worthy as well as the most dangerous rival of Christianity. The people of the Empire were devoted to the celebration of Mithra's Natal Day on the 25th of December, for that day had been established by authority of Julius Caesar, forty-five years before Christ, as the Winter Solstice, when the great pendulum of the sky, the Sun, having swung to the lowest point South, begins to swing back again towards the North, to reach its highest point in the sky at the Summer Solstice, the last of June. Accordingly they celebrated December 25 as the birthday of the new Sun, of the unconquered Sun (*Solis invicti*), as they said, which was represented as a naked newborn babe, for on that day it was reborn and rebegan its yearly vibration between the Solstices, across the sky. It would have been hard or impossible to wean the people away from this festival: the Church did not attempt it but with characteristic wisdom preserved, purified, beautified, and glorified the feast of the new-born Sun of the sky into the Feast of the new-born Son of Righteousness arising upon earth with healing under his wings.

Rapidly the new festival spread over the West, much more slowly over the East, where the old notions of Epiphany long held their sway. But before the year 400, even Epiphanius had been persuaded to adopt the new birthday. John of Nice has preserved an interesting and characteristic story of a Bishop of Jerusalem who wrote to the Bishop of Rome complaining that his people celebrated January 6 as birthday at Bethlehem and then hastened away thirteen miles to the Jordan to celebrate the Baptism on the same day, which hurried them too much. So he asked the Roman prelate to look into

the archives brought by the Jews to Rome after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 and find out just what was the real birthday of Jesus. The accommodating Roman consented; he examined Josephus and reported back that the birthday was December 25! To be sure, there were no such archives at all, and the Roman Bishop was the only man in the world that could ever find the remotest hint in Josephus upon the subject. But in that early day such a correspondence between two such dignitaries supplied all the proof that the faithful desired.

Very interesting is the story of the march of Christmas through the North, of how it encountered ancient festivals already unshakably possessing the heads and the hearts of the people, of how the Church most shrewdly declined the hopeless task of dispossessing these established notions and practices but sagaciously Christianized them, with the well-known results that we behold today—all this might make pleasant reading if set forth clearly in a book, but we have no time for it now, and its historic-philosophic significance cannot be compared with that of the balder and less entertaining facts of early Christianity, with which we have thus far dealt. Suffice it then to say that the great English historian, the Venerable Bede, informs us reluctantly and in as few words as possible that the 25th-of-December celebration was known and practised in England long before the Introduction of Christianity; moreover, although the Teutonic Christmas tree is comparatively recent, yet tree-worship itself is undatably ancient, perhaps older than the worship of the sun and the moon and the host of heaven, and has survived certainly in Christian lands to the year 1874, when James Piggul, steward of the estate of Pinakovitz, witnessed an elaborate priest-conducted ceremonial of worship of a withered and stunted yet holy oak by the rivulet Mitsky between the Governments of Pskov and Livonia, in Russia, and reported it in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* of the same year.