

INCONSISTENCIES AND INCONGRUITIES IN JESUS' REPORTED TEACHINGS

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

MODERN scholars of the unprejudiced and enlightened type recognize, of course, that our sources of information concerning the personality and actual teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are as meager as they are unsatisfactory in quality. The composition of the gospel of Mark, in the words of Prof. S. J. Case, of the University of Chicago—an acknowledged and high authority on New Testament literature and interpretation—"must fall near the year 70 A. D." The same author continues:

"The gospel of Mark, though composed somewhat later than the epistles of Paul, belongs near enough to Jesus' own day to come within the lifetime of some of the original disciples; while the more extended reports of Jesus' teachings now found in Matthew and Luke seem unquestionably to have been derived from common written tradition whose composition very probably antedates that of Mark." In the words of Dr. Julicher, "the gospel was virtually completed in the home of Jesus even before his generation passed away, and believing Jews wrote it down at that time in their own language."

I have made the foregoing quotations in order to show that we cannot be at all certain that Jesus actually said what he is reported as having said, or that he used the exact words attributed to him, or that his precise meaning was always comprehended, or that his pious and very simple-minded followers did not eke out their recollections of Jesus' sermons, fables and parables with notions of their own and with rather free interpretations of fragments they cherished.

If, therefore, there are inconsistencies and incongruities in the reported teachings and sayings of Jesus, the fair-minded and earnest student, and especially the student who is in sympathy with the quinfessential message of the Nazarene, will naturally be disposed to

account for them by assuming carelessness, defective memory, unintentional or well-meant amendments, additions and "tendency" interpretations on the part of the men who, in the role of active disciples, or propagandists or devout worshippers, wrote down what is today the Christian gospel.

But, whatever the explanation may be, *the inconsistencies and incongruities are there to note, consider and frankly discuss*. It is scarcely necessary to say that the present writer believes Jesus to have been a man, a mortal born of human parents in the natural way, but a man of unique moral and mental qualities, of genius, a man of profound insight and lofty ideals. Though he spoke the language of his time, shared many of the errors of his race, age and environment, and was a poet and prophet rather than a scientific philosopher, his wisdom is gladly acknowledged by the most exact and critical thinkers of our scientific age and is seriously challenged by very few—the few who, with Nietzsche, call Christianity a slave religion and Jesus' ethical teachings slave ethics. It may be remarked, in passing, that since the death of Nietzsche neither science, modern scientific philosophy, nor empirical thinking have confirmed the "slave" theory of essential Christian doctrine. Science is *not* in conflict with the humanities. Even biology is reverting to "the greatest of these," charity, and throwing overboard the crude notions of the half-baked professors of false eugenics.

From the point of view indicated, we start, then, with this definite theory, or this fact—that Jesus, who well knew the old law and the old way of life and found them wanting, and who had a new way of life, a new and revolutionary gospel to preach and teach, was not easily or rightly understood in his own life-time, and had to contend with many difficulties begotten of mental habits, ignorance, superstitions, memories of Jewish rebels and pretenders, inaccurate use of language, and the desire of most men to believe what is pleasant and reject what is disturbing or disagreeable. It was, therefore, necessary for him to repeat, reiterate, emphasize the vital, original and radical essence of his gospel. It is reasonable to assume that trivial, foolish or captious questions, or questions intended to tempt and entrap him, were either dismissed by him, somewhat impatiently, as unworthy of attention, or else answered only for the purpose of re-enforcing and stressing his fundamental conceptions and doctrines.

Let us take first the alleged illustration of the penny in connection with the embarrassing but natural question concerning the payment of tribute to Caesar. It would have been grist to the mill of Jesus'

opponents and enemies had he answered the question with a yes or a no. The Jews were divided into two hostile camps; one favored submission to Rome, the other urged rebellion. Jesus could not advise either submission or resistance and rebellion without arousing bitter opposition of a powerful section of the people, and he could not sanction rebellion, moreover, without instantly facing charges of sedition and treason to Rome. What he is reported to have said seemed astute and wholly disarming to the writers of the gospels, and no doubt to many others. In truth, his alleged answer was no answer at all. It is safe to assume that "believing Jews" put it in his mouth because *to them* it seemed remarkably effective. It is nothing of the sort. It is question-begging.

Suppose an Irish republican of the irreconcilable type were asked whether it was right and proper to pay tribute to Great Britain, which even now claims overlordship and sovereign control of Ireland; suppose he were to look at a British coin and say, Render to his majesty, the king and emperor, the things that are his. What would intelligent and honest men say of the reply? They would call it a dodge. The coinage and circulating notes of a suzerain are in no sense "his"; he does not make presents of them to his willing or unwilling subject; they have to work for the money—hard or soft—which they receive in industry or trade; the taxes and tribute they are made to pay represent their toil and self-denial. If Caesar has no right to rule them, he is not entitled to taxation or tribute, whether his image is on the coin of the colony, dependency, protectorate, or not. The coins turned over to his agents are not his; they are the property of those who earned them.

What Jesus, if correctly reported, really advised the inquiring Jews to do, therefore, was to continue to pay taxes and tribute to Rome; only, the simple-minded believing Jews failed to detect the evasion, the fallacy, in the alleged reply—if he made it, which, I repeat, is distinctly doubtful.

It may be asked: What answer should Jesus have made; what other answer was open to him? The philosophical student of the gospels, who is able to distinguish between what is significant and vital in Jesus' message and what is accidental, casual, superficial can have no difficulty in evolving an answer that is thoroughly consistent with Jesus' central doctrine and with the deepest and most significant of his reported sayings. Let us ask whether some such answer as the following—based strictly on the spirit, essence and pith of the gospels—would not be truly and characteristically Christian:

“The question of tribute to Caesar is of no importance and moment to the Son of Man and his faithful followers. They care little how it is answered by the worldly who neglect to lay up treasures in heaven. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, and both those who obey Caesar and those who defy him have strained at gnats while swallowing camels. Repent ye all and believe in the gospel; there alone is salvation; love your neighbors; nay, love even your oppressors and enemies; resist not evil; God is your father and all men are your brothers; let humility, charity and service govern all your actions.”

The answer just framed is the answer which is implied in and almost dictated by the teachings of Jesus. It is, indubitably, the answer consistent and sincere Christians would make today in a situation similar to that reported in the gospels. It is the answer Count Tolstoy actually made to anti-czarist Russian radicals who accused him of reactionary tendencies. He was a true Christian; he did not trouble himself with the abuses of autocracy; he was not interested in political or economic reforms; he was preoccupied with the problem of the meaning of life and the destiny of the human race. He had a mission—to preach salvation—to which everything else had to be sacrificed and beside which everything else was trivial. To Jesus, with the kingdom of God within him, and with the possibility of like superiority for every man always before his mind, how could a question of tribute to Caesar—or any other ruler, native or alien—seriously concern him? It could not, and did not; the answer imputed to him was not the right, logical answer.

Let us take another of Jesus' alleged answers to a question put to him by the Pharisees—namely the question about divorce. Was divorce lawful? It was under the Mosaic law; it was under the Roman law; the question was, therefore, what Jesus himself thought of divorce and what he proposed to do with the old law that permitted it. We know what the alleged answer was. Moses had “suffered” bills of divorcement because of the hardness of the hearts of the people he sought to lead, but Moses had been too lenient and mistaken. Divorce was really repugnant to God's law, because “from the beginning of creation he made them male and female,” and “what therefore God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

It is difficult to believe that Jesus is correctly reported in these strange pointless utterances. The Protestant sects disregard them, and decline to believe that to put away wife or husband is to com-

mit adultery. They are obviously right. The fact that God created males and females proves nothing. It constitutes no argument against any form of marriage, or against any ground for the dissolution of marriage. Sex is not confined to the human race, and in nature sex union is not always essential to reproduction. Besides, the state not God, enacts marriage laws, and there is no reason why the same earthly authority should not enact divorce laws. Where true love exists, God may be said by Christians and others to have spiritually and emotionally joined together two human beings of opposite sexes, but if love be the real marriage—as it indeed is—then, when love goes, marriage goes. If God decrees love and attraction, God also decrees repulsion, indifference and separation. Jesus would have distinguished between love and mere passion; he could not possibly believe in building family life on habit and empty convention. The question how many times a person is permitted by the state to marry another person must have had but little interest or significance to him who cried, "Who is my mother, and who are my brethren? . . . Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother"!

Be it noted that Matthew's version of Jesus' dictum on the question of the propriety of divorce is radically different from that of Mark. According to the former, Jesus said: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, *except it be for fornication*, and shall marry another, commiteth adultery." In this version adultery is recognized as a valid ground for divorce, and no mention is made of the number of marriages a man may contract if he is so unfortunate as to divorce his wives for adultery.

Which is the correct version? No one knows; no one can ever know; it is probable that neither is correct, and that "believing Jews" attributed to Jesus their own different opinion on the subject of divorce.

We take up next the Gadarene swine incident, which caused Huxley to return a special indictment, and a most bitter and wrathful one, against the alleged act of Jesus in sending devils into two thousand valuable animals, the property of innocent men, and bringing about the drowning of the animals. Huxley thought the act immoral, wrong and senseless—and it would be, of course, all these things, as well as plainly inconsistent with Jesus' teachings in regard to respect for contracts, established standards of wages and relations between masters and servants. But it is permissible to doubt if the alleged episode, as reported, had even a shadow of a basis of

fact. The superstitious and believing Jews must have invented it. They believed in devils and in the possibility of ordering them to leave one set of beings and invade another. They regarded such a transfer as a miracle calculated to bring converts into the fold. The story is grotesquely irrational and may be rejected without hesitation.

Hardly satisfactory or probable, again, is the reply attributed by the believing Jews to Jesus in connection with the question of the scribes and hypocrites, "By what authority doest thou do these (miraculous) things?" He is represented as knowing that the question was tricky and as resenting it. Yet what does he do? Decline to answer, treat his questioners with deserved contempt? No; he is said to have asked *them* a question about the baptism of John—a question they could not answer without getting themselves into trouble. Since, being hypocrites, they naturally gave an evasive answer, Jesus found in that evasion a sufficient reason for refraining from answering their question respecting his authority. The placing of Jesus on the level of the scribes and hypocrites is not exactly a tribute to his person or mission. Because *they* were cowardly and insincere, it did not follow that *he* was justified in his refusal to give a frank answer! If he wished to defy them and expose their cunning and treachery, other episodes recorded of him show that he knew how to do that without comparing himself with men he despised and often chastised. Again, we must doubt the accuracy of the report of the incident.

Finally, we come to the most astonishing riddle—or paradox—in the whole narrative—namely, the alleged complaint and cry of despair on Jesus' part about the ninth hour after the crucifixion. Matthew and Mark give virtually the same account of the alleged outburst. To quote the latter:

"And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, which, being interpreted, is My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? . . .

"And Jesus cried with a loud voice and gave up the ghost."

The account of the alleged episode in Matthew is, except for verbal differences of slight importance, identical with the above. Not so with Luke's version, however. According to Luke, Jesus, after crying (something) with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost." According to John, Jesus uttered no cry at all while on the cross, but said, "I thirst" in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, and

after receiving the vinegar, only said, "it is finished," bowed his head and gave up the ghost.

Which is the correct version? We cannot answer this question unless we consider the probabilities of the case; unless we ask whether Jesus could have uttered cries of despair and astonishment without contradicting some of his most solemn and deliberate previous sayings and interpretations of his high and unique mission. Many theologians are sorely perplexed by the alleged bitter cry and complaint, and some, absurdly enough, see in it a consistent reference to that very mission. But the latter cannot, by any amount of ingenuity or sophistry, reconcile the alleged complaint with the following statements of Mark:

"For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day."

"Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

How can the Son of man, after thus foretelling his fate and glorying in it, complain of or to God of the failure to save him from that fate? Is it reasonable to assume that Jesus was at the last unequal to his ordeal, though he had expected it and appreciated its significance in the whole drama? Inconsistency is human and pardonable, even in a genius, but why assume it?

That Jesus said *something* on the cross is morally certain. Just what he said, and the words he used, we shall never know. The recorders of his final sayings were not present at the crucifixion; they had to accept the dubious testimony of believing Jews, who, perhaps, relied on the impressions and recollections of other believing Jews.

Enough has been said to demonstrate the proposition that in studying the gospels the only safe and rational course is to disregard incongruities, contradictions and divergencies, and to form a *conception or image of Jesus on the strength, solely, of his most vital and essential doctrines and sayings*. To do that is entirely legitimate; it is the course adopted by all philosophical historians and biographers. But, alas, to do that is to arrive at the depressing conclusion that few of the self-styled Christians care to live up to the cardinal and central teachings of Jesus. Some day Christianity *may* become a religion—a guiding creed and way of life for civilized men and women; so far, Christianity has been a barren ideal, a form of lip service. Jesus is admired, but not obeyed or followed. A religion men do not live by is not a religion.