

CHRIST AND CHRISTIANS.

AN INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGINAL MEANING OF THE TERMS.

BY THE EDITOR.

ALMOST every Christian believes that he knows the origin and original meaning of the words "Christ" and "Christians," and yet scholars who have investigated the history of early Christianity will have to confess that the etymology as well as the first use of these two names is shrouded in darkness. All we know with the evidence at hand is, to put it mildly, that the current opinion is based on insufficient evidence, or if we state the case bluntly, that it is highly improbable, not to say untenable and erroneous.

Christ and Messiah.

According to the current connotation the term "Christ" is a translation of the Hebrew "Messiah," and Christians are those who believe that Jesus is the Christ. That would be a simple statement of fact as to the present usage of these words, but there are difficulties not commonly known and problems still unsolved.

The Hebrew word *Messiah* was translated into Greek by the term *Christos* some time before the Christian era. The word appears for the first time in the so-called Solomonic Psalms which are preserved in Greek. The problem is, how can the word *Messiah*, which means "the Anointed One," be translated by *Christos*?

Among the Hebrews it was the custom to have the king anointed with consecrated oil, but this ceremony was not practiced in Greece. It is difficult to say what word a native Greek might have used for this act, if he wanted to describe it in his own language, but Greek scholars will have to grant that the verb *chriein*¹ from which the word *Christos* is derived does not mean "anoint" but "to rub" and "to besmear." The root XPI is connected with the

¹ χρίειν.

Sanskrit *GRI* and the Latin *FRI*; the latter appears in *frico*, "to rub," and is still preserved in the original meaning of the root in its English derivative "friction." The Greeks had a habit of oiling their bodies after a bath, and this process was called *chricin*, which accordingly may be translated "to rub with unguents or oil," but we must bear in mind that it is the idea of rubbing or smearing that is fundamental, and not the unguent or the oil. This is apparent when we consider that the same word means also "to coat arrow-heads with poison," "to put on paint," and even "to scratch," "to puncture," "to prick," "to wound."²

The meaning "anoint" with its peculiar significance as an act of sanctification is postclassical and came into use only through the Jews after the term "Christ" as a translation of *Messiah* in the sense of "the Anointed One" had become accepted among the Jews in Alexandria. It is used in the Septuagint in the sense "to anoint," but never by any pre-Christian Greek author.

We may grant that the translation of *Messiah* by *Christos* was a Hebraism, although it seems very improbable that any one conversant with Greek should have selected so undignified an expression, and the Jews of Alexandria knew Greek as well as Hebrew, perhaps even better. But if we grant that the term *Christos* was originally an awkward Hebrew solecism, we find ourselves beset with new difficulties which render the traditional interpretation unacceptable.

The form of the word *Christos* is a passive participle of the future which means "one who is to be, or one who must be, or one who shall be anointed (besmeared)." It can by no stretch of licence be construed to mean "one who has been besmeared." The latter form would be *chriomenos*,³ i. e., "the anointed or besmeared one," or *kechrimenos*,⁴ "he who has been besmeared."

Whichever way we turn, we must confess that a Greek translator of Hebrew would never think of translating the term *Messiah* by *Christos*, and we feel compelled to grant that the term *Christos* originated independently from the term *Messiah*, however probable it may be that both terms were sufficiently analogous to be identified.

² For further information and the entire philological apparatus of passages, see any good Greek dictionary (e. g., Liddell and Scott, p. 172-3). Eschylus uses the word even to denote the sting of the gadfly.

³ χριόμενος.

⁴ κεχριμένος.

Christos and Chrestos.

The difficulties are by no means lessened by the fact that the pronunciation of the Greek term *Christos* was quite unsettled even as late as in the second century of the Christian era, for by the side of the spelling *Christos* we find the form *Chrestos* which in Greek means "useful." At any rate Justin Martyr still makes a pun by referring to this meaning of the word when he alludes to the Christians as being "useful," thus proving that he makes little difference between *Christos* and *Chrestos*. At his time in Greece the pronunciation of the *e* was beginning to gradually change into *i*, in the same way as the Saxon *e* (pronounced *ay* as it still is in Germany) was transformed into the modern English *e*. A Jew by the name of Chrestos* is mentioned as having caused disturbance in Nero's time, and some scholars think that the name should read *Christos*, and the disturbances thus produced should be referred to some Christian missionary who preached the Gospel of Christ before St. Paul had reached Rome.

Among the Jews exiled by Claudius was a certain man named Aquila, who together with his wife Priscilla became closely associated with the apostle St. Paul. They are frequently mentioned in both the Acts and the Epistles,† and judging from their zeal it is likely that they would have taken quite an active part in any controversy concerning Christ; at the same time they were probably well prepared for the message of Paul's Gospel by their antecedent education and experience, especially by their expectation of the advent of Christ.

One thing is sure: when the Jews translated their scriptures into Greek they used the word *Christos* to translate their term *Messiah*. The word appears to have existed and must have meant a divine personality, a God-man, a saviour, a representative of God on earth, but there is no positive evidence where the word originated or what its etymology may have been. The Greek grew gradually accustomed to the solcism and Christian Greek authors use the word *chricin* in the sense "to anoint" and the name *Christos* as "the Anointed One."

Christ and Krishna.

In those days the influence of India upon Greece began to be felt, and so the term *Christos* may be of Indian origin. The idea

* This must have been in 49 A. D.

† Acts xviii. 2, 18, 26. I Cor. xvi. 19. 2 Tim. iv. 19. Rom. xvi. 3.

of a God-man and of an incarnation of God on earth (called *avatar* in Sauskrit) is so typically Indian that we would naturally look for the origin of the term to that country, and it seems not quite impossible that the word *Christos* is a corruption of *Krishna*, for Krishna is indeed a divinity who in more than one respect anticipates the Christian idea of a God-man, of a divine incarnation in the shape of a man. Some Krishna legends have been incorporated into the Bible, especially the birth among shepherds and the massacre of children of his age by a king who feared to be deposed by the new born king. But when we ask for positive evidences for the etymology of *Christos* from *Krishna* we must confess that they are not forthcoming.

The name *Christos* in the sense of a Messiah as a divine incarnation appears suddenly in the Hebrew-Greek literature among the Jews of the dispersion, and quickly becomes a current term which was accepted in this sense even before Paul began to proclaim that Jesus was the Christ.

The idea that a saviour, a Christ, a divine teacher, was expected was current in the days of Paul, and he was called the Christ or the Lord, and the burden of Paul's message (the new thing which he added thereto) consisted mainly in showing that Jesus was this Messiah. That such was the state of affairs appears from Acts xviii. 24 ff., where we learn that Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew, was a traveling preacher like Paul, and he is highly praised for his ability and fervor. It is stated that "this man was instructed in the way of the Lord." However, he knew nothing as yet of Jesus, but "spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord knowing only the baptism of John." Apollos was converted by Aquila and Priscilla and became a devout adherent of Paul's doctrine, and now we are told that "he mightily convinced the Jews and that publicly, showing by the Scriptures that Jesus was Christ."

We ought to point out further that from the start the ideas associated with the term "Christ" are different from those connected with "Messiah." In the dispersion the Jews absorbed pagan ideas which insidiously influenced their traditional notions, and the idea of an expected Messiah was much modified even in the interpretation of the most orthodox rabbis. The Messiah, the anointed Jewish king, who was expected to restore the Davidian kingdom and redeem the Jews from the yoke of the Gentiles, gradually changed into a saviour like those among the Gentiles.

The Saviour Idea of Pagan Origin.

The idea of a saviour who would rescue mankind, conquer evil, overcome death, heal all ills and all disease, reconcile man with God, and be a representative of God on earth, an incarnation of God himself, was purely pagan. This conception of the Messiah occurs nowhere in the Old Testament and creeps into the Talmud only at a late date under the influence of Gentile surroundings. The Persians proclaimed that a saviour, a *saoshyant*, would come, and his name would be Mithras. He would be born of a virgin and bear the title "righteousness incarnate"; the dead would rise and the living would be transfigured so as to receive ethereal bodies that would throw no shadow.

Kindred ideas existed in distant India where the saviour was called the Buddha or the Enlightened One. Among the Brahmans he was regarded as an avatar, or a divine reincarnation, a god-man. Even the Greeks had their saviours and our word "saviour" is nothing but a translation of the Greek *Soter*.⁵ The Greek saviours were either heroes like Heracles, Theseus, Jason, etc., or they were gods as in the case of Æsculapius. They were either mythological figures humanized, or they were legendary men deified, or both at once. At any rate the idea of Christ was more associated with the pagan notions of a saviour than with the Jewish idea of a Messiah, and if we analyze our own sentiment when using these two terms there would hardly be any one among us to whom they would be so identical that we could say that *Christ* is the correct translation of *Messiah*. The Christian belief appears to reverse the historical relation of the two terms and if a Christian would scrutinize his faith he would confess that he believes Jesus to be the saviour called "Christ." In fact many Christians like to forget that Jesus was a Jew, or more correctly, an Israelite of Galilee. He certainly was not a Messiah to the Jews as the term is understood by the prophets, in the Scriptures and in Jewish history. When Christians speak of Christ as the Messiah they mean that the Jews ought to abandon their Messianic hopes of a restoration of Israel, and that they ought to believe in Jesus Christ as the international Saviour, who by a fulfilment of the law has abolished it.

No Exact Hebrew Equivalent for the Word Saviour.

The Hebrew language does not possess the word "saviour." All its synonyms have a somewhat different significance. The name

⁵ σωτήρ.

Joshua (by the Gentiles corrupted into "Jesus") comes perhaps nearest to the meaning of a saviour. In its original form it reads *Yehoshua*⁶ and means "whose help or deliverance is Yahveh." The root of the second part of the word is *Yasha*,⁷ used only in the hiphel- and niphel-forms, the former meaning "to set free" and the latter, "to be set free." The meaning of the root is "to be wide or broad," and the original meaning of the verb is "to set abroad, to let escape, to deliver from bondage," and finally in general, "to deliver from evil, to rescue, to send help."

The word *Yehoshua* was in later times abbreviated into *Yeshua*,⁸ and the Septuagint translates it by "Jesus."⁹

The words *Yehoshua* and *Jeshua* are names, but are nowhere used as nouns in the sense of "Saviour."

The word *goel*,¹⁰ which in the passage Job xix. 25, is rendered "redeemer" in our authorized version, has an entirely different significance and would better have been translated by "avenger." It is derived from *gaal*,¹¹ which means "to demand back, to reclaim, to redeem" in the sense of property that has been pawned, or a vow that has been made. The noun *Goel* is a technical term in Hebrew jurisprudence denoting the nearest in kin of a man who has been slain, and upon whom the duty devolves to take revenge by slaying the slayer or demanding a ransom. Gradually the word has acquired the more general meaning of "nearest of kin upon whom such a duty would devolve." According to the marriage laws this *goel* would be obliged to take to himself the widow of his deceased kinsman, as is instanced in the stories of Ruth and Tobit. The idea of seeing in *goel* a saviour and thus making the mooted passage a prophecy of Christ is due solely to wrong translations and is a late Gentile interpretation.

The word *rophe*,¹² which occurs in Job xiii. 4, and is translated in the authorized version by "physician," might be rendered "healer" in the same sense as saviour is called in German *Heiland*. In the context it means that Job's friends are vain comforters, but the word *rophe* has never become a theological or religious term and can not be regarded as an equivalent for Messiah or Christ.

The Nazarene.

In addition to these Hebrew equivalents of the term "Christ" we ought to mention the word "Nazarene." According to a theory

⁶ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ or יְהוֹשֻׁעַ

⁷ יָשָׁא

⁸ יֵשׁוּעַ

⁹ Ἰησοῦς.

¹⁰ גֹּאֵל

¹¹ גָּאָל

¹² רֹפֵא

recently brought forward by William Benjamin Smith,¹³ the home of Jesus was Capernaum which is called "his city," and Nazarene does not mean the man of Nazareth, since we know that the sect of the Nazarenes existed before Jesus. According to Smith the name is to be derived from *natsar*, "to preserve," and "Nazarene" means saviour or healer. The sect must have been similar to the Therapeuts and Essenes, perhaps it was another name for the latter, perhaps also for the Ebionites, but the sect was not recognized by the orthodox Pharisees, and we may assume that it had originated under pagan influences in Galilee. This would account for the fact that the epithet "the Nazarene" was so little understood as to be explained by early Gospel writers in the sense of one born at Nazareth, a village of whose existence nothing was known in the first and second century and which later on about the fourth was identified with the Galilean village Natzara.

The idea of a preserver, a Nazarene, is obviously un-Jewish and has not become assimilated to orthodox Judaism. It seems that the Nazarenes as a sect did not identify their saviour with the Jewish Messiah. This was not done except by St. Paul who could only indirectly and after his conversion be called a Nazarene by his association with the disciples, especially with Peter.

The Nazarenes must have existed before Jesus. If we accept the statements made in the New Testament, they continued a Jewish sect, but henceforth looked upon their martyred leader as the Messiah, whose second coming they expected to be imminent. We must bear in mind, however, that our New Testament information comes from Gentile Christians who would naturally interpret the faith of the Nazarenes in the light of their own conception of Christianity.

Whatever the belief of the Jewish Nazarene sect may have been, we are sure that it constituted the body of a small community which is known in history as the Jewish Christian Church, fragments of which existed still about the regions of Pella in the time of Epiphanius, who considered the Nazarenes as heretics because their Christianity differed widely from that of the Gentile Christian Church.

The Name Christian.

While the etymology of the name "Christ" is doubtful we can positively say that after this word had been accepted the original meaning of "Christian" is assured, for it can only be a derivative

¹³ See *The Monist*, Vol. XV, p. 25 ff.

from "Christ" and must from the beginning have meant a believer in Christ. That seems sufficient for our purpose, and yet even here we are beset with new difficulties.

According to the Acts of the Apostles (xi. 26)¹⁴ Antioch was the place where the disciples were first called Christians.¹⁵ The name is a solecism, and proves that its originators did not belong to the educated classes of society. At the same time we know that the improper formation of words with the suffix *ianus* started first in Latin and crept gradually into Greek.

The forms *Pompeianus*, *Appianus*, *Lucianus*, etc., being derived from words in *ius* are correct, but *Cæsarianus*, *Catonianus*, etc., are wrong. Cicero still uses the form *Cæsarinus*. Christianus from Christus is ungrammatical and could not have originated in the age of Augustus, nor before the degeneration of the Latin tongue began, and even then it stands to reason that it was first used among the uncultured. That the Greeks should have coined the word in the days of St. Paul is extremely improbable; and we ought to expect such forms as *Χριστικοί*, *Χριστιοί*, and *Χρίστειοί*. One thing is certain: The Apostle Paul himself designates the adherents of the new faith as "those of Christ,"¹⁶ but never Christians. With the exception of the isolated appearance of the word in the Acts, the form Christian remains unused and unknown among Greek authors in the first century of the Christian era. The first author who is familiar with the word is Justin Martyr, and the context in which he uses the word "Christians" proves that the name was used by the pagan accusers, and not by the adherents of the new faith. Accordingly, it may *not* have been the name by which the Christians called themselves, but the epithet of opprobrium by which their pagan enemies designated them. In his apology (I, 4) Justin Martyr says plainly: "You accuse us of being Christians, but that the useful¹⁷ becomes heinous is not fair."

The Jews called the Jewish Christians *Minæans* or *Natzerim* (i. e., Nazarenes), never Christians. The meaning of the former¹⁸ is unknown, but it seems probable that it is the Biblical *min*¹⁹ which means "species." We would only have to assume that in Talmudic times it acquired the meaning "sect." The adoption of the name "Christian" by Gentile authors appears well established simultaneously with Justin Martyr in the second century. Tacitus speaks in his Annals (XV, 44, written about 116 or 117) of Nero's perse-

¹⁴ See also xxvi., 28. ¹⁵ *Χριστιανοί* ¹⁶ *οἱ τοῦ Χριστοῦ*. ¹⁷ τὸ χρηστόν.

¹⁸ מִנְיָיִ in Latin *Minæi*.

¹⁹ מִין

cution of the Christians, but since under the rule of Nero (56-68) the term "Christian" was not yet used and known, because at that time as we have seen the word-formation was not yet possible in Rome, he must have employed the name in anticipation of its later usage, and it is not even sure that the persecuted sect were Christians at all. They may have been Jews or adherents of other Oriental religions between whom in those days even otherwise well informed Romans made very little distinction.

Well informed on the subject is the younger Pliny who was governor of Bithynia in 111-112 or 112-113. He uses the name "Christians" in his letters to the emperor, but so little is the Christian faith known in those days that he deems it necessary to characterize the new sect and ask for special instructions as to how to deal with them. But his correspondence indicates that in Asia Minor the name was already in common use.

It is true that Rome conquered the countries around the Mediterranean Sea, but the final result was that the victors adopted the customs of the conquered race. Under Augustus Rome was still Roman and preserved at least the semblance of a republic. But the West became more and more amalgamated with the East with the result that the more powerful West was leavened by the more civilized East. Eastern idioms, Eastern religions and Eastern institutions gradually supplanted Roman ones, and so Rome changed into an Oriental monarchy with Oriental forms of thought and dominated by an Oriental religion. The Latin tongue itself degenerated, but when the Empire failed in the time of distress under the vigorous attacks from the North, the new religion maintained itself triumphantly and gave Rome a new lease of life with the renewed glory of an ecclesiastical predominance built upon the débris of its former civilization.