

MOHAMMEDAN PARALLELS TO CHRISTIAN MIRACLES.

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EDUARD MONTET, head professor of the Semitic department of Protestant theology in the University of Geneva, Switzerland, and author of an article on "Israel and Babylonian Civilization" in the October *Open Court*, has contributed to the July number of the *Hibbert Journal* under the title, "Les saints dans l'Islam," an important French article which is very instructive not only for those who yet hold to the miracle idea in the old sense of the word, but also for those who absolutely deny that Jesus was a historical person, making him the concrete reflection or personification of some metaphysical or other speculation of which we hear so much these days, as also for those who hold that the miracle stories of the Bible (I especially refer here to those about Jesus) are products only of the imaginative mind of a later generation to glorify the master after he had gone. Professor Montet has not written his article at all with the tendency to give instruction in this respect, he simply states facts; still, I think very valuable conclusions can be drawn from his article in the direction to which I refer. Just as the study of the modern Orient has thrown more light on some points of the literature of the Bible, as many a commentary has done, (for instance the knowledge of the wedding customs of the Syrian peasantry, the so-called "king's week," the wedding lasting seven days, has cleared up with one stroke all the remaining uncertainties regarding the composition and meaning of Canticles,) so the article of Professor Montet, based on studies and observations of certain aspects of modern Oriental life, seems to me to make clear to us why so much of the miraculous, sometimes of a very crass character, has crept into the Bible and especially into the Gospels. Of course the student of comparative religion can bring up parallels in other religions in

many points to the miraculous in Judaism and Christianity, but in the study of Professor Montet, we have parallels from the same soil from which Christianity sprang, and parallels which completely cover the individual miraculous stories of the Bible and especially of the Gospels. Professor Montet, speaking of the saints of Islam, especially of the Marabouts of Morocco and Algiers, says that as in all religions that believe in the supernatural, so also in Islam the gift of miracles is not a matter belonging only to the saints of the past. Miracles belong to all times and living Marabouts perform them as well as those who have been dead for years or centuries. All kinds of miracles of any imaginable category are found in the legends about these saints of Islam. Professor Montet enumerates many such miracles and gives us examples in modern times of historical Marabouts about whom the strongest stories are told. He tells of the gift these men possess of being everywhere at the same hour on the same day; of the power of transporting themselves instantaneously to fabulous distances; of walking on water; of drying up rivers; of rendering themselves invisible; of remaining a long time without drink and food; of emitting rays and manifesting themselves under light or flames; of healing diseases and awakening from the dead; of driving out evil spirits; of multiplying bread and other food to feed many persons; of appearing after their death; of speaking with departed saints who have been dead for centuries; of transforming water into honey, etc. In reading this of Islamic saints, are we not reminded of the sudden disappearances of Jesus, of his being transported through the air by the Devil in the canonical Gospels and in the apocryphal Gospel to the Hebrews by the Holy Spirit, his mother (as he is called there) by means of one of his hairs; are we not reminded of Jesus walking on the water; of his power over the elements; of his transfiguration and his conversation with the saints of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah; in short of every miraculous deed that is reported of him? And if Professor Montet informs us that such things are told of living saints in Islam, will we continue to hold to the view that it was not until later Christian generations and writers that these things were imagined and told of the glorified Lord? By this I do not mean to say that our Gospels were written very early or based on writings and notes collected during the life of Jesus or shortly after his death, but I wish to say that even in the lifetime of Jesus many of the wonderful stories concerning him may have become current, that were later taken up into our Gospels. If the modern fervent believer in Islam can believe in the wonderful powers of the living saint whom he actually adores,

why was this not possible of the adorers of Jesus during his lifetime? Montet tells us how dead and living saints in Islam are adored, though this seems inconsistent with rigid monotheism. The people kiss the edges of their dress, the stirrup where their foot has rested, the tracks of their steps, etc. The Gospels tell us how Jesus was adored during his lifetime, by those who believed in him, in such an Oriental fashion which we Occidentals sometimes thoroughly dislike. But we Occidentals must try to put ourselves into the spirit and feelings of the Orientals, and then we shall have no difficulty in accepting Jesus as a historical personality and will give up the attempt to represent him as only a personification of the Logos-idea or a personification of the highest social ideal, drawn on the background of the terrible social and economic conditions of his times, or any other personification. For all these procedures the Gospel writers surely do not show very much ability with the possible exception of the writer of the Fourth Gospel, but who nevertheless as well as the Synoptics presupposed Jesus as an historical character. The Gospel writers did not have the material or the knowledge of modern scholars, who, after going through all the difficulties surrounding the Christ-problem, finally think it can only be solved by some elaborate theory, which shows that Jesus is only a shadowy personification. By this I do not at all deny that mythical characters can get into company with historical characters, for I know very well that the Sun-god, under the name of Siegfried, can get into company with historical characters such as Attila, Theodoric the Great, and Burgundian kings in the German epic the *Nibelungenlied*. After reading Professor Montet's article I am more and more confirmed in my view that Jesus was a historical reality. When I hear what impossible miracles are ascribed to these saints of Islam and how they are adored, what enormous political, social, moral and religious influence they exert, how often they have played the eschatological rôle of the Mahdi, (the Mussulman Messiah), the personality of the end of the world who will preside at the Last Judgment—when I read all this, Jesus looms up to me more and more as one of those many Oriental saints who have played an influential part in the history not only of the Orient but of the world, ever since the times of the Old Testament under the Hebrew titles of *Nabi* (prophet), *Roë* (seer), or the Moslemic names of Dervish, Marabout and Mahdi; though perhaps otherwise not very much was known of these men regarding their birth-place, their development, their parents, their common life and occupation, etc. If contemporaries of Jesus, as Philo, or other writers of the first century, as Josephus, do not mention Jesus,

they have done no differently than other historians before and after them, who did not deign to make any mention of these strange men, who perhaps were too much of the commonplace and plebeian sort, though they gave the impetus to and were the nucleus of world-wide movements. These saints, as we see them in Montet's representation, are realities, too often too real. The author classifies them into ascetical and non-ascetical, continent and incontinent, modest and lewd ones, but they are all realities, there is nothing shadowy about them; they are of great influence, whether for good or evil. In general, the writer says, they are in North Africa the representatives of right against violence, of knowledge, or at least good sense, against ignorance.