

THE NAZARENE.

(With special reference to Prof. W. B. Smith's theory of the pre-Christian Jesus.)

BY THE EDITOR.

IT is a rare honor for an American scholar to have his book translated into German even before it has appeared in English, but it is passing strange if the translation is made and published by one of the author's ablest antagonists who in a preface declares his desire to have its propositions refuted. But such exactly is the fate of Prof. William Benjamin Smith's great work, *Der vorchristliche Jesus*. He publishes a very brief summary of his views in the current number, and we can only recommend those of our readers who are interested in the problem of the origin of Christianity to weigh his arguments and refute them if they can. We believe that much of what he has to say is true.*

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All theologians possessed of a scholarly training know that the Nazarenes were a sect and that Jesus belonged to it. He was called Jesus the Nazarene, and the same designation was given to the disciples of Jesus and to St. Paul. At the same time we read that Jesus grew up at Nazareth in Galilee, and Nazareth is called his home; but the city of Nazareth is unknown to the geographers of Palestine and is first mentioned at the end of the third century A. D. by Eusebius and again at the end of the fourth century by Jerome as a small village inhabited by Jews. We need not doubt that they refer to the same place which is now called Nazareth and was called by the natives en-Natsira.

The readings of the word Nazareth vary in the New Testament. It is sometimes spelled Nazareth, Nazareth, Nazara, and Nazaret.

* William Benjamin Smith, *Der vorchristliche Jesus, nebst weiteren Vorstudien zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Urchristentums*. Mit einem Vorwort von Paul Wilhelm Schmiedel. Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1906.

The last form is preferred and considered the most authoritative. It is probable that the Greeks would have transcribed either *ts* or *dz* by their own *z*, which, however, is always soft like *dz*. The ending *at* or *ath* is Phœnician. Other Phœnician city-names are Zarafat and Daberat. The Phœnician feminine ending *ath* corresponds to the Hebrew *eth*, while the ending in *a* is Canaanitic. "En-Natsira" is modern Arabic, while the form "Natsara" is Aramaic.

We repeat that all scholars agree that the identification of Nazareth with en-Natsira is extremely doubtful, and it is not impossible that the translator who rendered the Gospel into Greek may have misunderstood the term Nazarene and construed it in the sense of "a man of Nazareth."

There can be no doubt that the sect of the Nazarenes existed, and that Jesus was a Nazarene. The question is only whether he was also a Nazarethan, an inhabitant of a city called Nazareth. He is never called Nazarethan, but only "the Nazarene," or "he of Nazareth," and Nazareth is often mentioned as his country, his city and his home, though the passages are open to question and may have originally referred to Capernaum.¹

What do we know of the Nazarene sect? According to the Acts of the Apostles, they were communists who held everything in common. They continued to exist in Pella and Basanitis and are described by Epiphanius and Jerome as a Jewish sect of Christians.

In former publications² of mine I have identified the Nazarenes with the Nazarites, and I have not yet retracted that view. The Nazarites³ of ancient Israel were such figures as Samson, who led lives of religious devotion and who were marked externally by the fact that they never permitted their hair to be cut. In the later development of Jewish life Nazirdom became a regular institution. The word *nadzir* is derived from *nadzar* which is not used in its primary form and in the niphâl form means "to separate, to stand aloof, to abstain from, to make a vow." A *nadzir* was looked upon as a devotee, and in Gen. xlix. 26, Joseph is called a *nadzir* in the

¹ For details in favor of Capernaum as the home of Jesus, see *The Open Court* for December, pages 705 ff.

² For further details see *The Story of Samson*, pp. 66-72, and also *The Age of Christ*, a pamphlet written in explanation of *The Crown of Thorns*. I have modified my position in so far as in that pamphlet I still defend the possibility that Nazareth may have been the hamlet en-Natsira, and that so long as we have no definite proof to the contrary we may assume that Jesus grew up in that place. But I have come more, and more to acknowledge the improbability of the existence of Nazareth.

³ נָזִיר. We transcribe the soft *z* (ז) by *dz*, and the sharp *z* (צ) by *ts*.

sense of one who is different from his brethren as being near to God. In fact the term reminds us, in this peculiar use, of the title of Messiah. Luther translates the word *Fürst*, i. e., "Prince," and the authorized version, "separate from."

The common translation of *nadzir* in English has been Nazarite, and if the Nazarenes were a sect who endeavored to continue the ancient Nazarite institution as John the Baptist appears to have done, we might say that Nazarene and Nazarite are two versions of the same original name.

Prof. W. B. Smith takes another view. He believes that there existed a sect of Natsarenes (note the difference of the sibilant) whose name is derived from *natsara*, a word which means "guardian" and is derived from the root *natsar*, "to protect, to watch." In Job xxvii. 18 we read of a watch-tower *Magdal notsrin*, "the tower of the guards." The word is used in the sense of guarding the door of one's lips, and Yahveh guards mankind. He preserves from trouble (Ps. xxxii. 7; see also Ps. xii. 7; lxiv. 2, etc.) Incidentally we may mention that the word is used as meaning to keep guard or watch over a hostile city in the sense of besieging it, and the word *notsrin* (Jer. iv. 16) means besiegers and is translated in the authorized version by "watchers." We will add that the root *natsar* has another meaning which is the same as *natsats*, which means "shine, sparkle, bloom, sprout"; and the noun derived from it, *netser*, means "sapling, sprout," and in a figurative sense "scion," in the authorized version translated "branch" (Is. lx. 2).

In Is. xi. 1, a scion of David is promised and Matthew makes a pun on the name of Nazareth when narrating that Joseph settled in that city; he adds, following his usual mode of Old Testament interpretation, "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets: He shall be called a Nazarene."⁴

For our present conception of the origin of Christianity it appears quite indifferent whether the Nazarenes to whom Jesus belonged were a sect who took their name from the old *nedzrim* (or devotees), or from the *notsrin*, "guardians." The character of their religious ideals must in either case have been the same, and as we have stated elsewhere the term Nazarenes or Nazarites appears

⁴ Here the author of this passage confounds two words. If he identifies Nazareth with the hamlet en-Natsira, he makes a pun on the word by taking it in the sense of a shoot or a scion, while Nazarene in the sense of "he of Nazareth" is ultimately derived from the root that means "to guard, to watch."

On account of the prophecy mentioned here we may be sure that this passage was contained in the original Aramaic manuscript of Matthew, which we may call Proto-Matthew, but it was not contained in that other source also used by him which New Testament scholars call Proto-Mark.

to have been merely another name for the Essenes repeatedly mentioned in secular literature, and also for the Ebionites, the sect of "the poor," sometimes alluded to in early Christian literature.

We are satisfied to have mentioned the distinctions between the names Nazarene, Nazarite, and "he of Nazareth"; and will indicate the difference between Professor Smith's views and our own. He points out, and successfully too, that there is a pre-Christian Jesus-conception in the sense of a saviour and draws the conclusion that there was no historical Jesus. Jesus to him is not a name but a title; it is an equivalent for Christ, Messiah, *natsara* (guardian) and *σωτήρ*. He therefore speaks of "the Jesus," and he believes that the whole life of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels is an historization of a religious idea. The Jew, he claims, has a preference for matters of fact, and following his disposition, he factualizes (*sit venia verbo*) religion.

Now in the writer's opinion, which can be substantiated by many facts of history, actual occurrences in life and mythical conceptions are closely interwoven. What is myth but a humanization of super-human phenomena? The events of solar manifestations are told in the several sun myths of Izdubar (Gilgamesh), Heracles, Samson, Siegfried, etc., as if the sun were a hero. On the other hand, if a hero appears who distinguishes himself by extraordinary feats, reminding his admirers of their mythological demi-gods, he is deified and his deeds are told and retold, and modified under the influence of the well-known myths. On the one hand the sun is viewed in the light of an actual hero; on the other hand a hero's life is viewed in the light of solar phenomena. Thus it happens that the two naturally and easily fuse together, a remarkable instance of which may be seen in the life of Napoleon.

In this connection we remind our readers of the Pèrèz satire which has been republished in Mr. H. R. Evans's *Napoleon Myth*. It was originally written to refute the higher criticism of New Testament theology when it claimed that Jesus was a solar hero and a mere myth; and while it does not serve the purpose which the author of this clever satire had in view, it proves that mythical notions can easily be fitted to a hero, whose typical character originally furnished the feature for the humanization of a myth.

For these and kindred reasons we believe that though Professor Smith is right in claiming the pre-Christian idea of a Christ, a Saviour, a Jesus, we need not jump at the conclusion that the New Testament Jesus is a mere precipitate of the pre-Christian Christ ideal.

In spite of all arguments, Jesus may have existed, and the main data of his life as enumerated in the gospels, especially in Mark, may have actually occurred. We would designate as the most assured incidents in the life of Jesus all those features which a later tradition would scarcely have invented, and which may be considered as remnants of the original strata of tradition which were left in the text by mistake, perhaps because it could not be avoided without upsetting the whole traditional picture of Jesus, but which were minimized in the further history of the Church as being in contradiction to its doctrines. Such features are the life of Jesus as an exorcist, his narrow Jewish views, his notion that the general judgment day was close at hand, etc. If Jesus had been a mere precipitate of the pre-Christian Christ-conception, some of these features would certainly have been omitted, and since it is a matter of history that myth crystalizes around real personalities from whom it derives the definiteness of its individual coloring, we deem the negative phase of Professor Smith's position as hypercritical although we acknowledge that his positive assertions are irrefutable.