

## THE JESUS AND THE BAPTIST: A REBUTTAL.

BY WILLIAM BENJAMIN SMITH.

IT would have been much more convenient and satisfactory for the reader, had this rejoinder followed immediately, in the same (Nov.) number of *The Open Court*; but the article of Mr. Kampmeier did not come to hand till this afternoon (Nov. 14, 1913). No other critic has defended the historicity with warmer zeal or keener weapons than has Mr. Kampmeier; it is not his fault if the defense has failed. In his latest article, as in one or two earlier ones, he urges the supposed relations of John the Baptist with the Jesus as evidence of the latter's historic reality. The argument does not come very clearly to view, but can hardly differ essentially from something like this:

Persons with whom in history an historical person is set in relations are themselves historical;

Jesus is such a person (being set in relations with the historical John the Baptist):

Therefore, Jesus is historical.

A material defect in this syllogism is that both the premises are false. It is quite common for purely divine beings to be figured in intimate relations with the strictly historical. Pindar assures us that both Artemis and Hermes joined Hiero of Syracuse with twin-handed help in yoking the strength of his steeds to the bridle-guided car; yet both were deities *pur sang*. Shamesh was the sun-god; no one, not even Shamesh himself, would claim that he was human or historical; yet on the famous stone he appears delivering a code of laws to the highly historical Hammurabi. Any one can multiply examples indefinitely.

Secondly, it is not correct that the Jesus appears *in history* in relations with historical characters. He is indeed persecuted by Herod and tried by Caiaphas and crucified by Pilate, but *not in history*. Such accounts are now generally admitted by critics to be feigned, at least in many or in most particulars, nor has any one

succeeded in adducing any single item of even high probability, one single detail that does not lie under the gravest suspicion. It is plain as possible that if *any* real connection could be shown to exist between *any* historical character or event and a human Jesus of Nazareth, then the question of the historicity would be settled finally and decisively. However, the very acutest and most learned defenders of the historicity, such as Noll and Peisker, such even as Schweitzer, admit that no such proof is possible, that the said historicity is at most probable only, while very many more concede that all proofs have thus far failed, even though they may still pray for "new and doughtier weapons" that "will have to be forged."

So much in general. More specifically, there is nothing known about the Baptist that implies any relation with a human Jesus. In fact, we know very little about the voice crying in the wilderness. The account in Josephus is vague to a degree (Ant. 18, 5, 2). It attests only that he was a preacher of righteousness and of baptism, that crowds flocked to him, that his influence was great, that the people seemed willing to do anything he might bid them, that Herod thought it wise to anticipate possible trouble by sending him as prisoner to Macherus, and there put him to death. Josephus is not always trustworthy, but there appears no good ground to discredit these statements, nor the preceding one that the Jews interpreted the defeat of Herod by Aretas as a punishment for his murder of the Baptist. On the other hand, the whole section *may* be an interpolation, for it may be removed without in the least disturbing the narrative.

Supposing it genuine and authentic, on passing to the New Testament we find there nothing about the Baptist that we can build on confidently. The accounts are all *tendenziös*, they betray distinct dogmatic interest, they were written for a purpose in general not hard to detect. In particular, it is well enough known and Volkmar has clearly shown, (even though Wohlenberg still shuts tight his eyes) that the celebrated paragraph in Mark (vi. 17-39) is simply an edifying fiction ("*aber eben nur eine Szene*," Wellhausen), involving the anachronism of putting the execution of John *after* instead of *before* Herod's marriage with Herodias, along with other absurdities, such as sending John to a fortress on the border of Aretas's dominion, and celebrating there a feast, *after* Herod's rupture with Aretas! In the presence of this specimen of evangelic dramatization, even in Mark, we dare not trust any such representations of the Baptist. That the accounts of his Baptism of Jesus are entirely fictive, though deep-thoughted, is unanswerably shown

in the profound work of Hermann Usener on *Das Weihnachtsfest* (pp. 38-71). Surely no one regards Matt. xi. 1-19, Luke vii. 18-35, as historic.

What then is left? All trace of connection between John and a human Jesus has vanished. We may still believe that the Baptist is correctly described by Josephus; that he preached a severer righteousness than perhaps any contemporary; that he baptized; nay more, that he was extremely popular and inclined towards Messianic agitation; and that he was first imprisoned, then executed, by Herod Antipas. It may very well have been that his movement had points of contact with the protochristian, and that after his death it was gradually absorbed in this latter, since many may have favored while some disfavored such absorption. The want of historic data does not allow us to reconstruct the course of events with much confidence.

That the Gospel historizers should have feigned points of attachment in the career of Jesus to that of the Baptist was natural and even inevitable. It was merely a manifestation of the historizing dramatizing tendency, at its maximum in the Fourth Gospel but also everywhere present and active in countless interpolations and addenda, from the birthstories in the Synoptics to single phrases like "born of woman" (Gal. iv. 4), or clauses like the second half of Rev. xi. 8 ("which is spiritually . . . crucified").

Still more specifically, the account in Acts xix. 1-7, even if it were historic, would hint naught about the historicity of the Jesus; it could not even prove that there were disciples of John in Ephesus. For they are *not* called disciples of *John*, but merely disciples, which elsewhere in Acts means also disciples of the Jesus, and it is by no means incredible that persons who had received John's baptism of repentance might yet have heard and accepted "the doctrine concerning the Jesus." However, there is good reason to question the authenticity of the incident. Weizsäcker long ago perceived that the "twelve men" are in all probability allegorical, standing for the apostles, who are here represented as not in the highest sense Christian till brought over to the Pauline view. Then the term "about" or "as if" (*ὡσεύ*) seems deliberately chosen to let in the light gently on the writer's meaning. He will not say openly "twelve," but "as if twelve," remembering Judas Iscariot and Matthias.

As to the case of Apollos, so far from being "a weak point" it has everywhere been recognized as a particularly strong point in the new criticism. Soltau concedes explicitly that "the things about the Jesus" (Acts xviii. 25) must mean the *Religionsanschau-*

ung, "the doctrine concerning the Jesus." Even Loisy admits that all attempts to explain away this datum are vain and that in its presence "one must avow that the original preaching took place under forms more various and conditions more complex than hitherto supposed." Clemen also can find no escape from the arguments in *Der vorchristliche Jesus* (pp. 1-9) save in the assumption that the writer of Acts xviii. 24-25 did not know what he was talking about!

There is no need to add much to the original discussion in *Der vorchristliche Jesus*. That a roving missionary, like Apollos, "preaching accurately the doctrine of the Jesus," should have known of John's baptism need rouse no one's wonder; that he should know only of this baptism, hence nothing at all of Christian baptism (the central act demanded in the preaching both of Peter and of Paul in Acts) and hence apparently nothing at all of any such career of Jesus as seems to meet us in the gospels—it is this historical ignorance in a most zealous and eloquent preacher of "the doctrine of Jesus" that wars so stubbornly with the traditional theory of Christian origins.

The bulk of Mr. Kampmeier's article consists of an ingenious attempt to evade the argument for the multifocal origin of Christianity, drawn in *Der vorchristliche Jesus* from the practically simultaneous appearance of the new cult in so many remote and widely separated regions. He thinks the influence of Jesus may have been enormous, may have penetrated here, there, everywhere. But he seems to forget that such a notion in no way agrees with Acts or with the traditional view. The preaching of Peter, of Philip, of Paul has naught whatever to do with the teachings or the life of Jesus. They preach nothing "against the self-righteousness of his race," or "the external observance of the law," or "the rabbinical traditions," or the like. They preach Jesus Divine, Jesus the God, Christ and him crucified, risen and enthroned in heaven. Hence the strong words of Ananias (Acts ix. 18): "Brother Saul, the Lord (i. e., Jehovah) hath sent me, Jesus that appeared to thee in the way etc.," whereby *Jesus* is identified with *Jehovah*, which would have been unthinkable if Ananias had meant by Jesus a Galilean carpenter of whom he had heard.<sup>1</sup> For such a doctrine the way was not in the least prepared, nay, it would have been completely barred by any such reports that might have reached distant regions concerning a wise and benevolent carpenter of Nazareth. It can not be too

<sup>1</sup> Is it a mere coincidence that Saul is found on a street called *Straight*, in the house of *Judas*, by *Hananias*? The latter name seems the same in meaning as *Nazarya*, and was not Saul still in the *straight* path of *Judaism*?

strongly stressed that the primitive preaching has naught to do with the life or career or teaching of any such rabbi-carpenter, and that if it had turned on any such pivot it could never have made effective appeal to the Gentiles, it would have been the silliest twaddle and could at most have won only a few Jewish converts.

This, however, is not the worst of it, though in itself decisive. In addition it must be noted that by imagining the influence of Jesus to have been thus far-reaching before the tragedy in Jerusalem, one makes it doubly and trebly impossible to understand the absolute silence of history concerning him. If the fame of Jesus had thus filled the Roman empire, why do Josephus and Philo and the rest, why do all writers both pagan and Jewish fail to take any note of his existence, though expatiating on matters of infinitely less report and importance? Still more, why do the first preachers take no account of such far-famed life and teaching? Why do they mention not a single word or deed of such a conspicuous and renowned character?

Even this is not all, however. Nothing can be more ill-advised than to attempt to deduce the historicity of Jesus from the historicity of John. For there is practically no resemblance between the two in the scriptures or anywhere else, but only the sharpest contrast. If the Saviour was only a continuator and perfecter of the work of the Baptist, if the two were in any way related as Elijah and Elisha, or Moses and Joshua, or Æschylus and Euripides, then the whole New Testament representation, the whole of early Christianity becomes much less intelligible than ever before, the riddle becomes tenfold darker. Why should the career of the one be all miracle, the career of the other show nothing marvelous at all?

Nevertheless, one may still ask, do not the preaching of John and his Baptism stand in some relation to the Christian movement? Was not the Baptist in *some* sense a forerunner of the Saviour? We may grant that the two *movements* stood in some way related, though in what way it is not easy to determine. But it is only our knowledge of the historical conditions that is so defective; the relation might have existed under a hundred forms without ever implying an historical Jesus. Some vague conjectures, however, seem more probable than others. It appears that the Johannine movement was strictly Palestinian, if not strictly Judaic. Hence the scene is laid in Judea. We are not informed that it was ever conceived more widely or with reference to the Gentile world. It seems to have contained no pagan elements. Whereas by every token the Christian movement, "the doctrine of the Jesus," was born in the

Dispersion and from the start aimed at the salvation or conversion of the heathen world.

In fact, by its proclamation of "our God Jesus" as the "Son of God" it almost compromised with pagendom, it adapted itself to pagan forms of thought and expression. Hence Jesus is represented as starting on his career in Galilee of the Gentiles, as a great light arisen on the midnight gloom of heathendom. Hence he is represented as coming into Judea, that is, the new doctrine came from the Dispersion into contact with official Judaism represented by Judea and Jerusalem, and with the resultant world-tragedy first sketched in Heb. vi. 6: "crucifying for themselves the Son of God and making mock"; i. e., the doctrine of the Son of God was at first tolerated, then contemptuously rejected (crucifying = pillorying) and publicly ridiculed.

To speak of the entrance of a doctrine or cult of a deity as the coming of the deity himself is so natural and near-lying<sup>2</sup> that it is used even to this day. For example, Gilbert Murray in his *Four Stages of Greek Religion* repeatedly illustrates this usage. Note also the frequent use (especially in the Fourth Gospel) of the participle "coming" (*ἐρχόμενος*), as applied to Jesus. The reference must be to the gradual progress of a doctrine; it surely cannot refer to the practically instantaneous event of birth, of physical coming into the world. This idea tempts one to elaboration, but the temptation must be resisted.

Mr. Kampmeier can not find himself at home in the conception of Protochristianity as a militant monotheism. Perhaps because he gratuitously inserts the phrase "purely intellectual." But the militant monotheism of Protochristianity was far as possible from being "purely intellectual." It was intensely religious, it was earnestly ethical. It did make religion first, but it made morality a good second. Says the venerable and authoritative *Teaching*: "The way of life is this: First, thou shalt love the God that made thee; second, thy neighbor as thyself." Similarly in the New Testament and elsewhere. The Protochristians, especially in Western Asia, rightly regarded polytheism as the "mother of abominations"; to overthrow idolatry was to strike the strongest possible blow for morality and righteousness. Neither did such a crusade for universal pure God-worship in any wise war with the quest for personal purity, personal salvation, personal "redemption from evil and sin." But such personal yearning for salvation can never be the heart of a great mis-

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Vergil's "*inferretque deos Latio*," the introduction of the gods is the introduction of their worship.

sionary religion, like the Protochristian; it is quite too narrow and selfish. Moreover, it is very easy to exaggerate this personal desire beyond what is written. It does not appear conspicuous in the early Christians, not even in Paul, who is not seeking his own salvation from sin and evil, but the salvation of the Gentile from paganism and its attendant iniquities. The sin of the New Testament is primarily idolatry, secondarily its concomitant vices. All this seems evident on mere statement.

How these two elements are related is plainly to be seen in the *Shepherd* of Hermas, apparently the witness most favorable to the ordinary view, for the "Angel of Repentance" is the guardian angel of Hermas, whose ideal of morality is certainly high, whose aims and interests are intensely practical, and sometimes almost narrowly personal. Yet hear him in his first commandment: "First of all, believe that One is God, who the universe created and set in order, and brought from the non-being into being the universe, and all containeth, but alone is uncontainable. Believe then in him and fear him, and fearing have self-control. *These commands keep, and thou shalt cast off all iniquity from thyself and put on all virtue of righteousness and shalt live to God, if thou keep this injunction.*" It seems impossible to be more explicit or every way satisfying. Remember this is the only religious commandment of all the twelve of Hermas; the rest are purely moral. Hermas not only sums up religion completely in his sublime monotheism, but he regards the latter as the sole condition, necessary and sufficient, of perfect righteousness, of life unto God. Remember furthermore that this *Shepherd* issued from the heart of the early Roman Christian consciousness (A. D. 95-145); that it was directed unerringly to that same early consciousness; that it became a Christian *Vade mecum*, one of the most popular favorites for near 300 years; that it was frequently quoted by the greatest fathers, was considered inspired by some (as by Origen) and narrowly escaped canonization; that it never mentions the name Jesus, never the name Christ, never any single item of the whole evangelic story; that it declares "the law of God is the son of God now preached unto the ends of the earth"—and then say whether there can be any doubt that Protochristianity was a protest against idolatry, a crusade for monotheism. Says Dibelius of this contention (in the *Theol. Literaturzeitung*): "This proposition Smith demonstrates first from the general movement of thought in the apologists—beyond doubt, correctly" (*zweifellos, mit Recht*). This assurance is made doubly sure by the witness of such authoritative

documents as this *Shepherd* of Hermas and the "Teaching of the Apostles to the Gentiles."

Mr. Kampmeier objects to explaining all of Christian origins at a single stroke. But who attempts it? On the contrary, I have many times insisted that manifold influences were at work, that the Protochristian hosts rallied under many banners, that there were frequent internal conflicts and contradictions, that the *Catholic* church emerged from a chaos of controversies as the *totalization*, the unification of many warring sects. The principle of unity was at first found in monotheism, in passionately earnest rejection of idolatry, in the zealous propaganda of the Jesus, the Christ, the one Saviour-God alike of Jew and of Greek. Much yet remains to be done, not so much towards proving as towards making these propositions clearer and more precise. In detail they will doubtless be greatly improved and conformed more and more closely to the truth as the discussion proceeds; but in general outline they have come definitely and to stay.