

OUR KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST: A REVIEW.¹

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EMERSON observes that the name of Jesus is not so much written in history as it is ploughed into it. This peculiar, insulated preeminence is of course consonant with orthodox Christian faith and also otherwise intelligible to the student of psychology with any genuine experience in personal piety and even the most general familiarity with the one-time power of the church, educational no less than political.

Much has been contemplated both in curiosity and in piety, and much argued in controversy, concerning the historical significance of the man Jesus, the ontological "Son of God," and the ideal Christ. Probably in no region open to investigation or speculation has there prevailed a greater wilful confusion or consciously prejudiced ignoring of issues, perhaps, with a like unintentional failure to sift and separate separable points of view and to recognize available distinctions possibly representative of real differences. Every error of pseudo-piety, of impiety, of intellectual artificiality and of intellectual inertia, of dogmatism and of skepticism, of ignorant credulity and of ignorant incredulity, of fantasy, of fear; of sentimentality real and assumed, of doctrinaire oversight and of doctrinaire excess, has been perpetrated upon these themes. Every degree of transmogrification seems to have been affected or achieved. We have not the space to characterize the history of christological dogmatics and apologetics in their patristic and medieval elaborations; nor of the great "independent" critical or interpretive biographies of Jesus, from the period culminating in Strauss and Renan to the present day; nor yet to glance even at the various hues and shades of neological interpretation, more or less explicit,

¹ *Our Knowledge of Christ, an Historical Approach.* By Lucius Hopkins Miller, Assistant Professor of Biblical Instruction in Princeton University. New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1914. 166 pages. \$1.00.

of the person, life, mission and meaning of Jesus Christ,—Catholic, Protestant, Judaistic, Oriental and secular,—whether, e g., primarily psychological, literary, imaginative, historical, theological, rationalistic, mystical, skeptical, sociological, personalistic, unitarian, Hegelian, Ritschlian, avowedly or unavowedly eclectic, critically or uncritically syncretic, or what not soever they may be. Where so much has been thought and felt, affirmed and denied, imagined, believed and doubted, a trustworthy statement of essential facts obviously would serve a good purpose.

Dispensing (in theory at least) with all apriorism of standpoint, save so much as is implied in an honest curiosity about the historically ascertainable or probable facts of the earthly life and teaching of Jesus; either assuming his historicity or easily reaching a belief in it on *prima facie* evidence: the little book before us—which can be read to advantage in about four thoughtful sittings, although there is meat in it for many more—aims to disentangle and set down the principal “facts” aforesaid; so that the ordinarily educated or intelligent lay reader may form sufficiently clear ideas, which shall be at the same time correct, of the historical setting of Christ’s life as related in the four Gospels, the chief episodes of his career, and the words that he uttered.

The book is not intended as a christology in the usual sense; it proposes no theory of Christ. Nor is it, except incidentally, a treatise on Christianity, friendly or adverse. It is not a *criticism* either of Christianity or of Christ, of his life or teaching. It is not a contribution to or an exposition of any “Christian” cultus, Christian metaphysic, Christian eschatology, Christian history, Christian ethic, Christian polity, Christian prophecy or poetry, Christian apologetic or exhortation; it is not an account of “Christian experience” or of “the Christian life”; although naturally it bears on some of these things. It is, in aim at least, a portrait or true picture, outlined in the light of modern knowledge and of common sense criticism, of the historic figure of the man Jesus Christ, showing what he did and said: that is all. It is, properly, a skeletal summary of its subject: a brief and episodic life, meager in the materials bequeathed to us, yet large, rich, and luminous in significance,—a garland of conspicuous good deeds and strange potent words, preternaturally penetrant,—a bloom of immortality encasing the cruel thorn of crucifixion.

In handling the subject the author aims, on the whole very successfully, at perfect frankness, at the same time seeking to be “constructive,” once the conditions of candor are fulfilled. The

result is accordingly an admirably useful sketch of the nature and presumable value of the sources of our information about Christ (Chapter I), followed by an account of the more obviously historical and traditionally prominent events of his life (Chapter II); this in turn by a résumé of his teaching (Chapter III); and finally the suggestion of a basis for a comfortable rationalism in thinking of his divinity, regarded both historically and in a logico-practical way, which preserves the sentiment of reverence dear to the Christian heart (Chapter IV). These chapters are written in a style pure, dignified and cultivated, befitting the theme.

The temper of the author impresses me as thoroughly sincere and wholesomely responsive to the simple truth of the situation. The statements about the Gospels appear to represent the sanest net results of the higher criticism, and possibly gain from being second-hand, the plan offering no temptation to a dubious originality. The early Christian legend has been thoughtfully examined, with a due sense of relative values sure to appeal to the studious reader. A dutifully clear discrimination between the better attested "facts" and the more doubtful reports of happenings is interestingly effected with a minimum of possible offence to anybody; and a reverent open-minded leaning toward conservative views accompanies an admirably intelligent grasp of the fundamentals of scientific criticism. Yet there is no straining after paradox, no truculent claims of superior orthodoxy such as frequently vitiate the lucubrations of liberal theologians; nor is there any desire to press, or even to express, too forcibly, the definite outcome of the author's own thinking as such, whether relatively orthodox or negative in respect of the questioned supernatural aspects of the story. The exegesis is straightforward, apparently unbiased and in accordance with current informed Protestant standards.

Unusually simple and comprehensive in plan, frank and earnest in method, the book is nevertheless characterized, throughout, by a noteworthy restraint in the result,—which one feels to be not so much, primarily, from what might antagonize, as from what might distract and detract from the factual issues which are the book's excuse for being. Nothing seriously to becloud these is admitted. Nevertheless the emphasis is rightly on the ideal and spiritual rather than the existential and temporal aspects of the teaching. The account given of Jesus's life is so short it cannot be abstracted; moreover, it should be read directly by any student caring to learn what is known concerning Christ. It is, however, a pleasant duty to commend the book's emphatic recognition and treatment of the

peculiar distinctive quality of the characteristic inwardness of Jesus's teaching, and its illustrations in his thoughts about God and about man; also to remark the definite and timely conclusion that Jesus's teaching was primarily "individualistic but affords ground for, and imparts a great impetus to, an extended social application." Another very important point, effectively brought out, is that Christ *lived* his teaching; and the *life* as it happens to follow, even with its tragedy of vicissitude (however this may be regarded), gives or rather constitutes the "teaching" a utilizable force in human conduct; it embodies and bestows a completely congenial human ideal sympathetic with our innermost being and apparently unalterable destiny, and renders the teaching fruitful of new ideal values in our lives in so far as they are like His.

I cannot so much as allude to the teaching of Jesus without remarking the *great difference between* it and all other ethical teaching of which we have anything like adequate knowledge. The sublimity and sweep of its seizure upon sympathy, charity and lovingkindness—transcending and countervailing all previous standards; the extremity of consideration and concrete altruism which it enjoins—a democratic altruism extended to our fellowmen as such, to the entire human family, thought of as subject to the solicitude of a common spiritual Father; the unique, vitalizing conception of the power and beauty, the privilege and duty of love, even the love which "passeth understanding," which is its summary and essence; these things have, I believe, wrought a gradual pervasive revolution in human society, and the end is not yet; rather are we still near the beginning of the due reign of mutual sympathetic recognition and service which is doubtless part of the general modern enlightenment of the human spirit, part of the practical doctrines of liberty and of cooperation which underlie our modern aspiration and much that is best esteemed in modern institutions, but which is, I believe, principally the gift to the world of Christ's teaching, and our inheritance from that. Even now, in these days of dreadful war, the best men of all parties and nations are actually troubled in their consciences and actively occupied in thinking out and arguing their national courses—even across the lines of battle—in terms of a *moral* standard, which imperatively takes theoretic cognizance at least of the other's rights, and of a general sense of the rights of all and the duties of each: even fear and policy owning an open allegiance to this moral consciousness recognized as diffused among the nations of the world, and which is possibly the chief characteristic, psychologically regarded, of what we cherish

as "civilization." There is apparently in the teaching and example of Jesus an element of charity and grace which reaches beyond abstract justice and represents a beautiful overflow of outgoing contributive spiritual vitality. Jesus proclaimed an exalted idea of the worth of a man, believed in the infinite significance, potentially, of every human life. This extreme acknowledgment of the absolute value of the soul, the spiritual integrity and importance of the individual as an entity in direct relations with God, and of the universal kinship of the race, together with an unequivocal sentiment of love toward all mankind, appear to be characteristic and essential aspects of the original Christian teachings. Professor Miller naturally enlarges upon the place of love and its kindred virtues in Christ's teaching, but he might have emphasized even more this amazing aspect, so fundamental, distinctive and influential.

Having in mind the piously contented and unadventurous, still satisfied with the old creeds and religiously unwilling to blaze new paths, even in the relatively passive exercise of curiosity or vision, Professor Miller professes "too much respect and admiration for the spiritual power and intellectual honesty of thousands of men and women who think in this way, [i. e., anti-innovationally] to appear for a moment as in any sense their antagonist." "I was born and brought up," he continues, "in an atmosphere permeated by such ideas and I owe too much to my upbringing to be able, even if I wished, to deny the spiritual value of that heritage." This passage not only illustrates our author's angle of regard, but reveals a truly beautiful spirit.

As a reviewer I feel bound to go farther, and to point out that a reasonable affirmation is made and briefly argued, toward the end of the book, which may be called an elastic or pragmatic dogma of Christ's divinity, empirically grounded on our alleged inevitable response to his character as the supreme concrete historical expression of noble spirituality; whence, it is argued, we derive (i. e., on the basis of a presumed correspondence of the "real world" and our deepest reactions, or the reasonableness of habitual human expectancy in directions of experienced satisfaction), a kind of theism from "our knowledge of Christ"; farther than that, we reach a theistic Christology from premises and authorities antecedent to our reading and experience of Christ's character. As a reviewer I purposely refrain from a discussion of this thesis, or of the experiences and allegations, the assumptions and inferences, which are back of it. But it cannot be doubted that the author earnestly feels and persuasively communicates the impression, doubtless satis-

fying to many who have slipped their moorings in the traditional faith, that Jesus may be uniquely regarded with reverence without superstition: with a reverence, one gathers, *sui generis*, and not quite appropriate toward any other persons or teachers. So much at least is left possible for the "Christian's" choice.

Finally, be it said that *Our Knowledge of Christ* by Professor Miller is rather uniquely useful as an elementary primer of the subject in English for any honest reader, but especially for such as, like the author, find themselves in a state of transition from prescribed interpretations toward detachment. Such a state is potentially prolific of nuances foreign to more logically definite positions. One thinks at once of many more radical books, such as Professor Bousset's splendid account of *Jesus* (accessible in English translation), Goldwin Smith's brilliant little book on *The Founder of Christendom*, and—equally unambiguous with these—a group of able sketches in miniature by American Unitarian divines, e. g., John White Chadwick's *The Man Jesus*, Charles F. Dole's *What We Know About Jesus*, and several expository treatises by Prof. Francis Greenwood Peabody. Comparative mention might be made also of Etienne Giran's *Jesus of Nazareth*, Joseph H. Crooker's *Supremacy of Jesus*, J. Estlin Carpenter's *The Historical Jesus*, and *The Theological Christ*, Delibach's *Whose Son is Christ?*, the writings of Dr. A. B. Bruce, the liberal Scotch divine, and many others, notably the beautiful serial called *The Man Jesus*, by Mary Austin now current in the *North American Review*. The masterly exhaustive biographical study by Nathaniel Schmidt, entitled *The Prophet of Galilee*, is hardly comparable. The student desiring to review the various biographical interpretations that have been essayed will do best to turn to the voluminous pages of the scholarly summary given by Albert Schweitzer in his *Quest of the Historical Jesus; a critical study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, from which incidentally it may be seen how preponderantly Germanic the subject is. Among very recent books, I think at the moment of nothing so superficially like *Our Knowledge of Christ* by Professor Miller as *The Life of Jesus* by Alfred W. Martin, of the Ethical Culture Society; which is also readable and excellent in matter, but much longer and more detailed, while in a sense less comprehensive, and furthermore written with complete humanitarian detachment from traditional orthodox, trinitarian or supernaturalistic Christianity. Both books are liberal in conception, the one more unreservedly, even enthusiastically so. Like Mr. Martin, Professor Miller is a sound scholar, truth-loving and clear-headed,

and a teacher of good influence upon aspiring minds. His book is perhaps equally thoroughgoing in its way; only it is, to say the least, more obviously conservative and better adapted to the reader of evangelical antecedents. It is a popular presentation of a greatly interesting problem, worthy of a university professor. If it is not a contribution to Christian scholarship, it is a contribution from it. The chief interest of the book, as by intent, lies not in the classification of the author's views, but in the information it gives us about Jesus Christ.