

JESUS THE GREAT TEACHER

HIS DEBT TO THE WISDOM BOOKS IN HEBREW LITERATURE

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MODERN attempts to understand Jesus have been much in error because of the fact that following the Reformation there was a discount placed upon the apocraphal books, and that after some two hundred years of quibbling they were early in the last century dropped from the Bible, by a printing firm, which having a big contract to print bibles for the heathen, boldly cut them out to save money. Thus we have attempted to understand the mind of Jesus, having cut from our thought, the literature of his people which stood nearest to Him in time, and was of great influence in the period in which He lived. Some of the books dropped were of little value, but the Wisdom writings were of great value and great influence on Jesus. Just as Socrates and other lovers of Wisdom went about Greece thinking and teaching, so Palestine after the days of Greek influence had its Wisdom teachers.

These teachers were men who observed the people, marked their follies, vices and failures, and handed down practical instructions to teach the thoughtless and ignorant to avoid the pitfalls about them. These wise men can be traced back quite far, and their own explanation of their position in society was, that they were followers of Solomon the wise king who had written 3,000 wise sayings, and drawn a lesson for human living from every kind of beast and bird. These teachers had great influence upon the land of Jesus, and their wise reflections on manners and morals placed them in public esteem alongside the ancient prophets. It is unthinkable that so serious a man as Jesus, with his mind open for every truth, should not be touched by this school of teachers. In our modern estimate of Jesus we do not take into consideration the influence of these teachers upon the thought of Jesus, nor how far He followed their example in His ministry.

Modern study of the Gospel Records shows us that Matthew and Luke at least, depended upon an earlier writing called the Logia, or Sayings, and given the technical name of the "Q" document by scholars. This Logia was a grouping of teachings of Jesus, written by Matthew the Apostle, and written very early. Flinders-Petrie, Professor Salmon, Sir William Ramsey, are among the competent scholars who hold that the Sayings were written while Jesus was yet alive, and this explains the fact they did not mention the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus.

In this earliest of all documents Jesus is the Great Teacher, teaching a way of knowledge which was for humanity a Saving Wisdom. Knowledge of God as He taught it, was the salvation Jesus came to bring, in that earliest document. It is only later thought, based upon later records which included His death and Resurrection, that made Jesus the *Redeemer* rather than the *Teacher*.

Careful study of the reconstructed Sayings, shows how great was the influence of the Wisdom writings on Jesus. Take the first collection of the book of Proverbs, it is a document of some 376 wise sayings (see Proverbs x., 1 to xxii., 16)—where each saying consists of two lines, the first giving a thought, and the second line the opposite side of the idea for clearness and emphasis. Or take the last chapter of Proverbs, a careful literary effort of one Lemuel, and which is an alphabetical poem on the "Virtuous Woman."

These writings, pinning down the sage thought of wise men, as Poor Richard pinned down the practical wisdom of Franklin, could never have been unobserved by Jesus; and as we study them, and also study His words in the Sayings, we see how much Jesus drew from them. The beautiful parables of Jesus show a careful observation of the habits of birds and animals; and His beautiful maxims show a close following of the prevailing form of Wisdom literature. It is an error to call Jesus familiar with, and influenced by, the older Prophets, and not see Him influenced by the Wisdom writers.

The book of Ecclesiasticus, the book of the Twelve Patriarchs, and book of Enoch, were certainly well known to Jesus. It was the apparent fondness of Jesus for the book of Enoch which made some follower take the liberty of putting into the mouth of Jesus some of its apocalyptic matter, which is recorded in certain chapters in the Gospels, and which Jesus did not say. The book of Job, the book of the famous Son of Sirach, these influenced Jesus. The morals of Jesus, His practical wisdom, show how the Wisdom Books reached the mind of Jesus with their message. Some scholar

has shown where Paul quotes 247 times from the apocraphal or non-biblical writings. Jude and James do the same. And so did Jesus.

The Wisdom movement grew following the return from the exile, and such a book as Ecclesiasticus shows its author a philosophical moralist of high order. The author uses the words of Plato such as "nous" and "sophia," and he says "sophia" (Wisdom) is the knowledge of things divine and human. Again he calls the fruits of Wisdom, "prudence, justice, manliness, temperance." And again the work of Philo is akin to the Greek philosophy. So if Philo and Paul, how can we expect Jesus to escape the great influence of the Wisdom writings?

Professor Briggs once pointed out that the Ethical Teaching of Jesus was given in the form of Hebrew Wisdom. That is, the measured lines and poetic form; and his book *The Ethical Teaching of Jesus* puts the teachings of Jesus which are quoted in that form.

Briggs again says: "The Logia, which were the basis of the teaching of Jesus in three Gospels, were written in Hebraic tongue, and arranged in the form of Hebraic poetry, and are patterned after the form of Hebrew Wisdom."

Take for instance such a saying as Mark ix., 43-48, and Matt. v., 29:

"If thy hand cause thee to stumble, cut it off;
It is better for thee maimed to enter into life,
Than having two hands to be cast into Gehenna.

"If thy foot cause thee to stumble, cut it off;
It is better for thee to enter halting into life,
Than having two feet to be cast into Gehenna.

"If thine eye cause thee to stumble, pluck it out:
It is better for thee with one eye to enter into life,
Than having two eyes to be cast into Gehenna."

Or again:

"Consider the lilies, how they grow:
They toil not, neither spin;
Yet Solomon in all his glory
Was not arrayed like one of these."

Now the point is, could Jesus have been a reader and lover of the Wisdom writing: followed its words and form of teaching, and yet

not be highly appreciative of its message? Such a question answers itself. Whatever Jesus in the last days of his hectic life may have felt, and whatever following his death, his followers have thought and taught, *there is in the earliest document, the "Sayings," as we can construct them, chiefly a greater Wisdom teaching.* There we see Jesus: the Philosopher, viewing life, sifting out its values, teaching men the ways to richer living and saner habits.

The keen intellect of Thomas Jefferson detected how akin Jesus was to the great ancient moralists and he made from the Sayings of Jesus his Jefferson Bible, or a Book of the *Morals of Jesus of Nazareth.*

Jefferson detected the position of Jesus as a Moralist by the value of the words of Jesus as a moral code. We today can sift out from the early documents the earliest record of the ministry of Jesus, and then looking at that reconstructed record, we see Jesus the Great Teacher, the Wisdom Philosopher, giving mankind the saving Wisdom of Life.

Religious questions which divide us grow up around the later records and the thought of Jesus after He had died. Why should not the world leave those questions to the realm of religion, and the whole world unite upon the question of the morals which Jesus taught; for who would dispute the statement of Jefferson, that the Wisdom of the greatest of ancient Wisdom teachers, gives us the world's loftiest moral code. Religious faith disputes over *why* Jesus died and what happened after His death; but decent human sense can have no division over what He taught, as it was caught during His life time and passed down to succeeding generations, in the Logia of Matthew which we can now reconstruct.