

"THE ENIGMA OF JESUS"

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THE historicity of Jesus has long been the subject of scholarly controversy and earnest research. From time to time even the secular, literary or popular periodicals take up the question and devote considerable space to papers pro and con. A year or two ago a French periodical published a series of articles from the pen of an erudite and sober-minded writer whose contention, briefly put, was that the Jesus of the Gospels never lived at all, and that the story of the founder of Christianity is a curiously composite story of several Jewish rebels against Rome, plus myths and pious fictions based on Old-Testament predictions of a Messiah. This theory was vigorously combated in the same journal by Roman Catholic theologians, but unfortunately the latter displayed but little knowledge of the now considerable literature on the question in the German and English languages. It scarcely needs saying that the historicity of Jesus is a purely scientific question to be settled without passion or bias. It is quite possible for Agnostics, or Jews, or Buddhist scholars to reach the conclusion that the Jesus of the gospels *is* a historical figure, and for Christian theologians to reach the opposite conclusion. What is essential in Christianity would not be seriously affected by the conclusive demonstration that the Jesus of the gospels was only a myth, an idea, an imaginative and symbolic figure, an embodiment of human aspirations, hopes and poetic interpretations of the mission and destiny of the race. On this point we may quote Professor Gilbert Murray who wrote as follows in a review of the book which is to claim our attention in this paper:

Belief is a great force in the world. And this particular belief has shown itself to be a living faith, a passion, an inspiration that makes saints and heroes and persecutors and maniacs, an optical glass that transforms the physical universe. And it matters not at all, except as a point of interest to historical students, whether the

faith accord's with history or no. In some regions of life a belief comes up against facts and is confirmed or disproved by those facts; "things are what they are, and their results will be what they will be."

But in the field of religion beliefs can seldom be put to any effective test, and beliefs about very remote past history never can. The belief lives or dies by its own power of survival or attraction, and by the credulous or incredulous, barbarous or rational, temper of the society in which its seed is sown. It is never killed by meeting a fact; for there are no facts.

Of course, religious ideas and concepts evolve as does everything else in a world of change and movement. Since finite minds cannot hope to solve the riddle of existence, religious theories will always be formed to serve as a working hypothesis for the masses of mankind, only the few being likely to find peace and serenity in Agnosticism and humility. It would be idle to quarrel with the human tendency to myth-making, symbolism, ritualism and dogmatic creeds.

And yet the question whether a certain great religious figure—a Jesus or a Buddha—was historic or mythical has tremendous importance and profound interest. Historians, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, moralists are all severally bound to exhaust—and will exhaust—every possible source of information in order to answer or settle that question.

No apology is necessary, then, for a glance at and comment on a fascinating little volume on "The Enigma of Jesus," from the pen of Dr. P. L. Couchoud, recently translated from the French and introduced to English-speaking readers by that distinguished authority on matters religious, Sir J. G. Frazer.

Dr. Couchoud, a French physician, psychologist and student of the origins of Christianity, who, by the way, promises a most elaborate work in three volumes on Jesus and his true significance, has given us the more general results of his studies in the preliminary volume named above. In that little volume he presents a quite original view of the supposed founder of Christianity. But let us first note his negative conclusions. The following quotations will make his position clear:

"As a historical personage Jesus is unknown. He may have lived, since millions of men have lived without leaving any certain trace of their life. It is a mere possibility, and to be discussed as such.

"It will not do to say with certain critics, "We know nothing about him save that he existed"; we must say courageously, "We know nothing about him, *not even that he did exist*. . . . We do not possess any document which, according to the standards of strict criticism, would prove beyond a doubt the existence of Jesus."

After reminding us of Renan's declaration that it is with great difficulty that one can arrive at so much as one page about the personage who was called Jesus, and of the admission of M. Alfred Loisy that the Gospels were based on *a few rather meagre recollections*, and that the fragments of divine biography in the Fourth Gospel "create no impression of reality," M. Couchoud continues:

"If one reduces the Jesus of the critics (some of whom were or are ardent Christians, by the way) to terms of actual history, one obtains something like the following:

"Throughout that overcast period between the deposition of Archelaos and the Jewish insurrection (6-66), there were little abortive revolts in Judaea which heralded the storm. In Jewish imagination the expulsion of the Romans was connected with the end of the world—that is, with the coming of God and his Messiah. Flavious Josephus introduces us to three agitators, more or less Messianic.

"In the year 6 of our era, Judas the Galilean attempted to oppose the census instituted by the legatè P. Sulpicius Quirinius, and founded the groups of Zelotes who recognized no other master than God. Somewhere between 44 and 46 the prophet Theudas, at the head of a band of followers, marched toward the Jordan and Jerusalem, proclaming that the waters of the Jordan would divide at the sound of his voice. The procurator, Cuspius Fadus, had the band dispersed by his cavalry. The prophet's head was brought to Jerusalem.

"Somewhere between 52 and 58, an Egyptian Jew led a mob as far as the Mount of Olives, promising that the walls of Jerusalem would fall at his command. The Procurator Felix sallied forth at the head of the garrison. Four hundred fanatics were killed, two hundred taken prisoners; the Egyptian Jew disappeared.

"To these three must be added a fourth, omitted by Josephus, reconstituted by Loisy. Somewhere between 26 and 36, a Galilean peasant, a village artisan, named Jesus, began to proclaim the coming of God. After preaching for a while in Galilee, where he enlisted only a few followers, he came to Jerusalem for Easter, and there all he succeeded in accomplishing was to get condemned to

death on the cross, like any common agitator, by the procurator, Pontius Pilate.' That is all that is known about him. Everything else was imagined by the marvelous faith of his disciples."

But M. Couchoud is not prepared to accept even this Jesus of the higher critics and pious theologians. He says:

"If Jesus did exist, this is how he may be conceived historically. But this is not all. What is the final proof of his existence? It cannot be said to be furnished by the texts. The Gospel texts are not presented as historical documents. Had they any such pretension, it could not be allowed. Jesus traced over the outlines of Theudas and the Egyptian does not fit; he is *made* to do so. . . . In the last analysis, Jesus is derived from an induction."

So far, however, M. Couchoud merely traverses fairly familiar ground. As he himself says, American, British, German and Jewish writers have long held that Jesus was a myth, just as William Tell is a myth. Indeed, that view is gaining ground today. Georg Brandes, the eminent Danish author, in a new book, asserts the absolutely mythical character of Jesus, and it is interesting to note that among orthodox and liberal Jewish rabbis a veritable tempest was aroused by the declaration of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise of New York that Jesus really existed and might well be "accepted" by Jews—accepted, to be sure, not as a God, or son of God, or in any sense a supernatural being, but as one of a long line of vigorous, bold, fervent ethical teachers and leaders of the Jewish people. The indignant rabbis objected to the admission that "Jesus *was*"—that is, lived, worked, preached and died. They persist in regarding him as a pure myth.

M. Couchoud is original not because he is disposed to deny the historicity of Jesus, or because he insists that there is not a scrap or scintilla of real evidence of the existence of Jesus, but because, realizing the many difficulties created by the myth theory, attempts to account otherwise for the Jesus of the Christian church.

His theory is that Jesus is "a personification of Yahveh." Paul, according to M. Couchoud, "proclaimed the strict monotheism of Israel," "he preached in a manner, passionate and hitherto unknown, in the Lord Jesus. He knew of an *additional* work of Yahveh, the work of the salvation of the world; he knew *another aspect* of Yahveh, benign, sorrowful and human. That new aspect was called Jesus, Yahveh who saves, Jesus who saves."

We shall not attempt here to set forth the argument of the work, as incompletely presented by M. Couchoud. We must await his

promised elaborate set of volumes in support of the theory that Jesus is only "the double of the ancient God of Israel." We shall limit ourselves to another quotation for the purpose of clarifying the theory so far as Paul's historic role is concerned.

"There is not," says M. Couchoud, "one word of Paul's which would warrant the supposition that he was acquainted with any historical legend of Jesus. He knew Jesus through the Scriptures and through his own ecstatic visions. . . . Jesus' crucifixion is an apocalypse, a mystical event brought to pass by the powers above. It does not happen on this earth."

"We have to come down to Justin, in the middle of the second century, to find the Gospels cited as authorities and regarded as memoirs of the apostles. Then it is that belief in a historical Jesus of flesh and blood becomes a theological principle, maintained in the genuine or forged letters of Ignatius Antioch, with the passion of the theological controversialist."

As to the Gospels, they are auxiliary and secondary ornaments of the faith; they embody fiction, legend, poetry, pious inventions, hearsay of catechists and preachers of the market places. They filled in the inconvenient blanks. There was, of course, great curiosity to know more and more about the resurrection and incarnation, about the central figure of the glad tidings, about the Jesus of the fiery Paul. Therefore, "out of Paul's celestial being"—Yahveh under another name and in a new role—"the Gospels make a person who has human features, an age, a manner, an accent and almost a character."

Humanization was carried a little too far by Luke, "who entered on the road that leads to Renan," to quote our author, but "John re-establishes the equilibrium between the Man and the God. After the Fourth Gospel Jesus is in possession of all the organs of his supernatural life. The combined efforts of the imaginative Jews and the mystical Greeks have given a God to the modern world"—a Man-God who is nigh unto broken hearts and oppressed, disinherited, starved beings, victims of cruel fate or of human folly and depravity.

If we accept the conclusions of the scholars and critics under discussion, we are bound to recognize that there is some deep-seated, ingrained sentiment in man which finds expression in the myths and symbols of the great religions. Certainly man has *the sense of sin*, or the sense of culpable failure to live up to the highest aspirations and ideals of which he is capable. It is sometimes asserted

that there would be no progress without that sense of sin and failure. Again, man feels that life is full of unmerited suffering and equally unmerited success. The wicked flourish and the pure perish; crime does not always go unpunished, but the penalties are often paid by the innocent of the third or fourth generation. Conceptions of human justice, embodied in the civilized codes, are continually outraged by the operations of the laws and forces of nature. Vicarious atonement seems to be a tragic fact, and, indeed, all human life seems to be essentially tragic. The scientific evolutionist has his tentative theory of these phenomena, but the founders of the great religions had no evolutionary doctrine, no accumulation of data whereon to build such a doctrine, and their theories postulated a divine law and divine justice of a character different from man's and not within his limited comprehension. Life seemed irrational; religion offered a non-rational justification of it. Since man could not explain the ways of God, and since the idea of a meaningless, purposeless, chaotic universe seemed abhorrent, the Son-of-God or Redeemer myth, with the familiar details, had to be evolved.

To trace the origin and development of the religious myths is the task of the man of science. It is, however, equally his task to explain man to himself, to account for the maladjustments in nature, to throw light on the problem of evil and sin.

Evolution tells us much, but it does not tell us everything we need to know. Evolution does not explain the unique character of man; it does not account for his anomalous place in nature—for his awareness of self, his dissatisfaction with himself, his critical attitude toward the rest of nature.

Thus, after the Enigma of Jesus, or the enigma of Buddha, we have to face the enigma of man—man, half animal and half—well, half *divinus*, as the poets say. The importance of biology in the study of man has been sufficiently emphasized, and even overemphasized. The study of religious and ethical systems in their evolution may throw much-needed light on man than the study of his anatomy, his physiological processes and his instinctive or unconscious reactions.