

MORE LIGHT ON THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS

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THE scientific discussion of the enigma of Jesus, or of the historicity of the alleged founder of the Christian religion, has been renewed with a vigor, earnestness and candor that are worthy of the great and fascinating theme. Scholarly thinkers continue to reach divergent conclusions, but the controversy is far from being sterile. Certain points are to be cleared up, the whole question is being simplified, and the tolerant spirit which the disputants evince in their respective contributions to the growing literature on the subject is not only creditable and reassuring, but full of promise for the future of intellectual and moral progress.

The little book of M. Couchoud—reviewed in these pages a year ago—on the enigma of Jesus and the mystery of Christianity did not escape critical notice. Attempts have been made at refutation of the startling proposition that Jesus was a myth and the account of his mission, sacrifice, death and resurrection an imaginative piece of fiction inspired by religious zeal and ecstatic visions.

We shall not deal here with certain magazine articles by French theologians and professors of biblical research which M. Couchoud's bold challenge provoked or elicited. But it would be unfair to ignore the more solid and analytical book of Prof. Maurice Goguel, doctor of theology and member of the faculty of Free Protestant Theology of Paris, which bears the significant title, "Jesus of Nazareth: Myth or History", and which is available in a good English translation. Although the arguments advanced by M. Goguel in favor of the historicity of Jesus do not always carry conviction, or resolve serious doubts, they are not without weight or force, and should receive the thoughtful consideration they merit.

M. Goguel is satisfied that Jesus was *in every sense a real personage and an historical character*. How does he dispose of the ob-

jections which so many students have advanced against that view?

So far as the silence of Josephus on the whole drama of Jesus is concerned—a silence which has seemed to warrant negative conclusions—M. Goguel points out that Josephus is equally silent concerning the birth and development of Christianity. The explanation of the complete silence, M. Goguel holds, is to be sought in the character of the historian and the object of his work.

Josephus, Prof. Goguel contends, “desired to flatter the Romans and gain their good graces. To do this, he expunged from the picture he drew everything likely to offend or excite their apprehension. Thus it is that he has scarcely at all spoken of the Messianic cult which nevertheless constituted the center of Jewish thought in the first century. . . . The silence of Josephus is not, therefore the silence of ignorance; it is the silence of prudence and fear—the silence actuated by interest.”

So far as the few and meager references of the Roman authors of the time of Jesus and his mission or fate are concerned, Prof. Goguel argues that, since those writers all regarded Christianity as contemptible and silly superstition, there was obviously no reason why they should say much about Jesus or the religion his disciples founded. They were interested in Christianity as a cause of political and social disturbances, and, naturally enough, they mention it only in connection with the measures adopted against it. As to the failure of Pilate to report to the emperor his rôle in the execution of Jesus, M. Goguel observes that Pilate was a cruel, arbitrary and vindictive ruler, and must have sent many agitators or rebels to their death. Jesus was to him only a dreamer and disturber, and there was nothing exceptional in the sentence imposed upon the strange person accused of blasphemy and treason.

M. Goguel deals elaborately with Paul and his epistles. His conclusion alone can be quoted here. It is as follows:

“The epistles of Paul afford, then, precise testimony in support of the existence of the Gospel tradition before him. They presume a Jesus who lived, acted, taught; whose life was a model to believers and who dies on the cross. True it is that in Paul was found only fragmentary and sporadic indications concerning the life and teachings of Jesus, but this is explained, on the one hand, by the fact that we possess no coherent and complex exposition of the apostle’s preaching, and, on the other, by the character of his interests. He had no special object in proving what no one in his time called

in question—namely, that Jesus had existed. His unique aim was to prove—what the Jews refused to admit—that Jesus was the Christ.”

The general and final conclusions of M. Goguel in regard to Jesus may be thus summarized:

Jesus was an actual, historical figure. He did not create the Church nor found a new religion. He had no quarrel with the traditions of his people; he combated abuses and excrescences, but was faithful to the law and the prophets as he interpreted them. He desired to announce the accomplishment of the promises of God to Israel and preached the nearness of the kingdom of God.

But Christianity was a new religion, and it was so from the day after the death of Jesus. It was the religion of the worshippers of Jesus, and “it was the personality of the master which linked together the gospel preached in Galilee and the religion of the primitive church. It is through the impression produced by Jesus that the church professed her doctrine of redemption. The historical reality of the personality in Jesus, coupled with the belief in his divinity and his mission, enables one to understand the birth and development of Christianity, which otherwise would indeed remain an enigma and a miracle.

M. Goguel is apparently an orthodox Christian and an uncritical believer in the divinity of Jesus. Not satisfied with affirming the *historicity* of the Nazarene, he goes on to contend that the mystery of Christianity is *most peculiar and radically unlike* the mystery of any other religion, ancient or modern. Just why the fancies and interpretations of some ignorant Jewish fishermen, peasants and other humble and uneducated folk, including the notion that Jesus was no mortal, but the son of God, the Heaven-sent redeemer and savior, are entitled to greater weight and credence than the imaginings and superstitions of other groups of uncultivated men and women devoid of all scientific knowledge, as of the faintest conception of the methods and canons of science, it is impossible to perceive. It is distinctly irrational for the adherents of the theory of the *historicity* of Jesus to connect that theory, or make it dependent on, the belief in the *divinity* of the peripathetic preacher, dreamer and moralist who, admittedly, had no intention of founding a new religion and who never called himself God or alluded to any miraculous circumstance about his conception and birth.

We have, indeed, a very scholarly work on “Jesus of Nazareth” from the pen of a Jewish thinker and writer, Dr. Joseph Klausner,

now of Jerusalem, in which a powerful case is built up for the historicity of Jesus from the viewpoint of a devout Jew who, unlike so many other noted rabbis and learned theologians of his race, is fully prepared to accept Jesus and all his essential teachings while finding *not a scintilla of proof in favor of the divinity of Jesus*.

Dr. Klausner's book, written in Hebrew and translated into English by an admirer of its solid qualities, its valuable data and its fine catholic spirit, should be heartily welcomed by thoughtful Christians, despite its negative conclusion as to the divine origin and divine mission of Jesus. It has already convinced not a few Jewish scholars that "*Jesus was*"—that he really lived and worked, suffered and died, as the Gospels in the fragmentary and unsatisfactory way allege that he did. This is a very important service to the ethical and practical sides of Christianity.

The salient merit of Dr. Klausner's work is that it draws on rich sources of evidence not readily accessible to writers unfamiliar with Hebrew literature, as well as on Greek, Latin and early Christian sources. The conclusion reached in the book is supported by an impressive amount of proof, and nowhere in the process of demonstration is a difficulty overlooked or slurred over.

It is impossible to give even a summary of the evidence adduced by Dr. Klausner, and those earnest seekers of truth who are interested in the subject will naturally read his book. But the conclusions reached therein may be briefly set forth.

The patient examination of Hebrew, Latin, Greek and Christian sources, *not including the canonical gospels*, leads Dr. Klausner to affirm without the slightest hesitation the historicity of Jesus. True, the information gathered is meager, disappointing and not always consistent, but, says Dr. Klausner, it is perfectly safe to conclude "that Jesus did indeed exist; that he had an exceptionally remarkable personality, and that he lived and died in Judea during the Roman occupation". Dr. Klausner continues:

"It was quite impossible for a purely fabricated presentment of the figure of Jesus so firmly to have gripped people's imaginations that historians like Josephus and Tacitus and men like Eliezer ben Hyrdanus should believe in his existence and refer to him as one who had lived and worked quite recently and made friends and disciples; or that Paul should have had such a complete belief in him and never doubted that James was the brother, and Peter and his fellows the disciples, of Jesus.

"That much is clear; and those who would utterly deny not simply the form which Jesus now assumes in the world, or that which he assumes according to the gospels, but even his very existence, and the great positive, or negative, importance of his personality—such men simply deny all historic reality.

The proof advanced by the adherents of the view that Jesus is a myth is dismissed by Dr. Klausner as pseudo-scientific and lacking in substance. He is satisfied that "there is no step in the life-story of Jesus, and no line in his preaching, on which is not stamped the seal of prophetic and Pharisaic Judaism and the Palestine of his day". Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew. His ideas, however, were opposed to the fundamentals of the politico-social system in which the Jews believed, and had *no practical significance for organized states and nations*. His ethical teachings were sublime, but only a few persons could practice them—or can practice them today. Jesus, in Dr. Klausner's view, was at once a mystic and a realist; he knew life and human nature, and his vision was clear even while he taught the most idealistic of doctrines. His nature was full of contradictions, and that is what appealed and still appeals to so many diverse elements. He could be gentle and he could be harsh and violent; he could be subtle, direct, evasive, pungent, simple, profound, in turn or all at once.

But to account for the Jesus of the gospels and of Christianity it is necessary to bear in mind the intellectual and emotional effects of his tragic and dreadful death. That, in Dr. Klausner's words, "added a crown of divine glory both to the personality and teaching of Jesus. Later arose the legend of the resurrection, heightening every value, obscuring every defect, exalting every virtue—and Jesus the Jew became half-Jew, half Gentile, and began to hold that supernatural rank which is his today among hundreds of millions of mankind."

Dr. Klausner does not take the view of Prof. Goguel—that the mystery of Christianity is a very peculiar kind, different from any other mystery at the basis or core of other religions. He thinks, on the contrary, that given the conditions of the time, the beliefs of the Jews in a Messiah, the relations between Rome and the Jews, and the courses which confronted any high-spirited, learned, sensitive, enthusiastic, fervent patriot who realized the futility of force and insurrection—given all the conditions and factors, nothing was more natural than the choice made by Jesus and all that it entailed

in his career and his subsequent place in history. Dr. Klausner fails to perceive why a perfectly rational view of Jesus does not explain every difficulty or reconcile every contradiction to which attention has been directed by scholars and theologians.

M. Couchoud and other thinkers and writers of his school cannot afford to ignore Dr. Klausner's erudite and judicious work.

Meantime men of letters and students of psychology have taken up the enigma of Jesus in their own fashion, and while their contributions contain nothing original from a strictly scientific or historical point of view, they cannot be said to lack interest or significance. The late George Brandes, for example, the eminent Danish-Jewish critic and publicist, felt constrained to write a little book on Jesus and to express his own conviction that the Christian redeemer and savior is a pure myth. Dr. Brandes will not convince those who have read Dr. Klausner's work, and, moreover, some of his arguments are strangely superficial. Thus he says that it is no more imaginable that the British viceroy in India should sentence a Hindu to death for expressing heterodox opinions concerning the teachings of Buddha than it is that a Roman procurator should interfere on account of an accusation which only orthodox Jews could resent as heresy. This is manifestly fallacious. Jesus was charged with rebellion and treason; he was not the first of the Jewish rebels to cause Rome apprehension and anxiety; he was accused of pretensions and teaching that were subversive of the Roman power as of the religious traditions and tenets of the Jews.

Jesus, on his way to his execution, according to the Gospel story, was jeered and railed at as "the King of the Jews". Rome was not interested in mere doctrinal squabbles, but it *was* interested in order, peace, respect for its sovereign power. Besides, as critics of Brandes' book have pointed out, religious issues often assume a political character, and when they do, the government, whether alien or national, has to intervene and prevent civil warfare.

Dr. Brandes does not seem to have studied the latest discussions of the historicity of Jesus, and at times permits himself to go beyond the evidence he adduces or has found in scholarly works.

Of a character and quality very different from those of Dr. Brandes' little book is a notable work of John Middleton Murry, the British critic and essayist, entitled "Jesus, Man of Genius."

Mr. Murry has his own original conception of Jesus. It is a conception based on psychology, on a study of religious and spiritual

mysticism, and on what may be called the probabilities of the case. Mr. Murry is not an orthodox, but he has deep sympathy with mysticism, and does not shrink from miracles. To him, all the anomalies and contradictions in the accounts of the life and mission of Jesus present little difficulty, provided we dismiss as a myth the Christ of the churches and the theologians, and regard Jesus as simply a man of genius, a man who knew sin and who brought about his own martyrdom, or suicide, by acts that in an ordinary person would be unpardonable. Mr. Murry builds up a plausible and interesting case, and, curiously enough, there is much in common between his Jesus and that of Dr. Klausner, who, as we have seen, in his own and different way arrives at the conclusion that Jesus was a most extraordinary man, a man of preternatural genius and strange but fascinating contradictions.

The objection of some conventional Christians, that neither Dr. Klausner's Jesus nor Mr. Murry's can be worshipped, prayed or confessed to, sought salvation from, is question-begging and foolish. If Jesus *was a man*, no matter how gifted, astute and myriad-minded a man, the idea of worship or prayer, of salvation or redemption, in connection with his life, is of course, absurd. Between those who choose to believe that he was "the son of God". or God himself in a certain manifestation, and those who believe that he was a lonely, dreamy idealist, a bold innovator, a revolutionist in thought, a misunderstood genius, there is nothing in common, no possibility of compromise. There never will be anything in common between them, and controversy under those circumstances is idle. We must, however, separate the question whether "Jesus was"—whether he is a true historical character—from the question *what he was* if he lived at all.

If he is a myth, that fact must be acknowledged, and we shall have to find purely ethical and practical grounds for the doctrines associated with Christianity. If he is a real historical figure, then the question as to his alleged "divinity"—if the word means anything whatever—arises naturally and simply enough, because of the belief of millions of men and women in that divinity, and must be settled scientifically and philosophically. It is hardly necessary to point out that the agnostic cannot in any case accept Jesus save as a man—not an ordinary man, certainly, but a man so rich and complex, so exceptional intellectually and morally, if not also physically, as to be capable of arousing admiration and wonder.