THE RESURRECTION AND IMMORTALITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

EASTER is the spring festival and has been celebrated among all nations since the dawn of civilization. The name Easter is of pagan origin and refers to the goddess Ostara, the Teutonic goddess of the East, who is credited with the rejuvenescence of nature. Among the ancient Orientals the Babylonians, Syrians, Phœnicians, and others, the Easter festival was a rejoicing at the resurrection of Tammuz, Adonis or Baal, the god of vegetation, whose death had been lamented in a kind of pagan Good Friday celebration. The Christian Easter was naturally attached to the Hebrew passover which most probably was also originally a spring festival, but under the influence of the Deuteronomist priests was later changed into a memorial of the Exodus from Egypt.

In many places the pagan celebration continued in its external forms and simply replaced the pagan Adonis by the Christian Jesus, the natural background and the rejoicing at the resuscitated life remaining the same in either case,—it was the god that died and was again called back to new life.

For an appreciation of the Christian doctrine of resurrection we must consider the character and life interests of the primitive Christians. Their numbers were recruited from the poorer classes and were mostly uneducated. Their interest in an after-life consisted mainly in the assurance that they would be resurrected in their bodily identity, in consequence of which their Easter message naturally took the turn that Jesus had risen bodily from the grave, and this belief has been incorporated more and more into the Gospel stories. It is noteworthy that nothing is stated with more contradiction and obscurity than the resurrection of Jesus. The original report of the oldest and most authentic Gospel (which is Mark) ends with the statement that the grave was empty. We may be assured that the disciples believed in the resurrection and that they
had visions of the risen Christ, but here as in many other respects
the Fourth Gospel flatly contradicts the account of Matthew and
Mark. According to St. John and Luke, Christ appears to his dis-
ciples in Jerusalem; according to Matthew, in Galilee, and the con-
clusion of Mark is lost. It has been replaced by a few verses
(Mark xvi. 9-20) which contain the parting command of Jesus.

Higher critics have discovered a gradual increase of the cor-
poreal and sensuous element intended to prove the bodily identity
of the risen Christ with the crucified Saviour. While the original
report only knows of the empty grave, later on the risen Christ de-
nies that he is a spirit. He says (Luke xxiv. 38-39):

"Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your
hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle
me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have."

The vision of St. Paul, too, is reported first as having been a
mere vision which affected only the sense of sight. In another
report, however, we read that Christ spoke to Paul, and so it is
assumed that the sense of hearing was also affected. We have here
apparently a modification of the story to answer the questions of
doubters that Paul's experience was a mere hallucination, and we
find the last stage carried to such a materialistic conception of the
resurrection that Jesus to convince the unbelievers of his bodily
existence, requests some meat, "And they gave him a piece of a
broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat it
before them."

The attitude of critical readers toward these accounts has been
different. Some who accept them as inspired, believe implicitly in
a bodily resurrection; others make out with some show of plausi-
bility that Christ did not die while on the cross, and was revived.
They suggest that he might have lived in seclusion for some time
and then died a peaceful death among his intimate friends. Omit-
ting the solution after the fashion of the Gordian knot which would
relegate all the reports of the Gospels into the realm of fable, we
will mention a third interpretation of the Gospel texts which assumes
that the burial of Christ by Joseph of Arimathea was historical and
in fact there is nothing incredible in the event itself. Mark states
this incident as follows (xv, 42-47):

"And now when the even was come, because it was the prepa-
ration, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, an
honourable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God,
came, and went in boldly to Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus.
And Pilate marvelled if he were already dead: and calling unto him
the centurion, he asked him whether he had been any while dead. And when he knew it of the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph. And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulchre. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid."

The same account has been incorporated almost literally in Matthew and John, and in the latter there is an additional mention of Nicodemus. Joseph of Arimathea is praised in the account as a "good man and a just," and it is further said that he was secretly a disciple of Jesus which suggests that he was not openly identified with the Nazarenes. He is never mentioned before nor after, and we may fairly well assume that this is the only relation that he had with the disciples, for otherwise considering his wealth and the prominence of his position he would certainly have played an important part in the congregation at Jerusalem.

Taking the standpoint of impartial critique without accepting miracles and without denying that the Gospel stories go back to original accounts and still reflect events that actually took place, we would naturally ask, what interest can a well-to-do man of official standing among the Jews have taken in the body of a crucified man with whom most likely he had very little in common? and the answer that suggests itself (as a German scholar, Paul Schwartzkopff has proposed) is not far to seek. According to the common belief of the age, bodies of executed men were endowed with magic power. We know that the nails used for crucifixion, hang-ropes, and other articles that had done service in an execution were deemed to possess miraculous powers, and it stands to reason that the body of a man who in the opinion of his followers was reputed to have performed miracles himself, should be credited more than others with supernatural qualities. It would be quite in keeping with the notions of the time that Joseph of Arimathea wanted the body of the crucified Jesus for the purpose of having his own tomb sanctified by the great thaumaturge, and he considered it a protection if his own body might rest by the side of the Nazarene’s. Accordingly it was to his interest to secure possession of the body for himself alone and remove it also from any interference from the followers of Jesus. If this assumption be true, the next step that Joseph would take could only be the removal of the body to a place within his own control and unknown to others especially the followers of Jesus.

The story of the guards bears all the symptoms of a late inser-
tion invented to refute the idea that the body might have been re-
moved. It is scarcely accepted as genuine or even ancient by any
one of the critics and stands on the same level with the account of
the resurrection itself which is reported most dramatically by Mat-
thew in chapter xxviii, as having taken place in the presence of
Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. We read (xxviii. 2-7):

"And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of
the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the
stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like
lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him
the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel an-
swered and said to the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye
seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen,
as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go
quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and,
behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him:
lo, I have told you."

The women saw the angel and heard his words, but nothing is
said that they themselves saw Christ rise. The doctrine of the
bodily resurrection has been held with great tenacity by all Chris-
tians not excluding Protestants, but it has of late been more and
more declared to be unessential, and it is doubtful whether any lead-
ing Protestant theologian would commit himself to regard it as an
essential article of faith. With the change of our views concerning
immortality which from a belief in the revival of the body has more
and more come to be a belief in the immortality of the soul, we have
also grown more accustomed to the account of Christ's resurrection
as a legend in which the current notion of life after death among
the early Christians found its typical embodiment. The celebration
of Easter, however, remains and will remain so long as the return
of spring indicates the revival of nature and the return of new life,
new verdure, new joy, new blossoms and the promise of a rich har-
vest in the summer.