

THE JESUS OF HISTORY.

The following article by Professor John Fiske, of Harvard, is from The Modern Thinker:

Of all the founders of religions, Jesus is at once the best known and the least known to the modern scholar. From the dogmatic point of view he is the best known, from the historic point of view he is the least known. The Jesus of dogma is in every lineament familiar to us from early childhood; but concerning the Jesus of history we possess but few facts resting upon trustworthy evidence; and in order to form a picture of him at once consistent, probable, and distinct in its outlines, it is necessary to enter upon a long and difficult investigation, in the course of which some of the most delicate apparatus of modern criticism will not fail to be required.

This circumstance is sufficiently singular to require special explanation. The case of Sakyammuni, the founder of Buddhism, which may perhaps be cited as parallel, is in reality wholly different. Not only did Sakyammuni live five centuries earlier than Jesus, among a people that have at no time possessed the art of insuring authenticity in their records of events, and at an era which is at best but dimly discerned through the mists of fable and legend, but the work which he achieved, namely, the course of European history, and it is only in recent times that his career has presented itself to us as a problem needing to be solved.

Jesus, on the other hand, appeared in an age which is familiarly and in many respects minutely known to us, and among a people whose fortunes we can trace with historic certainty for at least seven centuries previous to his birth; while his life and achievements have probably had a larger share in directing the entire subsequent intellectual and moral development of Europe than those of any other man who has ever lived. Nevertheless, the details of his personal career are shrouded in an obscurity almost as dense as that which envelops the life of the remote founder of Buddhism.

This phenomenon, however, appears less strange and paradoxical when we come to examine it more closely. A little reflection will disclose to us several good reasons why the historical records of the life of Jesus should be so scanty as they are. In the first place, the activity of Jesus was private rather than public. Confined within exceedingly narrow limits, both of space and of duration, it made no impression whatever upon the politics or the literature of the time. His name did not occur in the pages of any contemporary writer, Roman, Greek, or Jewish. Doubtless the case would have been wholly different had he, like Mahomet, lived to a ripe age, and had the exigencies of his peculiar position as the Messiah of the Jewish people brought him into relations with the empire; though whether, in such case, the success of his grand undertaking would have been as complete as it has actually been, may well be doubted.

Secondly, Jesus did not, like Mahomet and Paul, leave behind him authentic writings which might serve to throw light upon his mental development as well as upon the external facts of his career. Without the Koran and the four genuine Epistles of Paul, we should be nearly as much in the dark concerning these great men as we now are concerning the historical Jesus. We should be compelled to rely, in the one case, upon the trustworthy gossip of Mussulman clerical men, and in the other case upon the garbled statements of the "Acts of the Apostles," a book written with a distinct dogmatic purpose, sixty or seventy years after the occurrence of the events which it professes to record.

It is true, many of the words of Jesus, preserved by hearsay tradition through the generation immediately succeeding his death, have come down to us, probably with little alteration, in the pages of the three earlier evangelists. These are priceless data, as we shall see, they are almost the only material at our command for forming even a partial conception of the character of Jesus' work. Nevertheless, even here the cautious inquirer has only too often to pause in the face of the difficulty of distinguishing the authentic utterances of the great teacher from the later interpolations suggested by the dogmatic necessities of the narrators. Bitterly must the historian regret that Jesus had no philosophic disciple, like Xenophon, to record his sayings in a scientific manner, and that the various writings included in the New Testament, the Apocalypse alone (and possibly the Epistle of Jude) is from the pen of a personal acquaintance of Jesus; and besides this, the four epistles of Paul to the Galatians, Corinthians, and Romans, make up the sum of the writings from which we may demand contemporary testimony. Yet from these we obtain absolutely nothing of that for which we are seeking. The brief writings of Paul are occupied exclusively with the internal significance of Jesus' work. The epistle of Jude—if it be really written by Jesus' brother, of which there is some doubt—is solely a polemic directed against the innovations of Paul. And the Apocalypse, the work of the fiery and imaginative disciple John, is confined to a prophetic description of the Messiah's anticipated return, and tells us nothing of the deeds of that Messiah while on earth.

Here we touch upon our third consideration—the consideration which best enables us to see why the historic notices of Jesus are so meagre. Rightly considered, the statement with which we opened this article is its own explanation. The Jesus of history is so little known, just because the Jesus of dogma is so well known. Other teachers—Paul, Mahomet, Sakyammuni—have come merely as preachers of righteousness, speaking in the name of general principles with which their own personalities were not directly implicated. But Jesus, as we shall see, before the close of his life, proclaimed himself to be something more than a preacher of righteousness. He announced himself—and justly, from his own point of view—as the long-expected Messiah sent of Jehovah to liberate the Jewish race. The success of his religious teachings became at once implicated with the question of his personal nature and character. After the sudden and violent termination of his career, it immediately became all-important with his followers to prove that he was really the Messiah, and to insist upon the certainty of his speedy return to earth. Thus the first generation of disciples dogmatized about him, instead of narrating his life—a task which to them would have seemed of little profit. For them the all-absorbing object of contemplation was the immediate future rather than the immediate past. As all the earlier Christian literature informs us, for nearly a century after the death of Jesus, his followers lived in daily anticipation of his triumphant return to earth. The end of all things being so near at hand, no attempt was made to insure the accurate and complete memoirs for the use of a posterity which was destined, in Christian imagination, never to arrive. The first Christians wrote but little,

even Papias, at the end of a century, preferring second-hand or third-hand oral tradition to the written gospels which were then beginning to come into circulation. Memoirs of the life and teachings of Jesus were called forth by the necessity of having a written standard of doctrine to which to appeal to amid the growing differences of opinion which disturbed the Church. Thus the earlier gospels exhibit, though in different degrees, the indications of a writing, sometimes of an overruling dogmatic purpose. There is, indeed, no conscious violation of historic truth, but from the varied mass of material supplied by tradition, such incidents are selected as are fit to support the views of the writers concerning the personality of Jesus. Accordingly, while the early gospels throw a strong light upon the state of Christian opinion at the dates when they were successively composed, the information which they give concerning Jesus himself is, for that reason, often vague, uncertain, and contradictory. Still more is this true of the fourth gospel, written late in the second century, in which historic tradition is moulded in the interests of dogma until it becomes no longer recognizable, and in the place of the human Messiah of the earlier accounts, we have a semi-divine Logos or Deity, detached from God and incarnate for a brief season in the likeness of man.

Not only was history subordinated to dogma by the writers of the Gospel narratives, but in the minds of the fathers of the Church who assisted in determining what writings should be considered canonical, dogmatic prepossession went very much further than critical acumen. Nor is this strange when we reflect that critical discrimination in questions of literary authenticity is one of the latest acquisitions of the cultivated human mind. In the early ages of the Church, the evidence of the genuineness of any literary production was never weighed critically; writings containing doctrines accepted by the majority of Christians were quoted as authoritative, while writings which supplied no dogmatic want were overlooked, or perhaps condemned as apocryphal.

A striking instance of this is furnished by the fortunes of the Apocalypse. Although perhaps the best authenticated work in the New Testament collection, its millennial doctrines caused it to become unpopular as the Church gradually ceased to look for the speedy return of the Messiah, and, accordingly, as the canon assumed a definite shape, it was placed among the "Antilegomena," or doubtful books, and continued to hold a precarious position until after the time of the Protestant Reformation. On the other hand, the Fourth Gospel, which was quite unknown and probably did not exist at the time of the questionable controversy (A. D. 158), was accepted with little hesitation, and at the beginning of the third century is mentioned by Irenaeus and Tertullian as the work of the Apostle John. To this uncritical spirit, leading to the neglect of such books as failed to answer the dogmatic requirements of the Church, may probably be attributed the loss of so many of the earlier gospels. It is doubtless for this reason that we do not possess the Aramaean original of the "Logia" of Matthew, or the "Memorabilia" of Mark, the companion of Peter, two works to which Papias (A. D. 130) alludes as containing authentic reports of the utterances of Jesus.

These considerations will, we believe, sufficiently explain the curious circumstances that, while we know the Jesus of dogma so intimately, we know the Jesus of history so slightly. The literature of early Christianity enables us to trace with tolerable completeness the progress of opinion concerning the nature of Jesus from the time of Paul's early missions to the time of the Nicene Council; but upon the actual words and deeds of Jesus it throws a very unsteady light. The dogmatic purpose everywhere obscures the historic basis.

This same dogmatic prepossession which has rendered the data for a biography of Jesus so scanty and untrustworthy, has also until comparatively recent times prevented any unbiased critical examination of such data as we actually possess. Previous to the eighteenth century an attempt to deal with the life of Jesus upon purely historic methods would have been not only condemned as irrational, but stigmatized as impious. And even in the eighteenth century, those writers who had become wholly emancipated from ecclesiastic traditions were so destitute of all historic sympathy and so ignorant of scientific methods of criticism that they utterly failed to comprehend the requirements of the problem. Their aims were in the main polemic, not historical. They thought more of overthrowing current dogmas than of impartially examining the earliest Christian literature with a view of eliciting its historic contents; and, accordingly, they accomplished but little. Two brilliant exceptions must, however, be noticed. Spinoza, in the seventeenth century, and Lessing, in the eighteenth, were men far in advance of their age. They are the fathers of modern historic criticism; and to Lessing in particular, with his enormous erudition and incomparable sagacity, belongs the honor of initiating that method of inquiry which, in the hands of the so-called Tubingen school, has led to such striking and valuable conclusions concerning the age and character of the New Testament literature. But it was long before any one could be found fit to bend the bow which Lessing and Spinoza had wielded. A succession of able scholars—Semler, Eichhorn, Paulus, Schleiermacher, Bretschneider, and De Wette—were required to examine, with German patience and accuracy, the details of the subject, and to propound various untenable hypotheses before such a work as that of Strauss. The "Life of Jesus," published by Strauss when only twenty-six years of age, is one of the monumental works of the nineteenth century, worthy to rank as a historic effort along with Niebuhr's "History of Rome," Wolf's "Prolegomena," or Bentley's "Dissertation on Phalaris." It instantly superseded and rendered antiquated everything which had preceded it; nor has any work on early Christianity been written in Germany for the past thirty years which has not been dominated by the recollection of that marvellous book. Nevertheless, the labors of another generation of scholars have carried our knowledge of the New Testament literature far beyond the point which it had reached when Strauss first wrote. At that time the dates of but few of the New Testament writings had been fixed with any approach to certainty; the age and character of the Fourth Gospel, the genuineness of the Pauline epistles, even the mutual relations of the three Synoptics, were still undetermined; and as a natural result of this uncertainty, the progress of dogma during the first century was ill-understood. At the present day it is impossible to read the early work of Strauss without being impressed with the necessity of obtaining positive data as to the origin and dogmatic character of the New Testament writings, before attempting to reach any conclusions as to the probable career of Jesus. These positive data we owe to the genius and dili-

gence of the Tubingen School, and, above all, to its founder, Ferdinand Christian Baur. Beginning with the epistles of Paul, of which he distinguished four as genuine, Baur gradually worked his way through the entire New Testament collection, detecting—with that inspired insight which only unflinching diligence can impart to original genius—the age at which each book was written, and the circumstances which called it forth. To give any account of Baur's detailed conclusions, or of the method by which he reached them, would require a volume. They are very scantily presented in Mr. Mackay's work on the "Tubingen School and its Antecedents," to which we may refer the reader desirous of further information. We can here merely say that twenty years of energetic controversy have only served to establish nearly all Baur's leading conclusions more firmly than ever. The priority of the so-called gospel of Matthew, the Pauline purpose of Luke, the second in date of our gospels; the derivative and second-hand character of Mark; and the apostolic origin of the fourth gospel, are points which may for the future be regarded as completely established by circumstantial evidence. So with respect to the pseudo-Pauline epistles, Baur's work was done so thoroughly that the only question still left open for much discussion is that concerning the date and authorship of the first and second Thessalonians—a point of quite inferior importance so far as our present subject is concerned. So far as such vast results have been achieved by the labor of a single scholar. Seldom has any historic critic possessed such a combination of analytic and co-ordinating powers as Baur. His keen criticism and his wonderful flashes of insight exercise upon the reader a truly poetic effect like that which is felt in contemplating the marvels of physical discovery.

The comprehensive labors of Baur were followed up by Zeller's able work on the "Acts of the Apostles," in which that book was shown to have been partly founded upon documents written by Luke, or some other companion of Paul, and partly enlarged and modified by a much later writer, with the purpose of covering up the traces of the early schism between the Pauline and the Petrine sections of the Church. Along with this, Schweiger's work on the "Post-Apostolic Times" deserves mention as clearing up many obscure points relating to the early development of dogma. Finally, the "New Life of Jesus," by Strauss, adopting and utilizing the principal discoveries of Baur and his followers, and combining all into one grand historical picture, worthily completes the task which the earlier work of the same author had inaugurated.

The reader will have noticed that, with the exception of Spinoza, every one of the names above cited in connection with the literary analysis and criticism of the New Testament is the name of a German. Until within the last decade, Germany has indeed possessed almost an absolute monopoly of the science of Biblical criticism; other countries having remained not only unfamiliar with its methods, but even grossly ignorant of its conspicuous results, save when some German treatise of more than ordinary popularity has now and then been translated. But during the past ten years France has entered the lists; and the writings of Reville, Renan, Nicolas, D'Eichthal, Scherer, and Colatristy testify to the rapidity with which the German seed has fructified upon her soil.

None of these books, however, have achieved such wide-spread celebrity, or done so much toward interesting the general public in this class of historical inquiries, as the "Life of Jesus," by Renan. This pre-eminence of fame is partly, but not wholly, deserved. From a purely literary point of view, Renan's work doubtless merits all the praise which it has received. It is written in a style such as is perhaps equalled by that of no other living Frenchman. It is by far the most readable book which has ever been written concerning the life of Jesus. And no doubt some of its popularity is due to its faults, which, from a critical point of view, are neither few nor small. For Renan is certainly very faulty, as a historical critic, when he practically ignores the extreme meagreness of our positive knowledge of the career of Jesus, and describes scenes after scenes in his life as untruly and unscientifically as if he had himself been present to witness it all. Again and again the critical reader feels prompted to ask, How do you know all this? or why, out of two or three conflicting accounts, do you quietly adopt some particular one, as if superior authority were self-evident? But in the eye of the uncritical reader, these defects are excellencies; for it is unpleasant to be kept in ignorance when we are seeking after definite knowledge, and it is disheartening to read page after page of an elaborate discussion which ends in convincing us that definite knowledge cannot be gained.

In the thirteenth edition of the "Vie de Jesus" Renan has corrected some of the most striking errors of the original work, and in particular has, with praiseworthy candor, abandoned his untenable position with regard to the age and character of the Fourth Gospel. As is well known, Renan in his earlier editions ascribed to this Gospel a historic value superior to that of the synoptics, believing it to have been written by an eyewitness of the events which it relates; and from this source, accordingly, he drew the larger share of his materials. Now, if there is any one conclusion concerning the New Testament literature which must be regarded as incontrovertibly established by the labors of a whole generation of scholars, it is this, that the Fourth Gospel was utterly unknown until about A. D. 170; that it was written by some one who possessed very little direct knowledge of Palestine; that its purpose was rather to expound a dogma than to give an accurate record of events, and that as a guide to the comprehension of the career of Jesus it is of far less value than the three synoptic gospels. It is impossible, in a brief review like the present, to epitomize the evidence upon which this conclusion rests, which may more profitably be sought in the Rev. J. J. Taylor's work on "The Fourth Gospel," or in Davidson's "Introduction to the New Testament." It must suffice to mention that this Gospel is not cited by Papias; that Justin, Marcion, and Valentinius make no allusion to it, though, since it furnishes so much that is germane to their views, they would gladly have appealed to it, had it been in existence, when those views were as yet questionable; and that, finally, in the great comparative controversy, A. D. 158, the Gospel is not only mentioned, but the apostolicity of John is cited by Polyarp in flat contradiction of the view afterwards taken by this evangelist. Still more, the assumption of Renan led at once into complicated difficulties with reference to the Apocalypse. The Fourth Gospel, if it does not unmistakably announce itself as the work of John, at least professes to be Johannine; and it cannot for a moment be supposed that such a book, making such claims, could have gained currency during John's lifetime without calling

forth his indignant protest. For, in reality, no book in the New Testament collection would so completely have checked the prejudices of the Johannine party, John's own views are well known to us from the Apocalypse. John was the most enthusiastic of millenarians and the most narrow and rigid of Judaizers. In his antagonism to the Pauline innovations he went farther than Paul himself. Intense hatred of Paul and his followers appears in several passages of the Apocalypse, where they are stigmatized as "Nicolaitans," "deceivers of the people," "those who say they are apostles and are not," "eaters of meat offered to idols," "fornicators," "pretended Jews," "liars," "synagogues of Satan," etc. (Chap. ii.). On the other hand, the Fourth Gospel contains nothing millenarian or Judaical; it carries Pauline universalism to a far greater extent than Paul, and history by the allusions to "false prophets" (vii. 15), to those who say "Lord, Lord," and who "cast out demons in the name of the Lord" (vii. 21-23), teaching men to break the commandments (v. 17-20). There is, therefore, good reason for believing that we have here a narrative written not much more than fifty years after the death of Jesus, based partly upon the written memorials of an apostle, and in the main trustworthy, save where it relates occurrences of a marvellous and legendary character. Such is our author's conclusion, and in describing the career of the Jesus of history, he relies almost exclusively upon the statements contained in the first gospel. Let us now, after this long but inadequate introduction, give a brief sketch of the life of Jesus, as it is found in our author.

[To be continued.]

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