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II.

ATTEMPTS TO ELIMINATE THE SUPER-
NATURAL FROM THE GOSPEL
HISTORY.*

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We are constantly reminded by historical critics of the tendency to clothe the great personalities of prophet, teacher, or religious leader with the vesture of imagination, and of the tendency on the part of disciples to raise the figure of their master to superhuman proportions. As illustration of this tendency we are referred to the story of all great founders of religion, and the Buddha, Zoroaster, and others are frequently quoted. There is such a tendency. Disciples exalt their master, adventitious circumstances are invented, old traditions of greatness floating in the popular imagination condense themselves anew and settle down on the figure of the prophet, or religious leader, until the historical proportions are altogether lost. But it has also to be observed that such modifications of the historical figure, and such transformations are always in the line of the action of the imaginative workings of the people. For the most part the greatening of the figure of the religious leader proceeds in the line of what seems great to the imagination of the people who make them. They often lead to the exaltation of the prophet as soon as he begins to be.

At my nativity
The front of heaven was full of fiery shapes
Of burning cressets; and at my birth
The frame and huge foundation of the earth
Shaked like a coward.

* The first division of Professor Iverach's article appeared in the October number of *The Review and Expositor*.—Editor.

This statement which Shakespeare put into the mouth of Glendower may be taken as the type of the means used by the popular imagination to exalt the person who has won their regard. For the most part the popular imagination works in the material sphere. The advent of their prophet caused disturbances in the course of nature. The magnitude of the disturbance was the measure of the greatness of the prophet. Further magnifications proceeded along the lines made familiar to them by the traditions of their race, and by the ideals which had fed and nourished them and their fathers. Time does not permit to illustrate this, I must content myself with stating it. But this tendency of the popular imagination to greatness the hero has been worked for all that it is worth as a means of reducing the New Testament to the level of ordinary literature. Thus you have books which gather together all the tales of virgin birth recorded in the literature of the nations. You have books which enumerate various aspects of events which belong to the Gospels, and the inference sought to be drawn that here the imagination and faith of the church created its objects. One might say in passing that the inference to be drawn from a widespread human belief, and from a mode of embodying it almost universal is, not that the belief is false, but that there is truth in it, if that truth should only be that it represents a real human need. Human needs have always their roots in reality. And the stories of the virgin birth represent the conviction of humanity that salvation for the race must have its origin outside of the race. And if this need was met once in the course of human history that is no reason for questioning its possibility, it is rather a reason for admiring the prophetic character of human need, and the means in the purpose of the Maker of man for meeting that need.

Glance for a moment at the characteristic features of the Gospels and ask yourselves if these are likely to have been the product of the tendency of the human imagina-

tion to magnify its favorite. Take the forehistory and ask yourselves is this the product of popular imagination. Where are the fiery shapes of burning cressets, where the shaking of the frame and huge foundations of the earth? You have instead the company of lowly people forgotten by the world. A carpenter and his betrothed, in poor and lowly circumstances, no kingly person on the scene except indirectly. Joseph and Mary, the wise men of the East, the flight into Egypt, and the world of nature and of men went on undisturbed, as if their maker had not come to them. Or take the Messianic groups of Luke. What have you? An aged priest and his wife, Mary of Nazareth, a company of Shepherds, an old man on the brink of the grave, and an old woman unheard of except as she comes into the story. Then the silence falls on the Gospel story, and the infancy, and boyhood of Jesus is unrecorded, except for one brief episode. Thirty years of silence, and a few years of activity and then the betrayal and crucifixion. I submit that these taken as they are in this brief description are not the products of a popular imagination engaged in the process of magnifying its object. Nay, on the other hand, it may be said that each of the traits of the story shows that the story lays stress on those features which the popular imagination desires to avoid, and avoids those on which the popular imagination delights to dwell. Were there time I might give you illustrations of the working of the popular imagination, and the ways it takes of making its heroes appear great. I might point in detail the difference between the Gospels and such work, but the point is sufficiently clear, and I pass on to something else.

The further space at my disposal will, it appears to me, be most profitably occupied by an examination of the means by which most frequently some endeavor to reduce Jesus to the stature of ordinary men. It was in the Messianic expectation that Christianity found the means

of clothing itself with that concreteness which enabled it to become a world-wide religion. Read Baur, Strauss, Percy Gardner either in his *Exploratio Evangelica*, or in his Jowett lectures, read Estlin Carpenter in his various works, read a hundred others who mainly echo these, and you find that they all rely on the Messianic conception as the solvent by which the supernatural can be removed from Christianity. "The simple historical structure of the life of Jesus," says Strauss, "was hung with the most varied and suggestive tapestry, of devout reflections and fancies, all the ideas entertained by primitive Christianity relative to its lost Master being transformed into facts and woven into the course of its life. The imperceptible growth of a joint creative work of this kind is made possible by oral tradition being made the medium of communication."

Or as it is put more mildly by a later writer, "The Jews brought many dogmas into the church, including scenic, semi-material Messianic categories, and the evidence shows how much activity in primitive Christianity was devoted to fixing the relations between the old dogmas and the new experience." These quotations may fix for us the question of the relation between the actual Messianic conception embodied in Christianity, and the messianic conceptions and expectations of the Jews. It is a large subject, and I shall be able to give only the barest outline of it. Yet I hope to show in brief space that between the two the only resemblance is in the name. The question is not as to the contents of the Messianic prophecies, and representations in the Old Testament, nor as to whether there are anticipations of the Christian conception in the Old Testament, the question is as to the current conceptions and expectations in the minds of the Jews at the beginning of the Christian era. It is well known, and many citations could be given in proof, that the Jews of the time of Christ never thought of their Messiah save in terms of a deliverer from temporal op-

pression, as one who would restore the kingdom to Israel, and as one who would place the feet of the Jews on the necks of their oppressors. They never identified the Messiah with the suffering servant of Jehovah, nor did it occur to them to think of Him in the terms set forth say in the twenty-second psalm. Take their literature as a whole, look at the apocryphal books, at their apocalyptic literature, at their conceptions and their desires, as embodied in their history, and we find ourselves in a circle of ideas altogether foreign to the ideal set forth in the New Testament. If the writers of Scripture had scenic, semi-material Messianic categories in their minds and hearts they were singularly successful in leaving them out of the New Testament literature. Take the Gospel ideal of Him who did not strive or cry or cause His voice to be heard in the streets, of Him who loved His enemies and prayed for them who despitefully used Him and persecuted Him, who saved others and did not save Himself, who when He was reviled, reviled not again, when He suffered He threatened not, who went about doing good, and place it alongside of the expectations of the Jews, and you will find no resemblance between the two. Take the kingdom of God as set forth in the New Testament, a kingdom which is not meat or drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, a kingdom not of this world, and place it alongside of the kingdom expected by the Jews in the Messianic time and you will necessarily conclude that the one could never have sprung out of the other. Scenic semi-material categories you will find sufficiently in the Jewish messianic expectation. In the life of Christ you will find none of such. Or if you find them it is not in connection with the earthly life and work of our Lord, nor with the life and work which culminated in the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord, you will find them only in rare instances and always associated with His second coming.

Further the students of the Messianic expectations of

the Jews have not carried their studies far enough down the stream of time. They usually end them when these Messianic expectations come into contact with the founder of Christianity and the first generation of Christian believers. It would be well if they were to look for illustrations of Jewish Messianic beliefs in those historic figures which realized the Jewish ideals and in the first century gave rise to the struggle which ended in the fall of Jerusalem, and in the second century in the career of Bar-Chochba. The choice of Barrabas is not without significance in this relation. Messiahs enough you will find between 30 and 70 A. D., all of whom realized more or less completely the Jewish ideal. Judas of Galilee, the Zealots, the popular leaders of the revolt from Rome will cast light on the Jewish Messianic ideal, and on their expectations. It is well also to study the Jewish ideal in the final national endeavor of the Jews, their determined struggle under Bar-Chochba against Trajan. If these are studied we shall find ourselves amid scenic materialistic categories, and we shall find that these categories had their limits within the bounds of sense and time, and their highest outcome did not pass beyond material conditions. The kind of salvation in them is a salvation from earthly calamities, and their highest hopes were centered in a kingdom like that of David and Solomon.

Still further if you pass beyond the Jews and consider the condition of the Græco-Roman world, you will find there, too, something worthy of study in this connection. It was not among the Jews alone that there was the expectation of a deliverer, and a return of the Golden Age. You will remember that Josephus professed to find in Titus the promised deliverer of the Jews. Nor is this inconsistent with the fundamental expectation of the Jews. A deliverer from oppression was expected by almost all the world. Echoes of that expectation may be found in many quarters. This expectation found expression in the provinces of Rome in the worship of the

emperors. And in the provinces in particular emperor worship became a living, practical, and passionate religion. The pagan revival in the second century is closely associated with the worship of the emperors, and the test of Christianity was whether the Christians were willing to worship the emperors. The conflict between Christianity and heathenism was not a conflict between Greek philosophy and Christian ideas, it was a real practical conflict between competing ideals of a savior and salvation. It was a conflict between the Cæsar Savior and the Christ Savior. Between incompatible ideas of salvation. The history of the second century has to be written from this point of view. It will show the two ideals of salvation in active conflict. On the one hand was the Cæsar savior, reckoned to be divine, the living providence of the people, caring for them, enabling them to dwell in safety, defending them from their enemies, saving them from oppression, a living, present power, whose word was law to the bounds of the known world. Inscriptions tell us of this living religion, and the language of the inscriptions is full of devotional feeling. The emperor had dwarfed the old gods, and devotion to him had become the token and the sign of a revived religious life.

Here was an opportunity for the popular imagination to exert itself along familiar lines with a view to exalt its object, and it did so. Here for it was a visible object of adoration, with power beyond reckoning embodying the might and majesty of Rome, a power which the provinces had good reason to believe to be just, beneficent, strong, and the popular affection went out to it in reverent affection. On the other hand was the Christ Savior, with an ideal altogether different, with no visible power at the back of it, with sanctions altogether of the inward, spiritual sort, with motives that had their end not in the visible or temporal sphere, with rewards that had their outcome in the unseen and eternal world, with a course of conduct prescribed that cut athwart the

usual appetites, desires, and ideals of men, and the wonder is that in the long run the religion without visible sources of power conquered. It may be remarked that the conflict was not limited to the second century. It is perennial. There are still the two kinds of salvation and the two saviors in perennial conflict, and the issue is between salvation from sin, or salvation from the mere consequences of sin.

This rapid review, which I wish I had time to work out in detail, brings us back to the contention of our opponents that the Messianic expectation, if it did not create the figure of Jesus as we have it in the Gospels, at least was the means of exalting it to its superhuman proportions. I ask how did the messianic ideal of the Jews produce its opposite? The character and the work of the Christ are different from the Messiah expected by the Jews. It is not too much to say that the conception of a suffering Savior was in no mind at the time of our Lord's earthly ministry, save in his own mind alone. It was not in the mind of the Baptist, for he sent messengers to Jesus to ask, "Art thou he that should come or do we look for another?" It was not in the mind of Peter, for he took it upon him to rebuke the Master when He told the disciples of the decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem. It was not in the minds of the disciples generally, for they asked at a late stage of the ministry, "Wilt thou restore the kingdom to Israel?" It was not in any mind on the eve of the crucifixion, for some pathetically said, "We trusted that it was he who should have redeemed Israel," implying that all their expectations had been buried in His grave. From all the evidence at our disposal we conclude that the history of the Gospels is truly historical. It tells us of a great figure, original in the highest sense of the word, who spoke with authority, who impressed Himself on the minds and hearts of His disciples in such a way as to reverse all their inherited ideals, to put first what they were wont

to put last, and who so stamped Himself upon their imaginations that henceforth they could read the Old Testament only in the light of Him, His sayings, His doings and His character.

Can we measure the influence, if any, which the Old Testament and the current expectations of the Jews had on the form of the history as we have it in the Synoptic Gospels. Dr. Sanday recounts the following as the usual critical expedients for explaining away miracle altogether. 1. The imitation of similar stories in the Old Testament; 2. Exaggeration of natural occurrences; 3. Translation of what was originally parable into external fact. Dr. Sanday with the candor and fairness characteristic of all his work allows that these were to some extent really at work. But this concession is qualified by the affirmation "That something of the nature of miracle, something that was understood as miracle, and that on no insignificant scale must be assumed to account for the estimate certainly formed by the whole first generation of Christians of the Person of Christ." He has here significantly touched the essence of the matter. It is about the estimate of the Person of Christ that the conflict will ultimately be waged and determined. As for myself I wish to say as to the three causes of which Dr. Sanday has spoken their action was necessarily on a very limited scale. The disciples did not read Christ in the light of the Old Testament. They read the Old Testament in the light of the impression made on them by Jesus. They went back to the Scriptures after they had known Jesus, and they read them as if a veil had been rent from off their faces. They found to their wonder and astonishment that the Old Testament was full of anticipations of just such a Savior as Jesus had proved himself to be. They had formerly read the Old Testament and they had never seen in it what they now saw. They now found that the Scriptures testified of Jesus, and that the testimony of Jesus was the spirit of

prophecy. Those who state that the Old Testament helped the disciple to fashion the figure of the Christ are really reversing the true process, it was the actual historical figure of Jesus that opened the disciples' eyes to the meaning of the Old Testament. An illustration of this fact may be found in the interesting dialogue of Justin Martyr with Trypho. The disciples were so impressed with the personality of Jesus, that they could not read in the Old Testament anything inconsistent with that impression. Just as in the definitions of the creeds the church never attempted to give a rational explanation of her fundamental beliefs, she only said that certain explanations put forth by others were inconsistent with her fundamental beliefs, and the facts on which they were based, so here the disciples read the Old Testament in the light of the whole impression made on them by Jesus. They did not modify or enhance their conception of Him by additions drawn from the Old Testament. On the contrary they rather modified the Old Testament to make it suit the impression made on them by Him.

The supreme supernatural element in Christianity is Christ. If we accept Him there is a natural, scientific, and rational explanation of Christianity. If we accept the estimate of Him expressed in literature by those who knew Him most intimately, then we have a sufficient account and explanation of the origin and character of Christianity. If you do not accept Him as He is set forth in the New Testament you are still face to face with the historical difficulty of accounting for the estimate of Him held by the first generation of Christians, and you have no rational means of accounting for that great movement. What you have to account for is the reversal of human ideals, the substitution of the weak, the despised, for what was esteemed to be honorable, good, and beautiful. You have also to account for the success of the movement, and this is not possible apart from Him

and His abiding influence. You have also to account for the creation of this new ideal.

Were there time I might refer to Harnack's book, "What is Christianity?" and to the works of Loisy. Harnack's idea of Christianity is not that of the Apostles nor is it the Christianity which has turned bad men into good men and sinners into saints. Christianity is not dogma, is not doctrine, though dogma and doctrine are there, it is life from the dead, it is redemption. And that is not found in Harnack's answer to the question, "What is Christianity?" Again, Loisy has a conception of history which confines its operations to that which he can put into a formula. This is common to him and the Ritschlian school, particularly in the later developments of that school. "With regard to the history of religion in particular, people have seemingly failed as yet to realize that the historical science of religious events is wholly different from the religious appreciation of those events; that the doctrinal tradition of the church does not directly represent the real form of its past; that the essential value of the dogmas is not a matter of history; that God is no more a personage of history than He is a physical element of the universe; that His existence is not provable by facts alone, or by reasoning alone, but only by an effort of the moral conscience assisted by knowledge and reasoning; that the divinity of Christ, even if Jesus taught it, would not be a fact of history, but a religious and moral datum of which the certitude is attainable in the same way as that of the existence of God, and therefore, not by a mere discussion of the scriptural evidence," and so on. One is reminded of the old doctrine of faculties, and of the old psychology which allowed a reader to see the working of the faculties and their inter-relations, and never recognized the self who felt, thought, and acted. So Loisy shuts up history into compartments, and will allow no movements outside of his compartments. Thus he insists that the historical science

of religious events is wholly different from the religious appreciation of those events. Well, that raises the whole question of description versus appreciation and of value judgments as against judgments of truth, on which I do not propose to enter, except to say that in the modern school of Pragmatics, as they call themselves, there are no judgments except judgments of appreciation. That the will to believe has the largest share in the production of human beliefs. In which case one side of the antithesis of Loisy, the scientific side, falls to the ground. I take leave to say that all judgments are both scientific and appreciative, though it may depend on the aim in view on which aspect stress is to be laid. It is more important, however, to look at the statement of Loisy, "that God is no more a personage of human history than He is a physical element of the universe." It is a sweeping statement, and if you read history in the light of it you may leave no scope for divine action, no room for revelation, no place for the Incarnation. Reality cannot be put within our categories. Hegel is so far right when he says that the ordinary category of logical contradiction does not apply to the absolute which is also the real. Our Christian theology has to make a similar demand. We have to say, if we are to approach the truth, that God is not a personage in history and that He is a personage in history. We have to say that God is eternal and that He acts in time, that He is immanent in the world and that He transcends the world. We say further that if God has spoken then history may record His word, that if He has acted then history can take note of His deeds. If the word became flesh and dwelt among us, that is as much a fact of history as any other event that has taken place within the bounds of space and time. When Loisy says that the divinity of Christ even if Jesus had taught it would not be a fact of history but a religious and moral datum, then he assumes that a religious and moral datum cannot be a fact of history, a very large assumption in-

deed. History can regard what is unique and exceptional. In fact, it is doing it every day. It is not history that lays down these rules, or lowers things, events, and persons to a dead level, it is simply man's construction of history. If ever any supernatural event did happen, if ever any exceptional person enters into history, then history makes room for him, and his influence enters into the web of it, and his influence makes new possibilities for the race. This we learn from the story of personalities as these have appeared in history.

The New Testament literature has a place in history. You must find what its place is. When you have found for it its place, whatever its place may be in your view, you are face to face with a great problem, the greatest in history. Approach the New Testament literature from any avenue you please, come to it from the Old Testament, from the apocryphal and apocalyptic literature of the Jews, come to it from the current beliefs and expectations of the Jews, and you find yourselves transported into another atmosphere, exalted suddenly to a transcendent height, and you find yourselves in a sphere altogether new. Character, life, conduct are new, ideals have been changed, and indeed reversed, and all this is represented to be the work of one transcendent figure, a figure unique, unlike all others that have gone before, or that have come after. Take Him as real, and you can understand the movement; take Him as built up by the reflection of His followers, and you simply transfer the problem from Him to them, you have not solved it. Then, again, you have a descent as great, or greater than the former ascent, when you pass from the New Testament to subsequent literature. You simply pass out of the sphere of creative ideas into the region of the commonplace. The descent is great, and this also will have to be accounted for. You have the problem of that living literature, literature that from that day to this is productive of life, and life of a special sort. Whence did it come? If

you say that the literature sprang from the creative personality of Jesus Christ, if you say that the life it produces and fosters is derived from Him to-day you have a reasonable and sufficient explanation. On any other terms you have no rational explanation of Christianity as a whole, and as a historical phenomenon which must have its explanation, whatever that explanation may be.