

CHRIST'S ATTITUDE TO HIS OWN DEATH.

I.

ONE of the most remarkable facts in history is the significance which the New Testament attaches to the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. It represents Him as a Saviour who saves by the sacrifice of Himself, as "the Lamb of God," without blemish and without spot, "slain from the foundation of the world," yet offered at the end of the ages that He might redeem by His precious blood.¹ "He is our passover sacrificed for us,"² "whom God set forth as a propitiatory" (person), in order that He might "be just and the justifier of Him who is of the faith of Jesus."³ This mode of conceiving His death is so integral alike to the history and thought of the New Testament as to deserve to be described as its organic and organizing idea. And what makes the idea so remarkable is its complete singularity; it has no equivalent or counterpart in any historical religion, those religions in particular which make most of sacrifice being most remote from any such audacious conception as that their Founder is the supreme sacrificial person and His death their sole sacrifice. Thus to Israel Moses was a law-giver who commanded and threatened, exacting obedience by the hope of reward or the fear of punishment, but he was never conceived as one who "appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." Confucius is a sage whose authority is based on his wisdom, or his power in revealing to persons and states the secret of a happy life; but death, whether his own or another's, is too great a mystery to be understood; the wise man can only sit dumb before it. Mohammed is a prophet who denounces

¹ John i. 29; Rev. xiii. 8; 1 Peter i. 19; Heb. ix. 26.

² 1 Cor. v. 7.

³ Rom. iii. 25, 26.

hell to the disobedient and promises heaven to the faithful; but he is more distinguished by the will to inflict suffering than by the heart to endure it, even where it may bring good to others. Buddha is the nearest approach to Jesus; he makes the great renunciation, surrendering regal might and right and wealth for poverty and humiliation. For this reason his people revere him, love him, and seek to follow in his footsteps. But here the similarities are superficial, while the differences are radical. First, Buddha is a pessimist; he does not love life, for to him being is suffering, and his desire is to escape from sorrow by escaping from existence. But Jesus is never a pessimist; His very passion is the expression of a splendid optimism, the belief that being is so good that it needs only to be purged from the accident of sin to become altogether lovely, a thing to be wholly desired. Secondly, Buddha is a leader, a man to be followed and imitated; what he did men must do that they may partake of his illumination and enter into his rest. But what Jesus does no other person can do. He offers Himself a Sacrifice that He may win eternal redemption for men. Thirdly, Buddha is an Indian ascetic, whose highest work is to break up the bonds of life and all the forces which make for its continuance and for the social perfecting of the race. But Jesus is in the strict sense a Redeemer and a Sacrifice, one whose sorrow is curative, who restores our nature to personal and social health, that it may attain individual and collective happiness. His passion has thus a singular character and unique worth; it stands alone, without any parallel in the other religions of history, and it is in its ideal meaning as exalted as in its actual form and in all its circumstances it is sordid and mean. Outwardly there is nothing to distinguish it from the many thousand tragedies which describe the sufferings of inno-

cence at the hands of victorious violence, but inwardly it has been proved by the experience of man through many centuries to be the healing force of the world. Of all the conflicts of sense and spirit, this is the most curious and the most sublime.

Now, an idea at once so singular in the history of religion and so integral to the thought of the New Testament raises a double problem, first, as to its origin, and, secondly, as to its original significance. The two questions are, though quite distinct, yet so indissolubly related that they can hardly be discussed apart. Our main concern at present is with the first, though we must incidentally and illustratively touch also the second.

I. How did it happen that the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ came to be conceived as a sacrifice or atonement for human sin? Was the idea created by a real or a mythical process? Was it due to an apostolic after-thought, as it were an ingenious theory invented by imaginative men to explain an unwelcome and unexpected event? or was it an element native and necessary to the religion, as it were a primary principle of the Founder's mind?

A. The theory of a mythical and imaginative origin has of course been widely held and variously formulated. Its main lines may be stated thus: The death of Jesus was a complete surprise and disillusionment to His disciples. They had believed Him to be the victorious and immortal Messiah; they found Him to be a frail and mortal man; and in the first shock of the discovery they forsook Him and fled from their own past beliefs. But these beliefs were not so easily renounced; they had begotten hopes too precious to be abandoned even at the bidding of fate; they were endeared by affections too tender to die in the presence of disaster. And so while experience tempted to acquiescence in the accomplished, which was but the end that

Nature has in store for all, the imagination and the heart pleaded for another and more splendid issue. If the death was not to extinguish Jesus, He must transfigure the death, and change it into something quite other than the lot common to mortal men. This was the supreme achievement and victory of faith; it could not cease to regard Jesus as the Messiah, but it could do a sublimer thing—invest His death with eternal significance. The vision that created the belief in the resurrection made the transfiguration of the death more possible; yet the one was a harder and tardier process than the other. All at once, as is the way of visions, the resurrection became a credited fact, which the visionaries on every possible occasion affirmed they themselves had witnessed, but the death had an inexplicable, accidental, violent character. The one was God's action, the other was man's. God had raised Him from the dead, but it was by wicked hands that He had been "taken, crucified, and slain."¹ The Jews had "killed the Prince of Life," demanding His death even when Pilate "was determined to let Him go."² But this crude theory could not long endure, for if "wicked hands" could prevail once, why not again and finally? So a second stage is marked by the acceptance of the customary Jewish explanation of the detested inevitable—it was the Will of God. While Herod and Pontius Pilate, the people of Rome and of Israel had appeared to act, the real Actor had been God; they only did what the hand and counsel of God had determined before to be done.³ But this position had too little reason in it to satisfy the imaginative intellect of the young society. It read with new eyes the Old Testament, found that Isaiah's servant of God was a sufferer for human sin, and all his attributes and experiences were forthwith ascribed to Jesus.⁴ As this sufferer was "led like a lamb to

¹ Acts ii. 23.

² *Ib.* iii. 13-15.

³ *Ib.* iv. 27, 28.

⁴ *Ib.* viii. 30-35.

the slaughter," so Jesus became "the Lamb of God," with all the sacrificial ideas of Judaism aggregated round His person and His death. The process once begun, needed for its completion only a constructive genius, and instead of one such, three soon appeared: Paul, who argued that the death was both the fulfilment and the abolition of the law; the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who made Jesus and His sufferings the antitype which had its type in the elaborate ritual and worship of the old economy; and John, who found in the person, history, and death of our Lord the means by which the world was illumined and redeemed. And so by a perfectly natural, yet purely mythical and imaginative process, the death was transfigured from the last calamity of a blameless life to the act of grace by which God saved the world.

B. But this theory, however ingeniously plausible, has three great defects: it lacks proof, it is intrinsically improbable, and it fails to explain the facts. Its proofs are drawn from sources which its advocates have in other connexions, and for what they deemed adequate reasons, discredited. It is not open to the same criticism to prove by analysis at one time the early speeches in the Acts to be late compositions, and at another to use them as authentic evidence for the oldest Christian beliefs. And here the most primitive tradition is specially explicit. The gospel which Paul received and preached, and affirmed to be that which saved, was—"Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures."¹ And this can only mean that at the moment of his conversion the belief had been not simply formulated, but elaborated into a system in harmony with the Old Testament. Then, as to the intrinsic improbabilities, we have to consider both the men and the theory; it was a belief of stupendous originality; they were persons of no

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 3.

intellectual attainments and small inventive faculty. So far as the Gospels enable us to judge, they were curiously deficient in imagination, and of timid understanding. They were remarkable for their inability to draw obvious conclusions, to transcend the commonplace, and comprehend the unfamiliar, or find a rational reason for the extraordinary. Such men might dream dreams and see visions, but to invent an absolutely novel intellectual conception as to their Master's person and death—a conception that changed man's view of God, of sin, of humanity, of history, in a word, of all things Divine and human—was surely a feat beyond them. And the improbabilities involve the inadequacy of the theory; it makes Christ, with all He has accomplished, the creation of accident, and leaves us without any sufficient reason for the being of the beliefs and the religion which have so governed the course of history. In physical science the only thing that can be named a cause is one equal to the production of all the effects; and as here the total effect is the part played by Christianity in the history of man, we feel bound to say that nothing can be a cause less adequate to its production than the mythopœic faculty of a few illiterate men.

II. But now let us change the point of view, and see whether we can better explain the rise and nature of the idea through the mind of Jesus Himself than through the reminiscent phantasies of His disciples. If the idea be His, it must be regarded as a real and integral part of His religion, while a comparison of the forms He gives it with the forms it assumes in their hands ought to have some significance for theology, were it only as helping to define the place and function of the subjective factor in doctrine. Wendt, for example, holds that the Apostle Paul, in particular, "remodelled" Christ's idea, and so gave to His sacrificial death a special significance for the forgiveness of sins, "this being a reference nowhere made by Jesus Him-

self."¹ Whether this be so we must now attempt to determine.

A. It is important to note at the outset that the mind of Jesus may be described as in this matter simpler than the apostolic mind, but His emotions as much more complex. His thinking runs less into distinction and detail, but His feeling is richer, deeper, and more varied. Conflicting emotions agitate Him—now exalt and now depress Him. He sees the necessity of His death, and does not seek to escape from it, but from the forces which work it and the form in which it comes He shrinks with horror and alarm. He perceives its functions and issues, and He rejoices to give His life a ransom for many, but, as His life is taken as well as given, He suffers agony because of those who take it even while He feels in the act of surrender joy at doing His Father's will. As a result, those elements of the sacrifice and death which appear as the first and most essential to us appeared as the last and most incidental to Him. What this difference signifies we shall be the better able to appreciate if we first attempt to come to the death as He came to it, and then attempt to construe it, as it seemed to the Apostles, in the light of His words and His experience.

We frankly recognise that the idea distinctly emerges in the teaching of Jesus only at a comparatively late period, and we may reasonably infer that what is not explicit in His speech was not clear to His mind. The idea embodied in Holman Hunt's "The Shadow of the Cross" is false to nature and to history, for Christ's was too fine a spirit to make out of its own sorrow a shade in which those who looked to Him for love should sit cold and fearful; and we may reasonably infer that before the evil days came His customary mood would be the exaltation born of the splendid ideal He was to realize. The morning of His

¹ *The Teaching of Jesus*, vol. ii., pp. 239 ff.

ministry was a golden dawn; in His early parables the sunny side of life so greets us that we may almost see the smile upon His face answering the smile upon the face of Nature. The birds of the air had sung in His ear their songs of faith and hope. The lily of the field had unfolded to His eye a beauty which made the glory of Solomon seem tawdry pomp. He had communed with Nature until she became the presence of God, speaking to Him of the Father He loved and in whom He lived. He had watched the farmer following the plough, casting abroad the seed, putting in the sickle when the corn was fully ripe, storing the grain till his barns were bursting. He loved to walk through the cornfields, to look at the vines and the vine-dressers, to observe the fig tree, to study the shadows and the sunshine that flitted across the face of the lake. He who had so brooded over Nature must have had the happiness of the quiet eye, the placid soul which is ever born of the fellowship of the invisible in us with the invisible without us through the medium of what is visible in both. And so there is no person who could less be described as "the Man of Sorrows" than the Jesus of the earlier ministry. His spirit is bright, His words are serious without being sad, weighted with the ideas of God, and duty, and humanity, but not burdened with the agony or wet as with the sweat of blood.

Yet even then He had thoughts that prophesied the passion. They were native to Him, not given or forced upon Him from without. Experience was indeed to Him, as to us, a teacher; and as He "learned obedience by the things which He suffered," so, apart from the same things, He could not have known His meaning and His mission. But these were conditions rather than sources of knowledge. The notion of a suffering Messiah filled a small place, if, indeed, it filled any place at all, in contemporary Jewish thought, but He could not study ancient prophecy

without finding such a Messiah there. History showed that the very people who built the sepulchres of the dead prophets had refused to hear or even to endure them while they lived; and John the Baptist, slain by a foolish king to gratify the malice of a wicked woman, stood before Him as evidence of continuity in history. And as He preached the Kingdom He found that those who seemed or claimed to be its constituted guardians were His most inveterate foes, the scribe waited to catch Him in His talk, the Pharisee watched to charge His good with being evil, the priests resisted Him in the temple, which they had made into a mart for merchandise. Opposition confronted Him at every moment and in every point; His idea of God's righteousness as distinguished from the law's was made to appear a grave heresy; His friendship for sinners was represented as affection for sin; His very acts of beneficence were explained as works of the devil, and His doctrine of the kingdom handled as if it signified a reign of lawlessness. Such experiences could create only one feeling, that the enmity His ministry encountered must ultimately fall upon His person; and as He could not surrender His mission He must be prepared to surrender His life. This was a conclusion it needed no inspiration to draw; all it needed was an intelligence able to measure the moral forces opposed, and to calculate the moment when those who were determined not to suffer public defeat would make material force the final arbiter of the dispute.

B. This line of thought may show that there was nothing extraordinary or supernatural in Jesus' foreknowledge of His own death. His prophecy was but the expression of a mind which knew that it could not cease to be obedient while His enemies would not cease to be hostile. And their hostility could have only one end. But though His experience might thus explain how He came to anticipate the fact and even the manner of His death, it does not

explain the only thing worthy of explanation, viz., how He came to give it special significance. For this we must turn to His own teaching. One of the earliest things recorded of Him is His saying to the sick of the palsy, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee."¹ This is characteristic; His mission is not to the righteous, but to the sinner; and how this mission was to be fulfilled was made manifest, even before the ministry began, by the temptation. He was tempted, first, to make Himself independent of Nature and different from man by the use of supernatural power on His own behalf; secondly, to claim such special guardianship from God as would place Him above death; and thirdly, to employ such external and physical means for the attainment of His ends as would have conveyed into His new kingdom the methods of the kingdoms of the world. Hence by the rejection of these alternatives He affirms, first, that His obedience must be of the completest kind; secondly, that He accepts all the fatalities of our common lot, including the liability to suffering and death; and thirdly, that He is to accomplish His purpose by spiritual and personal action. And the principles that guided Him appeared in His earliest teaching. The qualities praised in the beatitudes He exemplified,—He Himself, as above all others persecuted for righteousness' sake, was to be above all others blessed. He had come to fulfil the law and the prophets by realizing their essence, the righteousness, the service, the sacrifice which avails before God. He substitutes self-abnegation for retaliation; the love of our neighbour, with all its obligations, He expands into love of man. The deeds we do are to be done in behalf of the evil as well as the good. And the laws of the kingdom are binding both upon His disciples and Himself. While they are so dear to the Father that even the hairs of their head are all numbered, yet they "shall be hated of all men for His name's sake."

¹ Mark ii. 5. Cf. Luke vii. 47-50.

But they are not to count their lives dear unto themselves; they are to take up the cross and follow Him. He that findeth his life shall lose it, he who loseth his life for the gospel's sake shall find it.¹ His work is one, therefore, which involves suffering even unto death. His destiny is to Himself so little peaceful that He seems to conceive it as a baptism of fire, and He feels straitened till it be accomplished.² By the loss of His life He is to fulfil His mission.

C. But from the implicit we must now advance to the explicit teaching of Jesus concerning His death. It first becomes distinct after the confession of Peter,³ and before we attempt to understand His words some preliminary remarks must be made. (i.) The reserve or even reticence touching Himself which He maintains in the Synoptics. He is clear and emphatic enough when He speaks to His disciples of God, or the kingdom or its laws, but concerning Himself He speaks not so much in parables as darkly, suggestively. He appears to have desired that their conception of Him should be of their own forming rather than of His communicating, a belief reached through the exercise of reason, not simply received on His authority. His method was to proceed through familiarity to supremacy, not through sovereignty to subservience. If the discipleship had been formed on the basis of His divine pre-eminence, it would have had no reality, He would never have got near the men, the men would never have come near to Him; aloofness would have marked His way and they would have walked as if divided by an impassable gulf from Him. And so it was as Jesus of Nazareth that He called them, He a man of whom they could learn, they men who could learn of Him. And He forced nothing, stimulated but did not supersede the action of their own minds; and when He asked His great question, "Whom say ye that I am?" it was as if

¹ Matt. x. 38, 39.

² Luke xii. 50.

³ Mark viii. 31-33; Matt. xvi. 21-23; Luke ix. 21, 22.

He had inquired, "What conclusion have you as reasonable men been compelled to draw from the things which you have seen and heard?" (ii.) This method of Jesus explains two things: (a) the relative lateness of the period at which the confession is made. It was the issue of a lengthened process in slow and simple minds, and to have hurried the process would have been to spoil the issue. (β) The immediate and consequent emergence of the new teaching, for only now could the disciples begin to understand the meaning and the need of the death; and unless they were made now to understand it, the Messiahship they confessed would turn into a counterfeit of the truth.

Now, all these points are cardinal for the interpretation of this passage. The teaching becomes explicit because the disciples were now beginning to be able to understand it. Not till they knew who the person was could they conceive the thing He had come to do. Thus the death He speaks of is not the death of the person called Jesus, but of the Christ, the Messiah for whom Israel had existed, into whom his whole meaning was gathered, through whom he was to be saved. Nor is it without significance that Mark and Luke retain the formula, "the Son of Man," as denoting Him who is to suffer and be slain. The act is on the passive side not merely personal, but official, concerns mankind as well as Israel. Then correspondent to the denomination of the victim are the titles of those who are to do the deed. "The elders, chief priests, and scribes" are named in all the three narratives, and the meaning of this can hardly be mistaken. The names are representative, symbols of collective Israel acting in a solemn and ceremonial manner. "The elders" are Israel as a State, the "chief priests" are Israel as a Church, the "scribes" are Israel as the people of the Book, possessed of "the oracles of God." When they are conceived as acting together, the action is conceived as all Israel's,

a civil, sacerdotal, and religious body corporate. These contrasted titles then—the Christ on the one hand, and “the elders, chief priests, and scribes” on the other, can only mean one thing, that the acts in which they were to be respectively engaged, bearing and causing suffering, enduring and inflicting death, have a more than mere personal significance; they realize the ends for which the Messiah stood by means of the ideas for which Israel was the symbol; *i.e.*, Jesus conceives His death as in form a sacrifice, a medium for the reconciliation of Man to God, though a sacrifice may have been the last thing it was intended to be by the men who effected it. And the rebuke to Peter shows how necessary Jesus thought this view of His death to be. His words are remarkable: “Get thee behind me, Satan! for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men.” It is hardly possible to avoid the inference that there is here a reminiscence of the temptation. Jesus feels as if the tempter were once more showing Him all the kingdoms of the world.¹ Peter’s idea had been before presented, resisted, and cast out; and the disciples must now begin to learn what the Master had known from the first, that He was born for sacrifice and must bear the cross.

The interpretation of these synoptic passages receives interesting illustration and confirmation from the verse in John: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”² Here the emphasis falls upon “*this* temple,” *i.e.*, as John explains, “the temple of His body,” the flesh which had become the tabernacle of the Word.³ The meaning is evident: His person is the new temple, where God meets man and man God, where all sacrifices are consummated by the eternal sacrifice which He performed, and all priesthoods are ended by the coming of the Eternal Priest. All the ideas which stood in symbol in the old

¹ Matt. iv. 10.² *Ib.* ii. 19.³ *Ib.* i. 14.

temple were in the new turned into the reality which abideth. Nothing was so fit as that the imperfect should pass when the perfect had come, and that its passing should be marked by the act in which "the elders, the chief priests, and scribes" took so fateful a part.

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(*To be continued.*)

THE RIVERS OF DAMASCUS:

ABANA AND PHARPAR.

(2 KINGS v. 12.)

THESE rivers are mentioned once, and only once, in the Bible. They are set in a heroic story as perennial in idyllic charm as their own cooling waters.

We owe the record of these names to a patriotic outburst of passion on the part of Naaman, "captain of the host of the King of Syria." This renowned general is described in the narrative as "a great man with his master and honourable, because by him the Lord had given victory unto Syria"; and it is added with pathetic antithesis, "He was also a mighty man of valour, but he was a leper."

Naaman must have been a man of transcendent genius to become the leader of the armies of Benhadad, notwithstanding the disadvantages of a loathsome disease that doomed its victims to a living death, and cut them off from all social intercourse with healthy men and women. He must also have diffused around him some of the graciousness that his name implies, for his memory is still green in the local tradition of Damascus, while the names of other great Damascene warriors are buried in oblivion. It might be said that Naaman takes rank in Damascus tradition immediately after Abraham, "the good Ibrahim."

There is outside the walls of Damascus a large edifice,