

*THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF JESUS OF
NAZARETH.*

WHEN in the middle of the nineteenth century D. F. Strauss reduced the bulk of the Gospel narratives to myth, it was not his intention to deprive them of all their historical character; and, indeed, in the later edition of his famous work, which he intended to be popular, he devoted a considerable section to a historical sketch of the life of Jesus. Since the mythical history occupies in his book only twice the number of pages which are devoted to the historical sketch, it is clear that he was far from thinking the subject of his sketch a creature of the fancy; and his view is shared by many English writers who even employ some of the Gospel narratives as evidence against the others: besides condemning a number on the ground of the miracles which they involve, they condemn others as unsuitable to the character which in other portions of the Gospels they believe to be faithfully depicted. Recent discussions in the newspapers have shown that distinguished Anglican theologians are embracing this opinion. They abandon (let us say) the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, but retain a general belief in the veracity of the Gospels.

There is, however, a step beyond this, a yet more radical form of criticism than that of Strauss. This is to deprive the Gospels of all claim to be regarded as history, by denying that such a person as Jesus of Nazareth ever existed. Such a view is not yet popular; though suggested as early

as 1863, it has found few supporters outside the Rationalist Press Association, a body of writers whose works are characterized by violent hostility to Christianity, such as perverts their judgment in estimating evidence; nor, indeed, are all the authors in this series agreed on this question, since several take a view which more nearly resembles that of Strauss. The chief exponent of this ultra-radicalism is Mr. J. M. Robertson, who has given his views in a number of works—*Studies in Religious Fallacy* (1900), *Christianity and Mythology* (1900), *A Short History of Christianity* (1902), *Pagan Christs* (1903). Since the paradox of one generation is the commonplace of the next—as, indeed, is clearly shown by the approximation of current theology to the once tabooed opinions of Strauss—it is worth while endeavouring to form an opinion as to the probability of the view propounded by Robertson acquiring permanent popularity.

In the first place, it is clear that the Gospel narrative is located within historic times: a fact which distinguishes it at once from the tales of Krishna, Zoroaster, etc., with which it is brought into comparison. For Palestine itself there is some contemporary history; for the empire of which Palestine formed a part there is much. But yet the main events recorded in the Gospels are of a sort which would be unlikely to find a place in contemporary history, though their memory would be cherished by the circle whom they interested. The execution of a Reformer who had only a small following, and who attempted no armed resistance to established authority, would have but a moderate chance of being recorded in the local chronicle, none at all of being recorded in the imperial history. When, therefore, the Gospels, in any case within 150 years of the supposed time, record the execution of Jesus of Nazareth by a governor who is a historical personage, and that execution is commemorated by a community which

cannot be traced earlier than the event, it is difficult to see why the event should not be historical.

It is at the point of the Crucifixion that the Gospel narrative comes in contact with profane history, and though not mentioned by contemporary historians, it is mentioned by a pagan historian—Tacitus—so soon as its effects made themselves felt at the Capital. The notion that the Annals of Tacitus are spurious has not hitherto gained a sufficient number of adherents to permit of his evidence being discounted. But even if he be disregarded, the evidence of the Gospels, which, while knowing the name of few Roman Governors, unanimously bring this event into connexion with Pilate, cannot easily be rejected. Nor does the hypothesis that the Gospel narratives are derived from a miracle-play weaken their evidence. The death of Husain at Kerbelā is similarly commemorated by a miracle-play, yet no one doubts that Husain is a historical character.

The question of the existence of the Gospels at any period before the latest at which their existence is not denied appears to be of no importance for this matter. For that the Gospels are not varying recensions of a romance is evident: the first three are very clearly redactions of an oral tradition. That oral tradition may contain numerous accretions; but that there may be accretions there must be something whereto they can cling.

Indeed, this is recognized by Mr. Robertson, who finds the nucleus of the Gospel story in one "Jesus, son of Pandira, mentioned in the Talmud, as hanged on a tree and stoned to death at Lydda, in the reign of Alexander Jannaeus." The Talmud, however, is "Oral Tradition," as its very name, "the Oral Law," implies; written down, according to the classical commentator, Rashi, "near his own time," i.e., about the ninth century A.D.; according to no opinion earlier than the fifth century A.D. Why, then, should the oral tradition of the Jews on this subject be

preferred to the oral tradition of the Christians, when the former was committed to writing some three centuries later than the latter, and when the sect that followed Christ are (in accordance with all analogy) likely to know most about Him ?

This story of Jesus, son of Pandira, was indeed known to Celsus (A.D. 190), and its cropping up in the oral tradition of the Jews is curious evidence of the tenacity of oral tradition. The details of Lydda and Alexander Jannaeus are due to the fancy of the Rabbis, and are not of course worth a moment's consideration; whereas the combination of hanging and stoning is an interesting case of conflation of traditions. The name Pandira has given trouble, and been used as the basis of extraordinary conjectures by Haeckel and others. Another form is Pantra; since the name *Peter* takes in some Arabic works the form *Batirah*, we need have no hesitation in identifying this Talmudic Pandira with the familiar Peter (Petros) of the Gospels. The acquaintance with the Gospel narrative shown in making Jesus the son of Peter is similar to that which is displayed in making the mother of Jesus "Mary the plaiter of hair" (Megadla, a clear mistranslation of the form Magdalene). Somewhat similarly a later Rabbi makes Paul the father of Saul.¹ Similarly Mohammed regarded Mary the Virgin as the same as Mary or Miriam the sister of Moses. This last doctrine appears to have found a patron (at last, after 1,300 years!) in Mr. Robertson; but his acceptance of it suggests that he is inclined to paradox. The fact is that such matters as relationships and synchronisms are better known to friends than to enemies, to kindred than to strangers. Hence for the date and attribution of the Founder of Christianity, as indeed of the founder of Islam and the founder of Mormonism, it is far safer to go to the adherents than to enemies of these systems.

¹ Jepheth Ibn Ali, *Comm. on Daniel*.

Certainly, Mr. Robertson is not altogether satisfied with "Jesus, son of Pandira," and endeavours to find traces elsewhere of the association of the name Jesus with Messianic hopes. One such trace he would find in the Jesus or Joshua to whom history or myth ascribes the final conquest and settlement of Canaan. Another in the Jesus, son of Josedek, whose name is associated with the rebuilding of the Temple. Both these suggestions are desperate in character. For, however mythical may be the Joshua who succeeded Moses, for some four centuries or more B.C. he was regarded as a historical character, as appears from the book of Nehemiah; but of any doctrine of his future re-appearance there is no trace: the prophet whose re-appearance was expected was Elijah, as we learn from Ben-Sira. Jesus, the son of Josedek, is certainly said in Zechariah vi. 12 to have had the second name Semach, or "branch," but of him we learn from Ben-Sira that his memory was honoured as one of the rebuilders of the Temple—no other hopes being associated with him.

Indeed, the evidence of the Gospels points with certainty to the fact that the name Jeshua or Jesus was not in itself associated with any Messianic prophecies, for no text of the Old Testament is quoted in justification of the name. On the other hand, the Old Testament supplies many names which exegesis appears to have connected with the Messiah from very early times—Shiloh, Emmanuel, David. Round one of these myth must necessarily have gathered, if the Messiah had been mythical. That the name borne by the Christian Messiah is none of these clearly proves that we have to do not with myth but history.

Then, the home of Jesus is given in the Gospels as Nazareth, a place also not foretold in the Old Testament, and not otherwise famous. The first Evangelist quotes a prophecy, "He shall be called Nazoraios," which he interprets of the home in Nazareth, but it is unknown to what

text he refers. Hence he has been accused of deliberately inventing a prophecy, but it is more likely that accident, not design, has produced this difficulty. It is certainly a curious perversion of the ordinary view, by which Mr. Robertson supposes the connexion of the Messiah with Nazareth to have arisen from the text which is sometimes thought to underlie St. Matthew's quotation—Isaiah xi. 1—where a word *nešer*, “branch,” seems to be used with Messianic import. The process then imagined is that a Messianic sect were called the Nasrites, or Branchists, falsely interpreted at a later time as followers of a man of Nazareth. Ingenious as this conjecture is, some positive evidence of the existence of a sect of Branchists would have to be adduced before any probability could be assigned it.

Otherwise the objections brought to the ordinary interpretation seem to be inconsiderable. The Syriac for “of Nazareth” is *Nāšrayyā*, or *Nošrayyo*; that the Greek *Nazoraïos* is a fair transliteration of this must be conceded; the other form *Nazarenos* merely differs from it in having the Greek termination instead of the Syriac. That “by no possibility could a sect be called Nazarenes whose founder never taught in Nazareth” is asserted by Mr. Robertson, but this proposition cannot be accepted. The *Druses* or *Darazis* are called after a certain Mohammed Ibn Isma'il al-Darazi, “the Tailor”; the *Jubba'* is after a man called al-Jubba'i, or “native of Jubba'.” Just as with us a man is known by his Christian name to his family, but outside it by his surname, so among the Easterns a man must, besides his actual name, have some more distinctive appellation, rendered especially necessary where the same name is constantly employed. Hence the greater number of Arabic authors are known not by their names but by the place whence they came—Bokhari, Tirmidhi, Nasa'i, Kazwini, Hamdani, Khwarizmi. Secondary relative adjectives are formed neither in Hebrew nor

Arabic, whence the followers of a Bokhari would be called Bokharis. The question of the length of time spent at Bokhara by Bokhari would not enter into the heads of those who called the followers of such a man Bokharis. That the name Jesus was exceedingly common among the Jews, till the rise of Christianity made them detest it, we know from the later books of the Old Testament. Hence the old explanation of Nazarenes or Nazoraioi as followers of the Man of Nazareth is perfectly natural and simple.

In *Studies in Religious Fallacy* the question of the names Nazoraioi and Nazarene (pp. 154-6) is discussed at length, but the statements on which the results are based appear to be quite indefensible. It is asserted that Nazoraioi means Nazarite, i.e., an ascetic of the sort familiar from the Old Testament; but the form used by the LXX. and Josephus is Nazaraioi or Naziraioi, where the Hebrew is not transliterated as Nazir¹; the variety between the vowels *a* and *i* is accounted for by a grammatical rule, but a form Nazoraioi is not found representing Nazir, nor is there any reason why it should be. "And that Nazarite was the originally current form in the East appears from the Syrian Peshito, which only at Matthew ii. 23 gives an adjective based on the place-name Nazareth, and everywhere else gives the equivalent of Nazoraioi save in Luke iv. 34, where it recurs to a variant of the geographical adjective, and in John i. 45 and Acts x. 38." One would gladly know whence this statement comes, for no one who had consulted the Peshito could have made it. The "adjective based on the place-name," which occurs in Matthew ii. 23, occurs (practically) wherever the Greek Nazoraioi, or Nazarenos, occurs; and there is no place in the New Testament where the Syriac word for Nazarite is found. Any one who is acquainted with the Syriac alphabet is aware that the word for Nazarite is written with *z*, that for Nazarene with an em-

¹ See the Concordances of Hatch and Bruder.

phatic *s*, whence confusion between the two is impossible. Still, Mr. Robertson must have got this statement from somewhere, but it is wholly inaccurate none the less.

The connexion of the mythical Jesus with the mythical Nazareth, as Mr. Robertson explains it, seems far less felicitous than his conjecture about the Branchists. He observes that Jesus, son of Josedek, is in the text quoted from Zechariah described as the Branch. This is so, but the word for Branch used here is not *Neşer*, but *Şemach*, and that the Prophet means the latter only is shown by his playing on it, the word in the following clause rendered "grow" being of the same radicals. On the word *neşer* it would be possible to play also, but the resulting sense would be quite different. Hence the conjecture by which this text is made to explain the connexion between the Christian Jesus and Nazareth has no probability.

Nazareth, moreover, by no means stands alone in the Gospel narrative, which records a number of events connected with Galilee and places otherwise of no consequence in that portion of Palestine. That all these occasions are historical need not be asserted. But even if they be supposed to consist largely of myth, they can only be accounted for on the supposition that the nucleus of history round which they grew was connected with Galilee; and while those of them that are historical confirm the connexion of the Founder of Christianity with Nazareth, those taken as mythical also assume it.

In the Fourth Gospel (vii. 27) the Jews object that they know whence Jesus came, whereas the home of the real Christ should be unknown. This implies that the connexion not only with Nazareth, but also with Joseph and Mary, was generally acknowledged. Like Nazareth, both these latter names are reduced to myth by the new criticism. With regard to Mary, it is observed that many names of goddesses either begin with the letter *M* or bear some

resemblance to the word Mary—e.g., the Indian Maya, “delusion.” The Arabic historian Tabari (of the tenth century A.D.) is quoted for a tradition that Joshua’s mother was named Mary. We should, indeed, have to re-write Biblical history if any importance were attached to Tabari’s statements on the subject; it is sufficient to mention that, according to him, it was generally agreed that Joshua was succeeded by Caleb, then by Ezekiel!

Worthless, however, as would be the statement of Tabari if he made it, he does not make it. The original of his Chronicle has been edited at Leyden by the best Arabic scholars in Europe; and his words run as follows (vol. i., page 508, line 7): “When there ended the forty years in which they were made to wander, Moses proceeded with them, having with him Joshua, son of Nun, and Caleb, son of Jephunneh, and he was, according to what they assert, the husband of Miriam, daughter of ‘Imran, sister of Moses and Aaron, and so was their brother-in-law.” The words, of course, mean that Caleb (not Joshua) was not the *son*, but the *husband* of Miriam; and Ibn al-Athir, who copies Tabari, makes this additionally clear (Cairo ed. i. 69). This Semitic tradition, which the Bible-makers concealed, turns out, then, to be a mistake or addition of the Persian translator of Tabari—of a sort against which the French translator specially warns us. And on this curious foundation there is based the suggestion (*Short History of Christianity*, p. 15), “as Joshua is in Arab tradition the son of the mythic Miriam (Mary), it may be that the roots of the historic Christian cult go back to an immemorial Semitic antiquity, when already the name of Jesus was divine.” Substituting correct premisses for those employed, we get the following argument: since there was a tradition current in the tenth century A.D. that Caleb was the husband of Miriam, it may be that the cult of a Jesus, son of Mary, goes back to immemorial antiquity. This suggests a curious study in *Religious Fallacies*.

With regard to the name Joseph, the Rabbinic tradition of a Messiah Ben Joseph is naturally quoted to account for it. Certainly some Talmudic passages can be adduced which speak of a suffering Messiah, son of Joseph, as opposed to the conquering Messiah, son of David. Evidence, however, of such a doctrine having existed in pre-Christian times should be brought, before it could be freed from the suspicion of having arisen under the influence of Christian theology. In the Gospels the idea of a suffering Messiah is represented as an afterthought, a notion recognized after the fulfilment, but by no means understood before. The event of the Crucifixion led to reflexion on the prophecies which were then found to contain such a conception. The Rabbis in the New Testament, in answer to the question, Whose son is Christ? reply unhesitatingly, the Son of David; to those who record that scene the notion of a Messiah, son of Joseph, expected by the Rabbis is quite unfamiliar. But the idea of a suffering Messiah, first developed in Christian circles, is likely to have spread outside them. Hence the Rabbinic "Messiah, son of Joseph," so far from giving an explanation of the ascription of Jesus to a father named Joseph probably owes his existence to that ascription.

With regard to external evidence, in 1900 Mr. Robertson apparently believed in the genuineness of some of the Pauline Epistles, and collected eight matters (e.g., the story of Judas Iscariot and Peter's denial) which are mentioned in the Gospels, to which St. Paul makes no allusion. How far this list can be trusted ought not, perhaps, to be guessed from the first item, "He has no single allusion to the parents of Jesus"; for since at the very beginning of St. Paul's first Epistle in the ordinary order (Rom. i. 3) Jesus Christ is said to have been born of the seed of David according to the flesh—a very distinct allusion to the parents of Jesus—the list by no means inspires confidence.

But even if it were trustworthy, the argument drawn from it would be liable to the difficulties which regularly attend the argument from silence ; for we none of us when writing mention everything that we know. There are doubtless cases in which silence implies ignorance or ignoring ; but before we could argue from St. Paul's Epistles that their author can never have heard of the Betrayal by Judas or of the Denial by Peter, it would have to be shown that there were places which imperatively called for their mention. In his latest works, however, Mr. Robertson has adopted the extraordinary view of the Epistles propounded by Van Manen, who regards them all as spurious ; but he fails to draw the inference that the evidence of spurious Epistles would not be worth having.

With regard to the correspondence of Christian practice and Christian doctrine with Pagan ceremonies and beliefs, the works cited certainly contain interesting collections of facts, which it is to be hoped may be trustworthy. And so far as such collections lead to sympathy with, and a better understanding of, alien cults, both the subject chosen and perhaps the manner of handling it often deserve commendation. If the inclusion of certain theories and rites rendered Christianity palatable to those who adopted it, we at least learn something as to men's spiritual needs, and the clothes which are found most seemly for spiritual conceptions. But when it is argued that an event is not historical because something similar figures in the mythology of another community, the reasoning appears to be very unsafe. That the doctrine of the death and resurrection of Adonis satisfied a need afterwards satisfied by the belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus may be admitted ; but the fact can surely have no bearing whatever on the historical character of either the Crucifixion or the Resurrection as the Gospels narrate them ; and should the latter be disbelieved on philosophical grounds, the story of the

former remains unaffected even by them. It is rather remarkable that the author of works professedly dealing with Logic (*Letters on Reasoning* and *Studies in Religious Fallacy*) should give some ground for the suspicion that he has been himself led away by a fallacy.

To the present writer, then, it seems that the advance beyond Strauss is likely to lead to a retrogressive movement. But to what point that retreat will be carried the future must show.

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