

Meanwhile (so James as good as tells us), *we can move our God to meet us in peace.* He could go no further in propounding the Gospel of the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Yet it is only the ripe outcome of the very old revelation, 'how that the Lord is *full of pity*, and merciful.' A king will keep his royal seat as we approach him, but James would have us to believe and act as if the Eternal King were our Eternal Father. A father cannot keep his seat as the far-wandered son, whom he loves still, is trying to draw near. The wonderful stroke from the pencil of Christ in the parable must surely be the source of James' words: 'And when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.' Even so: 'He will draw nigh to *you*.' It seems to have clung to his memory, and to have made itself true enough, evangelical enough, Divine

enough for him, mere undogmatic parable-picture though it was. He sees that God goes no farther off from a man when a man departs from Him; but he sees that God does come nearer to a man when a man begins to return. And he sees that the approach of God towards a soul is a more cordial and rapid movement than the comparatively weary, and crippled, and self-chiding approach of the soul towards Him, till the meeting be blessedly accomplished.

We will not go far astray, then, as it seems, if we say that, in the mind of James, nearness to God, in heart and hand, is religion, and the Divine readiness of response to all human Godwardness is the matchless pivot-jewel of the religion of Christ. These imply everything of gospel, and are the well-spring of all that lofty ethical energy which makes this man's letter so remarkable, even among New Testament Epistles.

## Could Jesus Err?

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MORE important than any inquiry that might be started concerning the errancy or inerrancy of Scripture is the question here raised about the fallibility or infallibility of Jesus. The bearing also of this question upon present day problems in Biblical Criticism and Theological Dogmatics it requires no special training to appreciate. If intellectual error on the part of Jesus was impossible, then these critics cannot be correct who assert that neither did Moses write the Pentateuch, either directly or indirectly, either in whole or in part, nor did David compose any of the Psalms traditionally ascribed to him, since Jesus expressly states that Moses left behind him 'writings' which all agree Christ understood to be found in the first five books of Old Testament Scripture, and that David was the author of at least one Psalm, the 110th. On the other hand, if intellectual error on the part of Jesus was possible, the aforesaid critics may be right in their contentions, notwithstanding Christ's declarations, though this, of course, will only follow if these contentions are established on independent and reliable grounds. Again, if on the part of Jesus intellectual error was possible, the conception of

His personality prevailing in the Christian Church, that He was God in the highest sense of that term, will be somewhat hard to sustain, however Godlike He may have been in any lower significance that may be assigned to the word; while, once more, if He was absolutely incapable of error, the way must be regarded as at least open for maintaining the doctrine of His supreme and essential divinity.

To the question as thus stated, special interest attaches from the circumstance that quite recently there has issued from the German press a theological brochure of 102 pages,<sup>1</sup> which not only deals with this momentous subject, but is also remarkable for the insight it shows into the grave character of the issues at stake as well as for the frankness and boldness with which it defines and defends the position it assumes. In plain language, Dr. Paul Schwartzkopff, Professor in Wernigerode, the author of the brochure referred to, undertakes to prove that Jesus actually did err,

<sup>1</sup> Now translated into English under the title: *The Prophecies of Jesus Christ relating to His Death, Resurrection, and Second Coming, and their Fulfilment.* (T. & T. Clark. Crown 8vo, pp. 328. 5s.)

and that not in unimportant details alone, but likewise in matters more or less directly affecting His mission as a Saviour; that nevertheless the errors into which He fell, while incompatible with a claim on His behalf to have been divine in the strong sense of that expression, in no way impaired His qualifications or efficiency as a Saviour; and that in point of fact His errors were inseparable from His humanity. It is not difficult to perceive that if these propositions can be vindicated, the Christian Church will require forthwith to revise and materially alter her view, not merely of the structure of the Old Testament, but also of the person and work of Christ.

### I

The proof offered in support of this thesis, that Jesus more than once lapsed into positive error, is not new, but may presumably be looked upon as presenting the impeachment in its strongest light. Three averments are made and backed up by what is obviously deemed sufficient evidence—first, that Jesus expected to find figs upon a tree whose luxuriant foliage had attracted His attention, and on coming up to it acknowledged He had been mistaken; second, that He believed Jonah had been three days and three nights in the whale's (or great fish's) belly, whereas Jonah had never been there at all; and third, that He totally misunderstood the 110th Psalm when He supposed that either David was its author or Messiah its theme. One cannot help admiring the confidence with which, as it were, the gage of battle is thrown down in these three propositions, or the easy manner in which their truth is presupposed.

1. With regard to the first example of error cited, that connected with the fig-tree, the charge is thus presented with undoubted ability and skill. No unprejudiced person who accepts the narratives of Matthew (xxi. 18-22) and Mark (xi. 12-14) as genuine can deny that Jesus erred in expecting to find figs upon the leafy tree. The suggestion is untenable that He did not certainly expect fruit, but only held the existence of fruit in the case of this tree to be possible. Had He not been disappointed He could not have cursed the tree—in reality His cursing was the wrathful outcome and expression of His disappointment. Even if He cursed the tree only in symbolic act, as a prophetic intimation of the doo awaiting

Israel for not meeting His or Jehovah's anticipations, it still remains true that His anticipations concerning Israel were not fulfilled, and that no parallel could have been drawn between the nation and the tree unless He had been disappointed with both. The evangelists tacitly presuppose that Jesus was capable of error, which shows that the first Christians must have ascribed to their Master a certain measure of fallibility, as otherwise it is inconceivable that the evangelists could have imputed to Him human weaknesses by which He had not been affected. Probably the arguments could not have been more dexterously marshalled,—whether they will hold is another matter.

Without commenting on the circumstance that Dr. Schwartzkopff himself declines to accept the story as authentic, and thus practically throws away the weapon against Christ's inerrancy he has so laboriously forged, it may be noted that even on the assumption that the incident occurred, the most he feels warranted in inferring from the narratives is, upon his own confession, that 'perhaps we have here a mistake of Christ's before us,' and that 'in any case the two evangelists presuppose that Christ went wrong.' This, however, as anyone can see, is a widely different conclusion from that which the accomplished critic promised to make good, that 'no unprejudiced person who accepted the narratives of Matthew and Mark as genuine could deny that Jesus erred.' It is by no means unthinkable that the evangelists may have blundered in attributing error to Christ (see below); and should one be faced with the alternative of sacrificing the inerrancy of Jesus, or admitting a mistake on the part of His biographers, there can be no doubt as to the choice one would make.

The other allegations just as helplessly break down.

Why should it be untenable that Jesus did not positively expect fruit, but merely deemed the existence of fruit possible in the case of a tree whose leaves were so abundant? Mark's statement, that 'the time of figs was not yet,' clearly implies that from the season of the year no one had reason to *certainly* expect figs. What excited hope that on this particular tree figs might be found, in the absence of explanation can only be conjectured. It may have been, as Holtzmann proposes, the experience Jesus had in Galilee, especially in the

vicinity of the Sea of Gennesaret, of fig-trees which bore fruit throughout a period of ten months, a fact attested by Josephus (*Wars*, iii. x. 8); or, as Delitzsch in Riehm's *Handwörterbuch* (art. "Feigenbaum") suggests, the knowledge possessed by Jesus, that unripe figs of the preceding year sometimes hung upon a tree the winter through and ripened when the leaves began to come again in spring; or, as Schwartzkopff himself concedes, the phenomenon which Jesus may have at times observed, that the fig-tree 'is accustomed to develop its fruit before the leaf,' or, as Dr. Thomson writes in the *Land and the Book* (p. 349), that 'the fig often comes with, or even before, the leaves, and especially on the early kind.' But whatever was the right explanation, why, it may be asked, might not Christ have approached the tree in uncertainty? Matthew does not assert the contrary, that Christ approached it in certainty, *i.e.* with full assurance of finding fruit; and if Mark *appears* to affirm that He did, can one be sure that the clause, 'If haply,' etc., was designed to do more than present the view of Christ's procedure, which was taken by those who witnessed it? At least, the advocate of Christ's inerrancy may reasonably demand more explicit demonstration that the words in question reveal the thought which lay in Christ's mind, rather than the surmise which occupied the disciples' minds and perhaps Peter's mind on the occasion. Till such be furnished, one may be excused for holding that the most that can be inferred from this incident is incomplete knowledge, which is assuredly not the same thing as positive error.

As for Christ's (so called) cursing the tree being an indication that He had been disappointed, since He would never have given way to such an exhibition of anger had He not felt chagrined, the whole implied syllogism, premises, and conclusions alike, is a gratuitous assumption, if not an unjustifiable insinuation. In neither of the two accounts is a hint given of either anger or cursing in the sense usually assigned to these words. Dr. Schwartzkopff himself recognises that such an outburst of passion as is here suggested could not possibly be harmonised with sinlessness; and as sinlessness, in his judgment, formed a necessary qualification for Christ as a Saviour, he follows Keim, Holtzmann, Wendt, and others in rejecting the entire story as unauthentic. No solid ground, however, exists for either repudiating the incident as apocryphal or charging Christ with moral

defalcation either in the feelings He cherished or in the words He uttered. On the contrary, if Christ's words caused the fig-tree immediately to wither, one need have no anxiety either as to whether He had a right to pronounce them, or as to the purity of heart and mind out of which they sprang.

That Christ's disappointment with Israel's reception of Himself was as represented by Dr. Schwartzkopff may be challenged by those who remember how, from the outset of His career, as reported by all the evangelists (Matt. ix. 15; Mark ii. 19, 20; Luke iv. 29, v. 35; John ii. 19), Christ possessed a more or less distinct foresight of His tragic end. Yet had it been otherwise, and Israel's treatment of Him had come upon Him as a surprise, even this would barely warrant the inference that He had also been cheated by the tree unless it had been His purpose to institute a parallel between these two experiences. But neither Matthew nor Mark asserts this. The proper parallel suggested by Christ's language rather lies between the materially fruitless condition of the tree and the spiritually barren state of the nation, or between the swiftly accelerated fate of the one and the rapidly approaching doom of the other. And even this, it should be kept in view, is not a pronouncement of the sacred historians, but only an inference of their expositors.

The last two propositions about the opinions of the evangelists and first Christians as to Christ's fallibility and actual errancy—conceding, for the sake of argument, that such were their opinions—cannot be accepted as unassailable evidence of Christ's having lapsed into error in this particular instance, or indeed in any instance at all, except on the presupposition of their infallibility. But this not even Dr. Schwartzkopff would allow. When he asks how it comes to pass that we impute intellectual indefectibility to Christ when they who lived so much nearer Christ's time did not, he forgets that on his own showing (see p. 21) the higher critics of to-day claim to have reversed the judgments of those who stood more than 2000 years closer to the Psalms of David than they do. 'Thou that judgest (another) doest the same things.'

2. The second example of error specified is the notion said to have been entertained by Jesus in common with His contemporaries, that Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of a sea

monster. That the Book of Jonah so relates is not denied. It is questioned, indeed, whether Christ actually adopted the Hebrew narrator's statement which is reproduced only in Matthew (xii. 40). If, as Dr. Schwartzkopff believes, Luke's version (xi. 29, 30) alone be genuine, it is clear that debate ceases to be longer necessary,—there can be no room whatever for charging Christ, at least in this instance, with error; but if, as textual critics of repute hold, Matthew's reading is no less authentic, it is still far from being obvious that Christ blundered. The miraculous character of the incident reported does not necessarily stamp it as myth, unless upon a foregone conclusion that the supernatural is always unhistorical. Nor can it be pled that because the higher critics have pronounced the Book of Jonah a didactic poem—perhaps rather a Hebrew theological novel—belonging at the earliest to the Persian period, the episode about the prophet and the fish must be dismissed as romance. Theological novels and didactic poems, in those days, it may be presumed,—were such compositions manufactured then,—just as in this nineteenth Christian century, were sometimes founded upon fact; and it should not be overlooked in this connexion that critics of eminence like de Wette, Schrader, Cornill, and Driver admit with more or less frankness that this may have been the case with the Book of Jonah—the last-mentioned writer stating that 'the materials of the narrative rest ultimately upon a basis of fact,' and that 'the outlines of the narrative are historical.' Until, then, it has been shown—not on anti-supernatural, but on literary or historical grounds—that the anecdote about the whale was not a fact, the (so-called) late origin and didactic or romantic colouring of the Book cannot be cited as unerring witness that Jesus erred. Besides, if the Book was a poem with a purpose, or a novel with a moral, rather than a prosaic history, why may Jesus not have known this then as well as German critics think they know it now? and have employed the incident about the fish, notwithstanding His acquaintance with its true character, simply as an illustration of His own impending resurrection? Not a few 'believing' critics adopt this solution of the knotty problem presented by Matthew's version of Christ's language; and *without indorsing it*, one feels that at this stage in the discussion it may lawfully be called into service to ward off from Jesus the accusation of blunder-

ing. At the same time, it is frankly acknowledged that the balance of probability lies with those who hold that Christ did accept the story of the whale as true; and yet it does not appear that on this account a charge of errancy can be sustained against Him except upon one or other of the following hypotheses: either that no such prophet as Jonah ever lived, or that he never went to Nineveh, or that, though he went to Nineveh, the narrative contains such a crowd of improbabilities and absurdities as to outrage common sense and render belief impossible, or at least transform it into an act of imbecile credulity.

Against the first supposition stands the mention in 2 Kings xiv. 25 of a Jonah the son of Amittai and a native of Gath-hepher, who discharged prophetic functions in Israel in the reign of Jeroboam II. In favour of the second, the strongest consideration urged is the extreme unlikelihood (so it is said) that a Hebrew prophet should have been sent upon or should have undertaken a mission to a heathen country, and especially to a frivolous and pleasure-loving city like Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, with its haughty and tyrannical king. Wherein, however, the extreme unlikelihood comes in one does not exactly see, when one considers that Elisha had some seventy years before, in obedience to Divine command, journeyed to Damascus to inform Benhadad of Syria of his approaching death (2 Kings viii. 7-15), which fell out by assassination, and that already in the reign of Jeroboam II. the Assyrian kings had begun to spread desolation and terror among the nations of Western Asia, and were soon to come into contact with Israel, so that even in Jonah's day Jehovah might have had something to say to that ferocious military power before permitting it to pounce down upon and eventually swallow up unworthy and apostate Israel. Nor, should it be conceded for the sake of argument that such a pilgrimage as that of Jonah was an utterly unheard-of proceeding until Jonah arose, is it easy to understand why a new departure on the part of either Jonah or Jehovah should have been impossible. Must it be ruled *à priori* that originality is not permissible to either a prophet or God? and that only modern critics are allowed or possess the genius to strike out new ideas or enter upon hitherto untrodden paths? The notion is preposterous, and barely worthy of serious treatment.

As for the inherent improbabilities attaching to

the story, the following are quoted as a fair sample. Supposing Jonah to have gone to Nineveh, it is in the highest degree unlikely, say Knobel, Hitzig, Ewald, and others, that he should ever have ventured to shout through its streets that in forty days it should be destroyed; that, if he did, either the people or the king of Nineveh would for a moment listen to such a threat from a foreign preacher, and least of all from a wandering Jew; and that if such a marvellous conversion—marvellous for its suddenness and completeness—is reported ever took place, it should have been passed over in absolute silence not only in Assyrian but also in Hebrew records. But are these improbabilities as staggering as they look? To insinuate that Jonah would have been afraid to preach destruction to Nineveh—lest, it is presumed, he might either be impaled or decapitated or subjected to some similar barbarity after the manner of the Assyrians—is little short of putting a libel upon the Jonah of the story whose cheek manifestly did not blanch in the presence of death, not to speak of heaping insult upon Jehovah. It is practically saying that Hebrew prophets generally were as conspicuous cowards and lily-livered poltroons as some modern teachers would be were they entrusted with like hazardous commissions, and that Jehovah who assisted Moses to brave the wrath of a Pharaoh and kept Elijah from quailing before Ahab could not have undergirded the son of Amittai in presence of the king and people of Nineveh. That if Jonah cried, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed,' neither king nor people would have paid attention to his fanatical ravings, except perhaps to arrest him as a lunatic, if not silence him as a troubler, is sufficiently refuted by Mr. Layard's deposition in *Nineveh and Babylon* (p. 632), that he had 'known a Christian priest frighten a whole Mussulman town to tears and repentance by publicly proclaiming that he had received a Divine mission to announce

a coming earthquake or plague.' That the conversion of the Ninevites is not reported elsewhere proves nothing. Its transient character was enough to justify its omission from both Assyrian and Hebrew annals; while its double mention by Matthew and Luke attests that in Christ's day, whatever may be said about the story of the sea-monster, the prophet's mission and the city's repentance were looked upon as historical. But if these were historical, and Professor Schwartzkopff admits they were, it will not be easy to explain why Matthew should be refused credence when he rehearses the miracle about the fish. If the entire population of an immense city like Nineveh became agitated from top to bottom in the manner described by Old Testament Scripture, it is natural to argue that the disturbing cause must have been some phenomenon more arresting than the preaching of a wandering Jew. So far from Matthew's explanation being intrinsically absurd, one feels that something equally unusual must have happened to account for so stupendous a revolution in the haughty and tyrannical capital as the narrative depicts. Nor does it militate against this inference that nothing is stated about how the Ninevites came to learn of and believe in the wondrous tale of the prophet's miraculous preservation and deliverance. By the time Jonah got to Nineveh the news of his amazing experience might have arrived thither through the ordinary channels of communication, or through one or more of the sailors having travelled thither. To secure its acceptance nothing more was needed than a special Divine influence upon the hearts of the Ninevites, which is neither absurd nor impossible if there be either a God or a Spirit. In any case, it is too much to expect that unprejudiced readers will on such slender evidence as is here supplied return against Jesus a unanimous verdict of error in His views about the Jonah sign.

(To be continued.)