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1932

756TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING,

HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM B, THE CENTRAL HALL,  
WESTMINSTER, S.W.1, ON MONDAY, APRIL 4TH, 1932,

AT 4.30 P.M.

DR. JAMES W. THIRTLE IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed, and signed.

The CHAIRMAN then called on the Rev. Paul P. Levertoff, D.D., to read his paper on "The Changing Attitude of the Modern Jew to Jesus Christ."

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*THE CHANGING ATTITUDE OF THE MODERN JEW  
TO JESUS CHRIST.*

By REV. PAUL P. LEVERTOFF, D.D.

SCATTERED among all nations; forced to struggle perpetually for preservation as an entity; persecuted, harried from land to land, forced into false positions by the pressure of social and economic circumstances; and so led into an ever-deepening hatred of a "religion" which could inform the hearts of its adherents to such bitter purpose—the Jewish people now emerges from the cauldron of past hate, and stands in a relation to the Christian world at once more peaceful and more desperate.

What they have for centuries preserved, that they are now throwing away. They are losing their identity in a maze of conflicting aims. Where, at one time, assimilation was forced upon them against their will, and so never consummated, now many of them allow themselves to be submerged, and the process is all too thorough. The strong, unifying purpose of religious tradition and aspiration has weakened, and for want of this bond the Jewish people is now scattered in a more profoundly tragic sense than ever before.

Thus, there can be no possible meaning in the phrase "changing attitude" if it be applied to the Jewish people as a whole. For the racial entity as such, there has been (and is) but one attitude to Jesus Christ, and that is the unchanging one of aversion and fear. The writer of the so-called "Letter of Lentulus" speaks of Christ as *vultum quem possent intuentes diligere et formidare*—"having a countenance which those who looked upon it might fall in love with, or might shrink from in terror." What he meant was, that men were at once awed and fascinated by His presence, and so felt that He was a true representative of the Divine Nature. But the Jewish people as a whole still "shrink from Him in terror," in a different sense.

This attitude has undergone no change, except in so far as the influence of Gentile and non-religious culture, tending to diminish hatred through lack of fervour and to replace it by indifference, can be counted a change. Unfortunately, that change is by far the easiest to perceive and to record.

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But it is equally certain that, among individual Jews, a more hopeful state of affairs is beginning to emerge. In fact, there has been nothing more striking in the movement of modern religious thought than the changing attitude of some Jews to the Person of Christ, as exemplified by some of their pulpit utterances, and such books as Claude Montefiore's commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, *The Old Testament and after*, etc., Joseph Klausner's *Life of Jesus of Nazareth*, and last but not least Franz Werfel's dramatic presentation of St. Paul's conversion, in which a new note is sounded, and for the first time there is found a genuine comprehension of the deeper mysteries of the Christian Faith. In its knowledge of the background and the play of forces that were operative as the Christian message widened its scope, in its delineation of character, and its deep spiritual insight, this is undoubtedly a unique and highly significant work, and we propose to concentrate our attention on it.

It is necessary, however, first to consider some utterances of eminent Jewish writers which reveal an admiration, even a veneration, for Jesus and His teaching, but nothing more, in order that the full importance of Werfel's masterpiece as a fulfilment of all that preceded it may be clearly understood.

Karl Emil Franzos, one of the most brilliant Jewish novelists of the latter part of the last century, relates in one of his works

a very interesting story. In the town of Barnow, in Galicia, there lived a Jewish shoemaker, Chaim Lipiner. This man was possessed by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, his favourite saying being "Who knows the truth?" He attached himself in turn to one sect after another. Being originally a Talmudic Jew, he left the Talmudists and joined the "Chasidim" *i.e.* the mystics. Among these Chasidim there are different parties and circles, each following a different (so-called) "Zadik," or miracle-working Rabbi, and he went from one party to another always with the cry, "Who knows the truth?"

It came to pass that, on one very cold moonlight night, as a company of Jews were returning late to their homes, they noticed a figure kneeling motionless in the deep snow before the large crucifix which was attached to the wall of the convent of the Dominicans, with his arms stretched out as if longing to embrace it. To their horror, when they came nearer, they saw that it was their eccentric friend, Chaim Lipiner. They stopped for a few moments, horror-struck at the sight, and, as they silently listened, they heard him, in a tremulous, sobbing voice, pronounce over the crucifix the blessing which in the Jewish liturgy is prescribed for a pilgrim who, after wandering through the dark night, sees the sun rise. Then their rage burst forth, they fell upon the poor man, beating and kicking him, until he had to be carried home half dead.

Next morning great excitement prevailed among the Jews in that small town. A court of judgment was to be held in the synagogue, and the Rabbi was to pronounce sentence on the culprit. The people gathered in masses. The poor man had to be brought on his bedding into the synagogue, and, as he was carried through the ranks of Jews on either side, they spat upon him and cursed him. The Rabbi preached a sermon, emphasizing the awful character of apostasy, and the terrors which were awaiting the apostate in the world to come; and when he had finished, the man was asked what he had to say for himself. To everyone's astonishment, he remained silent, merely shaking his head. This increased the indignation, and the Rabbi, together with the angry crowd, insisted upon a reply. At last, the poor man raised himself on his bedding, looked with a calm glance at the fanatics around him, and uttered a short speech. It was nothing more than his favourite saying, "Who knows the truth?"

Dr. Martin Buber, a well-known exponent of mystical Judaism, says in his *Drei Reden über das Judentum*: "It was on Jewish soil that this spiritual revolution (*i.e.* the Gospel) burst into flame. . . We must overcome the superstitious terror with which we have regarded the Nazareth movement, a movement which we must place where it properly belongs—in the spiritual history of Israel."

Speaking on St. Luke xv, the leader of Liberal Judaism, Dr. Claude Montefiore, says: "Surely this is a new note, something which we have not yet heard in the Old Testament of its heroes, something we do not hear in the Talmud or of its heroes. 'The sinners drew near to Him.' His teaching did not repel the . . . It did not palter with, or make light of sin, but yet gave comfort to the sinner. The virtues of repentance are gloriously praised in the Rabbinic literature, but this direct search for (and appeal to) the sinner, are new and moving notes of high import and significance. The good shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, and reclaims it and rejoices over it, is a new figure, which has never ceased to play its great part in the moral and religious development of the world." (*The Synoptic Gospels*, vol. i, p. 520).

The Hebrew writer, Reuben Brainin, speaks lyrically of his search for the "mysterious personality, who embodies in himself our great past and our yet more glorious future." . . . "Where art Thou? (he cries), Redeemer, who hast the power to draw everything which is yet spiritual, ethical, beautiful, and good in our nation to thyself, and to unite us in one great redeeming deed?" Although the Name of Jesus is not mentioned in the article, there can be no doubt that it is that "mysterious Person," whom he thus addresses.

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In all these brief extracts there is a predominant note of seeking—but not of finding; of longing unfulfilled, and of a desire scarcely defined; but ever present. The full expression of that longing, the fulfilment of that hope, and the concentration of all those aspirations into a passionate and articulate whole, can be found in Franz Werfel's drama, *Paul among the Jews*.

The author is an Austrian Jewish poet, novelist, and playwright, who has already won for himself a great reputation in Europe and America. In this play he gives,—aided by a consummate technique which never needs to suspend its sincerity in order to achieve its effects—not only a theatrical panorama of

Jerusalem at the time of Caius Caligula, in all its social, political, and personal intricacy, but also a powerful dramatic presentation of the great historic moment when Christianity liberated itself from the swaddling bands of a too nationalistic Judaism; and in addition—for else the play would have been a dramatic tract instead of the masterpiece that it is—a series of portraits of the leaders both of the old religious life and of the community based on the new revelation, all centring round and culminating in one principal figure—Paul himself—as a fit symbol of, and leading factor in, the events of that “revolution,” certainly one of the most momentous in the history of the world.

No one, reading or viewing this play without knowing anything about it, could imagine for a moment that its author was not, officially at least, a Christian. Every word of the newly converted Paul, now returned to Jerusalem only to meet the hatred of his former companions and the distrust of the Christian community which he so recently had persecuted—every word of this extraordinary and dominating character, at once so complex and so full of passionate simplicity, holds the note of joy in spiritual fulfilment, the affirmation and completion of Israel's expectation. Whether he is attempting to convey to the dubious apostles the miraculous change which has been wrought in him, or to proclaim the newly discovered truth to the amazed and angry rabbis whose brightest hopes had in the past been centred in himself; whether the Jewish leaders are attempting to exorcise him, or the Roman Government to imprison him on false charges—whatever the involved and often tragic turn of events, it is this Paul, this man immersed in and re-made by overwhelming experiences, who holds chief place.

At first he himself is not clear as to the nature of his immediate mission; he is saddened by the apostles' evident distrust of him; but when he hears Gamaliel's voice chanting Psalms as a procession passes, he divines that it is to him that he must take his message. When he visits the House of Study he becomes reconciled with that greatest of Israelites, who had renounced him when he deserted the mild ways of his teacher and joined himself to the violent men and the zealots.

Gamaliel it is who shelters Paul against the wrath of the other rabbis, and it is to him that, in the last scene, seated at his feet in the inner chamber of the Temple, on the eve of the Day of Atonement,—the murmuring of the praying people sounding from without like a symbol of despair—that Paul pours out the

full burden of his glorious message. He speaks of himself as he had been in the past—a slave of sin, and, equally, a slave of the Law; he speaks of Gamaliel himself, his greatness and beauty of soul; but Gamaliel commands: “Speak of that which thou shouldst speak!”

*Paul*: “How can I speak of Him, Rabbanu? How can I speak of the moment when the Light from heaven rushed into my being, when I entered, blind, into a new world? My heart is torn when I so much as think of it. Can a man speak of the moment of his birth?”

*Gamaliel*: “Thou wilt speak! For I have decided that thou shouldst lead back Rabbi Jehoshua of Nazareth to Israel!”

*Paul*: “Glorious! Rabbanu! Isaiah’s word is being fulfilled: ‘I was found of them that sought me not.’ Hear, O Israel! Thou hast found Him!”

*Gamaliel*: “I have found a holy man of God. And I will testify of him.”

But Gamaliel cannot go beyond a certain point, and when Paul insists that—“He did more than illumine the Law” . . . and that “The dispensation of the word Law is past,” he cannot, or dare not, believe. Says Paul: “Why has loneliness vanished? What is this strong exulting love in me?” But Gamaliel, his mood changing, cries: “What has the love of thy Jesus changed? Not He, and not I, can banish evil, only the Law, the holy Tie which binds mankind.”

*Paul*: “This Tie has become rotten, Rabbanu! Like a discarded wine-skin the word Law lies upon the road!”

*Gamaliel*: “This the man Jesus did not say.”

*Paul*: “Rabbanu speaketh of a *man*! Oh, the world is swallowed up, both Jews and Gentiles, and only thou art here, thou and He. . . . *A man*! Has ever a man conquered death and decay? Has ever a man risen bodily from the dead? The Light, which spoke to me before Damascus, was it a man? Was it a man that delivered me from myself? Can a man grant God’s renewing grace? No, Rabbanu! He was not merely a man! He wore Manhood as a garment. . . . He, the Messiah, the incarnate Shekinah, God’s Son, He was before the world came into being. . . .”

*Gamaliel*: “Saul, say that He was a man, for thine own sake and mine!”

*Paul*: “How can I? From man new birth cometh not.”



*Gamaliel* : “ From man alone it cometh ! For this Temple’s sake, say that He was a man ! ”

*Paul* : “ Not in the Temple, but on the Cross was the Blood of the Atonement shed. Now is the whole world the Temple of the great Sacrifice.”

*Gamaliel* pleads still more passionately—“ For Israel’s freedom’s sake, say that He was a man ! ”

*Paul* : “ Rabbanu, by the living God, I implore thee, believe ! In this hour, not for anyone’s sake can I lie.”

*Gamaliel* : “ Woe unto thee ! Knowest thou who the Messiah is ? He is annihilation ! For when this arrow flies the bow will break. I will not see Him. . . . ”

*Paul* : (after an awful pause) : “ The bow is broken, O Israel ! And forever ! ”

*Gamaliel* : “ Traitor ! ”

And as the murmur of prayer is borne up in a great volume of tragic sound, he advances on Paul with the sacrificial knife, crying : “ I retract my decision concerning Jesus of Nazareth ! Perhaps he was a holy prophet, but I call him enemy ! . . . The angel of Death between us, Saul ! ”

Passionately he appeals to God for guidance : “ Who is Jesus of Nazareth ? Who is Jesus whom they call Messiah ? Has the Messiah come ? Have we profaned thy Light . . . ? ”

But there is no answer. Imperiously he cries : “ Answer ! ” But only silence answers him.

Then Paul, softly and fervently,—“ I have received the answer, Rabbanu, Here am I.”

*Gamaliel* : “ I know the Truth no more. . . . Go ! ” (and he lets the knife fall).

*Paul* : “ Yes, I have seen God’s answer ! I was wafted into dusty streets, in harbours I saw ships come and go ; sailors sang. I stood among the throng in a great city, and ever must I go—go—go ! For the Christ is a tireless hunter.” And so he goes.

And *Gamaliel*, his face becoming slowly distorted, cries out, “ The Destruction upon us ! The Destruction ” . . . and stumbles out, covering his face, his cry dying away in the distance.

But this is not the end, though destruction does indeed fall upon the Temple, and Roman troops take possession of the holy place. The body of *Gamaliel* is carried in, and the Jews break into subdued yet dreadful wailing, which continues to the end. But above the tumult of an epoch crumbling to ruin ; above the tragic finality of that destruction, self-imposed by refusal of that

which alone could have kindled it anew to a more glorious life ; above the symbol of a more than national, a cosmic despair, sounds the voice of St. Peter, in that supreme affirmation which, in the final issue, is the touchstone of the only satisfying attitude to Jesus Christ of anyone, be he Jew or Christian—"THE HOUR OF THE CHRIST HAS COME!"

#### DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN (Dr. Thirtle) said : I am sure we have listened with profound attention to the paper read by Dr. Levertoff in our hearing. We could, perhaps, have wished the paper to be somewhat longer ; but what it has lacked in length it has exhibited in intensity of conception and strength of expression. I wish to return sincere thanks to our distinguished lecturer for that which he has placed before us. For myself, I fully expected depth of thought combined with warmth of feeling, for I have known Dr. Levertoff some twenty years or more, having met him in days before he found his home in England. As in the course of years friends and scholars have risen around him, and have given welcome to the output of his fertile pen, one and all have come to admire his special command of Jewish culture and Jewish learning as we have had it sampled before us this afternoon.

Quite obviously, the title of the paper was open to misconception. If there is changing attitude to Christ on the part of the Jew, it is not a change on what can rightly be called a communal scale, nor, I think, can it be described as fundamental in its effects upon the Jewish race. There may be *ostensible* change in some quarters, but there is nothing that can be said to carry the mentality of the Scattered Nation as a whole. As we are well aware, there exists an organization in which Jews and Christians combine on an intellectual basis, with the hope of establishing an understanding between those who follow Moses and those who follow Christ. But this organization cannot be said to exercise any wide and deep influence : it may carry the interest of circles of refinement, but it does not touch the heart of the Jewish people as a whole, even as it fails to represent Christian judgment along a line that holds with consistent tenacity to the teaching of Christ. Hence, we acquiesce without question in the words of a short paragraph on the opening page of the paper,

which says that the attitude of the Jew to Christ "has undergone no change except in so far as the influence of Gentile and non-Jewish culture, tending to diminish hatred through lack of fervour, and to replace it by indifference, can be counted a change. Unfortunately, that change is by far the easiest to perceive and to record."

I think we shall agree that, leaving on one side anything like a challenging statement, Dr. Levertoff has been wise in confining himself to incidents and records that have an illustrative bearing on the subject before us. The thoughtful Jew remains such, even as the thoughtful Christian must remain such; and while there may be (and should be) a spirit of understanding, yet, with Christ as answering to "the stone of stumbling" in Scripture language, there can be no justification for a spirit of insincere compromise. To the Jew, even as to the Greek, the Christian should be a confessor of Christ both by lip and life. As absolute honesty is cultivated, we may witness the upgrowth of feelings of mutual respect and confidence. Most certainly the Jew does not ask for patronage, equally as the Christian has no reason for maintaining a weak, apologetic attitude. At any rate, and always, it is right for Christian people to stand apart from the persecuting Church of the Middle Ages, and to evince the sympathetic spirit that has appeared in more recent generations, the while praying for the peace of Jerusalem, and invoking the Divine blessing upon the people still "beloved for the fathers' sakes."

I am sure you will join with me in thanking our lecturer for the paper to which we have listened.

Mr. PERCY O. RUOFF: This interesting paper describes in a graphic manner a remarkable spirit of inquiry among modern Jews in reference to Christianity. The principal point to be considered is: How far, if at all, does this inquiry extend beyond modern liberal-mindedness? Does it show any indication on the part of Jews to-day to approach Christianity or Jesus Christ with faith in its divine origin or acceptance of His Messiahship? Let it be granted that a readiness to investigate the truth is a hopeful and welcome sign, and it is certainly significant that in Werfel's drama, "Paul among the Jews," the claims of Messiah as Son of God are so forcefully and pathetically set forth. It is to be carefully observed

that, in the moving story of the shoemaker Chaim Lipiner, the climax is repudiation of Lipiner, and stern denunciation by the Rabbi of the awful apostasy committed. And with regard to the most dramatic and moving dialogue between Paul and Gamaliel, it should be carefully noted that, whilst it is deeply significant that Christ is openly spoken of as "the incarnate Shekinah, God's Son, He was before the world came into being," the climax of the drama is reached when Gamaliel, the accredited representative spokesman, declares of the Messiah, "He is annihilation!" And again, "Perhaps he was a holy prophet, but I call Him enemy." It may be that another emphasis may completely change this aspect of the drama, and show it to be a new approach to Christ. I shall welcome any light which Dr. Levertoff can give in this matter.

Rev. F. W. PITT said: It should be observed that a change of attitude or opinion does not imply a change of heart. There is, without doubt, a willingness among Jews to reconsider the work of Christ, Whom the nation as such rejected, but this must be regarded in the light of the liberalism of these last days. Jewish exclusivism is not what it was, it having yielded much in the widespread apostasy foretold. The prophetic Scriptures clearly show that Israel as a nation will not acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. When the Son of Man comes the second time, Israel, under the stress of the great Tribulation, will look for deliverance, calling on Him whom they pierced, and at His appearing they will say, "This is our God; we have waited for him." In the meantime, there is salvation for the individual Jew, whenever there is a change, not of opinion, but of heart.

#### LECTURER'S REPLY.

The questions propounded in connection with my paper can all be considered as connected with one problem: namely, in the words of Mr. Ruoff, "how far, if at all, does the remarkable spirit of inquiry, now manifest in modern Jews in reference to Christianity, extend beyond modern liberal-mindedness."

The Chairman's remarks present no definite questions other than those already raised in the course of my paper; with the exception

of some personal references, I am in complete accord with all his statements.

On the other hand, Mr. Ruoff, while emphasizing the very fact which I myself have always endeavoured to bring clearly to the minds of the over-optimistic, namely, that in most cases this spirit of inquiry does not extend beyond modern liberal-mindedness, seems inclined to underestimate the significance of such evidences to a deeper change of spiritual attitude as I have mustered. A readiness to investigate the truth, while a hopeful and welcome sign, can of course never be enough in the final issue, and in fact leaves the gulf between a Christless world and a world centred in Christ as wide (and as deep as) ever it was, though it may to a certain extent bridge the gulf between the Jewish and the Christian worlds, and aid in the achievement of that mutual respect and confidence emphasized by the Chairman.

As Mr. Pitt truly says, "a change of attitude or opinion does not imply a change of heart," and it is only in a comparatively few cases that this miracle or gift of true enlightenment can be detected. That was the very reason why the title of my paper was, in one sense, a misnomer. While many modern Jews have altered quite startlingly in their opinions of Christ from those held by their forefathers, and while their attitude becomes increasingly tolerant and inquiring, it is in only a very few cases that I have been able to find what I may call a preparation for the true spiritual enlightenment; and in one alone that I have found—at least I think so—the enlightenment itself. These cases are the examples mentioned in my paper, and it is their significance which is, to my mind, somewhat underrated by Mr. Ruoff.

The climax of the story about Chaim Lipiner is emphatically not repudiation and denunciation, but the triumphantly courageous "un-satisfaction" of the seeker—"Who knows the truth?" There is nothing final in that, but at least it is a pretty good basis for further spiritual ventures, which, one can only hope, may ultimately find their fulfilment and satisfaction in a better knowledge and understanding of the completest and most perfect Truth. As for the play, it may be noted that it is of great significance that a Jew should choose to write a play about St. Paul at all. One is amazed at the intense and accurate spiritual vision and under-

standing with which all the aspects and reactions of that character and the problems of the newly emerging Church are treated. It is a mistake to imagine that Gamaliel, or any other single character in the play, is to be considered as the vehicle for the expression of the author's opinions; rather it is the whole atmosphere of the work, the passionate sincerity that animates it, and the extraordinarily illuminating—and illuminated—phrases of complete affirmation and comprehension, such as could surely only be possible to one who has experienced, not only a change of opinion but—as emphasized by Mr. Pitt—a change of heart.

Of course, this example only bears out that which he has averred, namely, that it is in individuals only that we dare hope to find at present that miraculous and mysterious gift of sudden vision. But that it is present in this play I personally have no doubt: the climax is not—"He is annihilation!"; it is not—"I call Him enemy!"; it is—"For the Christ is a tireless Hunter" . . . It is—"The hour of the Christ has come!"