

THE CHEATING OF THE DEVIL

ACCORDING TO PAUL AND THE DOCETISTS.

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IN his article "Saint Ignatius *vs.* the Historicists" (*Open Court*, June, 1913) Prof. W. B. Smith cites this passage from Ignatius (*Ephesians*, XIX): "And hid from the Prince of this con was the virginity of Mary and her bringing forth, likewise also the death of the Lord. Three mysteries of shout (i. e., crying mysteries) which in stillness of God were wrought. How then were they (or was he) manifested to the ages? A star in heaven shone beyond all the stars, and its light was ineffable, and its novelty produced amazement; and the other stars along with sun and moon became chorus for the star, but itself in its light was far surpassing all; and perplexity there was, whence the novelty so unlike them. Whereby was dissolved all magic, and every bond of vileness vanished away, ignorance was annulled, the ancient kingdom was destroyed, God being humanly manifested unto newness of eternal life, and its beginning received what with God had been prepared. Hence were all things commoved by taking death's abolition in hand." These words need further explanation. They become clear to us as describing the descent of the heavenly Christ upon earth and his eluding the knowledge of the devil and his host if we look into the Ascension of Isaiah, a Jewish apocalypse with Christian interpolations, probably of the second century, comparing with it a passage of Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians (ii. 6-9).

In that apocalypse the descent of the heavenly Christ is described in a long chapter (X) from the seventh heaven down to the earth. He is going downwards through the different heavens, successively assuming the appearance of the angels in the different heavens, from the fifth on, thus preventing them from knowing

that he, in company with "the Highest," is the Lord of the seventh heaven and its angels.

After he has passed through all the heavens downward, he gets into the region of the firmament and the air, the abode (comp. *Eph.* II, 2) of the Prince of this eon and his angels. He escapes the notice of these also by assuming their form and because they are wrangling among themselves out of envy against each other.

In the next chapter the description takes a peculiar turn. It speaks of the Virgin Mary, whom Joseph intends to leave on account of her pregnancy. But "the angel of the Holy Spirit," described previously in chap. IX as of similar appearance to the heavenly Christ and kneeling with him together before the throne of God,¹ appears and Joseph then does not forsake Mary. After two months, while Joseph and Mary are alone in their home, suddenly Mary sees a little child and is startled. Her womb has resumed the condition as before pregnancy. A voice tells them not to say anything. The neighbors are astounded that she gave birth without pain and the help of a midwife.²

The child of Mary, when grown up, does great miracles. The devil becomes envious of him and stirs up the Jews to crucify him, but the Christ rises from Hades, the descent to which has been predicted to him by the Highest, in three days and then returns through the firmament and the air and up through the different heavens successively till up to the seventh, but in different form than when he descended. Satan and his angels are stricken with dismay and fall down before him exclaiming: "How did it come about that he descended and we did not know him?" In the heavens above the firmament the different angels likewise are astonished that they did not know him before, and they adore him. (Comp. in the passage of Ignatius: "And the other stars along with sun and moon

¹ This peculiar assimilation of the heavenly Christ and Holy Spirit occurs also in the gnostic book *Pistis Sophia*. It tells of Mary being visited by the Holy Spirit in her house, while Joseph and the little Jesus are working in the vineyard. The Holy Spirit asks Mary: "Where is Jesus my brother, that I may meet him?" Mary, thinking the appearance is a tempting spirit, ties him to the foot of a bed and goes out to tell Joseph about the matter. When Jesus hears it he is glad and says: "Where is he that I may see him?" Then all three of them go to the house. Mary and Joseph find Jesus and the Holy Spirit alike to each other. The Holy Spirit released embraces and kisses Jesus and Jesus likewise the Holy Spirit and they become one. Comp. Paul: "The Lord is the Spirit."

² The docetic tendency and color of this description is obvious. The birth of Jesus and everything surrounding it is only an empty appearance, according to the docetic doctrine that the human Christ was only loosely connected with the heavenly one.

became chorus for the star etc." Comp. also I Tim. iii. 16: "The great mystery etc., revealed to the angels.")

What is interesting in this passage of the Ascension of Isaiah is this, that the germ of it already appears in the afore-mentioned passage of first Corinthians. Paul says: "We speak out wisdom among the perfect, not wisdom of this eon, nor of the rulers of this eon done away with. But we speak wisdom of God in mystery, which has been hidden, which God predestined before the eons to our glory. Which none of the rulers of this eon knew, for if they had known it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as is written: What no eye saw, no ear heard, and came into no eye of man, which God prepared for those loving him. But God revealed it to us through his spirit. For the spirit searches out all things, even the depths of God."

"The rulers of this eon" are the devil and his host, not Pilate and the Jewish priests as the traditional interpretation gives it. "The rulers of this eon" is the standing phrase for the evil demons in Paul and other parts of the New Testament. They "are done away with," their power is demolished; they fell into their own pit when they crucified Christ; they were outwitted; if they had known the wisdom of God and known whom they crucified, they would have abstained from a deed which brought about their own destruction.

Paul like Ignatius calls the outwitting of Satan a "mystery" and in connection with this cites a passage, which is nowhere found in the Old Testament, but which according to Origen and other fathers of the church stood in the Revelation of Elias, another Jewish apocryphal work, not the only instance in the New Testament where extra-canonical books are quoted, a proof that the Old Testament was not the only "scripture" to the New Testament writers.

The conclusions which Professor Smith draws from the Ignatius passage for the unhistoricity of Jesus I cannot share. For although Paul in many ways reminds us of the Docetists, in that he dwells upon the heavenly Christ almost mainly and the human Jesus almost appears with him a mere empty form and phantasm, still the reality of the humanity of Jesus is of such great importance to Paul, that he can not conceive Christ to be the saviour of mankind without it. His human birth from a woman, his living under the Jewish law (Gal. iv. 4), his real humanity (Phil. ii. 7-8) are actual facts to Paul. Especially is the death and crucifixion of Jesus so important to him that he again and again dwells upon it and makes the most arbitrary unhistorical use of Old Testament

passages, even altering the original text somewhat to make them testify to the fact of the death of Jesus. In Rom. x. 7 he quotes Deut. xxx. 11-13, which speaks of the law as ever present and comprehensible so that there is no need to go up to heaven nor beyond the sea to hear it, as referring to the death and ascension, and in Eph. iv. 8-9 he quotes Ps. lxxviii, which speaks of the triumphal ascension of Yahveh from the earth after having laid low his enemies, likewise as referring to the descent of Christ first to death. What occasion did Paul have to do this, if the death of Jesus was not a historical fact and of great importance to him?

The Ignatius passage as made clear in its meaning from the Ascension of Isaiah can not be fairly used as speaking against the historicity of Jesus. The purpose of that passage is not to show that the historical birth and death of Jesus escaped the notice of Satan, but that it escaped his notice that it was the heavenly Christ who had been hidden under the human birth and death of Jesus. The passage in the Isaiah apocalypse as well as in 1 Cor. ii. distinctly states that it was Satan himself and his host who had brought about the crucifixion, but without knowing who it really was whose death they had accomplished. The point in the passage is to show how the devil was cheated and unwittingly fell into his own pit. Such a highly mythological passage surely can not be used to decide facts of history. Nor can our argumentation be met by the counter-argument that if the ascent of Christ upwards through the heavens in the Isaiah apocalypse is mythical, his death is also mythical and not historical. Suetonius (*Cæsar*, 88) relates that the bright star which shone for seven days during the plays given by Augustus in honor of Cæsar was firmly believed to be the soul of Cæsar risen to heaven, and (*Augustus*, 100) that it was sworn to that the soul of Augustus had been seen rising to heaven from the funeral pile. Were not therefore the deaths of Cæsar and Augustus historical facts?