

JESUS: A SYMBOL.

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[This short article comes from the pen of the minister of the United Churches of Waterford, Maine, and was called forth by the perusal of Dr. Moxom's article "Jesus's View of Himself in the Fourth Gospel" in the *May Open Court*. Mr. Rumball says, "While I agree in the main with Dr. Moxom I feel that the Johannine portraiture is not so peculiar to the Fourth Gospel as he implies. The idealizing elements can be found in the Synoptics as well as in John. The difference between them is not so great as some critics aver, the old traditional contention that the two portraits are not contradictory and do not exclude each other is not so far fetched as we at times imagine. Because of this I am sending you a short paper which may tend to help the discussion from another point of view."—Ed.]

“THE religion of one age is often the poetry of the next. Around every living and operative faith there lies a region of allegory and imagination into which opinions frequently pass, and in which they long retain a transfigured and idealized existence after their natural life has died away.” Thus the historian Lecky wrote in 1865. In no Christian age can the truth of this be better seen than in the present. Historical criticism is making all thoughtful people, from the scholar in his library to the mechanic at his bench, realize that not only are we creed-makers, but by some instinct which demands a poetry in life, legend-builders and myth-makers as ever were the primitive Christians. The very men who set themselves the task of writing the history of the “real” Jesus, betray this instinct before they close, by some idealizing. For many years we have been in the habit of charging Renan of writing a history of the Ideal Frenchman, but have not always realized that in perhaps a smaller degree, more recent writers of lives or histories of Jesus have yielded their historical sense to the poetical.

In two of the most recent books upon Jesus—Bousset's *Jesus*, and Schmidt's *Prophet of Nazareth*,—the interpolations, legends, and myths are cast aside and by learned reverent critics we are presented with the “real” Jesus as far as it is possible at this day to know him. As you draw near, however, to the close of each book and the critical parts are gradually being left behind, you feel the beautiful

and attractive influence of the advancing poetry. It is hard to cast blame on such idealizations, but one often feels that the influence we have received from contemplating the real is canceled by being wafted again to the ideal little altered from the one we started out with.

Now we have no fault to find with the possession of ideals, rather would we urge the counting of all things as loss in the endeavor of untiring moral energy to attain the life of God; but there are many men and women in this world, who belong to some of the strongest moral forces of society, who, by the way, often are outside our churches, who demand that we "call a spade a spade." One such wrote in the *Hibbert Journal* a year or two ago the following: "Let us not be ashamed to acknowledge that by which we really live. Let us have done with pretence. Let us cease to call ourselves Christians when we do not follow Christ. Let us cease attempting to reduce Christianity to a metaphor and to make the words of Christ mean to us what they never meant to him." Many of us today find fault with those ministers and churches who read into an ancient materialistic symbol some modern scientific ideal, but do we always remember that Jesus himself has become such a symbol to us?

Jesus is a symbol and has tended to become more and more so for many years. It is very questionable, however, whether in the ultimate religion of mankind Jesus will hold such a place. Rather do we think that the eternal religion which has expressed itself in past history will be looked for more in contemporary history. There is no one person who stands before us as the infallible eternal example to mankind. In no one life is embodied the manifold life of God. "The man has never lived who can feed us ever."

Every attempt to gather round Jesus the ideals of the ages is likely in ages like the present to impede rather than help forward to pure religion and undefiled. We are likely to be discovered floundering amid history, legends and our own ideals, barely able to understand which is which sufficiently to give to him who asketh "a reason" for the hope that is within us. The religion of those who follow the latest attempt to deny the historicity of Jesus, in affirming him to have been the deity of a small Syrian gnostic sect, is far more satisfactory, than the possession of a religion which brings such confusion of ideas as that which treats Jesus as historical and yet unconsciously makes him a symbol. I mean that it is more consistent.

Some may feel that up to the present we have been too bold in

speaking of Jesus as a symbol. Are not the lovely ideals we have each formed, in harmony with the historic picture given us? That we may be reminded that there is a difference between the Jesus of A. D. 30, and A. D. 1907, let us study him more in detail.

We might begin by thinking of the kingdom of God which formed one of the chief elements in his evangel. In this theocratic ideal Jesus looked for the exaltation of the Jewish nation. Some of the characteristics of this kingdom, as non-resistance, lose their seeming extravagances, when it is remembered that Jesus was thinking of peasant Galilee and not of modern London or New York. He expected this kingdom to grow quickly as a mustard seed. Some have affirmed that his kingdom was altogether a spiritual reign of God and that the references of an earthly kingdom are due to disciples, but, as the most recent history of Jesus shows, the earthly kingdom of God is too closely connected with Jesus for us to doubt it. At the present day, however, in this matter we have left Jesus behind. We use his form, but we have spiritualized the content. When the modern Christian prays "Thy kingdom come," he looks forward to the ideal world where God shall be all in all. The prospect of Jesus was nothing so large, he was thinking of his own people. This is akin to the modern missionary ideal expressed in the words of "Christ for the World." Jesus of Nazareth, however, had no such universal relationship. Grand and glorious as is the extension of goodness and piety through this world, the idea is foreign to Jesus. Only towards the close of his life when he began to see that his hopes for the Jewish nation were meeting with no response, did he hint of foreigners coming to God instead of them, it was no essential part of his message. The so-called missionary charge of "baptizing all nations," and the world-purposes of the Fourth Gospel do not belong to the historic Jesus. In them we see the beginning of the ideal Jesus.

Again, in an age like our own when social reform is occupying the minds of many good men and women, it is not to be wondered at that Jesus is found by many to be the founder of modern social schemes. When we come to view the facts we wonder that men do not realize that their leader is an ideal and not a historic person. It is nice to think of Jesus at the marriage in Cana, but the allegorizing methods of the Fourth Gospel forbid us speaking of it as history. There is also, no doubt, a great deal of truth in contrasting the "gluttonous man and wine-bibber" with the ascetic Baptizer, but the contrast is carried too far. Jesus was by no means the man of society we like to think him. His enthusiasm for his ideals cut

him off from his fellows; he was cut off from the rich and cultured by the views which a poor reformer often holds of such people. He did not exemplify for us a holy home, for he remained unmarried, and although his little band of disciples in no way approached the rules of the Essenes, his calling them to yield home, father, mother, children for his sake, his call to some to sell all and join him, rather places him with those saintly souls who have sought some earthly Utopia, but who have always failed to realize it. There are elements in the historic Jesus that tend to make the man who has his wife and children to think of, and who day after day has to meet a world of business that Jesus never knew, and never expected would be, that tend to make the man allow the historic Jesus to drop from his life. Jesus thought it best that he and others should be celibates for the kingdom of heaven's sake. "Our fragmentary record of his sayings does not tell us whether Jesus ever suggested that men might marry, and women bear children, and parents bring up their little ones for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Would that it did!" The Christ of our homes is an ideal, not Jesus of Nazareth.

Last but not least, our ideal Jesus is always a sinless Jesus. There is every reason why he should be; but we err when we attribute this to Jesus of Nazareth. He disclaimed the possession of absolute goodness and affirmed one alone as good and that, God; and further we should always remember that one of the things which seemed to open his work was taking part in John's baptism of repentance. It is not until we reach the idealizing tendencies of the apostles as found in the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles that we find sinlessness attributed to Jesus.

These are some of the reasons, roughly put it is true, for speaking of Jesus as a symbol. Among large sections of the Church the truth will be long spreading. In fact, among the uncultured classes, it is a question, which I leave casuists to decide, whether the aspiration towards an ideal without basis in history is the most beneficial. An idealized historical person seems not at all misplaced in some stages of the evolution of mankind. To minds that ever wish to "have done with pretence," it may seem as though such a stage in evolution is barely honest. God, however, moves in a mysterious way and much of his mystery is composed of what we call unfairness and unreality. Jesus of Nazareth is passing from us, but the ideal Jesus is the contemporary of all ages. If we would know how long we shall call our ideal by the name of Jesus, let us answer this question first: With whom doth history tell us is God, the historian or the poet? the man of reason or the man of faith?