

THE JESUS OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

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LONG AGO, many of our scholars were forced to conclude that the Fourth Gospel is an imaginative narrative of the life and thought of Jesus, belonging somewhere about 140 A.D., written by an Alexandrian Christian Jew who had become thoroughly imbued with the Neo-Platonic thought. It is no longer considered necessary, as it was fifty years ago when Dr. E. A. Abbott wrote his exceptionally fine paper for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, to assume that it was the work of some disciple of John of Ephesus who handled idealistically the material which came to him through that apostle. We can now see that it is so thoroughly Neo-Platonic in its thought that it must be regarded as having been written by one who by reason of his time and his personal idiosyncrasies was entirely independent of apostolic support, though he made some slight use of oral gospel tradition if not of the synoptic narratives. Our interest in the many problems this gospel forces upon us today lies in its conception of the person of Jesus and its presentation of his work and words. True, the abandon with which its narrative moves on is not to be ignored. There appears to be perfect freedom not only in its imaginative portions but also in its choice of material found in the other gospels. It passes over the legends having to do with the birth and infancy of Jesus as unessential to its purpose. Jesus is always alluded to as the Nazarene and as the son of Joseph. There is no slightest trace of his birth of a virgin, and though his ministry, as here set forth, centers almost wholly in Jerusalem, which really could have seen little of him until near the close of his earthly life, Bethlehem is not mentioned. Only two of the miracles attributed to him in the Synoptic Gospels are here narrated and these apparently because they were stupendous nature marvels which fit admirably into his scheme. Luke in giving us the story of

Jesus' Perea ministry tells us that he came upon two sisters in that region whose differences attracted his attention, one winning his commendation because of her meditative life, while the other is mildly rebuked for her absorption in domestic affairs. Apparently early gospel tradition knew nothing more of these sisters. But the writer of the Fourth Gospel was pleased to place them in a comfortably circumstanced home in Bethany near Jerusalem where they frequently entertained Jesus, to give them a brother intimate with Jesus, and to make them all figure prominently in the life of the Nazarene. The narrative of the sickness, death and resurrection of Lazarus is made to play a singular and crucial part in the events which led up to his crucifixion. Mary is also identified with the woman who is said by two gospel narratives to have anointed Jesus during his Galilean ministry. Here she comes forward again as one who anoints the Master, this time toward the close of his earthly life as a preparation for his death and burial. In these and a few other instances, the early gospel narratives are handled freely with no effort to conform to fact. But to us the fundamental point of departure from early gospel tradition is in the writer's depiction of the person, work, and teaching of Jesus.

The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels is wondrously human and most inspiringly humane. In his utter freedom from self-consciousness, in his noble simplicity of life, in his sanity and helpfulness of thought, in his passion to serve, and in his repugnance and hostility to all insincerity and artificiality of faith and life, he stands forth the greatest religious leader and reformer of the past and as one, and this is most marvelous of all, who is best fitted to lead as the Pioneer of Religious Liberty today. About the simple narrative of his inspiring life there seem to have grown accounts of certain nature miracles that had some symbolic significance, though they were foreign to him if indeed they were not utterly beyond his power. Into the narratives of his simple assertions concerning his hopes and aims there may have been incorporated statements that reflect the eagerness of his followers after his departure to show how his life and work were a realization of the Zionistic hopes and dreams (Messianic, many say) of the prophets of their past.

And the feeling on the part of his followers after his departure that his death was redemptive may have led them to represent him as so referring to his death, something many now feel he could not have done. Scholars have been slow to see that the statement, "and to give his life a ransom for many," was an apostolic appendix to

that fine and thoroughly characteristic utterance of his: "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister." And they have also been slow to discover that the reference to his bloodshed for many unto the remission of sins at the last supper reveals most conclusively the influence of Paul who changed the drunken debauch of the Corinthian Church into a symbolic rite of tender significance. The author knows of but one American scholar who has endeavored to show how foreign all allusions to his death as redemptive is to the general tenor of Jesus' thought.

Then, too, in his methods of presenting his thought as a teacher the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels is most winsome and effective. By sententious sayings, by suggestive exhortations, by parables of rare beauty, and by pregnant illustrations taken from nature and life he reached the masses and made himself widely understood and appreciated so that the fact was noted that the multitudes heard him gladly. But even more significant is the fact that he throughout these gospels appears as the friend of the needy, the overborne, and the sinful. He seems to have regarded his call to this work most distinctive; and he seems to have been ready upon all occasions to leave the upright and the comfortably circumstanced in order to minister to the lost and burdened of the House of Israel. But beyond this is the fact that he was so tender and pitiful as a man that he simply could not ignore such. We often read that "he was moved with compassion" in the presence of suffering and need. This side of the Man of Nazareth cannot be ignored in any attempt to get at the real man and the secret of his wonderful power; for these simple gospel narratives touch the heart of him who reads them today. Taken with the fact that Jesus speaks as he does of God as a loving Heavenly Father they give us suggestions for a theodicy that admirably supplements and modifies that which modern evolutionary science offers us.

Turning now to the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel we find we come upon a radically and irreconcilably different person. It pleased the author to declare that this One was the Logos who had been with God and was divine, who had been the active agent in the creation of the world, and who had been incarnated as the Life and Light of men. He was able to make those who received him sons of God and to impart to them his grace and truth. He was a great thaumaturgist and wrought miracles oft; but he was himself the Supreme Miracle, the Greatest Wonder of all. Jesus' conception of himself is in harmony with this thought. The author leaves us in no doubt

just here. He is thoroughly consistent in making everything Jesus says and does harmonize with his assertions concerning him. Indeed, this is one of the marvels of this gospel, that not once does the author forget himself and drop down to the level of the other gospels in his portraiture of Jesus which has seven more pages of the Greek text than the Gospel of Mark. He keeps the Philonic mystical tone throughout, never employing the language, or vocabulary, peculiar phrases, and idioms of the other narratives which seem to have become somewhat stereotyped before the present gospels were written. This is noteworthy. There are but a few of the simple remarks of Jesus found in the Synoptists which reappear here and these are embedded in narratives of miracles and in related incidents, the very wording of which was largely changed to suit the purposes of the author, so that the narratives themselves are hardly recognizable.¹

Here then we find Jesus is one who is supremely interested in himself as a unique and supernatural personage who is in no real sense a man and makes little pretense of being one. His *ego* occurs in this gospel over two hundred times and his *me* and *my* conjointly nearly as many times. He declares himself to have lived in heaven prior to his earthly life. He had existed not only before Abraham's day but had dwelt in heaven long prior thereto. He there as God's son had seen, known, and lived with him in perfect unity and harmony, though as a lesser being than he. From heaven as his home he had come to earth, given of God and consecrated and sent of him, and after bestowing eternal life upon as many as would receive him not as judge of the world but as Saviour thereof, was to return whence he had come and get ready a place for his own whom he had won out of the hostile, devil-dominated world. True, there is a note of universality here and there, none of the narrow exclusiveness that we encounter elsewhere. The writer never represents the Nazarene as confining his labors to the Aramic speaking Jews as the Synoptists do, presumably the only people he was linguistically able to address. But while the Jesus of this gospel has a mission for the world, while he comes to save the world and to make himself known in order to save it, his teaching throughout is a proclamation of himself as a stupendous personage, the Light of the World, the Bread of Heaven, the Way, the Truth, the Life, sent to bear witness of his Father and to do his will. He is to save by his exaltation. He

¹ Certain scholars have come to feel that this gospel is wanting in unity and that the work of late editors can easily be traced. Even if we grant this to be true, we must insist that however much they break the course of the narrative they are not untrue to its main trend.

is to lay down his life; but the cross is not so much something he is to suffer upon as something he is to be elevated to, to be lifted upon. His death, therefore, is not something he is forced to undergo but something he takes upon himself. In harmony with this thought there is in the story of the crucifixion here no record of his having prayed: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do"; nor is there of his crying out in agony in the words of a psalmist: "My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken me."

In order to represent his Jesus as a Neo-Platonic teacher the author must keep him in or near Jerusalem most of the time where he would come in contact with the cultured classes. He allows him to run up into Galilee often in order to escape the hostile Jewish leaders who are ever curiously enough plotting his death, something they are mysteriously kept till the end from accomplishing; but he no sooner gets him to Galilee before he finds occasion for bringing him back. There is usually some feast that he must attend, so that three years pass instead of the one year of the other gospels as the length of his ministry. And as teacher in harmony with his Neo-Platonic thought he represents him not as simple, direct, stimulating, helpful and convincing, but as mystical, illogical, contradictory, and consequently perplexing. His disciples make little pretense of understanding him. Only the cultured Jews will listen to him and they are utterly unable to grasp his mystical thought. His assertion that he is the Bread of Heaven that must be eaten by men if they are to live and that they must partake of his flesh and drink of his blood or have no part in him who is able to impart eternal life, are but samples of the mystical nature of his teaching in this gospel. Then, too, his mystical statements often are illogical and contradictory. There is here naught of the sweet serenity and limpid purity of the teacher we encounter in the other gospels. Nowhere, as in the Synoptic Gospels where the emphasis is upon life and character, is there here intimation that these are supremely necessary. Here the path to life is through faith in him as the Exalted One, the Eternal Son of the Father. It is creed rather than character upon which one must put emphasis, belief in him as the sent of God rather than the living of the Christ life. This indeed he does not expect of us for he is too far removed from us to become an inspirational example. And here the essential thing is acceptance of him as Anointed Son of God; and those who accept him as such are made to do so upon the slightest evidence, evidence that could not be expected deeply to change the life. Nathaniel was convinced that he

was the Son of God and King of Israel because, according to the narrative, he revealed some clairvoyant power; and the woman of Samaria accepted him as Christ because he read a little chapter of her corrupt life. These are typical instances revealing the fact that here the way of faith that leads to eternal life is vastly different from the straight and narrow way of the earlier gospel tradition.

And finally we note that the most tragic thing about the Jesus of this gospel is that there is slight trace of humanitarianism. Not once is there any allusion to his compassion. He is tender only among his few disciples near the close of his life; and here it seems to be the thought of his unfinished work which is to burden them and their weakness that moves him. Throughout the narrative he appears as one uninterested in the poor. But once is he made to speak of them and then his allusion is in the story of the anointing in words, taken from another anointing, that the author appeared to think admirably suited to his general neglect of such: "The poor ye have always with you; but me ye have not always." As the only allusion to his poor in this gospel this is terrific; but it is not so in Matthew from which gospel it is literally taken. And it is noteworthy that the clause found in Mark was not used: "And whenever ye may do them good," an omission that but adds to the terrificness of this as the only mention of the poor by the Christ in this gospel, enough of itself to discredit this as a picture of the lowly and pitifully disposed Nazarene. Jesus is made to allude to sin but never to sinners. The poor woman who was a sinner, mentioned in Luke's gospel, finds no mention here; Jesus does not go to be a guest of a man who was a sinner; there is no trace of the poor publican who prayed: "God be merciful to me a sinner"; and the heaven which Jesus knows is not one which thrills with joy over the repentance of one solitary sinner. The narrative of the woman taken in adultery is not now recognized as belonging to this gospel, for as a late and questionable story it seems to have been inserted long after the author's time.

And his miracles of which we have eight here recorded with allusions to "many signs" as narrated were wrought to manifest his power, not as deeds of mercy. They are spectacular and the stories of them bear marks of conscious purpose, even when it is not directly asserted that they were wrought by him to reveal his supernatural power. The only slight humanitarian touch is in the case of the supposed resurrection of Lazarus where Jesus is said to have groaned and wept, apparently with the thought on the part of the author that he realized that his calling forth of this friend from his

tomb would turn these weeping Jews from a state of indifference to him into one of hostile enmity and so would lead to the tragic close of his earthly career. In the narrative of the turning of water into wine at Cana, too often alluded to in these days as revealing the Master's love of conviviality, there is no evidence of concern for his embarrassed host. The feeding of the five thousand as narrated was prefaced by questions, not found in other accounts, designed to make evident to his disciples the stupendous character of this miracle. The restoration of the impotent man and the man blind from his birth are represented as wrought in such a way as to astound his enemies. They are unemotionally wrought with no least hint of compassion on the part of Jesus. All these narratives of miracles are, as here narrated, on an entirely different plane than the stories of such marvels in the other gospels. Those are so tenderly and lovingly humane, so manifestly wrought under the stress of deep feeling, that a disbeliever in Jesus as a great thaumaturgist would like to be able to accept the stories of them as narratives of fact in keeping with the humanitarian character of his life.

There can be no question as to the serious way in which this gospel is taken by many. They regard it as the *Heart of Christ*, to quote the title of a volume upon it by a Unitarian of the last generation, or the *Cream of the Gospels*, to quote the characterization of a recent biblical lecture. It would seem that because of its mystical nature it especially appeals to cultured people who are disinclined to exercise their critical faculties. Nevertheless, it must be admitted in accord with the data brought to light in this paper that its conception of the person, life, and work of the Mighty Galilean, as the writer prefers to designate him whom he conceives to have been born of humble peasants in Nazareth and to have devoted his public ministry almost wholly to the people of his loved hills and vales, is utterly misleading and that if it had not been for the pictures of a tenderly human and altogether sane and uplifting Jesus found in the Synoptic Gospels there would be far less of that much to be desired commodity in the world, known as "Christianity pure and undefiled," than there now is. If we are to push back of Paulinism and get to the Christ who actually lived in these days when the cry is heard: "Christ not Paul," we must break away from the mystical influence of this gospel; for despite the artificiality which many feel is characteristic of Paul's dominant thought there was on the part of this greatest of all the apostles a loving thoughtfulness and genuine humanitarianism. Instead then of resting in this Alexandrian Neo-

Platonic conception of the Christ we should go back to the Jesus of early gospel tradition; and surely the need of the recovery of this thought of the Nazarene is bound to be increasingly felt as the sad and burdened life of our time presses along its darkened path.

It has been remarked that Neo-Platonism while seeking to perfect ancient philosophy really extinguished it and while attempting to reconstruct the ancient religions really destroyed them. Is this to be the fate of Christianity because of the efforts of a Neo-Platonist to rewrite the story of its beginnings? If we must accept the Fourth Gospel as the authoritative and final word concerning the life, work, and teaching of Jesus we must conclude that its writer is fated to be the destroyer of Christianity. If the inspiring message of the Jesus of the Synoptist Gospels finds its choicest flower and fruitage here then sooner or later Christianity must become a bankrupt faith and in consequence must join other faiths which have passed into limbo as discredited and neglected. The fact that this gospel appeals particularly to cultured people who delight to quote it has little significance. Its mysticism rather than its thought attracts them. Nor need mention of the fact that it has survived the Christian centuries and has seemed to grow in popularity be made; for ours is a searchingly critical age and we who hitherto have been slow to use our critical methods, long employed in Old Testament study, in our handling of the New Testament must now use them in this field or lose our reputation for honesty. It would be a singular commentary on the statement that Neo-Platonism was vanquished by Christianity if it should go down because a second century writer injected his Neo-Platonic thought into his narrative of the life and work of Jesus. That there is a real danger here we must believe, though few of us are likely to take seriously its doctrine of the pre-existence of the human soul that seems to have rendered it easy for the writer to conceive of Jesus' supposed pre-existence, few its dualistic opposition of the divine and the earthly and its failure to put a true evaluation upon the latter. We cannot share its contempt for the world of sense; nor can we on the other hand see the necessity for a Logos to reveal the Supreme Being. While we reverence the Great Teacher we believe we have the same ways of approach to the Infinite Spirit which he had. But that there are not a few who cherish this gospel as the very "heart of Christ" we know. Hence modern critics owe it to the Christian world that the real character of its narratives be made widely known.