

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE GROWING JESUS

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A JEWISH lad, growing to manhood in turbulent Nazareth while Rome held all the western world in an unrelaxing grip, came to believe himself the Messiah, the Promised Deliverer, of his people. It was not an uncommon delusion. It led him where it led many others—to death on a Roman cross. In it alone there is nothing to challenge our attention or command our interest.

The incidents of his brief career and the genius apparent in his sayings, however, were such that for nearly two thousand years a very considerable portion of the human race has affirmed the sanity and the rightness of his claims. He has been held to be not merely sane but the supreme personality of history. He did not drive the Romans from Judea. He did not liberate his people. He never even tolerated the suggestion of revolt. His efforts ended in defeat and agony and shame. Yet his impact upon the life of the world has been beyond all measurement.

Through nearly twenty centuries it seems to have accumulated rather than lost energy. From his cross the young Nazarene has ruled the world. Even today, in situations remote in every feature from those in which he moved, his authority is invoked, his sayings are considered of greater weight than the edicts of emperors. An unequalled winsomeness of character draws to him followers from all the races of the world and binds them into a fellowship transcending racial and political divisions.

In two respects, at least, our generation is better equipped than any that has gone before to understand Jesus. We possess for the first time in history a scientific and a tolerably adequate psychology. And it has been our privilege to witness, in circumstances amazingly parallel point by point to those that obtained in his day, an

attempt to apply his teachings on an immense scale. Gandhi's labors in India have illuminated the sermon on the Mount more vividly and more realistically than all the commentaries.

To trace the development of Jesus is a psychological problem of unique and superlative interest, if it is nothing more. And today it can be done. In spite of the obscurity that envelopes his early years, it is possible to discern a well-defined, coherent, and intelligible principle of growth. The materials at our command are meagre indeed; but they are such that, if we use them at all intelligently, we cannot altogether fail.

The starting point is clear. We must begin with the twelve-year-old boy in the Temple, conversing with the teachers of Israel—"hearing them and asking them questions" (Luke 2: 46). The point at which we must arrive is also clear. It is the coming of Jesus into Galilee exclaiming, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me: Because he hath annointed me to preach good tidings to the poor (Luke 4: 18-19). The Baptism and the Temptation plainly mark the supreme crisis. Here are four shafts that reveal the course of the vein of precious ore beneath. We have only to connect them in a coherent scheme.

THE BOY

It is easy to dismiss the story of Jesus' first visit to the Temple as a legend. It does seem akin to those bizarre narratives that make up the apocryphal gospels. On the other hand the incident, rightly understood, is plausible and illuminating. Nothing in the canonical record obliges us to regard him as a *godling* exhibiting prodigies. Whatever the evangelist may have thought, it is no great wonder that a boy of twelve should astonish even men of the most extensive and thorough learning. Bright boys are always doing that.

Jesus, of course, lived ages before the days of the "I. Q.". No other childish anecdotes enable us to guess at his "mental age" at the time. But we have studied the early years of great men. And we can be certain that he was thoughtful and sagacious beyond his years.

He did not ask his questions, we may be sure, with any purpose to confound the ancient wisdom. He asked them for the simple

reason that there were things he wanted to know. He answered for an equally simple reason—because others asked questions of him. It was all like a boy. At least it was like such a boy as Jesus must have been.

With the aid of memory and a moderate exercise of the imagination, it should not be difficult for us to enter sympathetically into the experience of the boy of Nazareth on that first memorable journey to Jerusalem. Probably every one of us has known something of the excitement he must have felt. We may even now be able to recall the brilliance of every landscape, the tension of every nerve, the alertness of every sense, the untiring vigor of young muscles.

No boyhood trip of ours, though, can have compared with this first venture of the small-town boy into the wider stream of Jewish life. Every stage of the journey brought to view scenes associated with stirring events in his people's history. To him, as to every Jewish lad, Jerusalem had a wealth of meaning which neither our great commercial centers with their glittering amusement palaces, nor our capitals with their legislative halls, can ever possess. In Jewish eyes it was "beautiful for situation, the joy of all the earth." God's house was there. At its grandeur even Gentiles, familiar with the architecture of Athens and Ephesus marvelled. In its courts proceeded the impressive rituals of the Jewish religion. Above it rose the smoke of a nation's sacrifices.

The boy's questions must often have perplexed his parents. What boy's have not? Probably the simple teachers of Nazareth were often at a loss to answer. We cannot be far astray, if we introduce at this point the first of the very few assumptions we shall be compelled to make. We may suspect that from the outset of the journey, possibly for a long time before, he had cherished in typically boyish fashion, half avowed but shyly concealed, a great purpose.

In early adolescence, awakening to great problems to which in Nazareth he could find no satisfactory solutions, it is entirely natural that he should look forward to seeing in Jerusalem the men whom all his nation held in honor for their wisdom. He would hear them speak. They were probably kindly men, too; and the opportunity might arise to place before them some of the questions and the thoughts that were forming themselves in his mind.

With this assumption we can understand his words to his parents, when their anxious search for him had at last succeeded. As they stand (at least in the translations), no ingenuity can make them sound other than ungracious. They carry the taint of the *godling*. If our interpretation is correct, however, he might well ask those who were closest to him why they had not looked for him there at once. He may even have reminded them that they knew his intention from the first. It would be like a boy to assume that they understood obscure hints. And it would be like parents to *misunderstand*.

That God was for him already "My Father" there is no good reason to doubt. It was not an uncommon title to apply to the Deity. To believe that even in early adolescence the words held for him a deep and a poignant meaning is not to surrender ourselves to any cramping dogma or ecclesiastical Christology. It is only to note that an attitude fundamentally characteristic of his later life was already forming.

How vividly some obscure and difficult problems of theology might be illumined; and what new ones might be suggested; if we could see the youthful Jesus struggling with questions of faith and life. Of one question we may be certain. It confronted every loyal or devout Jew. It tortured them, like a fire forever burning within their breasts. What was God's plan for His people? Was there a plan at all?

Daily the Roman power grew more oppressive and insulting. The Greek culture day by day became more insidious and menacing. What was the meaning of Israel's long agony? Would a deliverer appear, as so often in the past? When would the Romans be driven from the land? When would the glories of David and Solomon return?

One of the innumerable tragedies of the time may well have given exceedingly sharp point to the questions that puzzled the scholars in Jerusalem. For nearly a century before the final catastrophe in A. D. 70, the Jews maintained a bitter, a persistent if necessarily intermittent, a pathetically futile rebellion against the invincible and ruthless power of Rome. A particularly serious outbreak was led by Judas of Galilee about the year 6 A. D. Jesus, born sometime between 4 and 10 B. C., growing up in Nazareth,

could scarcely have been ignorant of it. If it was already stamped out when he made his first journey to Jerusalem, ferocious fighting, the tragic blighting of fantastic hopes, the cruel vengeance of the Romans, were matters of recent and vivid memory. If it had not yet burst, he surely knew of smoldering grievances, perhaps of secret preparations. From whichever angle he knew of it, it was an enterprise to quicken the thought and to fire the imagination of every Jewish boy.

What answers he made to the questions that others asked, we can of course only guess. But we can guess at one that would account for the astonishment of his hearers. We are obliged to deduce it from the teachings of his ministry; and this will constitute the second of our assumptions. It is not impossible, indeed it would seem even probable that he had already caught at least a glimpse of the vision which later filled and dominated his life—of an empire founded on love, grander, wider, and more enduring than any could be that was based merely on military coercion. It may already have occurred to him that Israel's true destiny was not imperialism but pioneer achievement in the realm of the spirit and leadership through sacrificial service.

Whence could he have derived an insight so penetrating and so revolutionary? It is easy for us to see now that the materials were all about him. There was the visible might of Rome wherever he turned—fortresses, marching legions, crosses with their tortured victims. There was the scarcely less visible weakness of his people—the deadening legalism of orthodoxy, the wild fanaticism of the revolutionary zealots, the inarticulate yearnings of the common people, pathetic “sheep without a shepherd.” There was the record of the past. There were the great words of the prophets—above all that strange, compelling figure, “The Servant,” “on whom was laid the iniquity of us all and by whose stripes we are healed.” (Isaiah 53.)

Disillusionment may have played its part. In this matter it may be that the tragic years of the Great War have enabled us to enter somewhat into his experience. As young men we dreamed that

“ truth and error speak their words
“Through hot-lipped cannon and the teeth of swords.”
(Whittier)

We took in hand the instruments of destruction and slaughter, thinking to build with them a fairer world. . Today we doubt that cannon, bayonets and poison gas can contribute anything of truth or value. As Jesus pondered the events of his own day, similar reflections may well have led him to doubt that the deepest truths are written in the sheen of whirling swords or pressed home by the points of spears.

The materials, truly, were all about him. To grasp their significance was genius. To recognize the true greatness of Rome, even while his heart was wrung by the suffering of his people, demanded balanced judgment and a rare superiority to the passions of the time. It was a superiority which was yet not a cynical detachment. To discard the visions of crazed apocalyptic writers and hopes of miraculous interventions on behalf of unequipped and undisciplined Jewish rebel bands, was evidence of sanity in a time of general madness. To suppose that love, justice, righteousness, forgiveness, were mightier forces than armies or fleets—this it is not for us to appraise. We profess it glibly enough. Sometimes we practice it.

This interpretation of Jesus, it must be frankly admitted, is not that given in the New Testament. More tragic in some ways than the failure of his people to grasp the spiritual meaning of his message was the failure of his chosen disciples. On them he concentrated the full wealth and power of his personality. Yet to the end their thought was dominated and vitiated by apocalyptic obsessions such as we may see reflected in the books of Enoch and Esdras. The dynamic principle of the Apostolic Church was its vibrant expectation of the Lord's return upon the clouds and with the hosts of heaven. Even the memory of his life and teachings was distorted to fit the picture; and he was credited with prophecies that were in radical contradiction to the principles for which he toiled and suffered.

Nor can this view of Jesus be found in the metaphysical speculations of orthodox theology. Nor yet again in the utterances of modern Evangelical Christianity. It has become possible in our own day, because in India Gandhi has reenacted in outline the obscured and forgotten drama.

Point by point an amazing parallel holds. For the Romans we

may substitute the British. To the Sadducees correspond the "Moderates," educated in Europe, holding government offices, and adopting in large measure the European modes of life. The orthodox of Judea and Hindustan have in common the oriental fixation upon religion and devotion to ancient usages. Like Jesus, Gandhi was credited with miraculous powers. And like his greater predecessor he proposed to meet oppression with willing submission, violence with invincible kindness, material force with "soul force."

He summoned his people to revolt. But it was to be a revolution unlike any other in history. Freedom was not to be won by war. "Indeed freedom of the sort that could be so won would not be worth the cost. Real freedom could only come from moral regeneration.

"His people must put away weakness, timid servility, deceitfulness, sloth, every form of moral impurity, and put on courage, honor, self-respect, industry. So equipped, they could assert themselves and their mere assertion would be irresistible. They had only to refuse cooperation with a government that would not meet their desires, and that government, though fortified with all the resources of materialistic science, would find itself powerless. Especially must all forms of hate be replaced by love. Against a love that had no limit and was strong enough to endure all things, the utmost malice and oppression must soon succumb. Then would come victory. And India so freed need fear none but would lead the world to yet undreamed-of spiritual conquests."

Contrasts there are, of course; and they are as significant as the parallels. There is a narrowness about Gandhi's program that does not characterize the thought of Jesus. India's Messiah was content to stake everything upon his success in bringing the foreign power to terms. Jesus seems to have regarded the Roman power, as indeed all merely material force, "with patient deep disdain." Gandhi promised his people freedom within six months. Jesus was content to build for the ages.

Yet Gandhi has reenacted for us, in large measure, the gospel drama. And the stage upon which he moved was immense. Three hundred million people hung upon his word. All the agencies of our highly developed publicity broadcasted his every act and ut-

terance. So from the twentieth century, as by one of the great modern search lights, the first is illumined. Both resemblances and contrasts enlarge our understanding of Jesus. And as the light of modern research and experience is concentrated upon him, his figure grows in majesty.

THE UNRECORDED YEARS

To trace the growth of Jesus through the long years of which we have no record is less a task for a psychologist than a simple exercise in logic. It is only necessary to work out the implications of the ideas we have ventured to suggest. It is enough to note that the boy who spoke of God as "My Father" became, it is safe to say, the critical instance of mysticism—either its abundant justification or its reduction to ghastly ruin and absurdity. The boy whose questions and answers amazed the rabbis grew into the fiery reformer whose quick, stinging retorts confounded the most ingenious of his opponents. The lad who dreamed of a spiritual destiny for Israel was in later days to weep over Jerusalem—"If thou hadst known in this thy day, even thou, the things which belong unto peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes." (Luke 19: 42.) A vision of God, understanding of the human heart, a passion for righteousness, profound insight into the meaning of Israel's history, a glowing vision of Israel's destiny; these are various aspects, or facets, of a singularly unified personality. Each reinforced and contributed to all the others.

Inevitably his life was one of growing loneliness. He could not live with God as he did, he could not dream the dreams he did of Israel's destiny; and be like the men around him.

Today we know more than we used to know of the effect of long, solitary brooding and progressive alienation from the common ways of life. But we must keep in mind an important difference between our time and that in which he lived. "We in the twentieth century talk and think of *our* discoveries, of our personal achievements; but to Jesus [and to all the men of his time] a concrete and self-evident intellectual insight was a gift of God." (Simkhovitch, "Towards the Understanding of Jesus," p. 57.) When

strain and conflict arise between our convictions and the standards of those about us, we find it easy to compromise or even to surrender. If we hold fast, we are apt to build up delusions and to slip imperceptibly into the madness of the paranoiac. In his day belief in a special relationship to God or in a new revelation involved no acute conflict with the socially accepted standards of reality. For him the growing separation, the deepening loneliness, resulted in nothing more abnormal (in the psychiatric sense) than a consciousness of a unique privilege and a unique obligation.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

In the ringing summons of John the Baptist it is easy to discern new and arresting notes that must have stirred profoundly one whose soul had been fashioned by such experience as those we have ventured to ascribe to Jesus. It was no new cry that the Messiah was at hand. But the preparation that John demanded for his coming was unlike anything that had been heard before. John's Messiah was plainly different from the figure of current expectations. There was no point of contact whatever with the frenzied schemings of the zealots. Soldiers, we read, came to John asking, "What shall we do?" It is easy to imagine the services they were prepared to render, the instructions they expected to receive. John's reply was disconcerting—"Do violence to no man, neither exact anything wrongfully; and be content with your wages." (Luke 3: 14.) Pharisees declared that, if all Israel would but keep the Law perfectly for a single day, the Messiah would appear. For their caricature of religion the Baptist had only the fiercest scorn. A radical moral regeneration was imperative. Justice was demanded throughout the full range of human relationship. Days of terrible testing were coming. It would avail nothing to plead descent from Abraham, unless the heart within were pure, and outward acts, those of kindly helpfulness.

Some explosives remain inert until fired by a particular primer. Energies had accumulated in the soul of Jesus through the long years of solitary musings—energies that only such a summons could release. All that had gone before had been preparing him for just this hour. So now he who must often have heard the raucous cry "Behold, he cometh" who had ever turned away from

the schemes of revolt that were always brewing in turbulent Galilee, came to John and was baptized of him.

The solemn rite clearly marks a profound, perhaps the supreme crisis in Jesus' development. As he came up from the water, the conviction came upon him that he was himself the Messiah for whom he had been looking!

Madness it seemed, we know, to his family and the townspeople of Nazareth. Madness it has seemed to some students of modern psychology. But this indicates only a failure to comprehend a supremely great personality and to view in proper perspective the situation in which he moved. There were scores, at least, of paranoiac Messiahs in his day. It is because he was utterly unlike them, that he has been worshipped through nineteen centuries.

He read the meanings of events with the insight of genius. Belief in his unique mission was no grandiose delusion. It was a legitimate—indeed the only legitimate—conclusion from the facts that confronted him. A vivid consciousness of God, a unique understanding of his people's position, a glowing vision of Israel's possible destiny as a spiritual leaven transforming the life of all the world; these, at such a time, when their full meaning became apparent, could mean nothing less than that the fate of his nation rested upon him. He and he alone was the hope of Israel.

History has amply confirmed the judgment. If his nation had followed his leadership, he would certainly have saved it from the disaster of A. D. 70 and the long centuries of oppression. And who else could have saved it. Could Caiaphas? Or Gamaliel? It is not pious imagination but simple, sober truth, that the one personality who might have led his people to deliverance and glory was neither the priestly politician nor the renowned rabbi but the Galilean prophet.

Madness it may have seemed, at first, to himself. Unless the thought burst upon him with bewildering shock, the narrative of the opened heavens, the descending Spirit, and the stern, desperate struggle of the Temptation can scarcely be understood. On the other hand, it is easy to see that the idea was the natural, indeed the inevitable climax of the development we have followed to this point.

THE TEMPTATION

Obviously the meaning of the Temptation is not to be discerned on the surface of the accounts. The narratives are plainly allegorical. It is in keeping with all that we know of the character of Jesus and with the dignified reticence which alone was appropriate to the description of such an experience, that he should speak of it in parables. Underneath the strange, almost bizarre figures, however, it is possible to trace a struggle that is at least partially intelligible as the continuation of what has gone before.

First, of course, the spiritual work of the Messiah had to be finally and completely dissociated from political and imperialistic grandiosities. We of a colder clime, of a temperament less fervid, less deeply versed in suffering, can little realize how deeply the hope of national greatness was wrought into the inmost fibres of Jewish life. And to know it vain! To know beyond question that the Promised One must come not as a glorious king but as the Suffering Servant, ministering to the poor, the weak, the sinful, the ungrateful, the treacherous, to be despised and rejected by his own (as it was plain he would be),—nothing in all our experience can enable us to understand or to enter more than very superficially into his suffering.

For forty days, he read, he fought out the battle in the wilderness. Then "physical exhaustion and reaction supplied the background for the temptation to employ his unique endowment for his personal advantage." But the great decision he had already made precluded consideration of his personal interests. In his answer we can see foreshadowed his life of homeless wanderings, of unselfish service marked by no "mighty work" for his own glory or advantage, and the taunt of the Pharisees, as he suffered on the cross, "he saved others, himself he cannot save."

Greater subtlety characterizes the second temptation. (We follow the order in Luke as psychologically more plausible.) "Under the allegorical form of a vision of universal sovereignty to be obtained by obeisance to the paramount power, there is graphically portrayed the temptation to sacrifice the ideal by a compromise with the actual. The real sacrifice of the ideal, however, is disguised by representing it as a mere concession of a momentary character involving nothing more than the sacrifice of a personal feeling

which ought not to weigh against the success of the cause. . . . The nature of the temptation is such that only the greatest souls can feel its seductiveness. It is the man who has sacrificed everything and has nothing left who can alone be tempted to sacrifice his soul. . . . The high mountain which in this allegory is the scene of the temptation is suggestive of the moral height where alone such a temptation is possible.

Whom of us would the devil consider worth the offer of even a hundred thousand dollars? The bizarre question may serve to emphasize the magnitude of the issues at stake.

In Jesus' answer we may see prefigured his life of toil and conflict, the swift disintegration of his superficial popularity, and his sad question to the uncertain few who remained, "Will ye also go away?"

Compromise with what? Perhaps with the Roman Power and Hellenistic culture. Such a compromise the Sadducees and Josephus contrived with some success. The "Moderates" of India today afford suggestive, though naturally not complete parallels. More probably with popular expectations. Perhaps, even after all the temptations already surmounted, there was still insidious power in the vision of military triumphs and world-subduing diplomacy.

The third temptation gains strength from all that has gone before. We shall utterly fail to appreciate its supreme subtlety, however if we suppose that he was tempted to convince the spectators in the Temple court by a miraculous descent from the high pinnacle. That would have been only one of the short cuts to superficial success that he had already considered and rejected. There is no mention in either narrative of any witnesses nor of any possible effect upon them. The question and Jesus' answer indicate the real point. It was not to convince others but himself.

He had accepted failure rather than faithlessness to the ideal. Doubt must have descended upon him. Had he been right in dismissing so summarily that which alone could assure him or his cause success? Was it indeed God's will? In such an hour the soul's deepest longing is for certainty. Better an instant and violent death than a life of mistaken and futile endeavor.

We are wont to draw up our petty time tables and to demand that God's great universe shall observe them. When it does not,

we cry out against Him. We dictate the terms on which we shall believe in Him. Jesus trusted Him through the wrecking of his life, through the blasting of fairer hopes than our dull souls have ever been able to frame.

In his darkest hour he cried, indeed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But Luke, at least, records that his final utterance was true to the whole tenor of his life: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

We have watched the boy of Nazareth growing into the Christ. From the wilderness, with the spirit of the Lord God upon him, he came to his people proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven. For a time they heard him gladly. In the end they failed him. Their failure sealed their doom.

As for him, he appealed from man to God, from time to eternity.