

INTRODUCTION

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEME

THE following pages are designed to fix our thoughts on that point which marks the zenith of the Christian's interest—the life-story itself of our Saviour. We should like to make credible His portrait in the form in which it is offered to us by the Gospels. Naturally this can be undertaken from many different standpoints, and the opposition it may arouse will depend not least on the way in which it is presented. For our part, we should like to attempt its defence from a side which so far has received little attention, but in which it seems to us there lies a particularly convincing power. Let us therefore develop our idea.

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What did Rousseau really mean by his well-known words on the life-story of Jesus and its origin: "The man who invented it would be greater and more astonishing than its hero"? Surely what he chiefly means is this: the portrait given of Jesus towers above human conception and invention, it is too great, too pure, too perfect to have been conceived in the human brain. "And His raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them" (Mark ix. 3)—these words from the story of the transfiguration, says Rousseau, are true also of Jesus' inner man. No hand on earth could have painted the snow-white garment of light in which the Gospels present Him to us. There will always be many who believe that this is so. Many people are firmly convinced of the truth which Lavater wrote on a scrap of paper as he lay dying, "Terrible and without number are the doubts of the believing Christian, but the unfathomableness of Christ conquers them all."

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The story of Christ cannot be fathomed by human intelligence. The matter may be considered in the following way: the depravity of human nature is not only so great that man, as is very evident, does not do the good which he perceives; no, the depravity of human nature has gone so far that it has seized on human understanding and affects man's intelligence. No sensible person can deny that this is so in isolated instances, but the assertion is made that the same overcasting of the moral intelligence would be discernible if a collective result could be obtained of the highest moral perceptions to be found in the most varied individuals all over the world. Even the ideal thus obtained would fall into error and could not reach the highest because of universal sin. For even in human thought, it is said, there is always a residue where depravity works its will. (Cf. Rom. xii. 2: not only that he may be able to *do* what is morally right, but that he may be able to *recognize* it, a man requires nothing less than complete regeneration.)¹

The findings of experience confirm this train of thought. We perceive in different races and in different centuries ideal figures, the creation of many heads and busy hands, often a tissue woven by many generations, the attempt having been made to glorify one man above his fellows—but it has not been successful in a single instance. In every case the deficiencies can easily be perceived, and the blots on the picture are very clearly visible to everyone who is not wilfully short-sighted. To take only one of these figures: to his disciples and his race Confucius is the man “who never sinned, because he was incapable of sin.” Yet how easy it is to perceive sin in the picture we have of him—for instance, his lack of veracity.² The

¹ “Man cannot ascend beyond a certain height in an airship, and this is even more clearly demonstrable in the flight of thought.” How apposite this remark is, particularly in reference to morality!

² One of his disciples tells us, “If Confucius does not wish to receive a guest, he makes the excuse of being unwell.” On his journey from Tschin to Wei, Confucius arrived at Pu, which was at war

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character of Jesus as the Gospels have rendered it is the only one in the world in which the sharpest eye can find no sin; and so it bears with it its own evidence that it comes from above. The sinful human brain is no Jupiter-head from which this sinless human figure could have emerged.

From above! This figure of Jesus is a strange growth, alien in the fullest sense. Another thing reveals the origin of the picture—the fact that the human mind is incapable of adding anything to it. A short time ago, under the title of “A New Saying of our Lord,” an esteemed scientific journal drew attention to a supposed saying of our Lord’s hitherto unnoticed, which appears three times in Latin in ancient English literature. One has only to hear it to feel how far removed it is from the words of Christ: “Be courageous in battle, fight with the old serpent, and yours shall be the Kingdom of Heaven.”¹ The idea is Christian, and yet it does not attain to the standard of Christ’s words. In 1897 a papyrus was discovered, said to date from A.D. 140, and containing seven sayings of Jesus. Two of these are the same as sayings of our Lord already known, but in the others, which are new, the lower level is very apparent.

In his well-known novel, *Ben Hur*, Wallace is daring enough to make the Saviour appear twice on the scene. The author is sufficiently astute not to attribute any words of his own invention to our Lord, only recording an action of the Saviour. The first incident is when Ben Hur, treated as a human outcast, is brought to Nazareth as a murderer, and Jesus, then a young man, offers him with Wei. When the inhabitants of Pu learned of his intention, they refused to let him go. Whereupon Confucius swore with an oath that he would not go to Wei, and was set at liberty. Yet he did go to Wei. When one of his disciples asked him, “May a vow then be broken?” he replied, “It was a vow extorted by force, and such the gods do not hear.”

¹ *Estote fortes in bello et pugnate cum antiquo serpente et accipietis regnum aeternum.*

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a cup of water with a profound look of pity in His eyes. Here the heights of the Gospel story are not attained. He was compassionate, too, towards the adulteress, outcast and sentenced to death by stoning, but He gave her something better than pity, the best thing of all—words which were to become for her a flaming memory (John viii. 11). In the second incident Wallace makes Ben Hur accompany the Saviour on His way to the crucifixion, and offer to help Him. Jesus makes no answer—and yet, in the same hour, even the tears of the women moved Him to speech.

The truth is, the figure of Jesus as shown to us in the Gospels has all the characteristics of a metal which resists every alloy. Anything added to the likeness does not contribute to the whole, but betrays itself as a foreign substance which cannot be blended in the crucible.

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The train of thought we have been following, that of the unfathomableness of Christ, seems to us to be a profitable one. Like the dying Lavater, we are aware of a breath from Heaven blowing round us when we come into Christ's presence; we feel that this Jesus is not of the earth, and that the likeness is not made by human hands. But this has to be felt and experienced; and it is difficult to prove, on the other hand, that human imagination should be incapable of glorifying and exalting a loved one to any extent. Some people have an unlimited belief in the capacity of human thought and imagination for embellishing and developing, and how are we to weaken such a belief? Just as the power of imagination cannot be limited in picturing the beauty of some object, so, according to the people who reason in this way, human thought can, by the power of imagination, morally exalt a being which it loves to the point of transfiguring it. And if in doing so the mind should take the way of denying all that is ugly and sweeping away everything bad from the picture it paints, if love

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were to guide the brush, the clearest, brightest portrait would be created. And besides, it is said, these disciples who so lovingly glorified their Master from Nazareth had already the clearest, brightest colours at hand for their picture, in the idealistic utterances of the prophets. The fishermen of the Lake of Gennesareth had only to make use of the exaggerated adulation expended on the expected Messiah, and the glowing picture which they have painted for us would be well on its way to completion.

It cannot be denied that this "glorification of Jesus" at the hands of His disciples provides a ground for constant suspicion among the great army of doubters. It is not only the suspicion cherished by David Strauss and his disciples, but it is ultimately that felt by the numberless multitude of all doubters. They are convinced that the Christ portrayed in the Bible is the creation of His disciples, who were the first to exalt Him to such heights, who in their love were the first to make Him glorious. Once, disastrously, a nation believed that the disciples came and stole Him away. Later there arose the far more widely disseminated delusion that His disciples by their preaching—which is all the New Testament gives us—were the first to glorify Him. But if doubt through the centuries has built its own fortress here, this is just where we must make our attack. His thankful followers are accused of transfiguring Jesus by their words. Then it is surely important for the defence to bring out how much is to be found in the life of Jesus that is inglorious, strange, yes, even offensive. One after another all have been offended in Him—the Baptist, the disciples, the people, the Christian community of the second century, the rising Catholic Church, the expositors of the Bible, our own hearts. It can be proved, and for the defence the proof is important, that as soon as men withdrew their opposition to the picture given in the Gospels and followed their own imagination, they never painted the likeness with the colours used by the

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evangelists. For the figure that looks at us from the Gospel story is not one which is always exalted and glorified, rather does it bear on its forehead, even to-day, the sign of much that is an offence. It has features that will never appeal as great to the natural man, features to which we have gradually to accustom ourselves, and which are now an example to us only because, gazing at Jesus, we have become convinced of their worth. And these characteristics of which we speak are not only to be found here and there in the picture, so that one might think the evangelists had merely forgotten to erase them when they idealized the main traits—no, they are the basic features of the portrait of Jesus. But if this is so, then this portrait can only be understood as a product of the most scrupulous historical accuracy. The members of that early community did not find in themselves the solid foundations and the divine features of the Saviour of the world, they gave them to us as they received them, even when they thereby outraged their own feelings.¹

There are only two ways of looking at the matter. It may be, as the doubter believes, that the figure of the Beloved One has been faithfully adorned with all imaginable splendour and glory, and a halo fashioned for His head such as the pictures of the saints show us. In a letter to Lavater, Goethe uses this strong expression to illustrate such a procedure: “To pluck out the feathers of every bird and give them to the one and only bird of Paradise.” And the result? Such a stream of idealization would have swept away everything that is displeasing in Jesus, or at least have left only a few solitary characteristics emerging from the flood. Or else the matter stands thus: Jesus is not only the Beloved whom a grateful

¹ It is only natural that we who have been brought up in Christianity are not at once acutely aware of this strangeness in the figure of Jesus, as the disciples and their contemporaries were. We have known this figure since our childhood, our thoughts and ideas have been more or less formed by it, we have grown accustomed to it. We are already “clean through the word” (John xv. 3).

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community adorns with a halo of light, He is the Lord and Master before whom they kneel and worship. And what follows from that? The community stood silent in adoring reverence before the life of this Man, not daring to add or subtract anything, holding with special loyalty to all that was alien and unexpected in it, hoping always for the fulfilment of the promise, "What I do ye know not now, but ye shall know it hereafter." In this case it was a conception thrust upon them. No imagining of their own brains, but wisdom from God. It is a conception that bears the title, "I am from above" (John viii. 23).

There is a difference between the *ethical* (moral) revelation as revealed to us in the story of Christ and the *dogmatic* revelation (matters of belief). Our understanding can for the most part approve the dogmatic revelation. Sayings, for instance, such as that concerning the image of God which man bears within him, or of the Fatherhood of God, flatter our understanding; we have nothing against such ideas, and we even believe we might have thought them out for ourselves (compare Lessing). The ethical revelation, on the contrary, is directly opposed to our self-will—that is, to our sinfulness. It remains alien and distasteful to the natural man within us all our lives; and yet, as a revelation, it can be more easily proved. It carries with it the *offence* as the eternal hallmark of its genesis from above.

In one way it may be considered a thankless task to seek out only what is alien and strange to us in the story of Jesus.¹ How much more attractive it would be to trace those passages in which even to the natural eye Jesus is the loveliest among the sons of men! Someone has said that "Jesus wears the star of His order beneath His cloak." We mean to make an unequal division—we

¹ It is therefore possible that this study of what offends may distress and even alarm some people. Such readers will find this feeling removed when they turn to Chapter III, Part III, Book One, and particularly to the second half of the work on the Glory of Jesus.

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mean to examine the cloak and leave the star to others. But the way we propose to travel holds a promise. Its issue will be that Jesus has not been transfigured by the hand of man, but that the community of the first century stood awestruck before the story of His life even when it was displeasing to them. We see Him as He was.

After all, we have not made our own choice of the way we mean to take, we are only following a thought to be found in the Bible. “Unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor. i. 23), is Paul’s testimony to the crucified Jesus. Probably he did not limit this only to the fact of the crucifixion; for when the Master Himself says, “Blessed is he that shall not be offended because of Me,” the expectation is expressed that not only in that last night would all the world be offended because of Him, but that in other ways, too, He would be an offence to all the world. And so our intention of bringing out that which is a stumbling-block in the story of Jesus is only following up a thought already touched on by Jesus Himself.