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A. H. McNeile

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## CHAPTER I

## THE TEACHING OF JESUS

## § I. THE PROBLEM

THE study of the first three Gospels presents a problem to which we cannot close our eyes. Each of them reached its present form after at least a generation<sup>1</sup> of reflexion on the nature and meaning of Christ. They wrote in an age when the modern historic sense, and the strict conception of historical accuracy were unknown. And they would have been non-human if they could have compiled their gospels wholly free from their own presuppositions formed by the general Christian consciousness as it had been developed up to their date. It is, indeed, fully recognized to-day that a historian is not a mere chronicler, but one who presents historical facts in such a way as to indicate the meaning which they bear for himself. To say that a man is a historian, and at the same time 'absolutely impartial' is almost a contradiction in terms. And in the case of a first century writer the contradiction would be more violent. We shall not be mistaken, therefore, in recognizing that the Gospels contain 'later ideas,' that is ideas which the writers, as purposeful historians, 'found' in the facts before them. They presented the facts, as we do to-day, with the deliberate intention of conveying what they believed to be their meaning. And the differences in the conceptions of Jesus during His earthly life held by modern writers mostly resolve themselves into differences of opinion as to the extent to which this interpreting

<sup>1</sup> The Second Gospel at about 70 A.D., the First and Third between 80-100 A.D.

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[More information](#)

process was at work in the minds of the evangelists. It is generally agreed that in the mind of the writer of the Fourth Gospel the process was at work to a very considerable extent. But what is true of him cannot be wholly untrue of the others. Nevertheless when we compare the ideas which the synoptists enshrined in their records with those of the other Christian writers of the same generation, we find that the former were faithful, to an astonishing degree, in preserving the main elements in the life and teaching of our Lord as handed down to them by 'those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.'

In comparing our Lord's teaching with St Paul's, care is needed not to lose one's way in a multitude of details. We must single out the great, primary subjects where they are comparable. A few years ago there was a tendency, brought to a head by Schweitzer's *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (Engl. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*) to find the keynote of the teaching and claims of Jesus in His eschatology alone. The inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven would be a catastrophic event of the immediate future, and He would be the Messiah of the Kingdom. All His ethical teaching was an *interimsethik*, the moral life appropriate, during the short remaining interval, for those who were about to experience the crisis. Schweitzer undoubtedly opened the eyes of many, especially English-speaking people, to see that eschatology holds a larger place in the synoptic Gospels, and in the Pauline epistles also, than had previously been realized. But he was so 'consistent' in the application of his theory as to provoke a reaction. And there is now a danger of the opposite extreme, i.e. to discount most of the eschatology in the Gospels as the work of later thought, and to confine our

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Lord to the 'sane and sober' enunciation of ethical principles<sup>1</sup>. But we must refuse to be tied to the alternatives that He was *either* a fantastic visionary, a mental victim of the Jewish apocalypses, *or* a liberal Protestant, moral, pacifist, and socialistic. Of the two we can say without hesitation that the former would go further than the latter in accounting for the spiritual enthusiasm of His first disciples in their triumphant witness to His Messiahship.

Imagine the situation supposed in the latter case. A prophet, a teacher of a high morality, who openly expressed his independence of cherished traditions and conventions, brought upon himself violent religious opposition, and was executed at the hands of the authorities. His handful of devoted disciples underwent an experience which convinced them that He had appeared to them alive after death. What was there in this to afford the faintest reason for their glad and unshakeable certainty that He was not only alive (the idea of risings from the dead was not at all foreign to Jewish thought; cf. Mat. xiv. 2, xxvii. 52; Heb. xi. 35), but exalted to God's right hand as the heavenly Messiah; that it was He who had not only been anointed with, but had Himself poured out upon them, the divine Spirit; and that He would very soon be seen in the terrible glory of His world-shaking Parousia to inaugurate the Kingdom of God upon earth? There is no psychological means of transit from the first set of ideas to the second.

On the other hand, the former alternative, rigidly adhered to, wholly fails to account for the inclusion in the Gospels of the large element of moral teaching. 'He began

<sup>1</sup> Some of which, nevertheless, it is not considered sane and sober to put into practice *ad literam* today.

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to teach them many things' (Mk vi. 34). 'He was accustomed' to teach them (x. 1). The theory of an *interim-sethik* covers only portions of it. If, as Schweitzer holds, Jesus did not think of Himself as a 'teacher' at all, what place in the eschatological theory can be found (to take a single example) for the parable of the Prodigal Son? Must those who can discern nothing eschatological in it deny its genuineness, and 'put<sup>1</sup> it down to the account of "primitive theology," which serves as a scrap-heap for everything for which they cannot find a place in the "historical life of Jesus"'?

Thus it is not mere dislike of a dilemma that makes us refuse to be pinned down to one of two alternatives, but the fact that neither of them by itself satisfies the *data*. It is evident that we must search for something which would give rise both to the moral teaching ascribed to our Lord by the synoptists, and to the belief in His Messiahship held by the primitive Church.

We can start from the statements in the Gospels that He was thought of as a Prophet. 'This is the prophet Jesus who is from Nazareth of Galilee' (Mat. xxi. 11). 'A great prophet is risen among us' (Lk. vii. 16). He was even thought to be one of the Old Testament prophets come to life again (Mk vi. 15, viii. 28). And He is recorded to have applied the title to Himself: 'A prophet is not without honour except in his own country' (Mk vi. 4), 'I must go on my way to-day and to-morrow and on the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet perish outside Jerusalem' (Lk. xiii. 33). Now the Jewish race knew very well what they meant by a prophet; the cessation of prophets is lamented in Psalm lxxiv. 9; and the word

<sup>1</sup> The sentence is Schweitzer's, but it lends itself to be quoted against him.

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carries us back into the distant past of Hebrew thought. In so far, then, as it could be rightly used to describe our Lord, a parallel should be traceable between Him and His predecessors.

The essence of the work of the prophets from Amos onwards is to be found not in their moral teaching alone, nor in their eschatological predictions alone, but in something which combined them both, i.e. in the correction of the popular nationalistic self-consciousness, and the eschatological ideas in which it found expression, by placing them in the light of the moral Being of God. Both the self-consciousness and the eschatology were created by the experiences of the Exodus and the settlement in Canaan. They believed that each land and nation had a real God of their own; Israel's God was Yahweh, but He was the most powerful of them all, and gradually proved it by helping them to overcome their enemies. The 'sons of Israel' were naturally and necessarily sons of the God of Israel. 'Israel is My son, my firstborn' (Ex. iv. 22); 'I called My son out of Egypt'<sup>1</sup> (Hos. xi. 1). Their defeats were His defeats, their triumphs His triumphs; their conceptions of His greatness and their greatness grew together.

And thus arose the confident expectation that the day must come when He and they would arrive at complete supremacy over all foes. He was naturally and necessarily bound to bring this about; it was an obvious certainty that the 'day of Yahweh' would be a day of 'light,' ushering in a golden age of perpetual prosperity and world-wide dominion. They had as yet little conception of Him as a moral Being, who required to be served by moral character. But Amos stood forth and declared that the

<sup>1</sup> The rendering of the Hebrew is doubtful, and the versions differ. See the writer's note on Mat. ii. 15.

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[More information](#)

day of Yahweh would be not light but darkness (v. 18). And he and his successors declared that the golden age to which the nation looked serenely forward would come to them not as a consequence of their unique position as the privileged sons of Yahweh, but of their obedience to His moral commands. The eschatology of the prophets was thus bound up with, and conditioned by, their moral teaching. The good time to come was not an inevitable consummation of national privilege, but an event which was impossible without national righteousness.

It is not difficult to trace the circumstances which led the Prophet of Nazareth to adopt a similar attitude.

## § 2. SONSHIP

After the return from exile the lesson of the prophets, pressed home in the hard school of suffering, was thoroughly understood. God's commands must be obeyed; and the *ḥasidim*, the pious, strove to obey them, many no doubt with the frank and simple delight of the author of Psalm cxix. But their zeal for obedience so consumed them that they felt it necessary to keep themselves more safe from stumbling by means of bye-laws which were not in the Torah; the 'tradition of the elders' began to grow up as a fence round the Law. And it grew to such dimensions and complexity that it was beyond the mental range of the ordinary population. It is true that the new rules were not all on the side of strictness; many of them were intended to mitigate the severity of the Law and of rules already made. But the whole *corpus* of regulations could be known only to those who were rich enough, or self-sacrificing enough, to give up ordinary occupations, and to devote themselves wholly to the study of it. And those who did, tended increasingly

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to despise the unlearned and ignorant, and to consider them unfit for the blessings of the age to come. Scholarship held the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. And to it was being added in certain quarters speculations about the age to come, which are reflected in the apocalypses. From all this the Sadducaean, aristocratic, priestly party held aloof. They might be worldly and time-serving, they might for political purposes acquiesce in the movement to Graecize their nation; but with scribal rules and apocalyptic speculations they would have nothing to do. They claimed to adhere only to the sacred Scriptures, and especially to the Pentateuch. And they were concerned mainly with the preservation of their privileges of position with its attendant prestige and wealth. They held the keys of worldly office, which attracted many of them more than the Kingdom of Heaven.

Thus the legalists on the one hand, and the ecclesiastics on the other, possessed a monopoly of religious knowledge and privilege, over against the 'am ['ammê] hā-'ārez, the common folk, the masses, whom they despised as lacking in culture and piety<sup>1</sup>. Cf. Jn vii. 49, 'This people [*or* mob] that knoweth not the Law are accursed.' The poor, though not, of course, identical with the humble and pious in the land, were broadly speaking nearer to being so than the labouring classes today. They could say with the Psalmist 'our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud.' Those that were humble and pious among them were nothing accounted of in the days when our Lord began His ministry. *And He was one of them.* That is a salient fact which conditioned His work. He had lived

<sup>1</sup> On the contempt in which they were held see Foakes Jackson and Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. i. Appendix E.

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all His life in Galilee as one of the 'mob.' Publicans and sinners were held by the scholars and ecclesiastics to be scarcely further from the Kingdom of God than such as He. And while He mused upon it the fire kindled, and at last driven by the impelling force of divine inspiration He emerged from His secluded life to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was not the monopoly of culture and privilege, but was open to any and every one who repented of his sins and lived a life of righteousness. The prophets had taught that a sonship of mere privilege would not of itself bring with it blessings in the day of Yahweh. And the better minds in Israel had begun to understand that a 'son' of God was one who received His fatherly discipline (cf. 2 Sam. vii. 14, 15; Hos. i. 10), and exhibited a character like unto His. The following late passages are noteworthy: Eccles. iv. 10, LXX., 'Be to orphans as a father, and instead of a husband to their mother, and thou shalt be as a son of the most High' (Heb. 'and God shall call thee son'); Wisd. ii. 16, 18, 'He [the righteous] boasteth that God is his Father'; 'If the righteous be God's son, He will uphold him'; v. 5, 'How was he [the righteous] reckoned among the sons of God!'; Psalms Sol. xiii. 8, 'He shall admonish the righteous man as a beloved son, and his discipline shall be as that of a first-born'; xviii. 4, 'Thy discipline is upon us as upon a first-born only son.' And our Lord is recorded to have used similar language: 'Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called sons of God' (Mat. v. 9); 'Love your enemies . . . that ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven' for He also does kindnesses to bad men as well as good (v. 44 f.). The parallel in Lk. has 'ye shall be sons of the most High' (vi. 35). It was the burning centre of His message that since character and not privilege constitute

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true sonship, every blessing provided for God's sons is attainable by *anyone*. That was fundamental in His good tidings, and a study of it sheds a bright light upon much of the synoptic records.

(a) It was a revolution. It had nothing akin to socialism in the modern sense, or to politics in any sense, because it was 'not of this world.' But to eat and drink with publicans and sinners, and to defend Himself as He does in Mat. ix. 12, 13 and Lk. xv., to be known as their friend (Mat. xi. 19), and to treat them as is recorded in Lk. vii. 37-50, xix. 5-7, Jn viii. 1-11, in a word to open the Kingdom of Heaven to *all*, was to attack privilege. And an enthusiastic crowd was storming the Kingdom of Heaven, and taking possession of it by force, as a band of spiritual revolutionaries against the intellectual autocrats who would keep them out (Mat. xi. 12). It was 'the revolt of true prophecy against the monopolising of the Lord of heaven and earth by an intellectual coterie' (Bacon). It was the principle underlying His whole attitude to the Law and the scribal tradition. To be learned in either was not essential. 'I say unto you' shew a righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees, one which involves the fundamental principles of human ethics, which are binding upon, and can be observed by, *everyone*,—as distinct from the casuistries of scholastic moral theology, in which even the learned were divided, on such subjects as the Sabbath, divorce, oaths and vows, washings, and tithes. 'Woe unto you, professors of the Law, because ye have taken away the key of knowledge; ye yourselves entered not in, and them that were entering in ye hindered' (Lk. xi. 52). 'I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed

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them unto babes' (Mat. xi. 25 = Lk. x. 21). When those who were called to the feast refused to come, the masses scattered on the high roads were gathered in (Mat. xxii. 1-10). Of the two sons, he that 'repented and went' was the one that really did his father's will, and the publicans and harlots are his analogue (Mat. xxi. 28-32). The publican in the temple, with his true penitence for undoubted wrong-doing, was better than the Pharisee (Lk. xviii. 10-14). The one wandering sheep, the one lost coin, gives more joy than the others (xv. 1-10), and the prodigal son than the scrupulous, privileged elder brother (vv. 11-32). And the revolution culminated at the capital, the august centre of priestly and aristocratic privilege, in the cleansing of the temple to be a house of prayer for all.

(b) Since sonship consists morally in likeness to the Father, we are enabled to see where the emphasis lies in our Lord's references to the Fatherhood of God. It is not the case that Jesus was the first to teach that God is Father. In the Old Testament, God is the Father of Israel the privileged nation, and of its representative or king. In later writings there is the beginning of the conception that He is the Father, in a more immediate and personal sense, of individuals. E.g. 'O Lord, the Father and Master [God] of my life' (Sir. xxiii. 1, 4). 'They all ... called upon the all-Sovereign Lord and all-powerful Ruler, their merciful God and Father' (3 Mac. v. 7). 'Cause us to return, O our Father, unto Thy law'; 'Forgive us, O our Father, for we have sinned' (*Shēmōneh 'esrēh*<sup>1</sup>). It is true that the instances that can be cited are not numerous, while for our Lord the truth of God's

<sup>1</sup> I.e. 'Eighteen,' a title given to a collection of pre-Christian Hebrew prayers. See the *Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (ed. Abrahams, p. lv ff.).