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978-1-108-01955-2 - The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined, Volume 1

David Friedrich Strauss

Excerpt

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THE LIFE OF JESUS.

INTRODUCTION.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MYTHICAL POINT OF VIEW IN RELATION TO THE GOSPEL HISTORIES.

§ 1.

INEVITABLE RISE OF DIFFERENT MODES OF EXPLAINING SACRED HISTORIES.

WHEREVER a religion, resting upon written records, prolongs and extends the sphere of its dominion, accompanying its votaries through the varied and progressive stages of mental cultivation, a discrepancy between the representations of those ancient records, referred to as sacred, and the notions of more advanced periods of mental development, will inevitably sooner or later arise. In the first instance this disagreement is felt in reference only to the unessential—the external form: the expressions and delineations are seen to be inappropriate; but by degrees it manifests itself also in regard to that which is essential: the fundamental ideas and opinions in these early writings fail to be commensurate with a more advanced civilization. As long as this discrepancy is either not in itself so considerable, or else is not so universally discerned and acknowledged, as to lead to a complete renunciation of these Scriptures as of sacred authority, so long will a system of reconciliation by means of interpretation be adopted and pursued by those who have a more or less distinct consciousness of the existing incongruity.

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A main element in all religious records is sacred history ; a history of events in which the divine enters, without intermediation, into the human ; the ideal thus assuming an immediate embodiment. But as the progress of mental cultivation mainly consists in the gradual recognition of a chain of causes and effects connecting natural phenomena with each other ; so the mind in its development becomes ever increasingly conscious of those mediate links which are indispensable to the realization of the ideal ¹ ; and hence the discrepancy between the modern culture and the ancient records, with regard to their historical portion, becomes so apparent, that the immediate intervention of the divine in human affairs loses its probability. Besides, as the humanity of these records is the humanity of an early period, consequently of an age comparatively undeveloped and necessarily rude, a sense of repulsion is likewise excited. The incongruity may be thus expressed. *The divine cannot so have happened* ; (not immediately, not in forms so rude ;) or, *that which has so happened cannot have been divine* : — and if a reconciliation be sought by means of interpretation, it will be attempted to prove, either that the divine did not manifest itself in the manner related,—which is to deny the historical validity of the ancient Scriptures ; or, that the actual occurrences were not divine,—which is to explain away the absolute contents of these books. In both cases the interpretation may be partial or impartial : partial, if undertaken with a determination to close the eyes to the secretly recognized fact of the disagreement between the modern culture and the ancient records, and to see only in such interpretation the original signification of these records ; impartial, if it unequivocally acknowledges and openly avows that the matters narrated in these books must be viewed in a light altogether different from that in which they were regarded by the authors themselves. This latter method, however, by no means involves the entire rejection of the religious documents ; on the contrary, the essential

¹ [This passage varies slightly from the original, a subsequent amplification by Dr. Strauss being incorporated with it.—Tr.]

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may be firmly retained, whilst the unessential is unreservedly abandoned.

§ 2.

DIFFERENT EXPLANATIONS OF SACRED LEGENDS AMONG THE GREEKS.

Though the Hellenistic religion cannot be said to have rested upon written records, it became enshrined in the Greek poems, for example, in those of Homer and Hesiod; and these, no less than its orally transmitted legends, did not fail to receive continually varying interpretations, successively adapted to the progressive intellectual culture of the Greeks. At an early period the rigid philosophy of the Greeks, and under its influence even some of the Greek poets, recognized the impossibility of ascribing to Deity manifestations so grossly human, so immediate, and so barbarous, as those exhibited and represented as divine in the wild conflicts of Hesiod's Theogony, and in the domestic occupations and trivial pursuits of the Homeric deities. Hence arose the quarrel of Plato, and prior to him of Pindar, with Homer¹; hence the cause which induced Anaxagoras, to whom the invention of the allegorical mode of interpretation is ascribed, to apply the Homeric delineations to virtue and to justice²; hence it was that the Stoics understood the Theogony of Hesiod as relating to the action of the elements, which, according to their notions, constituted, in their highest union, the divine nature³. Thus did these several thinkers, each according to his own peculiar mode of thought, succeed in discovering an absolute meaning in these representations: the one finding in them a physical, the other an ethical signification, whilst, at the same time, they gave up their external form, ceasing to regard them as strictly historical.

¹ Plato, de Republ. ii. p. 377. Steph.; Pindar, Nem. vii. 31.

² Diog. Laërt. L. ii. c. iii. No. 7.

³ Cic. de Nat. Deor. i. 10. 15. Comp. Athenag. Legat. 22. Tatian, c. Græc. Orat. 21. Clement. homil. 6, 1 f.

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On the other hand, the more popular and sophisticated culture of another class of thinkers led them to opposite conclusions. Though, in their estimation, every semblance of the divine had evaporated from these histories; though they were convinced that the proceedings ascribed to the gods were not godlike, still they did not abandon the historical sense of these narratives. With Evemerus⁴ they transformed the subjects of these histories from gods to men, to heroes and sages of antiquity, kings and tyrants, who, through deeds of might and valour, had acquired divine honours. Some indeed went still further, and, with Polybius⁵, considered the whole system of heathen theology as a fable, invented by the founders of states to awe the people into subjection.

§ 3.

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS AMONG THE HEBREWS.—PHILO.

Whilst, on the one hand, the isolation and stability of the Hebrews served to retard the development of similar manifestations amongst this people, on the other hand, when once actually developed, they were the more marked; because, in proportion to the high degree of authority ascribed to the sacred records, was the skill and caution required in their interpretation. Thus, even in Palestine, subsequent to the exile, and particularly after the time of the Maccabees, many ingenious attempts were made to interpret the Old Testament so as to remove offensive literalities, supply deficiencies, and introduce the notions of a later age. Examples of this system of interpretation occur in the writings of the Rabbins, and even in the New Testament; but it was at that place where the Jewish mind came into contact with Greek civilization, and under its influence was carried beyond the limits of its own

⁴ Diodor. Sic. Bibl. Fragm. L. vi. Cic. de Nat. Deor. i. 42.⁵ Hist. vi. 56.¹ Döpke, die Hermeneutik der neutestamentlichen Schriftsteller, s. 123. ff.

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national culture,—namely, at Alexandria,—that the allegorical mode of interpretation was first consistently applied to the whole body of historical narrative in the Old Testament. Many had prepared the way, but it was Philo who first fully developed the doctrine of both a common and a deeper sense of the Holy Scriptures. He was by no means inclined to cast away the former, but generally placed the two together, side by side, and even declared himself opposed to those who, everywhere and without necessity, sacrificed the literal to the higher signification. In many cases, however, he absolutely discarded the verbal meaning and historical conception, and considered the narrative merely as the figurative representation of an idea. He did so, for example, whenever the sacred story appeared to him to present delineations unworthy of Deity, tending either to materialism or anthropomorphism, or otherwise to contain contradictions².

The fact that the Jews, whilst they adopted this mode of explaining the Old Testament, (which, in order to save the purity of the intrinsic signification, often sacrificed the historical form,) were never led into the opposite system of Eucherius, (which preserved the historical form by divesting the history of the divine, and reducing it to a record of mere human events,) is to be ascribed to the tenacity with which that people ever adhered to the supernatural point of view. The latter mode of interpretation was first brought to bear upon the Old Testament by the Christians.

§ 4.

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS AMONG THE CHRISTIANS.—ORIGEN.

To the early Christians who, antecedent to the fixing of the christian canon, made especial use of the Old Testament as their principal sacred record, an allegorical interpretation was the more indispensable, inasmuch as they had made greater advances beyond the views of the Old Testament writers than

² Gfrörer. Dähne.

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even the most enlightened of the Jews. It was no wonder therefore that this mode of explanation, already in vogue among the Jews, was almost universally adopted by the primitive christian churches. It was however again in Alexandria that it found the fullest application amongst the Christians, and that in connexion with the name of Origen. Origen attributes a threefold meaning to the Scriptures, corresponding with his distribution of the human being into three parts: the literal sense answering to the body; the moral, to the soul; and the mystical, to the spirit¹. The rule with him was to retain all three meanings, though differing in worth; in some particular cases, however, he was of opinion that the literal interpretation either gave no sense at all, or else a perverted sense, in order the more directly to impel the reader to the discovery of its mystical signification. Origen's repeated observation that it is not the purpose of the biblical narratives to transmit old tales, but to instruct in the rules of life²; his assertion that the merely literal acceptance of many of the narratives would prove destructive of the christian religion³; and his application of the passage "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,"⁴ to the relative worth of the allegorical and the literal modes of biblical interpretation, may be understood as indicating only the inferiority of the literal to the deeper signification. But the literal sense is decidedly given up when it is said, "Every passage of Scripture has a spiritual element, but not every one has a corporeal element;"⁵ "A spiritual truth often exists embodied in a corporeal falsehood;"⁶ "The Scrip-

¹ Homil. 5. in Levit. § 5.

² Homil. 2. in Exod. iii.: *Nolite putare, ut sæpe jam diximus, veterum vobis fabularum recitari, sed doceri vos per hæc, ut agnoscatis ordinem vite.*

³ Homil. 5. in Levit. i.: *Hæc omnia, nisi alio sensu accipiamus quam literæ tactus ostendit, obstaculum magis et subversionem Christianæ religioni, quam hortationem ædificationemque præstabunt.*

⁴ Contra Cels. vi. 70.

⁵ De principp. L. iv. § 20: *πᾶσα μὲν (γραφή) ἔχει τὸ πνευματικόν, οὐ πᾶσα δὲ τὸ σωματικόν.*

⁶ Comm. in Joann. Tom. x. § 4:—*σαζομένου πολλάκις τοῦ ἀληθοῦς πνευματικοῦ ἐν τῇ σωματικῇ, ὡς ἐν εἴποι τις, ψεύδει.*

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tures contain many things which never came to pass, interwoven with the history, and he must be dull indeed who does not of his own accord observe that much which the Scriptures represent as having happened never actually occurred.”⁷ Among the passages which Origen regarded as admitting no other than an allegorical interpretation, besides those which too sensibly humanized the Deity⁸, he included those which attributed unworthy action to individuals who had held intimate communion with God⁹.

It was not however from the Old Testament views alone that Origen had, in consequence of his christian training, departed so widely that he felt himself compelled, if he would retain his reverence for the sacred records, to allegorize their contents, as a means of reconciling the contradiction which had arisen between them and his own mind. There was much likewise in the New Testament writings which so little accorded with his philosophical notions, that he found himself constrained to adopt a similar proceeding in reference to them. He reasoned thus:—the New Testament and the Old are the work of the same spirit, and this spirit would proceed in the same manner in the production of the one and of the other, interweaving fiction with reality, in order thereby to direct the mind to the spiritual signification¹⁰. In a remarkable passage of his work against Celsus, Origen classes together, and in no ambiguous

⁷ De principp. iv. 15 : συνύφηνεν ἡ γραφή τῆ ἱστορία τὸ μὴ γενόμενον, πῆ μὲν μὴ δυνατὸν γενέσθαι, πῆ δὲ δυνατὸν μὲν γενέσθαι, οὐ μὴν γεγενημένον. De principp. iv. 16 : καὶ τί δὲ πλείω λέγειν; τῶν μὴ πάντῃ ἀμβλέων μυθία ὅσα ταιαῦτα δυναμένων συναγαγεῖν, γεγραμμένα μὲν ὡς γεγονότα, οὐ γεγενημένα δὲ κατὰ τὴν λέξιν.

⁸ De principp. iv. 16.

⁹ Homil. 6, in Gen. iii. : *Quæ nobis ædificatio erit, legendibus, Abraham, tantum patriarcham, non solum mentitum esse Abimelech regi, sed et pudicitiam conjugis prodidisse? Quid nos ædificat tanti patriarchæ uxor, si putetur contaminationibus exposita per conviventiam maritalem? Hæc Judæi putent et si qui cum eis sunt literæ amici, non spiritus.*

¹⁰ De principp. iv. 16 : οὐ μόνον δὲ περὶ τῶν πρὸ τῆς παρουσίας ταῦτα τὸ πνεῦμα ἀκονόμενοι, ἀλλ', ἅτε τὸ αὐτὸ τυγχάνον καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐνὸς θεοῦ, τὸ ὅμοιον καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν εὐαγγελίων πεποιήκει καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀποστόλων, οὐδὲ τούτων πάντη ἕκαστον τὴν ἱστορίαν τῶν προσουφασμένων κατὰ τὸ σωματικὸν ἰχόντων. μὴ γεγενημένων.

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language, the partially fabulous stories of profane history, and of heathen mythology, with the gospel narratives¹¹. He expresses himself as follows: "In almost every history it is a difficult task, and not unfrequently an impossible one, to demonstrate the reality of the events recorded, however true they may in fact be. Let us suppose some individual to deny the reality of a Trojan war on account of the incredibilities mixed up with the history; as, for example, the birth of Achilles from a goddess of the sea. How could we substantiate the fact, encumbered as it is with the numerous and undeniable poetical fictions which have, in some unascertainable manner, become interwoven with the generally admitted account of the war between the Greeks and the Trojans? There is no alternative: he who would study history with understanding, and not suffer himself to be deluded, must weigh each separate detail, and consider what is worthy of credit and may be believed without further evidence; what, on the contrary, must be regarded as merely figurative; (*τίνα δὲ τροπολογήσει*) always bearing in mind the aim of the narrator,—and what must be wholly mistrusted as being written with intent to please certain individuals." In conclusion Origen says, "I was desirous of making these preliminary observations in relation to the entire history of Jesus given in the Gospels, not with the view of exacting from the enlightened a blind and baseless belief, but with design to show how indispensable to the study of this history are not only judgment and diligent examination, but, so to speak, the very penetrating into the mind of the author, in order to discover the particular aim with which each narrative may have been written."

We here see Origen almost transcending the limits of his own customary point of view, and verging towards the more modern mythical view. But if his own prepossessions in favour of the supernatural, and his fear of giving offence to the orthodox church, combined to hinder him from making a wider application of the allegorical mode of interpretation to the Old Testa-

¹¹ Contra Celsum, i. 40.

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ment, the same causes operated still more powerfully in relation to the New Testament; so that when we further inquire of which of the gospel histories in particular did Origen reject the historical meaning, in order to hold fast a truth worthy of God? the instances will prove to be meagre in the extreme. For when he says, in illustration of the above-mentioned passage, that amongst other things, it is not to be understood literally that Satan showed to Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth from a mountain, because this is impossible to the bodily eye; he here gives not a strictly allegorical interpretation, but merely a different turn to the literal sense, which, according to him, relates not to an external fact, but to the internal fact of a vision. Again, even where the text offers a tempting opportunity of sacrificing the literal to the spiritual meaning, as, for example, the cursing of the fig-tree¹², Origen does not speak out freely. He is most explicit when speaking of the expulsion of the buyers and sellers from the temple; he characterizes the conduct of Jesus, according to the literal interpretation, as assuming and seditious¹³. He moreover expressly remarks that the Scriptures contain many more historical than merely scriptural truths¹⁴.

§ 5.

TRANSITION TO MORE MODERN TIMES.—DEISTS AND NATURALISTS OF THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES.—THE WOLFENBUTTEL FRAGMENTIST.

Thus was developed one of those forms of interpretation to which the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, in common with all other religious records, in relation to their historical contents, became necessarily subjected; that, namely, which recognizes in them the divine, but denies it to have actually manifested itself

¹² Comm. in Matth. Tom. xvi. 26.

¹³ Comm. in Joann. Tom. x. 17.

¹⁴ De princip. iv. 19. After Origen, that kind of allegory only which left the historical sense unimpaired was retained in the church; and where, subsequently, a giving up of the verbal meaning is spoken of, this refers merely to a trope or a simile.

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in so immediate a manner. The other principal mode of interpretation, which, to a certain extent, acknowledges the course of events to have been historically true, but assigns it to a human and not a divine origin, was developed amongst the enemies of Christianity by a Celsus, a Porphyry, and a Julian. They indeed rejected much of the history as altogether fabulous; but they admitted many of the incidents related of Moses, Jesus, and others, to be historical facts: these facts were however considered by them as originating from common motives; and they attributed their apparently supernatural character either to gross fraud or impious sorcery.

It is worthy of observation that the circumstances attending the introduction of these several modes of interpretation into the heathen and Jewish religions, on the one hand, and into the christian religion, on the other, were different. The religion and sacred literature of the Greeks and Hebrews had been gradually developed with the development of the nation, and it was not until the intellectual culture of the people had outgrown the religion of their fathers, and the latter was in consequence verging towards decay, that the discrepancy which is the source of these varying interpretations became apparent. Christianity, on the contrary, came into a world of already advanced civilization; which was, with the exception of that of Palestine, the Judaico-Hellenistic and the Greek. Consequently a disagreement manifested itself at the very beginning; it was not now however, as in former times, between modern culture and an ancient religion, but between a new religion and ancient culture. The production of allegorical interpretations among the Pagans and the Hebrews, was a sign that their religion had lost its vitality; the allegories of Origen and the attacks of Celsus, in reference to Christianity, were evidences rather that the world had not as yet duly accommodated itself to the new religion. As however with the christianizing of the Roman empire, and the overthrow of the chief heresies, the christian principle gained an ever-increasing supremacy; as the schools of heathen wisdom closed: and the uncivilized Germanic tribes lent themselves to