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HOW THE JEWS WILL RECLAIM JESUS

Throughout the history of religious controversies between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages Christianity was on the defensive. The Christians considered themselves called upon to prove the claims they made on behalf of Jesus by endeavouring to show that the vague prophetic promises were all fulfilled in Christ. The Jews had no counter claims to make; they simply refused to be impressed. As the historical custodians of the Bible text as well as of its manifold interpretations, the Jews looked rather amazed and at times even amused at the confidence with which the erstwhile heathen interpreted at their own pleasure the mistaken Scriptures quoted from the Vulgate. This attitude of aloofness and incredulity was sufficient to enrage even saints among Christians, for it gave them an uneasiness of feeling, deepening into fear and doubt and a general sense of discomfort, which explains much of the Christian intolerance of the Jews. The great victories achieved by Christianity, its conquest of many youthful barbarian races and its destruction of many effete civilizations—all this did not compensate its adherents for their failure to win over the handful of survivors of the race that had witnessed the birth of Christianity. And so the Jews were dragged to churches and to royal courts to listen to sermons and

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to partake in disputations in order to be impressed and become convinced.

Today we Jews have taken the burden of proof upon ourselves. A century of infiltration of Christian ideas into our life through all the agencies of education has robbed us of our essential Jewish character, of our distinctively Jewish philosophy of life, and has left us Jews only in appearance, in occupation and in the semblance of an external social coherence. In everything that guides our life and determines our view thereof, we have become thoroughly Christianized, for we have all accepted Christ if not in the theological sense of a savior at least in the historical sense of a civilizer. We have all fallen in with the prevalent view that Christianity is essential to the progress of human civilization, which is, after all, another version of the orthodox belief that Christ is necessary for the salvation of our soul. If indeed we do not openly acknowledge that Christ has fulfilled the promises of the prophets, we proceed on the assumption that modern civilization is the fulfillment of the promises of Christ. And everything we imagine nowadays that we see in the utterances of Christ we assume to have been contained in them from the beginning and to have been obvious to everyone who stood by and listened. We thus wonder at the blindness of our forefathers, the eye witnesses of Christ, for not seeing all this. We ask ourselves, why did they not accept Jesus?

From this question it is only another step to the greater question, why should we not accept Jesus? There are many among us who, while not quite convinced that civilization has already fulfilled the promises of Christ—for occasionally facts stare us

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in the face and awaken us from the spell of words—still believe in the potency of Christ's sayings, a potency almost magical, by which the world is yet to be saved. We seem to think with the rest of the sentimental part of Christendom that evil can be cured not by removing its causes but by exhortation and by calling to repentance and to a closer study of the sayings of Jesus. If we are sometimes reminded that as Jews we are already supplied with a complete assortment of similar sayings by the rabbis, Mr. Claude Montefiore answers for us, in effect, that it is easier for the modern Jew to learn Hellenistic Greek than rabbinic Hebrew.

We thus have two questions: Why did not the Jews accept Jesus? Why should not the Jews accept Jesus?

Of the historical question there are many attempted solutions. All these solutions, however, proceed upon the hypothesis that there were certain elements in the teachings of Jesus which made them *a priori* unacceptable, if not repugnant, to the Jews of his time. It is sometimes said that it was due to the fact that Jesus was too willing to render unto Cæsar the things which were Cæsar's, as if the Jews of that time, and immediately after, were at one in their open defiance of the powers that be. More often it is said that the boldness of his legal decisions offended the sensibilities of the Law-abiding Jews, as if the Law were already rigid and fixed by that time and as if the Pharisees themselves were not torn by internal dissensions which had almost divided the Law into two Laws. Occasionally fine-spun speculations are expended upon subtle distinctions between the ethical teachings of Jesus and those of the lead-

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ing contemporary Pharisees, distinctions in which one finds no greater difference than that between the negative form of the Golden Rule as given by Hillel and its positive form as given by Jesus. One would not like to become irreverent and dismiss the entire question by repeating with Pontius Pilate in Anatole France's *Le Procureur de Judée*: "*Jésus, de Nazareth? Je ne me rappelle pas.*"

But what we should really like to know is what is exactly meant by the question of the Jewish acceptance of Jesus. The personality of Jesus as conceived in the manner of the various forms of christology could never find a place in Judaism, for it is altogether foreign to its fundamental principles and is a later importation from without. As the promised Messiah, if he ever claimed to be that, he simply did not meet the conditions which in the conception of the people of that time had to attend the coming of the promised Messiah. As a leading authority on questions of the Law, the contemporaries of Jesus could not be expected to accept Jesus more than they did Shammai or Hillel. As a moral and religious teacher, it seems that he succeeded quite well in attracting a goodly number of Jews of the lowlier station of life and culture among whom he appeared and to whom he delighted to deliver his messages. What really requires an explanation is not the paucity of Jewish followers but rather the great number of Gentiles that were soon to follow him or, rather, his idealized name.

The only intelligent meaning that a Jew may attach to the problem of the acceptance of Jesus is of a literary nature, namely, why were not the teachings of Jesus incorporated in Jewish literature to-

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gether with those of other great teachers? One naturally would not expect them to be formed into a new book of the Bible, though he certainly did claim to be a prophet. Only those who are unacquainted with literary conditions in Palestine at that time and are accustomed to think of the New Testament as a continuation of the Old could ever dream of such a possibility. Jesus is not a rejected prophet, at best he is a rejected rabbi. Prophecy was supposed to have come to an end long before Jesus made his appearance. The Jews did not put a limitation to the books of the Bible in order to keep Jesus out; Jesus simply happened to come at a time when that body of literature in the opinion of the authorities of the time was practically closed. The question is merely, why were not the teachings of Jesus included in the Tannaitic collection of a subsequent generation which includes the teachings of men who lived at about the time of Jesus? To put it more concretely, why is the Sermon on the Mount not included in the collection of the *Sayings of the Fathers*? That Jesus had fallen from grace could not account for that omission, for Elisha ben Abuyah, too, fell from grace, and still he is quoted in that collection of traditional wisdom.

The answer seems to lie in the nature of the records which entered into the making up of the Tannaitic collection of ancient traditions.

The Tannaitic literary collections contain the teachings recorded in the name of individual authors from the time of Simeon the Just, a contemporary of Alexander the Great, to the early part of the third century after the Christian era. There is, however, a marked difference between the earlier

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records and those of the period following the establishment of the school of Jabneh, after the fall of Jerusalem. In the earlier period only those who were officially at the head of the schools are quoted by name, otherwise scholars are grouped together and referred to as collective bodies. To this generalization there are only a few exceptions, for which there is always an obvious explanation. In the later period, individual scholars in great numbers, whether official dignitaries in the schools or not, are quoted by name. There is no doubt that in the period from which the Tannaitic collections contain only the common decisions of the schools transmitted in the names of Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel (House of Shammai, House of Hillel) but no teachings in the name of individual scholars, there must have been many individuals who in their private capacity, unaffiliated with these two great schools, had taught and preached in the synagogues, but whose teachings, for lack of any agency for their collection and preservation, were lost to the world. Jesus was one of these unaffiliated teachers who taught and preached during the period of the Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel. If the teachings of Jesus were not similarly consigned to oblivion, it is due to the fact that his followers banded themselves, not into a sect, as it is usually supposed, but into a "House," a Bet Jesus, corresponding to the Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel, and this "House" it was that collected and preserved the teachings of Jesus just as the other "Houses" collected and preserved the teachings of their respective founders.

Once the teachings of Jesus were collected and written down and were issued for public circulation,

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which took place long before any official collection of the Tannaim was allowed to be publicly circulated in writing, they were declared by the leaders of the Tannaitic schools as unauthorized writings, and were put into the same class with all other unauthorized works. It is thus not as an individual that Jesus was excluded from the Tannaitic literary collections but rather as an unaffiliated teacher, of no official position in any of the Tannaitic schools, who lived at a time when, as a result of a general practice, the teachings of that class of men were not included in the official records of the schools which later made up the Tannaitic collections.

By the same token the present day problem of the Jewish acceptance of Jesus should be treated as a problem of the reclamation of a lost literature rather than that of the recognition of a new moral philosophy which is needful for our salvation. Good souls always rush to gnomic sayings for guidance. Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius, Confucius and the Buddha, the rabbis and the folk sayings of every nation are drawn upon for that purpose, though, unlike the Sermon on the Mount, we are not expected to make them into a creed. But gnomic sayings and parables and homely examples hardly guide our lives. All this kind of homespun wisdom was produced in the infancy of mankind, in the simplicity of life, and has been with us for centuries and in spite of it all we have built up our atrocious civilization. If from the complexity of our life we occasionally seek refuge in the simple utterances with which the sages of the past attempted to solve the difficulties of their time, it is only painfully to realize how inadequate they are to solve the problems of today.

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No economist, for instance, would take the view of Jesus on riches as a solution of the evils of accumulated wealth; or the examples of the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field as a remedy for unemployment; or the miracles of the feeding of the five and the four thousand as an alleviation of the blight of famine; nor would any medical man take the stories of the miraculous healings as a cure for all disease. A leader of liberal Christian thought has recently called upon Christians to give up the pretense that they seriously believe all the teachings of Jesus to be adequate as a practical guide of life.* Gnostic sayings, whether rabbinic or evangelical, are sufficient neither to change the human heart nor to alter conditions. At best they can be used only to adorn an economic report or to illustrate a sociological survey.

The Jewish reclamation of Jesus will not be brought about by efforts of evangelical piety on the part of some Jews, or by a sentimental yearning for what we haven't got, or by a servile imitation of the more powerful element in our environment. It will come about as a result of a wider and more comprehensive conception of the scope of Jewish learning and Jewish literature and of a general restoration of our lost literary treasures. When the works of Josephus, and the Apocrypha, and the Hellenistic writings have all been restored by us and given a place beside the hallowed literature of our tradition, then the works of Jesus also will find a place among them. It is not as a returning hero that Jesus will be restored, not as a beatified saint,—we shall not

* Kirsopp Lake: "Jesus" in *The Hibbert Journal* for October, 1924.

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regret the past nor shall we apologize for our forefathers. But when with the revival of Jewish culture and Jewish learning under free and unhampered conditions in a Jewish environment, painstaking Jewish scholars, in an effort to reorganize and to reclassify our literary treasures, will come to compile anthologies of the wise sayings and inspiring teaching of our ancients, they will include among them the sermons and parables of Jesus the Nazarene, the Galilean rabbi who, like Philo and Josephus, has by force of historical circumstances been for centuries better known among non-Jews than among Jews. The readers of those anthologies will pass on from Talmudic and Midrashic selections to those of the Gospels without being conscious of any difference, except of such individual differences as mark the sayings of men. The sayings of Jesus together with the sayings of other rabbis will win their way into the speech of the people, will become blended and interwoven, and misquoted, after the manner of such things,—for they all breathe the same spirit. His sayings will be considered as part of the maxims of the anonymous body of the wise, of blessed memory, who express the national genius of the people, not as those of an inspired individual to be worshipped and exalted above all others.

And perhaps at that time our people will resume their creative activity at the point it was nipped off, in the time of the Mishnah and Midrash. If prophecy will not return, the spirit of the Haggadah will again rest upon our sages. Tired of the fettered forms of verse and the diffuse forms of prose, we shall return to our native original forms of expression. We shall write text-books of science in the style of the

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Mishnah, we shall compose works of erudition in the style of the Midrash, and we shall once more give expression to the great truths of life in the form of the Haggadah.

Then in a cloistered synagogue in a re-Judaized Galilee a sage, continuing the traditions of an ancient rabbi, will con over a new tome which will be an old tome revised. It will be a completed *Sayings of the Fathers*, recording the wisdom of the ages from the Men of the Great Synagogue to the men of the littlest of the synagogues, and among these will be included the sayings of the Alexandrian Philo and the Palestinian Jesus. He will read the utterances recorded in the name of Jesus the Galilean about the Pharisees and will say to himself: "O Rabbi Jesus, dost thou condemn the many for the sins of the few? Where is the quality of justice, not to speak of mercy?" But with characteristic Jewish charity he will quote from an ancient rabbi: "No man is taken to account for what he speaks in his distress." He will read his sayings about divorce and mutter: "O Rabbi Jesus, verily thou art a Shammaite; but we have long decided to follow the more lenient views of Hillel. We are not bound by thee." He will read his views about the Sabbath, and say: "Verily this is a precious sentiment of the rabbis, but where is the line to be drawn between the conflicting rights and the mutual obligations of institutions and individuals." And thus he will go on commenting in the spirit of an ancient rabbi. Then he will weave in a story in the fashion of a Haggadah: "Come and see, how great is the power of Israel. Once there was a child in Galilee. He was taken captive and carried off into the great city of Rome.

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There they made a God of him; but some say they made of him only a son of God, and others say only a prophet of God. They built temples and churches to his name in every land, and each nation worshipped him according to its tongue, according to its manner and according to its custom. But the mind of the child was not at rest until he returned to Galilee and saw his name inscribed in an ancient tome among the names of his castigated Pharisees. It is this which Scripture says:"—and here an apt or an inapt quotation from the Scripture will follow.

This is how the Jews will reclaim Jesus.

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