ECCE HOMO

A Survey of the LIFE & WORK of JESUS CHRIST

by Sir J·R·SEELEY

LONDON & TORONTO
PUBLISHED BY J·M·DENT
& SONS LTD & IN NEW YORK
BY E·P·DUTTON & CO

INTRODUCTION

THE nature of man can be regarded from many points of view, and upon it much has been written, without being in any way exhaustive. It is probably true that all subdivision and classification is ultimately only a concession to finite intelligence, but one of the simplest modes of dealing with human nature is to think of it as divided into two regions—the region of the soul with its continuity of transcendental existence, and the region of the body with its physical and terrestrial ancestry. Likewise, concerning the nature of Christ, volumes have been written; and the same kind of simplifying treatment has been found useful here also. It can be regarded from the eternal and Divine point of view, being thought of as the Logos which existed before all worlds, and as such can be worked into an elaborate idealistic philosophy, with weighty and beneficent results; or it can be considered from the human point of view, and dealt with as belonging to a being born upon this planet, subject to the difficulties attendant upon partial knowledge and growing powers, and living a life as troubled and as strenuous as any other of the sons of men.

That something of this latter treatment is necessary, is obvious to a person of any lucidity who contemplates the development of a human being from earliest infancy.

Writers of all ages have emphasised one or other of these aspects, and they are both conspicuous in the New Testament itself. The one treatment is found especially in the fourth Gospel and in the Epistles of Paul, the other treatment chiefly in the other three Gospels.

Emphasis on the humanity is no novelty, and is per-

fectly orthodox; and yet in some ages of the world it has seemed a novelty, and has occasionally struck devout persons as almost blasphemous.

Forty years ago the majority of religious people were surprised and somewhat shocked when a book was written to recall them to a recognition of the thorough humanity of Christ. It appears that the generation of that day had let this aspect slide out of its field of view, its attention being focussed upon another. Consequently, when "Ecce Homo" was published, it was received with a chorus of disapprobation, broken only by a few judicious utterances in its favour from leaders of thought: one of these—a notable article in "Good Words" by Gladstone—having a great influence in making the book more widely known and better appreciated.

Nowadays the pendulum has swung so far in the direction advocated by this book that it is difficult to realise the shock experienced when an historian set to work to deal with the life of Christ as he would deal with any other history, and to make an attempt to trace the career of the "young man of promise," spoken of in the originally anonymous and much-criticised brief preface, on the basis of the bare facts as deducible by historical methods from the documents themselves, without explicit attention to the mass of subsequent tradition and theoretic gloss which the Church had inevitably, and to a great extent rightly, superadded.

The attempt thus made by Sir John Seeley was singularly able; and, being undertaken in a reverent and scholarly spirit, has achieved much towards the improved mode of thought on these subjects now prevalent. The book was admittedly somewhat one-sided, but it was amply justified by the needs of the time. Nor is it at all out of date now. In the treatment of any great subject, vivid attention to one aspect at a time is all that average human beings are capable of; but he is a poor reasoner, or has a pitiful intellect, who is thereby blinded to the existence of other aspects equally worthy of attention in their turn.

And whenever a generation has concentrated itself too exclusively on one side, it behoves some prophet or leader of thought to restore the balance by calling attention to another; and to expound it forcibly, in spite of what, to his contemporaries, may seem a painfully inadequate treatment of the side with which they were already familiar.

The author was accused of dogmatism: but in reply explained that throughout he addressed free inquirers like himself; that his book was not one of authority, but one of inquiry and suggestion, intended not to close discussion but to open it. He dealt with the matter as a lay historian rather than as a theologian; and the result is a very living picture. He collects a considerable body of illustrations both of Christ's character and of the great Christian moral principle, " the divine inspiration which makes virtue natural, active, tender, elevated, resentful, forgiving." This he regards as the foundation of the Teachings.

So also with regard to Christ's acts. As an historian he considers that those which are in harmony with his character gain thereby in credibility, and that about many of them there is " something beyond the ordinary reach, or beside the purpose, of invention." Most of the record is justified and rendered probable, by consistency with character, when subjected to the ordinary historical tests and criteria.

Christian Principles

Reading the book we must thankfully realise how great progress has now been made, at any rate in thought, towards a better understanding of genuine Christianity. Our acts and practical achievement still fall terribly short; but in thought there has been a distinct effort in many parts of Europe to throw overboard needless accumulations of tradition and return to the early and simple Teachings.

It is remarkable that within such recent times it was possible to write as follows:—

"The direct love of Christ, as it was felt by his first followers, is a rare thing among modern Christians. His character has been so much obscured by scholasticism as to have lost in a great measure its attractive power." That can hardly be said so unreservedly now.

The virtues especially insisted on by early Christianity were Love, Enthusiasm, and Faith: all lying in the region where intellectual ideas are fertilised by emotion, —the most actively motive-producing region of the mind.

It is easy to misunderstand what is meant by "faith," sometimes wilfully to misunderstand it; but let no one suppose that to the educated and thoughtful man belief is easy. A period of doubt and uncertainty must almost inevitably be gone through, and the problems presented require close study.

The author fully admits the difficulties of Christian belief. "We conclude," he says, "that though it is always easy for thoughtless men to be orthodox, yet to grasp with any strong practical apprehension the theology of Christ is a thing as hard as to practise his moral law."

Facile belief is of but little value: it often only means that as certain words make no impression whatever upon the mind, so they excite no opposition in it. There are few things which Christ would have visited with sterner censure than that short-cut to belief which consists of abandonment of mental effort.

Yet faith is among the most important and expressive ideas in Christianity, and it is an essential condition for fellowship in the Kingdom. Properly understood, it is the attitude in which the most neglected and most ungifted of men may make a beginning. Even in half brutal countenances faith will light up a glimmer of nobleness.

"The savage, who can do little else, can wonder and worship and enthusiastically obey. He who cannot know what is right can know that some one else knows; he who has no law may still have a master; he who is incapable of justice may be capable of fidelity; he who understands little may have his sins forgiven because he loves much."

Of all these virtues, it must be admitted, the average product of modern education is liable to be quite incapable; unless he is something more than merely "wise and prudent"—and often he is less—he may thus be, in some respects, lower than the savage.

Severity

Among the list of epithets applied to the Teachings, as quoted on page ix, occurs one which sounds a harsh note — the word "resentful." But the author claims that Christ was far from being weak, effeminate, tolerant of hypocrisy and imposture, or even universally forgiving. His personal injurers he could and did forgive; but the obstruction of his kingdom, not through ignorance and weakness but in the strength of warped authority and self-satisfied bigotry, he strongly and to the end resented.

"Christianity is not quite the mild and gentle system it is sometimes represented to be. Christ was meek and lowly, but he was something beside. What was he when he faced the leading men among his countrymen and denounced them as a brood of vipers on their way to the infernal fires?" So says the author, and he continues:

"The Enthusiasm of Humanity creates an intolerant anger against all who do wrong to human beings, an impatience of selfish enjoyment, a vindictive enmity to tyrants and oppressors, a bitterness against sophistry, superstition, self-complacent heartless speculation, an irreconcilable hostility to every form of imposture, such as the uninspired inhumane soul could never entertain."

Practical Effort

The gospel is not all peace, it has a sword too. The Church as founded by Christ was not an insipid prelude to another world; it is an active and militant agent in this.

"As Christ habitually compared his Church to a state or kingdom, so there are traces that its analogy to an army was also present to his mind."

It has to fight against evil as well as to promote good. "At the present day," says the author, "the Church fails most in that which its Founder valued most—originality; it falls into that vice which he most earnestly denounced—insipidity." He believes the root of all evil in the Church to be "the imagination that it exists for any other purpose than to foster virtue, or can be prosperous except so far as it does this."

Nor is the modern reformer likely to forget that to give people a fair chance of virtue and happiness in this world their surroundings must be such as not to subject their character to too hopeless a strain, and that it is part of the Church's duty to endeavour with all its might to carry out the meaning and spirit of the Divine petition which, among those who acquiesce in the submergence of children in our slums and criminal haunts, is too grievously ignored—Lead us not into temptation.

Not the pulpit alone, but also the best part of literature and of the stage is emphasising this to-day.

The practical doctrines of Christianity are all general, so that they are not limited in their application to a specific period but apply to all time. One of them is that to make the fruit of a tree good you must put the tree into a healthy state; that a man's actions result from the state of his mind. If that is healthy they will be right; if not, they will be wrong; and to amend his acts effectually his disposition must be amended. Such language, the author says, was new in the mouth of a legislator. Incidentally it may be remarked that this is also the teaching of a good deal of modern drama, and constitutes the key to some of its puzzles.

Summary

Now to give a short summary of the principal contents of the book:—

The first five chapters are a masterly synopsis of the position and early outlook of the Nazarene Prophet who felt that he had a Divine mission to found a Church for all time.

The prelude to and the anticipation of some such work, in the light of the religious state of the country in that age, are glanced at in the first chapter called "The Baptist." Then comes an analysis of the period which followed close upon Christ's Baptism, with its extraordinary soul-stirring episodes; the time when he spent weeks in solitude and passed through the strange experiences which we know as the Temptation. The inner meaning of these temptations has been made so familiar now, by innumerable sermons, that it is difficult to suppose that this rational and illuminating treatment of them was new forty years ago. I would not venture to assert that it was really new then, yet from the book it so appears; and if so, this treatment was a great contribution to the atmosphere of Christian thought.

Then follow chapters on the idea of the Kingdom, on his conception of his own Royalty, and the striking means he took to enforce his claims and to exhibit his credentials,—which were not what the superficial reader may suppose them to have been.

After this the Founding and the nature of the Christian Society or Church is dealt with; and then the second part deals with the Laws of the new kingdom; the keynote of the whole being the meaning underlying the phrase "Enthusiasm of Humanity." And it may be explained that this much-emphasised and highly-valued concomitant of living Faith, namely Enthusiasm, is not a mere sound of doubtful significance but has a derivation (from θεος) which associates it directly with the perception and felt influence of God. It means unification with the Divine, and is thus closely akin to the true idea of Atonement.

Treatment of Miracles

There is one thing which, in fairness to the author, it is desirable to make clear. Few will accuse him of heterodoxy now, but some will accuse him of over orthodoxy, by reason of his treatment of miracles. As an historian he finds it impossible to dissociate a certain amount of

super-normal power from Christ—power which he became aware of and frequently used for purposes of beneficence and compassion, though he scrupulously refrained from using it for any other purpose,—never for a moment to benefit himself, even though he were starving; nor did he wish to use it in order to call attention to and enforce his mission. He evidently mistrusts the attitude of mind which can depend much upon external evidence of that kind. He will not give them a sign; and where candour does not pre-exist mighty works become impossible. No conversion is to be effected by main force: he always appealed to free volition. His credentials were not so much the super-normal power, as the discriminating use he made of that power. This scrupulous reticence, according to the author, impressed his immediate followers as the most superhuman thing about him, so far as his acts were concerned.

The point of view thus indicated is an important feature in the book, though it is not a feature upon which it is considered safe to dwell at the present day. Some are now in favour of rejecting all miraculous narratives wholesale; others would accept the acts of healing, but would reject all others. Such a miracle as the feeding of five thousand, for instance—one of the most difficult to accept as it stands—is liable to be treated nowadays as if it had only a spiritual significance, was in fact only a parable and was understood by contemporaries as such and no more. The author does not go to this length, nor do I feel called upon to go to this length either.

An easy way to truth is not to be found by rejecting wholesale, any more than by admitting wholesale. The risk of error lurks on both sides. It has been easy to believe uncritically in the past; it is easy to reject too readily in the present. Truth lies in a middle way, and it is our business to pick our steps carefully.

I would, however, urge people to lay no particular stress on any one miracle, though they may fancy it to be fundamental and certain, for such a foundation is apt to prove a sandy one. These signs and wonders

were never foundations, and were never meant to be foundations; the truth of the Christian religion cannot be dependent upon them. But they may be facts of nature for all that. And just at this epoch, when many things are being investigated, and when discoveries are being made in strange and unlooked for regions, it behoves the wise man to reserve his judgment; to decline to build, indeed, upon unproved phenomena, but also to hesitate to reject them as untrue. We are immensely far from understanding all the laws of nature. For only a few centuries, and under much discouragement, have a few members of the human race been investigating them; and already fresh chapters, fresh volumes, seem likely to be opening before us. Now is no time for dogmatic denial of anything, however remarkable, however weird. Nor is there need for loud-voiced assertion either. The truth concerning these things will appear in due time. That can be depended on. Meanwhile we can attentively wait.

Listen to the historian as to the documentary evidence for these things—some of them will undoubtedly prove to be invention, for others the literary evidence may be good —and then keep your ears open to the men of science also, when in good time they have something to say on present-day occurrences not wholly unallied to what is asserted of the past, and on subjects which are receiving the strenuous and thoughtful attention of more and more among them.

The truths of the universe are far greater, and the ultimate outlook wider, than has been thought possible even by the vagaries of undisciplined imagination; and, under the touch of a lofty spirit, detents spring open revealing secret chambers which to the majority, in their smug contentment, must be for ever closed.

OLIVER LODGE.

December 1907.

The following is a list of the chief published works of John Robert Seeley:—

David and Samuel, with other poems (under the pseudonym of John Robertson), 1859; Ecce Homo, 1865; Lectures and Essays, 1870, with Preface by Lady Seeley, 1895; The First Book of Livy, with an Introduction, Historical Examination, and Notes, 1871; English Lessons for English People (in collaboration with Dr. Abbott), 1871; The Life and Times of Stein: or Germany and Prussia in the Napoleonic Age, 1878; Natural Religion, 1882, 4th Edition, 1895; The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures, 1883, 1895; A Short History of Napoleon I. (expanded from an Article in the "Encyclopædia Britannica"), 1886; Goethe Reviewed after Sixty Years, 1894; The Growth of British Policy: An Historical Essay, 1895; Lectures on Political Science, 1895; Introduction to Political Science: Two Series of Lectures, ed. H. Sidgwick, 1896; Ethics and Religion (address delivered before the Ethical Society at Cambridge), 1900.

He was also Editor of the Student's Guide to the University of Cambridge, 1863, etc.

Life by Professor Prothero, prefixed to "The Growth of British Policy."

First Issue of this Edition . 1908
Reprinted 1910, 1915, 1920

CONTENTS

FIRST PART

SECOND PART

CHRIST'S LEGISLATION

ECCE HOMO

FIRST PART

CHAPTER I

THE BAPTIST

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH sprang from a movement which was not begun by Christ. When he appeared upon the scene the first wave of this movement had already passed over the surface of the Jewish nation. He found their hearts recently stirred by thoughts and hopes which prepared them to listen to his words. It is indeed true that not Judæa only but the whole Roman Empire was in a condition singularly favourable to the reception of a doctrine and an organisation such as that of the Christian Church. The drama of ancient society had been played out; the ancient city life, with the traditions and morality belonging to it, was obsolete; a vast empire, built upon the ruins of so many nationalities and upon the disgrace of so many national gods, demanded new usages and new objects of worship; a vast peace, where war between neighbouring cities had been the accustomed condition of life and the only recognised teacher of virtue, called for a new morality. There was a clear stage, as it afterwards appeared, for a Universal Church. But Palestine was not only ready to receive such an innovation, but prepared, even before the predestined Founder appeared, to make more or less abortive essays towards it. At the moment of his almost unobserved entrance, the whole nation were intent upon the career of one who was attempting in an imperfect manner that which Christ afterwards fully accomplished.

It was the glory of John the Baptist to have success-

fully revived the function of the prophet. For several centuries the function had remained in abeyance. It had become a remote, though it was still a fondly-cherished, tradition that there had been a time when the nation had received guidance from commissioned representatives of its invisible King. We possess still the utterances of many of these prophets, and when we consider the age in which they were delivered, we can clearly perceive that no more precious treasure was ever bestowed upon a nation than these oracles of God which were committed to the Jews. They unite in what was then the most effective way all that is highest in poetry and most fundamental in political science with what is most practical in philosophy and most inspiring in religion. But prophecy was one of those gifts which, like poetry or high art, are particularly apt to die out under change of times. Several centuries had succeeded each other which were all alike incapable of producing it. When John the Baptist appeared, not the oldest man in Palestine could remember to have spoken even in his earliest childhood with any man who had seen a prophet. The ancient scrolls remained, as amongst ourselves those Gothic cathedrals remain, of which we may produce more or less faithful imitations, but to the number of which we shall never add another. In these circumstances it was an occurrence of the first magnitude, more important far than war or revolution, when a new prophet actually appeared. John the Baptist defied all the opposition of those *scribes*, who in the long silence of the prophetic inspiration had become the teachers of the nation, and who resisted him with the conservatism of lawyers united to the bigotry of priests. He made his way back to the hidden fountains; and received at last that national acknowledgment which silenced even these professional jealousies, that irresistible voice of the people in which the Jew was accustomed to hear the voice of God. Armed with the prophetic authority, he undertook a singular enterprise, of which probably most of those who witnessed it died without suspecting the importance, but which we can see to have been the foundation of the Universal Church.

There may have been many who listened with awe to his prophetic summons, and presented themselves as candidates for his baptism in implicit faith that the ordinance was divine, who nevertheless in after years asked themselves what purpose it had served. It was a solemn scene doubtless, when crowds from every part of Palestine gathered by the side of Jordan, and there renewed, as it were, the covenant made between their ancestor and Jehovah. It seemed the beginning of a new age, the restoration of the ancient theocracy, the final close of that dismal period in which the race had lost its peculiarity, had taken a varnish of Greek manners, and had contributed nothing but a few dull chapters of profane history, filled with the usual chaos of faction fights, usurpations, royal crimes, and outbreaks, blind and brave, of patriotism and the love of liberty. But many of those who witnessed the scene and shared in the enthusiasm which it awakened must have remembered it in later days as having inspired hopes which had not been realised. It must have seemed to many that the theocracy had not in fact been restored, that the old routine had been interrupted only for a moment, that the baptised nation had speedily contracted new pollution, and that no deliverance had been wrought from the " wrath to come." And they may have asked in doubt, Is God so little parsimonious of His noblest gift, as to waste upon a doomed generation that which He did not vouchsafe to many nobler generations that had preceded them, and to send a second and far greater Elijah to prophesy in vain?

But if there were such persons, they were ignorant of one important fact. John the Baptist was like the Emperor Nerva. In his career it was given him to do two things—to inaugurate a new régime, and also to nominate a successor who was far greater than himself. And by this successor his work was taken up, developed, completed, and made permanent; so that, however John may have seemed to his own generation to have lived in vain, and those scenes on the banks of Jordan to have been the delusive promise of a future that was never to be, at the distance of near two thousand years he appears not less but

far greater than he appeared to his contemporaries, and all that his baptism promised to do appears utterly insignificant compared with what it has actually done.

The Baptist addressed all who came to him in the same stern tone of authority. Young and old gathered round him, and among them must have been many whom he had known in earlier life, and some to whom he had been taught to look up to with humility and respect. But in his capacity of prophet he made no distinction. All alike he exhorted to repentance; all alike he found courage to baptise. In a single case, however, his confidence failed him. There appeared among the candidates a young man of nearly his own age, who was related to his family. We must suppose that he had had personal intercourse with Christ before; for though one of our authorities represents John as saying that he knew him not except by the supernatural sign that pointed him out at his baptism, yet we must interpret this as meaning only that he did not before know him for his successor. For it appears that before the appearance of the sign John had addressed Christ with expressions of reverence, and had declared himself unfit to baptise him. After this meeting we are told that on several occasions he pointed out Christ as the hope of the nation, as destined to develop the work he himself had begun into something far more memorable, and as so greatly superior to himself, that, to repeat his emphatic words, he was not worthy to untie his shoe.

Now, before we enter into an examination of Christ's own public career, it will be interesting to consider what definite qualities this contemporary and sagacious observer remarked in him, and exactly what he expected him to do. The Baptist's opinion of Christ's character then is summed up for us in the title he gave him—the Lamb of God taking away the sins of the world. There seems to be in the last part of this description an allusion to the usages of the Jewish sacrificial system, and in order to explain it fully it would be necessary to anticipate much that will come more conveniently later in this treatise. But when we remember that the Baptist's mind was doubtless full of imagery drawn from the Old Testament,