



***ANNIE
BESANT***

***MY PATH
TO ATHEISM***

Annie Besant

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION.

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The Essays which form the present book have been written at intervals during the last five years, and are now issued in a single volume without alterations of any kind. I have thought it more useful—as marking the gradual growth of thought—to reprint them as they were originally published, so as not to allow the later development to mould the earlier forms. The essay on "Inspiration" is, in part, the oldest of all; it was partially composed some seven years ago, and re-written later as it now stands.

The first essay on the "Deity of Jesus of Nazareth" was written just before I left the Church of England, and marks the point where I broke finally with Christianity. I thought then, and think still, that to cling to the name of Christian after one has ceased to be the thing is neither bold nor straightforward, and surely the name ought, in all fairness, to belong to those historical bodies who have made it their own during many hundred years. A Christianity without a Divine Christ appears to me to resemble a republican army marching under a royal banner—it misleads both friends and foes. Believing that in giving up the deity of Christ I renounced Christianity, I place this essay as the starting-point of my travels outside the Christian pale. The essays that follow it deal with some of the leading Christian dogmas, and are printed in the order in which they were written. But in the gradual thought-development they really precede the essay on the "Deity of Christ". Most inquirers who begin to study by themselves, before they have read

any heretical works, or heard any heretical controversies, will have been awakened to thought by the discrepancies and inconsistencies of the Bible itself. A thorough knowledge of the Bible is the groundwork of heresy. Many who think they read their Bibles never read them at all. They go through a chapter every day as a matter of duty, and forget what is said in Matthew before they read what is said in John; hence they never mark the contradictions and never see the discrepancies. But those who *study* the Bible are in a fair way to become heretics. It was the careful compilation of a harmony of the last chapters of the four Gospels—a harmony intended for devotional use—that gave the first blow to my own faith; although I put the doubt away and refused even to look at the question again, yet the effect remained—the tiny seed, which was slowly to germinate and to grow up, later, into the full-blown flower of Atheism.

The trial of Mr. Charles Voysey for heresy made me remember my own puzzle, and I gradually grew very uneasy, though trying not to think, until the almost fatal illness of my little daughter brought a sharper questioning as to the reason of suffering and the reality of the love of God. From that time I began to study the doctrines of Christianity from a critical point of view; hitherto I had confined my theological reading to devotional and historical treatises, and the only controversies with which I was familiar were the controversies which had divided Christians; the writings of the Fathers of the Church and of the modern school which is founded on them had been carefully studied, and I had weighed the points of difference between the Greek, Roman, Anglican, and Lutheran

communions, as well as the views of orthodox dissenting schools of thought; only from Pusey's "Daniel", and Liddon's "Bampton Lectures", had I gathered anything of wider controversies and issues of more vital interest. But now all was changed, and it was to the leaders of the Broad Church school that I first turned in the new path. The shock of pain had been so! rude when real doubts assailed and shook me, that I had steadily made up my mind to investigate, one by one, every Christian dogma, and never again to say "I believe" until I had tested the object of faith; the dogmas which revolted me most were those of the Atonement and of Eternal Punishment, while the doctrine of Inspiration of Scripture underlay everything, and was the very foundation of Christianity; these, then, were the first that I dropped into the crucible of investigation. Maurice, Robertson, Stopford Brooke, McLeod, Campbell, and others, were studied; and while I recognised the charm of their writings, I failed to find any firm ground whereon they could rest: it was a many-colored beautiful mist—a cloud landscape, very fair, but very unsubstantial. Still they served as stepping stones away from the old hard dogmas, and month by month I grew more sceptical as to the possibility of finding certainty in religion. Mansel's Bampton lectures on "The Limits of Religious Thought" did much to increase the feeling; the works of F. Newman, Arnold, and Greg carried on the same work; some efforts to understand the creeds of other nations, to investigate Mahomedanism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, all led in the same direction, until I concluded that inspiration belonged to all people alike, and there could be no necessity of atonement, and no eternal hell prepared

for the unbeliever in Christianity. Thus, step by step, I renounced the dogmas of Christianity until there remained only, as distinctively Christian, the Deity of Jesus which had not yet been analysed. The whole tendency of the Broad Church stream of thought was to increase the manhood at the expense of the deity of Christ; and with hell and atonement gone, and inspiration everywhere, there appeared no *raison d'etre* for the Incarnation. Besides, there were so many incarnations, and the Buddhist absorption seemed a grander idea. I now first met with Charles Voysey's works, and those of Theodore Parker and Channing, and the belief in the Deity of Jesus followed the other dead creeds. Renan I had read much earlier, but did not care for him; Strauss I did not meet with until afterwards; Scott's "English Life of Jesus", which I read at this period, is as useful a book on this subject as could be put into the hands of an inquirer. From Christianity into simple Theism I had found my way; step by step the Theism melted into Atheism; prayer was gradually discontinued, as utterly at variance with any dignified idea of God, and as in contradiction to all the results of scientific investigation. I had taken a keen interest in the later scientific discoveries, and Darwin had done much towards freeing me from my old bonds. Of John Stuart Mill I had read much, and I now took him up again; I studied Spinoza, and re-read Mansel, together with many other writers on the Deity, until the result came which is found in the essay entitled "The Nature and Existence of God ". It was just before this was written that I read Charles Bradlaugh's "Plea for Atheism" and his "Is there a God?". The essay on "Constructive Rationalism"

shows how we replace the old faith and build our house anew with stronger materials.

The path from Christianity to Atheism is a long one, and its first steps are very rough and very painful; the feet tread on the ruins of the broken faith, and the sharp edges cut into the bleeding flesh; but further on the path grows smoother, and presently at its side begins to peep forth the humble daisy of hope that heralds the spring tide, and further on the roadside is fragrant with all the flowers of summer, sweet and brilliant and gorgeous, and in the distance we see the promise of the autumn, the harvest that shall be reaped for the feeding of man.

Annie Besant. 1878.



ON THE DEITY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

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"WHAT think ye of Christ, whose son is he?" Humane child of human parents, or divine Son of the Almighty God? When we consider his purity, his faith in the Father, his forgiving patience, his devoted work among the offscourings

of society, his brotherly love to sinners and outcasts—when our minds dwell on these alone,—we all feel the marvellous fascination which has drawn millions to the feet of this "son of man," and the needle of our faith begins to tremble towards the Christian pole. If we would keep unsullied the purity of our faith in God alone, we are obliged to turn our eyes some times—however unwillingly—towards the other side of the picture and to mark the human weaknesses which remind us that he is but one of our race. His harshness to his mother, his bitterness towards some of his opponents, the marked failure of one or two of his rare prophecies, the palpable limitation of his knowledge—little enough, indeed, when all are told,—are more than enough to show us that, however great as man, he is not the All-righteous, the All-seeing, the All-knowing, God.

No one, however, whom Christian exaggeration has not goaded into unfair detraction, or who is not blinded by theological hostility, can fail to revere portions of the character sketched out in the three synoptic gospels. I shall not dwell here on the Christ of the fourth Evangelist; we can scarcely trace in that figure the lineaments of the Jesus of Nazareth whom we have learnt to love.

I propose, in this essay, to examine the claims of Jesus to be more than the man he appeared to be during his lifetime: claims—be it noted—which are put forward on his behalf by others rather than by himself. His own assertions of his divinity are to be found only in the unreliable fourth gospel, and in it they are destroyed by the sentence there put into his mouth with strange inconsistency: "If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true."

It is evident that by his contemporaries Jesus was not regarded as God incarnate. The people in general appear to have looked upon him as a great prophet, and to have often debated among themselves whether he were their expected Messiah or not. The band of men who accepted him as their teacher were as far from worshipping him as God as were their fellow-countrymen: their prompt desertion of him when attacked by his enemies, their complete hopelessness when they saw him overcome and put to death, are sufficient proofs that though they regarded him—to quote their own words—as a "prophet mighty in word and deed," they never guessed that the teacher they followed, and the friend they lived with in the intimacy of social life was Almighty God Himself. As has been well pointed out, if they believed their Master to be God, surely when they were attacked they would have fled to him for protection, instead of endeavouring to save themselves by deserting him: we may add that this would have been their natural instinct, since they could never have imagined beforehand that the Creator Himself could really be taken captive by His creatures and suffer death at their hands. The third class of his contemporaries, the learned Pharisees and Scribes, were as far from regarding him as divine as were the people or his disciples. They seem to have viewed the new teacher somewhat contemptuously at first, as one who unwisely persisted in expounding the highest doctrines to the many, instead of—a second Hillel—adding to the stores of their own learned circle. As his influence spread and appeared to be undermining their own,—still more, when he placed himself in direct opposition, warning the people against

them,—they were roused to a course of active hostility, and at length determined to save themselves by destroying him. But all through their passive contempt and direct antagonism, there is never a trace of their deeming him to be anything more than a religious enthusiast who finally became dangerous: we never for a moment see them assuming the manifestly absurd position of men knowingly measuring their strength against God, and endeavouring to silence and destroy their Maker. So much for the opinions of those who had the best opportunities of observing his ordinary life. A "good man," a "deceiver," a "mighty prophet," such are the recorded opinions of his contemporaries: not one is found to step forward and proclaim him to be Jehovah, the God of Israel.

One of the most trusted strongholds of Christians, in defending their Lord's Divinity, is the evidence of prophecy. They gather from the sacred books of the Jewish nation the predictions of the longed-for Messiah, and claim them as prophecies fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. But there is one stubborn fact which destroys the force of this argument: the Jews, to whom these writings belong, and who from tradition and national peculiarities may reasonably be supposed to be the best exponents of their own prophets, emphatically deny that these prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus at all. Indeed, one main reason for their rejection of Jesus is precisely this, that he does not resemble in any way the predicted Messiah. There is no doubt that the Jewish nation were eagerly looking for their Deliverer when Jesus was born: these very longings produced several pseudo-Messiahs, who each gained in turn a considerable following,

because each bore some resemblance to the expected Prince. Much of the popular rage which swept Jesus to his death was the re-action of disappointment after the hopes raised by the position of authority he assumed. The sudden burst of anger against one so benevolent and inoffensive can only be explained by the intense hopes excited by his regal entry into Jerusalem, and the utter destruction of those hopes by his failing to ascend the throne of David. Proclaimed as David's son, he came riding on an ass as king of Zion, and allowed himself to be welcomed as the king of Israel: there his short fulfilling of the prophecies ended, and the people, furious at his failing them, rose and clamoured for his death. Because he did *not* fulfil the ancient Jewish oracles, he died: he was too noble for the *rôle* laid down in them for the Messiah, his ideal was far other than that of a conqueror, with "garments rolled in blood." But even if, against all evidence, Jesus was one with the Messiah of the prophets, this would destroy, instead of implying, his Divine claims. For the Jews were pure monotheists; their Messiah was a prince of David's line, the favoured servant, the anointed Jehovah, the king who should rule in His name: a Jew would shrink with horror from the blasphemy of seating Messiah on Jehovah's throne remembering how their prophets had taught them that their God "would not give His honour to another." So that, as to prophecy, the case stands thus: If Jesus be the Messiah prophesied of in the old Jewish books, then he is not God: if he be not the Messiah, Jewish prophecy is silent as regards him altogether, and an appeal to prophecy is absolutely useless.

After the evidence of prophecy Christians generally rely on that furnished by miracles. It is remarkable that Jesus himself laid but little stress on his miracles; in fact, he refused to appeal to them as credentials of his authority, and either could not or would not work them when met with determined unbelief. We must notice also that the people, while "glorifying God, who had given such power unto *men*," were not inclined to admit his miracles as proofs of his right to claim absolute obedience: his miracles did not even invest him with such sacredness as to protect him from arrest and death. Herod, on his trial, was simply anxious to see him work a miracle, as a matter of curiosity. This stolid indifference to marvels as attestations of authority is natural enough, when we remember that Jewish history was crowded with miracles, wrought for and against the favoured people, and also that they had been specially warned against being misled by signs and wonders. Without entering into the question whether miracles are possible, let us, for argument's sake, take them for granted, and see what they are worth as proofs of Divinity. If Jesus fed a multitude with a few loaves, so did Elisha: if he raised the dead, so did Elijah and Elisha; if he healed lepers, so did Moses and Elisha; if he opened the eyes of the blind, Elisha smote a whole army with blindness and afterwards restored their sight: if he cast out devils, his contemporaries, by his own testimony, did the same. If miracles prove Deity, what miracle of Jesus can stand comparison with the divided Red Sea of Moses, the stoppage of the earth's motion by Joshua, the check of the rushing waters of the Jordan by Elijah's cloak? If we are told that these men worked by *conferred*

power and Jesus by *inherent*, we can only answer that this is a gratuitous assumption, and begs the whole question. The Bible records the miracles in equivalent terms: no difference is drawn between the manner of working of Elisha or Jesus; of each it is sometimes said they prayed; of each it is sometimes said they spake. Miracles indeed must not be relied on as proofs of divinity, unless believers in them are prepared to pay divine honours not to Jesus only, but also to a crowd of others, and to build a Christian Pantheon to the new found gods.

So far we have only seen the insufficiency of the usual Christian arguments to establish a doctrine so stupendous and so *prima facie* improbable as the incarnation of the Divine Being: this kind of negative testimony, this insufficient evidence, is not however the principle reason which compels Theists to protest against the central dogma of Christianity. The stronger proofs of the simple manhood of Jesus remain, and we now proceed to positive evidence of his not being God. I propose to draw attention to the traces of human infirmity in his noble character, to his absolute mistakes in prophecy, and to his evidently limited knowledge. In accepting as substantially true the account of Jesus given by the evangelists, we are taking his character as it appeared to his devoted followers. We have not to do with slight blemishes, inserted by envious detractors of his greatness; the history of Jesus was written when his disciples worshipped him as God, and his manhood, in their eyes, reached ideal perfection. We are not forced to believe that, in the gospels, the life of Jesus is given at its highest, and that he was, at least, not more spotless than he

appears in these records of his friends. But here again, in order not to do a gross injustice, we must put aside the fourth gospel; to study his character "according to S. John" would need a separate essay, so different is it from that drawn by the three; and by all rules of history we should judge him by the earlier records, more especially as they corroborate each other in the main.

The first thing which jars upon an attentive reader of the gospels is the want of affection and respect shown by Jesus to his mother. When only a child of twelve he lets his parents leave Jerusalem to return home, while he repairs alone to the temple. The fascination of the ancient city and the gorgeous temple services was doubtless almost overpowering to a thoughtful Jewish boy, more especially on his first visit: but the careless forgetfulness of his parents' anxiety must be considered as a grave childish fault, the more so as its character is darkened by the indifference shown by his answer to his mother's grieved reproof. That no high, though mistaken, sense of duty kept him in Jerusalem is evident from his return home with his parents; for had he felt that "his Father's business" detained him in Jerusalem at all, it is evident that this sense of duty would not have been satisfied by a three days' delay. But the Christian advocate would bar criticism by an appeal to the Deity of Jesus: he asks us therefore to believe that Jesus, being God, saw with indifference his parents' anguish at discovering his absence; knew all about that three days' agonised search (for they, ignorant of his divinity, felt the terrible anxiety as to his safety, natural to country people losing a child in a crowded city); did not, in spite of the

tremendous powers at his command, take any steps to reassure them; and finally, met them again with no words of sympathy, only with a mysterious allusion, incomprehensible to them, to some higher claim than theirs, which, however, he promptly set aside to obey them. If God was incarnate in a boy, we may trust that example as a model of childhood: yet, are Christians prepared to set this early piety and desire for religious instruction before their young children as an example they are to follow? Are boys and girls of twelve to be free to absent themselves for days from their parents' guardianship under the plea that a higher business claims their attention? This episode of the childhood of Jesus should be relegated to those "gospels of the infancy" full of most unchildlike acts, which the wise discretion of Christendom has stamped with disapproval. The same want of filial reverence appears later in his life: on one occasion he was teaching, and his mother sent in, desiring to speak to him: the sole reply recorded to the message is the harsh remark: "Who is my mother?" The most practical proof that Christian morality has, on this head, outstripped the example of Jesus, is the prompt disapproval which similar conduct would meet with in the present day. By the strange warping of morality often caused by controversial exigencies, this want of filial reverence has been triumphantly pointed out by Christian divines; the indifference shown by Jesus to family ties is accepted as a proof that he was more than man! Thus, conduct which they implicitly acknowledge to be unseemly in a son to his mother, they claim as natural and right in the Son of God, to His! In the present day, if a person is driven

by conscience to a course painful to those who have claims on his respect, his recognised duty, as well as his natural instinct, is to try and make up by added affection and more courteous deference for the pain he is forced to inflict: above all, he would not wantonly add to that pain by public and uncalled-for disrespect.

The attitude of Jesus towards his opponents in high places was marked with unwarrantable bitterness. Here also the lofty and gentle spirit of his whole life has moulded Christian opinion in favour of a course different on this head to his own, so that abuse of an opponent is now commonly called *un-Christian*. Wearied with three years' calumny and contempt, sore at the little apparent success which rewarded his labour, full of a sad foreboding that his enemies would shortly crush him, Jesus was goaded into passionate denunciations: "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites... ye fools and blind... ye make a proselyte twofold more the child of hell than yourselves... ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell!" Surely this is not the spirit which breathed in, "If ye love them which love you, what thanks have ye?... Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that persecute you." Had he not even specially forbidden the very expression, "Thou fool!" Was not this rendering evil for evil, railing for railing?

It is painful to point out these blemishes: reverence for the great leaders of humanity is a duty dear to all human hearts; but when homage turns into idolatry, then men must rise up to point out faults which otherwise they would pass

over in respectful silence, mindful only of the work so nobly done.

I turn then, with a sense of glad relief, to the evidence of the limited knowledge of Jesus, for here no blame attaches to him, although *one* proved mistake is fatal to belief in his Godhead. First as to prophecy: "The Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels: and then shall he reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here which shall not taste of death till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." Later, he amplifies the same idea: he speaks of a coming tribulation, succeeded by his own return, and then adds the emphatic declaration: "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass till all these things be done." The non-fulfilment of these prophecies is simply a question of fact: let men explain away the words now as they may, yet, if the record is true, Jesus did believe in his own speedy return, and impressed the same belief on his followers. It is plain, indeed, that he succeeded in impressing it on them, from the references to his return scattered through the epistles. The latest writings show an anxiety to remove the doubts which were disturbing the converts consequent on the non-appearance of Jesus, and the fourth gospel omits any reference to his coming. It is worth remarking, in the latter, the spiritual sense which is hinted at—either purposely or unintentionally—in the words, "The hour... *now* is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live." These words may be the popular feeling on the advent of the resurrection, forced on the Christians by the failure of their Lord's prophecies in any literal sense. He

could not be mistaken, *ergo* they must spiritualise his words. The limited knowledge of Jesus is further evident from his confusing Zacharias the son of Jehoiada with Zacharias the son of Barachias: the former, a priest, was slain in the temple court, as Jesus states; but the son of Barachias was Zacharias, or Zachariah, the prophet.* He himself owned a limitation of his knowledge, when he confessed his ignorance of the day of his own return, and said it was known to the "Father only." Of the same class of sayings is his answer to the mother of James and John, that the high seats of the coming kingdom "are not mine to give." That Jesus believed in the fearful doctrine of eternal punishment is evident, in spite of the ingenious attempts to prove that the doctrine is not scriptural: that he, in common with his countrymen, ascribed many diseases to the immediate power of Satan, which we should now probably refer to natural causes, as epilepsy, mania, and the like, is also self-evident. But on such points as these it is useless to dwell, for the Christian believes them on the authority of Jesus, and the subjects, from their nature, cannot be brought to the test of ascertained facts. Of the same character are some of his sayings: his discouraging "Strive to enter in at the strait gate, *for* many," etc.; his using in defence of partiality Isaiah's awful prophecy, "that seeing they may see and not perceive," etc.; his using Scripture at one time as binding, while he, at another, depreciates it; his fondness for silencing an opponent by an ingenious retort: all these things are blameworthy to those who regard him as man, while they are shielded from criticism by his divinity to those who worship him as God. There morality is a

question of opinion, and it is wasted time to dwell on them when arguing with Christians, whose moral sense is for the time held in check by their mental prostration at his feet. But the truth of the quoted prophecies, and the historical fact of the parentage of Zachariah, can be tested, and on these Jesus made palpable mistakes. The obvious corollary is, that being mistaken—as he was—his knowledge was limited, and was therefore human, not divine.

* See Appendix, page 12.

In turning to the teaching of Jesus (I still confine myself to the three gospels), we find no support of the Christian theory. If we take his didactic teaching, we can discover no trace of his offering himself as an object of either faith or worship. His life's work, as teacher, was to speak of the Father. In the sermon on the Mount he is always striking the keynote, "your heavenly Father;" in teaching his disciples to pray, it is to "Our Father," and the Christian idea of ending a prayer "through Jesus Christ" is quite foreign to the simple filial spirit of their master. Indeed, when we think of the position Jesus holds in Christian theology, it seems strange to notice the utter absence of any suggestion of duty to himself throughout this whole code of so-called Christian morality. In strict accordance with his more formal teaching is his treatment of inquirers: when a young man comes kneeling, and, addressing him as "Good Master," asks what he shall do to inherit eternal life, the loyal heart of Jesus first rejects the homage, before he proceeds to answer the all-important question: "Why callest thou *me* good: there is none good but one, that is, God." He then directs the youth on the way to eternal life, and *he sends that young man home without one word of the doctrine on which, according*

to Christians, his salvation rested. If the "Gospel" came to that man later, he would reject it on the authority of Jesus, who had told him a different "way of salvation;" and if Christianity is true, the perdition of that young man's soul is owing to the defective teaching of Jesus himself. Another time, he tells a Scribe that the first commandment is that God is one, and that all a man's love is due to Him; then adding the duty of neighbourly love, he says: "There is *none other* commandment greater than these:" so that "belief in Jesus," if incumbent at all, must come after love to God and man, and is not necessary, by his own testimony, to "entering into life." On Jesus himself then rests the primary responsibility of affirming that belief in him is a matter of secondary importance, at most, letting alone the fact that he never inculcated belief in his Deity as an article of faith at all. In the same spirit of frank loyalty to God are his words on the unpardonable sin: in answer to a gross personal affront, he tells his insulters that they shall be forgiven for speaking against him, a simple son of man, but warns them of the danger of confounding the work of God's. Spirit with that of Satan, "because they said" that works; done by God, using Jesus as His instrument, were done by Beelzebub.

There remains yet one argument of tremendous force, which can only be appreciated by personal meditation. We find Jesus praying to God, relying on God, in his greatest need crying in agony to God for deliverance, in his last: struggle, deserted by his friends, asking why God, his God, had also forsaken him. We feel how natural, how true to life, this whole account is: in our heart's reverence for that noble life, that "faithfulness unto death," we can scarcely bear to

think of the insult offered to it by Christian lips: they take every beauty out of it by telling us that through all that struggle Jesus was the Eternal, the Almighty, God: it is all apparent, not real: in his temptation he could not fall: in his prayers he needed no support: in his cry that the cup might pass away he foresaw it was inevitable: in his agony of desertion and loneliness he was present everywhere with God. In all that life, then, there is no hope for man, no pledge of man's victory, no promise for humanity. This is no *man's* life at all, it is only a wonderful drama enacted on earth. What God could do is no measure of man's powers: what have we in common with this "God-man?" This Jesus, whom we had thought our brother, is after all, removed from us by the immeasurable distance which separates the feebleness of man from the omnipotence of God. Nothing can compensate us for such a loss as this. We had rejoiced in that many-sided nobleness, and its very blemishes were dear, because they assured us of his brotherhood to ourselves: we are given an ideal picture where we had studied a history, another Deity where we had hoped to emulate a life. Instead of the encouragement we had found, what does Christianity offer us?—a perfect life? But we knew before that God was perfect: an example? it starts from a different level: a Saviour? we cannot be safer than we are with God: an Advocate? we need none with our Father: a Substitute to endure God's wrath for us? we had rather trust God's justice to punish us as we deserve, and his wisdom to do what is best for us. As God, Jesus can give us nothing that we have not already in his Father and ours: as man, he gives us all the encouragement and support which we

derive from every noble soul which God sends into this world, "a burning and a shining light":

"Through such souls alone
God stooping shows sufficient of
His light For us in the dark to rise by."

As God, he confuses our perceptions of God's unity, bewilders our reason with endless contradictions, and turns away from the Supreme all those emotions of love and adoration which can only flow towards a single object, and which are the due of our Creator alone: as man, he gives us an example to strive after, a beacon to steer by; he is one more leader for humanity, one more star in our darkness. As God, all his words would be truth, and but few would enter into heaven, while hell would overflow with victims: as man, we may refuse to believe such a slander on our Father, and take all the comfort pledged to us by that name. Thank God, then, that Jesus is only man, "human child of human parents;" that we need not dwarf our conceptions of God to fit human faculties, or envelope the illimitable spirit in a baby's feeble frame. But though only man, he has reached a standard of human greatness which no other man, so far as we know, has touched: the very height of his character is almost a pledge of the truthfulness of the records in the main: his life had to be lived before its conception became possible, at that period and among such a people. They could recognise his greatness when it was before their eyes: they would scarcely have imagined it for themselves, more especially that, as we have seen, he was so different from the Jewish ideal. His code of morality stands unrivalled, and he was the first who taught the universal Fatherhood of God publicly and to the common people. Many of his loftiest

precepts may be found in the books of the Rabbis, but it is the glorious prerogative of Jesus that he spread abroad among the many the wise and holy maxims that had hitherto been the sacred treasures of the few. With him none were too degraded to be called the children of the Father: none too simple to be worthy of the highest teaching. By example, as well as by precept, he taught that all men were brothers, and all the good he had he showered at their feet. "Pure in heart," he saw God, and what he saw he called all to see: he longed that all might share in his own joyous trust in the Father, and seemed to be always seeking for fresh images to describe the freedom and fulness of the universal love of God. In his unwavering love of truth, but his patience with doubters—in his personal purity, but his tenderness to the fallen—in his hatred of evil, but his friendliness to the sinner—we see splendid virtues rarely met in combination. His brotherliness, his yearning to raise the degraded, his lofty piety, his unswerving morality, his perfect self-sacrifice, are his indefeasible titles to human love and reverence. Of the world's benefactors he is the chief, not only by his own life, but by the enthusiasm he has known to inspire in others: "Our plummet has not sounded his depth:" words fail to tell what humanity owes to the Prophet of Nazareth. On his example the great Christian heroes have based their lives: from the foundation laid by his teaching the world is slowly rising to a purer faith in God. We need now such a leader as he was—one who would dare to follow the Father's will as he did, casting a long-prized revelation aside when it conflicts with the higher voice of conscience. It is the teaching of Jesus that Theism gladly

makes its own, purifying it from the inconsistencies which mar its perfection. It is the example of Jesus which Theists are following, though they correct that example in some points by his loftiest sayings. It is the work of Jesus which Theists are carrying on, by worshipping, as he did, the Father, and the Father alone, and by endeavouring to turn all men's love, all men's hopes, and all men's adoration, to that "God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and," not in Jesus only, but "*in us all*."

APPENDIX: "Josephus mentions a Zacharias, a son of Baruch ('Wars of

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the Jews,' Book iv., sec. 4), who was slain under the circumstances described by Jesus. His name would be more suitable at the close of the long list of Jewish crimes, as it occurred just before the destruction of Jerusalem. But, as it took place about thirty-four years after the death of Jesus, it is clear that he could not have referred to it; therefore, if we admit that he made no mistake, we strike a serious blow at the credibility of his historian, who then puts into his mouth a remark never uttered."

A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE FOURTH GOSPEL AND THE THREE SYNOPTICS

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EVERY one, at least in the educated classes, knows that the authenticity of the fourth gospel has been long and widely disputed. The most careless reader is struck by the difference of tone between the simple histories ascribed to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the theological and philosophical treatise which bears the name of John. After following the three narratives, so simple in their structure, so natural in their style, so unadorned by rhetoric, so free from philosophic terms,—after reading these, it is with a feeling of surprise that we find ourselves, plunged into the bewildering mazes of the Alexandrine philosophy, and open our fourth gospel to be told that, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." We ask instinctively, "How did John, the fisherman of Galilee, learn these phrases of the Greek schools, and why does he mix up the simple story of his master with the philosophy of that 'world which by wisdom knew not God?'"

The general Christian tradition is as follows: The spread! of "heretical" views about the person of Jesus alarmed the "orthodox" Christians, and they appealed to John, the last aged relic of the apostolic band, to write a history of Jesus which should confute their opponents, and establish the essential deity of the founder of their religion. At their repeated solicitations, John wrote the gospel which bears his name, and the doctrinal tone of it is due to its original

intention,—a treatise written against Cerinthus, and designed to crush, with the authority of an apostle, the rising doubts as to the pre-existence and absolute deity of Jesus of Nazareth. So far non-Christians and Christians—including the writer of the gospel—are agreed. This fourth gospel is not—say Theists—a simple biography of Jesus written by a loving disciple as a memorial of a departed and cherished friend, but a history written with a special object and to prove a certain doctrine. "St. John's gospel is a polemical treatise," echoes Dr. Liddon. "These are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," confesses the writer himself. Now, in examining the credibility of any history, one of the first points to determine is whether the historian is perfectly unbiassed in his judgment and is therefore likely give facts exactly as they occurred, un-coloured by views of his own. Thus we do not turn to the pages of a Roman Catholic historian to gain a fair idea of Luther, or of William the Silent, or expect to find in the volumes of Clarendon a thoroughly faithful portraiture of the vices of the Stuart kings; rather, in reading the history of a partisan, do we instinctively make allowances for the recognised bias of his mind and heart. That the fourth gospel comes to us prefaced by the announcement that it is written, not to give us a history, but to prove a certain predetermined opinion, is, then, so much doubt cast at starting on its probable accuracy; and, by the constitution of our minds, we at once guard ourselves against a too ready acquiescence in its assertions, and become anxious to test its statements by comparing them with some independent and more impartial authority. The history may be most

accurate, but we require proof that the writer is never seduced into slightly—perhaps unconsciously—colouring an incident so as to favour the object he has at heart. For instance, Matthew, an honest writer enough, is often betrayed into most non-natural quotation of prophecy by his anxiety to connect Jesus with the Messiah expected by his countrymen. This latent wish of his leads him to insert various quotations from the Jewish Scriptures which, severed from their context, have a verbal similarity with the events he narrates. Thus, he refers to Hosea's mention of the Exodus: "When Israel was a child then I loved him and called my son out of Egypt," and by quoting only the last six words gives this as a "prophecy" of an alleged journey of Jesus into Egypt. Such an instance as this shows us how a man may allow himself to be blinded by a pre-conceived determination to prove a certain fact, and warns us to sift carefully any history that comes to us with the announcement that it is written to prove such and such a truth.

Unfortunately we have no independent contemporary history—except a sentence of Josephus—whereby to test the accuracy of the Christian records; we are therefore forced into the somewhat unsatisfactory task of comparing them one with another, and in cases of diverging testimony we must strike the balance of probability between them.

On examining, then, these four biographies of Jesus, we find a remarkable similarity between three of them, amid many divergencies of detail; some regard them, therefore, as the condensation into writing of the oral teaching of the apostles, preserved in the various Churches they severally

founded, and so, naturally, the same radically, although diverse in detail. "The synoptic Gospels contain the substance of the Apostles' testimony, collected principally from their oral teaching current in the Church, partly also from written documents embodying portions of that teaching."* Others think that the gospels which we possess, and which are ascribed severally to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are all three derived from an original gospel now lost, which was probably written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and variously translated into Greek. However this may be, the fact that such a statement as this has been put forward proves the striking similarity, the root identity, of the three "synoptical gospels," as they are called. We gather from them an idea of Jesus which is substantially the same: a figure, calm, noble, simple, generous; pure in life, eager to draw men to that love of the Father and devotion to the Father which were his own distinguishing characteristics; finally, a teacher of a simple and high-toned morality, perfectly unfettered by dogmatism. The effect produced by the sketch of the Fourth Evangelist is totally different. The friend of sinners has disappeared (except in the narrative of the woman taken in adultery, which is generally admitted to be an interpolation), for his whole time is occupied in arguing about his own position; "the common people" who followed and "heard him gladly" and his enemies, the Scribes and Pharisees, are all massed together as "the Jews," with whom he is in constant collision; his simple style of teaching—parabolic indeed, as was the custom of the East, but consisting of parables intelligible to a child—is exchanged for mystical discourses, causing perpetual