

STUDIES IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST.

I.—THE HISTORICAL CONDITIONS.

WHAT does our religion owe to Jesus, and what to Judæa and the Jews? Is it the ripe fruit of his spirit, or the fair and final blossom of dying Judaism? Was He its legitimate, though outcast and hated, Son? Was He made by his circumstances, the child of a land and people prodigal of choicest gifts and propitious opportunities? Was He but a Voice, throwing into memorable and immortal speech the truths given Him by the fathers of his people and the schools of his faith? These are questions history and historical criticism alone can exhaustively discuss, but at the first blush only one answer seems possible. Circumstances may be plausibly thought to make a man where they are equal to his making, where he does not conspicuously transcend all they are and contain. But where he does, it were as absurd to make the circumstances create the man as to make the night create the day, because after the dark comes the light. Jesus was born in Judæa and nursed in Judaism, but He rose out of them as the sun rises out of the grey dawn to pour his beams over heaven and earth and flood them with the glories of light and colour. Jesus was the antithesis and contradiction of the conditions amid which He grew. By his coming they were changed, and in all their distinctive features annihilated. What He brought with Him was so much more than they contained, that passing from Judaism to Jesus is like passing from the hill top tipped with the cold but beautiful dawn to a plain lying warm and radiant under

the unveiling and revealing light of the summer noon-day.

But while the historical conditions do not explain Jesus; without them He cannot be either explained or understood. The mysterious force we call his person was clothed in natural forms. The conditions under which He lived were human conditions. He was open and sensitive to every influence, inherited, traditional, social, physical, intellectual, moral, religious, that can affect man. He was a son, a brother, and a friend. He was a Jew by birth, speech, and education, and the Spirit, the *Geist*, of his land and people and time worked on and in Him with its plastic hands. Where He was divinely set there He must be humbly studied, and only as He is so studied can it be seen how He resembles "the bright consummate flower" which crowns the months of culture and of growth, and yet, when it bursts into blossom, beauty, and fragrance, is so unlike the dark earth, hard seed, and green stem out of which it has grown.

The question as to the causes and conditions which contributed to form its founder is one of the deepest moment to every religion. It helps to determine its claims, the degree in which it has been a discoverer or revealer of new truths, a creator of fresh moral forces for humanity, a minister to the happiness and progress of man. It helps, too, to determine our estimate of its creative personality, to shew him as a maker or an adapter, as one who depraved by his touch or transfigured by his spirit what he found before and around him, becoming to after ages the embodiment of the most deteriorative or the most regenerative influences. Thus the question as to the century in which Buddha

was born, and the circumstances amid which he lived, powerfully affect our criticism both of the man and his religion. It affects our interpretation of its most characteristic doctrines, our judgment as to its relation to the Sankhya philosophy, to Brahmanism, and to the political movements of India ; and these, again, influence our estimate of a religion that is at once so rich in ethical spirit and so poor in intellectual content. Buddha, regarded as a man who simply translates metaphysical into religious doctrines, and precipitates a political by converting it into a religious revolution, is a less original and beautiful character than the Buddha who so pities man and so hates his sorrow as to find for him by suffering and sacrifice the way to everlasting rest, the path to the blessed *Nirvana*. And so, too, with Islam and its founder. If Mohammed be compared with his heathen contemporaries and their ancestors, and his system with theirs, he can only profit by the comparison, stand out as a pre-eminent religious genius and benefactor of his country and kind. But if his doctrines be traced to their sources, Judaic, Magian, Christian, if it be found that he depraved what he appropriated, that he practised what his own precepts forbade, and so became personally a greater influence for evil than his law was a means of good—then we may allow him to be a political, but not a religious, genius. Knowledge of the historical conditions may thus so modify as to change from favourable to adverse our judgment of the historical person.

Now what were the historical conditions under which Jesus was formed? Are they in themselves sufficient to explain Him? Did they embody intellectual and spiritual forces potent enough to form Him, and,

through Him, his religion? Was He, as we have been assured, a pupil of the Rabbis and a child of the native Judaic culture? Was He indeed "called out of Egypt," a Son of its later wisdom, educated in Alexandria, illumined by the light that lived in Aristobulus and Philo? Or was He by the accident of birth a Jew, by the essential qualities as by the nurture of his spirit a Greek, gifted with the serene soul and open sense of ancient Hellas, softening by his Hellenic nature and culture the stern and exalted truths of Hebraism? It is impossible to discuss here and now the many points involved in these questions: all that is possible is to indicate the historical conditions amid which He lived, his relation to them, and theirs to Him.

I. THE LAND. Modern historical thought sufficiently recognizes the influence of a country and climate upon a people, upon the collective nation and its constituent units. Physical conditions have both a moral and an intellectual worth. The great people and the great man are held to owe much to nature without as to nature within. And the land is here of singular significance. It was small but goodly, rich in the fruits of the earth, fair, fragrant, and fertile as the garden of the Lord. It was a land of hills and valleys, lakes and water-courses, mountains that guarded, streams that made glad its cities, especially queenly Zion, beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth. Shut in before by the sea, behind by the desert, girt and guarded to the north by the royal ranges of Lebanon, to the south by waste lands, its fruitful plains, full of corn and wine, seemed to the wandering sons of the desert to flow with milk and honey. To

tribes weary of change and migration in the wilderness Canaan was by pre-eminence the land of rest. And so many distinct yet related families had striven for a foothold and a home in it, for room on its plains and a right to its cities. The sons of fathers who had parted as kinsmen in the desert met as foemen on the plains, as invaders and invaded, as Hebrews and Phœnicians. On the coast once famous cities stood, the cities of the men who made the commerce of the ancient, and, through it, of the modern world—men full of resource and invention, builders, dyers, carvers of ivory, weavers of rich stuffs, discoverers of the secrets the stars can whisper to the seafaring, bearers of manifold impulses for good and ill to the cities and isles of Greece. On the one side lay Egypt, on the other Assyria; over and through the land that intervened they had fought out their rivalries, and made their names, their armies, and their civilizations both familiar and fearful to the sons of Israel. It was thus a land full of many influences, historical and physical, small in size, but mighty in power. Greece is great for ever as the home of the Hellenes, the men so gifted with “the vision and the faculty divine” as to discover and reveal to the world the beautiful in nature and man. The city that rose beside the Tiber and swayed for centuries the sceptre of the world, has made the hills on which she sat throned famous for evermore. The queenly Nile and the rivers of Mesopotamia have been immortalized by the ancient empires of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. But to only one land was it given to bear and nurse two peoples, most dissimilar while akin, small in numbers but most potent in influence, the Phœnicians, who made for us the art of commerce and found for

us the pathway of the sea, and the Hebrews, the people of the Book, "to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the Shechinah, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen."

2. THE PEOPLE. Descent is a potent factor of character. The past can never disinherit the present; the present can never dispossess itself of qualities transmitted from the past. The great man cannot be understood apart from his people—must be approached through his country and kin. Jesus was a Jew, a son of Israel. Israel had not been a royal or imperial people, had no claim to stand among the empires of the world. Once, for a brief season, they had become a great power. Their history boasted but two splendid reigns, one famed for conquest, the other for wisdom; yet in each case the splendour was dashed with darkness. The great kings died, and the great kingdom perished, fell into two miserable monarchies, always rivals, often at war, threatened or held in fee by the great empires on either side. And the people were as destitute of genius as of political importance. They were not gifted with the faculty of making a language beautiful and musical for ever, of creating a literature that could command the world by its rich and exact science, sublime and profound philosophy, pure and exalted poetry. They were, too, not only without the genius for art, but possessed the spirit to which art is alien, an unholy and hateful thing. They had had as a people nothing cosmopolitan in their past, had never, like the Phœnicians, penetrated the world

with their inventions and commerce, like the Greeks, with their literature, like the Assyrians or Romans, with their arms; but they had lived a life that grew narrower and more exclusive every day, and had become among the nations not so much a nation as a sect.

Yet this people had had a glorious and singular past. They had been creators of a religion, of a new and peculiar conception of God and man, of society and the state. Two thousand years before our date a band of slaves had fled from Egypt and found freedom in the desert. There their leader had given them laws which were his, yet God's. They were organized into a nation, with God as their king, and settled in Canaan to realize a divine kingdom, an ideal state, instituted and ruled of God. In it everything was sacred, nothing profane. The common duties of life were subjects of divine commandment. The nation in its collective being was meant to be the vehicle and minister of the Divine Will. Worship was, while individual, national, the homage of the people to their invisible King. While the nation by its worship and through its priests spoke to God, God by his prophets spoke to the nation. They were, indeed, the voices of God, speakers for Him, revealing his truths, enforcing his will. But a recognized is not always an obeyed authority. Worship is easier than obedience. Men are ever readier to serve the priest than to obey the prophet, and sacerdotalism flourished in Israel while prophecy decayed and died. And so, while the prophets created a literature embodying an unrealized religion, the priests created a nation, a people devoted to the

worship they administered, the symbols and ceremonies they had instituted. Hebraism remained an ideal, a faith too sublimely spiritual and ethical for gross and sensuous men ; but Judaism became a reality, as was easily possible to a religion that translated the grand and severe idea of righteousness into the poor and simple notion of legal cleanness, and substituted the fanaticism of the symbol for the enthusiasm of humanity.

Two things need to be here noted. (1) The contradiction in the history of Israel between the political ideal and the reality. The ideal was the Theocracy. The state was the Church, God was the King, the polity was the religion. Our modern distinctions were unknown ; God penetrated everywhere and everything, and consecrated whatever He penetrated. The individual and the state were in all their modes of being and action meant to be religious. But to the realization of such an ideal, absolute freedom was necessary ; a tyranny, either native or foreign, could only be fatal to it. If the state was not allowed to develop according to its own nature, its institutions spontaneously crystallizing round its central belief, it could not fulfil the end given in its very idea. And Israel had but seldom enjoyed the freedom his ideal demanded. He had often been the vassal, had even been the captive, of great empires. His struggle for political existence acted injuriously on his religious ideal—made him feel that to maintain national being was to fulfil his religious mission. And the patriotism evoked by the first narrowed to a miserable particularism the generous universalism that lived in the second. Israel believed that the states which were the enemies of his political being

were the enemies of his religious mission, and so he hated his conquerors with the double hatred of the vanquished patriot and the disappointed zealot. If the alien refused to spare his freedom, he could refuse to distribute his light. The circumstances that did not allow him to realize his political ideal prevented him from fulfilling his religious mission.

(2) The contradiction in the life of Israel between the religious ideal and the reality. There were, as above indicated, two elements in the faith of Israel, a sacerdotal and spiritual, or a priestly and prophetic. The one was embodied in the legal ordinances and worship, the other expressed in the prophetic Scriptures. The prophets represent the religion of Jehovah, not as realized in Israel, but in its ideal truth and purity. The priests represent it not as it ought to have been, but as it actually was. It was possible to be most faithful to the sacerdotal, while most false to the spiritual, element. Where the priest was most blindly followed the prophet was most obstinately disobeyed. Prophecy, neglected, died, but the priesthood, respected and revered, grew. While all that remained of the prophets was a dead literature, the priests lived and multiplied, the soul of an active and comprehensive system. It has often been said that the Jews went into captivity polytheists and returned monotheists; that, before it, nothing could keep them back from idolatry, after it, nothing tempt them to it. But it entirely depends on the meaning of the terms whether the above statement be true. The Jews were as little monotheists, in the sense of the prophets, after as before the captivity. There is an idolatry of the symbol as well as of the image. The idol is a representation of God,

the symbol a representation of the truth; and where the representation becomes to the man as the thing represented, there is idolatry—reverence of the sign instead of the thing signified. And the Jews were idolaters of the symbol. Their sacerdotalism was deified. Means were made ends, legal more than ethical purity, mint, anise, and cumin, more than righteousness, mercy, and truth. Priestcraft and legalism proved as fatal to the realization of the religious ideal as bondage to the realization of the political.

And these contradictions between the ideal and the real had reached their sharpest point when Christ came. Freedom, the necessary condition of greatness, whether of deed or endeavour, was unknown. The land was ruled by hated aliens. In things outer and social, indeed, the people seemed prosperous. New and splendid cities like Cæsarea were rising, aping the magnificence in architecture and vice, in law and licence, of the famous and dreaded Capital in the West. In old cities like Jerusalem buildings were in process that eclipsed the greatest structures of ancient times, a temple splendid as Solomon's, monument of a man who mocked the faith it was meant to honour. While the people used the temple, they hated and feared its builder. For Herod was a double offence—a son of Edom, a hated child of hated Esau; and a vassal king, monarch of Judæa, but subject of Rome, one whose rule made the ruled slaves of a slave. On the religious side the people had been for centuries afflicted with barrenness. The Divine oracles were dumb, and in their place there had risen a forced and fantastic literature, visionary, turgid, that was to the prophetic what the spent echo, broken into confused and inarticulate

sound, is to the human voice, full of soft music and sweet reason. The people were in the seat of their strength smitten with weakness, and at their heart the grim and terrible forces of dissolution were at work.

But the state of the people will become more evident if we analyze and describe the two great parties of Christ's day, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Ascetic and communist societies like the Essenes stood too remote from the national life and influenced it too little to be here of much significance. Our knowledge of the two great historical and politico-religious parties is still most imperfect, though clearer than it once was. The parallel, suggested by Josephus, between the Pharisees and the Stoics, and the Sadducees and the Epicureans, was as incorrect as unjust. The popular notion, identifying the Pharisee with the formalist and the Sadducee with the sceptic, is no better. The two parties were at once political and religious, represented different ideas of the national polity, and different interpretations of the national faith. The Pharisees were a popular and democratic, but the Sadducees a conservative and aristocratic, party. The former represented a freer and more individual movement, but the latter a hereditary and sacerdotal tendency. The Pharisees constituted a school or society, where the condition of membership was intellectual; but the Sadducees constituted a party, where the condition of membership was descent. The former was an association of the likeminded, but the latter a cluster of priestly and governing families. Each had a different interpretation of the past, present, and future of Israel; and their conduct differed with their interpretation. When the creative period in Israel ceased, the interpretive

began. When the school of the prophets died, the school of the scribes was founded, and in the latter Pharisaism was born. With the idea of interpretation came the idea of authority. The men that had been despised while living were revered when dead; and the interpretation became as authoritative and sacred as the interpreted, the oral as the written law. The former at once explained, modified, and enlarged the latter. The school became a sort of permanent law-giver, augmenting the original germ by aggregation as opposed to growth or development. This process the Pharisees represented, but the Sadducees resisted. They stood by the old sacerdotalism, by the hereditary principle that secured sacerdotal functions and political authority to the old families. The prophecy their fathers had hated, they ignored. The later doctrines of angels and spirits, of resurrection and immortality, they denied. The oral law, the interpretations of the schools, they despised. And so they and the Pharisees stood in practical as in theoretical politics in antithetical relations. The Pharisee represented the patriotic view, developed Judaism, the theocratic belief in all its scholastic exaggeration and rigidity. But the Sadducees represented the standpoint of the politician, the creed of the ruling families, that know how calmly to accept the inevitable while preserving their prerogatives and privileges. Neither party was true to Hebraism, the universalism that lived in the prophets. Both were illustrations of how historical parties may be most false to history, to every great principle it expresses or contains. Judaism, as it then lived, was the antithesis and contradiction of Hebraism; the religion alike of Puri-

sees and Sadducees was the negation of the religious psalmists had sung and prophets preached.

Now, amid these and similar historical conditions Jesus lived. Could they make Him? Can they explain Him? It is a small thing to find among the sayings of Hillel or Shammai one curiously like a saying of Jesus. The great thing is the spirit of the men and the system. Common sayings can be claimed for neither Hillel nor Jesus, but what each can claim is his distinctive character and spirit. Hillel is a Jewish Rabbi, and could never have been a Universal Teacher; Jesus is a Universal Teacher, and could never have remained a mere Jewish Rabbi. But He could be the first only as He transcended the second, and his historical conditions, while equal to the making of a Rabbi, were not equal to the creation of a Universal Teacher. Contrast his day with ours. We are free, the children of a land where a man can speak the thing he will; but He was without freedom, the Son of a people enslaved and oppressed. We are educated, enlightened by the best thought of the past, the surest knowledge of the present; but his were an uneducated people, hardly knew the schoolmaster, and where they did, received from him instruction that stunted rather than developed. We live in a present that knows the past and is enriched with all its mental wealth—the treasures of India, from its earliest Vedic to its latest Puranic age—of China, of Egypt, of Persia, of Assyria—the classic riches of Greece and Rome—the wondrous stores accumulated by the Hebrews themselves and deposited in their Scriptures—all are ours, at our feet, in our heads, there to make the new wealth old

wealth never fails to create. But Jesus lived in a present closed to the past. The common home-born Jew knew the Gentile but to despise him; wisdom of Greece and Rome was to him but foolishness, best unknown; while the light that streamed from his own Scriptures could be seen only through the thick dark horn of rabbinical interpretation. We live in times when the world has grown wondrously wide and open to man; when nations beat in closest sympathy with each other; when the thoughts of one people swiftly become those of another; when commerce has so woven its fine network round the world that all its parts now feel connected and akin; but Jesus lived in a land which prided itself on its ignorance and hatred of the foreigner, where the thought of common brotherhood or kinship could only rise to be cast out and abhorred. In our day nature has been interpreted, the physical universe has become practically infinite in space and time, filling the soul with a sense of awe in its presence the earlier ages could not possibly have experienced; but in Christ's day and to his countrymen nature was but a simple thing, of small significance, with few mysteries. Ours is, indeed, a day that might well create a great man, a universal teacher, the founder of a new faith. Yet where is the person that thinks it possible for our historical conditions to create a Christ? Strauss did not think they could, for Christ was to him the supreme religious genius, unapproached, unapproachable, who must in his own order stand alone for all time. Renan does not think so, for to him Christ is a creator, the founder of the absolute religion, who did his work so well that it only remains to us to be his continuators. But if the creation of Christ transcends our historical

conditions, was it possible to his own? Or does He not stand out so much their superior as to be, while a Child of time, the Son of the Eternal, the only Begotten who has descended to earth from the bosom of the Father, that He might declare Him?

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TESTAMENT OR COVENANT?

A NOTE ON HEBREWS ix. 15-22.

No English reader who has carefully followed the train of thought contained in Chapters viii. to x. of the Epistle to the Hebrews, can fail to have been perplexed by the sudden transition in the Authorized Version from the notion of a "covenant" to that of a "testament" in Chapter ix. 15-20. It has been said, indeed, that the transition is not so sudden as it seems, because the mention of an "inheritance," at the end of Verse 15, suggests the notion of a will or bequest. Accordingly those who take this view do not introduce the changed signification of the term *διαθήκη*, at the beginning of the fifteenth Verse, as our translators did, but at the beginning of the next Verse, returning to "covenant" again in Chapter x. 16. But the connection between an inheritance and a will, though familiar to a Greek or Roman mind, was by no means so familiar to the Hebrew mind. To the Christian Jews here addressed, the term *διαθήκη* would inevitably bear the usual meaning attached to it throughout the Septuagint Version as the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word denoting a covenant (*Berith*), unless their attention was specially directed to the introduction of another and a