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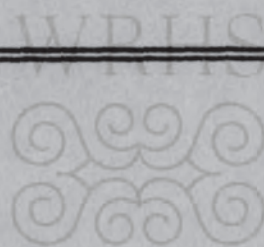
Jesus, 1925.

"JESUS."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

FEBRUARY 22, 1925, CLEVELAND.



In speaking of the founder of Christianity ~~this morning~~ we shall ^{try to} apply the same standards of critical historical knowledge which we ^{would} ~~applied~~ in our study of the ~~four~~ other great founders of the religions of mankind. We ~~shall~~ endeavored to strip their character of all their legendary, mythical accoutrements whichtime ~~and fiction~~ had added to them; we ~~endeavored~~ ^{shall} to cut through the crusts and layers of the miraculous ~~and the fantastic~~ in order to reach down to the man himself and to his basic teaching. Of all the great leaders of mankind, especially the religious leaders of mankind, strange and marvelous tales ^{have been} ~~were~~ told by their disciples and adherents. They were immaculately conceived; they were equipped with divine powers and potencies; they performed miracles; they healed and they ^{were} ~~resurrected~~.

We must either credit all these reports of all the religious leaders of mankind or none. We cannot be critical with what we choose to call the superstitions of other people, and be at the same time indulgent with our own. To me the greatest miracle in the world is man himself; to me the most profoundly mystical and the holiest is ~~natural~~ human ^{teaching} ~~earth~~; to me moral resurrection is ^{more profound} ~~as much a challenging~~ ^{than} ~~enigma as~~ physical resurrection; and to me all men are in greater or less degree divine. Moses and Jesus and Zoroaster and ^{the Buddha} ~~Confucius~~ are no less objects of reverential praise when I think of them not as ^{supernatural} ~~congenital~~ beings, miraculously equipped

with supernatural powers, which somehow remove them from kinship with me, but when I think of them as brothers, fellow human beings--wiser, of course; greater, of course; but fellow human beings, nevertheless, who share the common burdens of life and pass through the universal tribulations of the race on to glory everlasting.

And so I will speak this morning of a man--a man of humble birth and origin, who in three short years transformed the face of the whole world. The epic of his life is very much like the epic of the life of every great leader of men--a vision to begin with, a flaming vision, and then years of wandering ^{and labor} in ^{at the highest} quest of that vision, and then suffering and martyrdom and ultimate beatification. Whether it be the story of one whose life began in a wicker basket on the Nile, ^{and enduring} ~~enclosed~~ in a lonely sepulcher on the top of Mount Nebo, or whether it be the life of one which began in the manger and ended on the cross, the story is the same--the dolorous road of frustration and disillusionment which every great servant of God and man must traverse.

We have no authentic biography of this man Jesus any more than we have of any of the great men of antiquity. Most of the writings of the New Testament are of a later time, and even the earliest sources have been subjected, like all ancient writings, to revision, interpolation, change and addition. The writings of the New Testament are, in the main, religious propaganda--literature possessing all the inevitable ^{limitations} ~~condition~~ of such literature. It is therefore

quite difficult to extract the kernel of historic fact from this mass of theologic writing. But with the aid of historical criticism, by means of a matter of fact reading of the text, and by means of other sources outside of the New Testament writing, we may succeed in reconstructing the life of Jesus, but only imperfectly and with no absolute certainty.

Jesus was born in Galilee ^{some} four years before the common era. He was of the seed of Abraham--a Jew. His father was a humble artisan, in that part of Palestine where life was hard ~~and crude~~ and exacting, where men enjoyed ^{but} few luxuries and shared many burdens, in the midst of a peasant population. Jesus' early years were spent, undoubtedly, just as the early years of any Jewish lad in Palestine were spent. He undoubtedly went to a Hebrew school, studied the Torah, worshipped in the synagogue, listened to the tales of the heroes and saints of Israel, heard the echoes of the psalms as they were chanted in his synagogue, and paid particular heed to the marvelously powerful and passionate sermons of the prophets which were read in the synagogue.

He was undoubtedly a lad of great spiritual sensitiveness, with a decided mystic bias. Up to the age of thirty the life of this man Jesus remains comparatively uneventful; hard work, study, meditation. He lived and moved among his people, among the fishermen of Galilee and the craftsmen and the day laborers. He was himself a carpenter, and it is perhaps due to these early contacts with the toilers of the world, with the poor and the humble, the denied and the ^{dispraised} ~~despised~~

of life,--I say, it is perhaps due to these early associations that those marvelous expressions of exalted sentiments touching the poor, the needy, the unfortunate, ^{and} the sinners of the world, ^{which we find in his teachings ~~are~~ arise,} ~~gave rise~~ He was able to understand ^{the common folk} ~~them~~ because he lived with them and among them and as one of them during the early formative years of his life.

Around the age of thirty the great crisis in his life occurred, ^{It seems that with some} ~~and you know from your study~~ of the other founders of religion, ~~whom we discussed~~, that just about this time in their life, around their thirtieth year, somehow, ^{a great spiritual} ~~strangely enough in each one of them~~ the crisis which alters their entire mode of living and thinking occurs. Jesus meets John, called the Baptist. John in his dress and in his primitive mode of living reminded men of Elijah, the prophet, who lived a thousand years before his day. John was preaching the end of the world and calling men to repentance in preparation for this catastrophic event which was swiftly approaching. "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven ^(of God) ~~is near~~ at hand." Many men at that time believed that they were about to witness the close of the mundane cycle of existence. The belief was held that this earth, this world, was to endure five thousand years; that at the close of the ^{five} ~~five~~ thousand years the millennium would be ushered in--the six th thousand years; a period of time during which wickedness and sin would ^{no longer exist} ~~be completely destroyed~~ and a universal condition of righteousness and godliness and peace would prevail, ~~and~~ The men of that time ~~actually~~ believed that they were on the threshold of that

momentous event. They were at the close of the year 5000, and eagerly and anxiously awaited the coming of the millennum. In order to be privileged to enter the kingdom, John urged them to repent, to cleanse them of their sins, ~~and the believer~~ ^{themselves} ~~should hearken unto him and set out to~~ prepare ~~himself~~ for the millennum; ^{and to them} signify ~~his~~ ^{to do this} willingness by submitting ~~himself~~ ^{themselves} to baptism--a symbol of spiritual purification. *Else p. 160*

Jesus meets John. His mystical, sensitive soul is tremendously impressed, first, by the man himself, and then by his message. His message sinks deep into his soul. Jesus has himself baptized, signifying his acceptance of the mission and the message of John and his readiness to prepare himself for the advent of the kingdom; and Jesus himself sets out as a preacher of this self-same ^{message.} ~~prophecy~~ of John, namely, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Now preparation for the kingdom implied, in the mind of Jesus, the highest ethical ^{self-}discipline. The program which Jesus presented to his followers and disciples as a preparation for the kingdom contained some of the most exalted ethical ideals of mankind. They are all authentic echoes of Jewish prophecy; they all breathe the spirit of the prophetic preachments of the Old Testament. One finds in them new or renewed emphases; ~~one finds in them significant slight revisions, but all in all, they are grounded in~~ ^{of} authoritative Jewish teachings; they arise from the soil and the soul of the spirit of the genius of Israel.

Those ethical teachings of Jesus are not new

in the sense that they ^{had} ~~have~~ never, up to his day, been revealed to man, or that they had not been heard before in the schools and in the synagogues of Israel, but they are new in the sense of their new freshness and vigor, and that superb artistry of phrase; they startled men because of the passionate earnestness, ~~that was back of those teachings.~~ Some of the ethical doctrines which Jesus taught were extreme, ~~very extreme.~~ Jesus taught voluntary self-impoveryishment; poverty was the ideal of the Eb¹⁰anites, a ~~whole group~~ ^{sect} in ancient Israel ^{which} ~~who~~ lived and preached at the time of Jesus, and Jesus ~~seems to have accepted~~ ^{believed in} their doctrine and preached poverty as an ideal in life. Jesus preached pacifism; ~~Jesus preached~~ ^{and love of his enemies and} communism--doctrines which are ~~not good for~~ ^{hardly acceptable as} human daily food; but one must remember that Jesus was preaching to a world in ~~suspense~~ ^{extremes}, a world which ~~the faithful~~ believed was about to terminate. His code of ethics was, therefore, an interregnum code, an intensive program of self-purification in preparation for the swift advent of the kingdom of absolute perfection which would be ushered in swiftly and suddenly ~~and immediately.~~ ^{by God Himself} Men listened to him; men were impressed--by his personality, by his earnestness, by the brilliancy ~~and sharpness~~ ^{and his parables the} pithiness, ~~if we may coin the phrase,~~ ^{the confession and deep humanity} of his teaching,--especially the despised, the rejected, the harrassed, ~~the tax payers, the tax collectors, rather, of ancient Palestine,~~ the ostracized. It is doubly true that the poor ~~shall~~ inherit the earth, for it is always the poor who first inherit truth. Every new revelation was first received by

Jesus'

the poor. ~~His numbers grew, his followers increased.~~
It is still an open question whether
Jesus ~~soon~~ came to think of himself not only as a messenger
Messiah who would come in with the millennium
like John, sent to announce the coming of the ~~kingdom, but~~ as
~~the man destined himself to usher in the kingdom; in other~~
~~words, the Messiah.~~ *himself* In the mind of the people of his day
~~this millennium was to be ushered in by the Messiah--the scion~~ *who would be*
of the House of David *and* who would break the power of Rome,
restore the political independence of Israel, and then
establish the universal reign of peace and justice and truth. *upon the earth.*
may have that Jesus ~~felt~~ that he was summoned to be ~~that~~ *the* Messiah, ~~and to~~
but it is clear that ~~perform that mission.~~ Jesus was ~~not~~ particularly interested in
destroying the power of Rome, or in restoring *the* political
independence ~~of~~ Israel. Jesus was interested not in political
in preparation for the New World order reformation but in spiritual reformation. ~~He thought of~~
~~himself as the man sent by God--the instrument in the hand of~~
~~God to destroy this sorry scheme of things entirely; this~~
~~whole world as then existing--a world of sin and misery and~~
~~pollution and crime, and bring on the Golden Age--the Kingdom.~~

You will recall that six hundred years before
him Zoroaster spoke of himself as the "Savior." Oftentimes
earnest men become so enthralled with the message which they
have to bring to the world, so completely possessed by the
urgency and the reality of their message, that they soon come
to identify themselves with the message; that they soon come
to think of themselves not merely as the apostles or the
spokesmen or the messengers of the truth, but as the agencies
for effecting and bringing about the conditions which they are

If Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah he

~~announcing~~ ~~he~~ probably confided this fact to some of his disciples. ^{Be that as it may} Rumor got abroad that Jesus was the Messiah

~~whom~~ ~~which~~ Israel was expecting. But in the minds of the people, ^{remember,} ~~the Messiah was a political Messiah and they were not expect-~~ ^{it was a political Messiah} ~~ing such a Messiah.~~ ^{whom the people were expecting.} Josephus makes mention in his ~~great~~

History of the Jews which he wrote in the first century of the common era, of the numerous Messianic movements which took place in Israel during the first century. The people were groaning and fretting under the yoke of Rome; they were looking for surcease from oppression; they were anxiously praying, fervently hoping for the advent of ^a ~~the~~ descendent of the House of David--a man supremely endowed, God-appointed, who would break the shackles of Rome, restore them to their freedom and bring about the conditions of peace and harmony. ^{and} ~~this cabal~~ ^{that the hour was at hand.}

So that it was not at all incongruous to them, ~~not at all an improbable or a fantastic notion~~ that ~~Jesus~~ ^{this man} claimed to be, or that his disciples claimed for him, that he was the Messiah. ~~And~~ ^{It} was the report of Jesus as the Messiah, in the popular conception of the word, namely, as a political rebel against the power of Rome, that finally ^{and his doom was sealed.} reached the ears of the Roman procurator. ^R But Jesus had other enemies beside the power ~~of the rulers~~ of Rome. Jesus was sharp and outspoken in his teachings. I do not know where this notion originated that Jesus was a calm, gentle, imperturbable, passive individual--a perfectly fantastic notion, ^{it seems to me} grounded on nothing.

^{of this strain} Jesus was ~~a~~ prophet not a suave diplomat or

a pleasant deacon of a church. ~~He was a prophet,~~ He used the whip on the money changers in the temple when the occasion demanded it; he was a man who ^{could give vent to} ~~entered a veritable~~ towering rage when his moral indignation was aroused; he called men hypocrits and vipers and ravening wolves, and liars, when he faced hypocrits and vipers and wolves and liars. He was not a cautious diplomatic individual at all. ~~Men who use such appellations, men who speak the truth,~~ are not likely to be the occupants of the prosperous pulpits of the land, in those days or in these days. Such words rasp, hurt, make enemies.

Jesus soon won for himself a host of enemies. He denounced the mercenary priests, of whom there were many in those days, as in these days; he denounced the hypocritical pious ones who cast sand in the eyes of people, then as now; he denounced bitterly the arrogant, unsympathetic learned men; he bitterly criticized the unyielding, incur-solated fundamentalists of those days, of whom there were many then as now. He invoked maledictions upon the oppressors of the widowed, the orphans, the fatherless, the exploiter; and in all this he spoke as the prophets of old spoke, in the same spirit and by the same authority, and his words derived from the same moral passion of the Jewish race, which at all times demanded justice, truth, fairness, compassion of all men. Like Jeremiah, of old, ~~whose words I read this morning,~~ he reminded the people not to put their ^{last} ~~faith~~ in the temple buildings and in the sacrificial cult

~~there;~~ like Jeremiah of old, he reminded them that the temple may be destroyed, but that God endured *and his moral law.*

And so he won the hostility first of the priestly hierarchy, who saw in the words of this rebel and radical a menace to their authority and to their influence over the people; and then he gained the hostility of the rabbinic party--the Pharisees; men who did not like the liberties which Jesus took with the text of the Bible when he interpreted that text in the synagogue--~~his homilies, his Agades~~ *on the exegesis of them* ~~his Midrash;~~ men who also resented his presumption to the Messiahship, and above all, men who resented his manner of speech; for Jesus, unlike all other Jewish prophets, spoke not in God's name, as Amos had done, as Jeremiah and Isaiah had done, but seemed to speak in his own name. And ~~then~~ *at last* he even won the hostility of the people, the masses, who ~~had~~ followed him heretofore; for the masses wanted a political deliverer; the masses were looking for a political revolution, *T* ~~any~~ who would lift the yoke of Rome. When Jesus came to them and said, "Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's"; *(reason)* when he told them he was not a political ~~reformer~~ *rebel* at all, but that he was interested solely and exclusively in *the* spiritual self-~~transfiguration~~ *transfiguration*, they turned against him, and ~~he~~ left ~~them~~ *him*

So before very long, on a trumped-up charge of blasphemy, he was seized by the priestly party in the sanhedrin and handed over to the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, as a dangerous political rebel, and by him sentenced, and by Roman

hands and in true Roman fashion crucified on the cross. The dying words on the lips of ~~this latest Jewish prophet~~ were, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me."

He failed; his mission failed; the millenneum did not come. Life moved on just as before; the same oppression, the same sins, the same weak, the same strong. Life always moves on just that way. Salvation does not come suddenly and swiftly through the intervention of one man or of ^{one} group of men. Human ⁱⁿ perfection is as eternal as human life, and the process of ~~it~~ ^{its amelioration} is an eternal process. The multitudinous labors ~~and~~ ¹ multitudinous generations of men alone will bring the human race nearer to the ^{Kingdom} ~~throne~~ of God.

Jesus knew on the cross that he had failed, and yet it is of such tremendous ~~tragedies and failures~~ that the ultimate victories of the race come. ^{The flame lives} ~~His~~ life was not quenched. The truths, the profound, mighty truths which he uttered were destined to encircle the globe, ~~unto this day, a challenge at scoffers of mankind.~~ Jesus did not found a new church and did not establish a new religion. He was not interested in churches and in theologies. Jesus was ~~the~~ ^a loyal, pious, observing Jew to the day of his death; he believed in the one God; he believed in the revelations of God through the mouth of the prophets ^{as inscribed in the Torah}. He did not bring a new law; he did not invalidate the old law. "I come not to destroy but to fulfill. He was a ~~prophetic~~ Jew, of the race of Amos, the same stamp, the same consecration, the same marvelous grasp of the fundamentals of life, and the same

overpowering earnestness.

It was Paul--Paul who never saw Jesus, who was not born in Palestine but in Cilicia in Asia Minor,--it was Paul, who was not steeped in Jewish learning but in Hellenic thought,--it was Paul, whose entire outlook on life was colored by the prevalent gnostic theosophy and the Greek mysteries of ~~Alexander~~ in the Mediterranean world,--it was Paul, who founded the Christian church, ~~this morose fatalist and pessimist, who seemed to have suffered from a physical disease which he called "the thorn in his flesh,"~~ It was Paul, preaching celibacy, ~~preaching~~ self-mortification, preaching that life is essentially evil and the ideal of life is to escape from life,--it was Paul who defined the theology of the Christian Church, which, to a large ^{extent} ~~degree~~, is ~~its~~ ^{the more orthodox churches} the ~~theology~~ to this day. For to Paul Jesus was no longer a man but a theologic notion, a Christ idea, a principle; to him Jesus became ~~the heavenly attempt~~, the redeemer, the mediator between God and man, the arch-enemy of Satan. The human Jesus was completely eclipsed.

For the world at large, may I say for progressive Judaism today, in a large measure, Jesus is being re-humanized; he is regaining his human status, and thereby his divine stamp. We are now coming to see him for what he was--a noble, heroic, suffering soul; a man of universal compassion, because he understood universal sorrow; a man ^{of universal love} who preached pity and ^{to friend and foe} forgiveness and mercy and love; a man who taught his fellowmen to call God Father and man Brother.

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