

EVIDENT INVALIDITY OF THE APOCRYPHA.

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"IT is a matter of real astonishment that outside the circle of the canonical gospels so few reminiscences are preserved of the Perfect Man, who, though he was the Son of God, yet lived as a living man among living men. There are multitudes of historical celebrities respecting the incidents of whose lives endless details and anecdotes have been recorded and preserved. It is little short of amazing that neither history nor tradition should have embalmed for us one certain or precious saying or circumstance in the life of the Savior of mankind, except the comparatively few events recorded in four very brief biographies. St. Paul has preserved for us the one deep word of the Lord Jesus, how he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," and it is just possible that the rule, "Approve yourselves trustworthy moneychangers," quoted by several of the Fathers, which, after all, is little more than an epitome of the parable of the talents and the pounds, may be a true recollection of his words. Many of the "unrecorded sayings" of Christ (the *agrapha dogmata*) are profound and forcible, and it is far from improbable that some of them may be a true echo of what he said; but there is not one of them which adds a new thought or a new lesson to those contained in the authentic discourses and parables. It is quite certain that neither from the apocryphal gospels, nor from any other source, do we derive one anecdote or even one hint upon which we can rely as expressing a single new feature of his example, or a single additional particular of his life.

"WHAT WAS CHRIST'S APPEARANCE?"

"We could not have a more signal proof of this failure of tradition than the astounding fact that, not only at this day, but even in the early centuries, there was not even a dim remembrance as to the physical

appearance of the King of Glory. Was he of beautiful features and commanding aspect, or was he of marred visage and mean appearance? We might surely have anticipated that so much at least might have been remembered. But it was not. The descriptions of Christ, which for centuries haunted and dominated the numberless endeavors of Art to represent him during and since the Middle Ages, were late forgeries, not earlier at the earliest than the seventh and eighth centuries. As early as the fourth and fifth centuries it was disputed whether he was 'the chief among ten thousand and altogether lovely,' 'fairer than the children of men,' and 'endowed with the oil of gladness above his fellows;' or whether he was smitten and stricken and ugly and dwarfish. The earlier view that he was exceptionally unbeautiful in appearance prevailed mainly in consequence of the false conception of life, and the revolting glorification of dirt and unnatural asceticism, which invaded Christianity from Paganism and the East, and upheld before Christians the ideal of yogis and fakirs. The belief that there must have been 'something starry' in the look of Christ, and that one who is repellent in aspect could never have won the passionate adoration of multitudes, commended itself to the opinion of many in the fourth century, who, further, rightly argued that his outward form could not but have been translucent with the moral and spiritual beauty within. But the remarkable thing is that neither party of those who treated the subject from opposite points of view was able to claim the slightest authority of tradition for their opinion on a subject so full of interest. They argued exclusively *a priori*, from what they regarded as most fitting, or *a posteriori* from their interpretation of passages in Isaiah and the Psalms. Nor did the earliest efforts of Christian art afford them the smallest assistance. For nearly five centuries it was generally regarded as profane, among the greatest writers and thinkers in the church, to attempt any naturalistic representation of Christ at all. The sweet and simple artists of the catacombs, with no exception before the fourth century, and with but few exceptions for two or three centuries later, only idealized him as a radiant boy; and men like Eusebius, Epiphanius and Asterius were even shocked and scandalized by any wish or

attempt to paint the human Christ in any naturalistic method, or otherwise than by way of symbol.

"Now, if tradition could not even tell the Christian inquirer of 1,000 or 1,700 years ago whether the lineaments of Jesus were beautiful or ill-favored, it is supremely unlikely that it should have preserved any other particulars. In point of fact, the Apocryphal Gospels do not represent *tradition* at all. They are for the most part poor, valueless, ill-guided and to a great extent heretical figments.

"Happily their authors, some of whom wrote as late as the seventh and eighth centuries, had not the audacity to pretend that they could reproduce any of Christ's essential teaching. They occupied themselves exclusively with the invention of imaginary details about his infancy, or about his cross or his passion.

"OF WHAT VALUE ARE THE APOCRYPHAL ACCOUNTS?"

"Several answers may be given apart from the fact that it is always interesting to watch the tendency of human speculations about sacred things. First of all, they furnish a melancholy proof of the sort of way in which many Christians had begun, as time went on, to form most distorted and erroneous opinions about the person and character of Christ. Secondly, they furnish us with a striking gauge of the unapproachable and immeasurable superiority of the Canonical Gospels. Thirdly, they show us that such was the unique divinity of Christ that he stood infinitely above all the capabilities of human invention. Whenever men venture to give the reins to their imagination respecting him, even with the intention to exalt and magnify, they do but instantly dwarf and degrade his sinlessness and supreme majesty.

"Passing over the many legends of the Virgin – which, however, are not yet due to Mariolatry, but to the desire to glorify Jesus through her – we come to the pretended anecdotes about Jesus as a boy.

"STORIES ABOUT THE BOYHOOD OF CHRIST.

"1. Many of them are mere translations into hard prose of the metaphors of the prophets and psalmists. [R2027 : page 205] Thus, since we read in the Psalms, 'Praise the Lord upon earth, ye dragons and all deeps,' we are told that when Jesus was a child, dragons came out of a cave and worshiped him. If we read in the Canticles, 'I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of its boughs,' we have the story that during the flight into Egypt Mary longed to refresh herself with ripe dates, and Jesus commanded the palm branches to bow down to her, rewarding their obedience by sending a palm branch to heaven by the hands of angels, and making it the sign of victory. If the prophet says, 'The idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence,' the prophecy is transformed into the tale that, as the Holy Family entered the city of Hermopolis, the 365 idols of its temple all fell with their faces to the earth, in consequence of which the priests and all the people were at once converted.

"If we read in Isaiah, 'The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib,' and in another verse, 'In the midst of the years shalt thou be known' – with the mistranslation of the Septuagint, 'in the midst of two animals shalt thou be recognized' – we are furnished with the tale, reproduced in so many thousand pictures, and even in the Catacombs, that, as Jesus lay in the manger, the ox and the ass worshiped him.

"2. Another large class of the apocryphal stories of the infancy consists in a multiplication of meaningless miracles. There is not a single miracle of the gospels which does not teach us deep lessons: there is not a single miracle invented in these fictions which does. In the gospels, the evangelist's every miracle is a revelation; but the apocryphal miracles of the infancy are mere startling thaumaturgy. The boy Jesus drops all kinds of robes into a single dyer's vat, and when the dyer is vexed, he pulls them all out dyed with the different colors required; he 'profanes' the Sabbath by making sparrows of clay, and when he is reproved by the scribes he claps his hands and makes them

fly. Breaking a pitcher, he brings back water to his mother in his robe. While working in the carpenter's shop he sees Joseph vexed because the two beams for a couch [R2028 : page 205] are of unequal length, and Jesus pulls the shorter one to the requisite size. He is accused of having pushed a boy from a housetop, and killed him; he therefore leaps down from the roof, raises the boy to life and makes him acknowledge that it was another lad who had given him the push. He changes into kids some boys who had hidden themselves from him when he wanted them to play with him; and then, at the entreaty of their mothers, transforms them into boys. It is needless to touch further on this prodigality of superfluous and unmeaning portents.

"THEY PRESENT A FALSE PICTURE.

"3. But, worse than this, the Apocryphal Gospels, from the ignorance, and probably, in most instances, from the heretical opinions of their writers, make the boy Jesus positively repulsive in character. He is implacably revengeful and cruelly remorseless. He becomes the terror of the neighborhood in which he lives, so that, because of him, his parents live in perpetual disquietude and alarm. He is pert, petulant and intolerable to his teachers, and instead of listening to their instructions, lectures them on 'physics and metaphysics, hyperphysics and hypophysics.' Let one or two instances suffice.

"1. 'When the Lord Jesus was returning home with Joseph in the evening he met a boy who ran to thrust him so violently that he fell down. Jesus said unto him, 'As thou hast thrown me down, so shalt thou fall and not rise.' And the same hour the boy fell down, and breathed his last.'

"2. Again Jesus had been making some pools and channels of water, and 'the son of Annas, the scribe, was standing there with Joseph, and took a branch of willow and spilled the water which Jesus had collected. And when Jesus saw what was done, he was angry and said to him, 'Wicked, impious and foolish one, wherein have the pools wronged thee? Behold now, thou shalt also wither as a tree.' When the

parents complained, his mother came and entreated him to be less wrathful. 'But he said, 'He was worthy of death because he destroyed the works which I had wrought.' Therefore his mother besought him saying, 'Do not, my Lord, because they all rise against us.' And he, not willing that his mother should be grieved, spurned the body of the dead with his right foot, and said to him, 'Arise, O son of iniquity, for thou art not worthy to enter into the rest of thy father.' Then he who was dead arose and departed.

"3. Again, when he is sent to a teacher to learn his letters, the master begins imperiously to teach him, saying, 'Say Aleph.' But Jesus said to him, 'First tell me what Beth is.' The master, being angry, struck him with a rod of storax-wood; and soon after he smote him he died. And Jesus returned home to his mother. But Joseph being afraid called Mary to him and said, 'Know truly that my soul is sad unto death on account of that boy.'

"THE AUTHENTIC ACCOUNTS ENOUGH.

"It is, then, abundantly clear that the spurious James, and Matthew, and the others, have not only nothing genuine to teach us about Jesus, but that the picture of him which they represent is utterly debased. The genuine gospels were written for our learning, not for our amusement; to promote our salvation, not to gratify our curiosity. Their very silence is eloquent with truth. What do they tell us of the infant and the youthful Christ? They give us the narrative of his birth; they present us with the picture of the sweet, submissive years spent in the shop of the carpenter at Nazareth; but from his early return from Egypt to Galilee, up to the commencement of his ministry, when he 'began to be about 30 years old,' they preserve but one anecdote and one word. The one anecdote is the story of that visit to Jerusalem; and this to show us how, in his earliest years, he loved his Father's house of prayer. The one word is 'the carpenter,' in the disdainful question of the vulgar and the ignorant, who thought that they had abolished his claims when they asked, 'Is not this the carpenter?' That one word tells us all that is to be

told of more than twenty years, during which he grew 'in wisdom, and stature, and favor with God and man.' A scanty record? Not scanty for its purpose, for in that one word is revealed to all mankind nothing less than the sacred dignity of labor, and the blessed truth that the true grandeur and meaning of human life depend neither on rank nor fame, neither on the glare of publicity nor on the entourage of power, nor on the multitude of things which a man possesses."
