

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

LETTERS

TO

JESUS CHRIST.

BY

G. W. FOOTE.



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THE INCARNATION.

DEAR SIR, DEAR GHOST, OR DEAR GOD,—

You are reputed to be everywhere, and therefore I presume you will see this letter, although I am unable to send it through the post. I would have ventured on that method of conveyance, but I was deterred by the failure of a pious gentleman in Germany, who posted a letter to "God, in Heaven," and had it returned as "insufficiently addressed." A similar difficulty occurred to me a few years ago, when I was prosecuted by your zealous admirers for doubting your absolute perfection. I wished to call you as a witness in the case, but I found no one to serve the subpoena.

When you were on earth, more than eighteen centuries ago, you advised people to "search the scriptures." Following your recommendation, I *have* searched them, and I have paid the penalty which is generally exacted from those who are in any respect wiser than their neighbors, or their neighbors' priests. Yet my zeal for knowledge is unabated; and as my study of the Bible has opened up an endless vista of curious problems, which none of the commentators are able to solve, I take the liberty of communicating with you personally, and seeking the assistance of the only being who can help me in my perplexity.

My inquiries will be restricted to the New Testament. When I desire the aid of an infallible guide through the mazes of the Old Testament, I shall apply to your heavenly father. But as his temper was always violent and irascible, and may not have im-

proved with age, I shall naturally postpone my investigations in that direction until my thirst for information can no longer be resisted.

I shall, in the present letter, confine myself to the subject of your nativity. When a week has elapsed, I shall trouble you with a fresh communication, and subsequently perhaps with others, dealing with various aspects of your marvellous career.

Judging from many passages in the Gospels, I should say that, in the opinion of your contemporaries, you were born like other babies. They called you "the carpenter's son," referred to Mary as your natural mother, recited the names of your four brothers, and alluded to your sisters, who completed the family circle. Nor does it appear, from the report of the trial which preceded your execution, that your friends or your enemies breathed a whisper of your miraculous birth. What is still more surprising, two of your four biographers fail to mention the circumstance. Had the gospels of Matthew and Luke been lost in the stream of time, we should never have learnt from Mark and John that your entrance into the world was at all uncommon.

Will you kindly explain their silence? At present it puzzles me. Did they think your being born without a father was too trivial a fact to record? Did they disbelieve the story, and treat it with quiet contempt? Or had they never heard of it, and is their silence due to their ignorance? I cannot conceive of another alternative, and whichever I accept, the mystery remains unsolved. Yet truth is so simple and perspicuous, that when you disclose it on this subject I shall doubtless comprehend it at a glance, and wonder I had not understood it before.

At present, however, I am in a dilemma. If Mark and John disbelieved the story of your miraculous birth, they neutralise the testimony of Matthew and Luke. It is two against two, and the Lord (that is, yourself) only knows whom to believe. If Mark and John never heard of the story, it could not have been widely prevalent, and this militates against its truth, for so tremendous a fact could hardly have been con-

cealed, or confined to the notice of a few. There remains the supposition that they regarded the fact itself as trivial. If they did so, it could only be for one reason. You were born without a father, but other boys have been in the same plight. Illegitimacy has in all ages been too frequent to be wonderful, and it is a topic on which those immediately concerned are discreetly reticent. Yet it is no one's fault if his parents anticipated or neglected the rites of matrimony; and if, as Celsus declared in the second century, there was a bar sinister in your escutcheon, you cannot be blamed for a transaction in which you were involved without being consulted. Considering this, therefore, you may deign to tell me how the matter stands. Still, if the theme is painful, I refrain from pressing you for an answer.

Personally, I have long thought that being born without a father is no miracle. Had you been of divine origin, you or your progenitor might have demonstrated the fact by dispensing with the assistance of a mother. Such a miracle would have been too obvious for disbelief, and the greatest sceptic would have been convinced. But when there is a mother in the case, common sense will always conclude that there is a father somewhere.

Matthew and Luke, I find, differ from each other, as well as from Mark and John. One makes Joseph discover Mary's premature pregnancy, while the other says it was revealed to him in a dream. One relates the Annunciation, while the other omits it. One affirms that your birth was heralded by angels who appeared to some shepherds, while the other declares that it was heralded by a star which the Magi followed from the east, probably from Persia. One records the massacre of the innocents, while the other ignores it. Two such witnesses would damn any case, when they both appear on the same side.

Supposing Matthew is right, will you inform me how the Magi followed a star, the nearest being millions of miles distant? And how did the star "stand over" the place where your mother was literally in the straw? Was it a meteor, expressly provided for the

occasion, or an angel with an electric light or a dark lantern ?

You might also inform me (for it is a point of some interest) whether there is any truth in the legend that your parents were too poor to pay for decent accommodation ; or whether, as Luke intimates, they were obliged to occupy a stable because the hotel was " full up," and no gentleman would go outside to oblige a lady ?

I should also be obliged by your telling me *when* you were born. Luke says it was when Cyrenius was governor of Syria, but that was ten years after the beginning of our era. Some scholars maintain that you were born two, and others four, years before the orthodox date ; while the Jews place the event nearly a century earlier. Nor is the *day* of your birth settled to my satisfaction. Your worshippers say it was the 25th of December, but that is not a season when sheep pasture out at night. Neither your brethren, your apostles, your biographers, nor the Fathers of the early Church, knew that you were born on that day. It was not recognised until the second half of the fourth century, and that very date was the birthday of all the sun-gods of antiquity. I am not apprising you of these facts, for of course you know them. I am simply stating the grounds of my dubiety. Probably you know when you were born ; I do not. You certainly were present ; I was not. I am, therefore, justified in asking you to settle the question for me, and for other inquiring spirits. Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord.

With regard to your godhead, I am dying for news. Your biographers are very unsatisfactory on this point. They evidently wrote for a credulous age, when every fable and legend was swallowed without a question. But this age is more critical, and you will pardon my curiosity, which is shared by millions.

Other children begin their existence when they enter this world, but your career began milleniums before you were born. According to your own statement, you lived before Abraham. What were you doing all this time, and where did you reside ? Were you really the

hero of the Song of Songs which is Solomon's? Was it you and your prospective Church, as the headings of the chapters indicate, who exchanged all those amorous greetings, and indulged in all that voluptuous imagery? Did you liken your mystical bride, still unborn, and hidden in the womb of time, to a lily among thorns? Did you resemble her neck to the tower of David, her breasts to twin roes, her eyes to the fishpools of Heshbon, and her nose to the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus? Did you expatiate still more lusciously on her hidden charms, in the manner of Ovid or Catullus? And did she, the unborn beauty, reciprocate the strain, and chant a poetical inventory of your manly graces? If she was not blinded by passion, but spoke the simple truth, you must have been a regular lady-killer. Perhaps this explains the number of your female devotees in Palestine, including pretty Mary Magdalene, and the rich women who ministered unto you of their substance.

When you write, if you vouchsafe me a reply, you might answer these questions. You might also inform me whether such glowing strains are fit to be read by children, as part of the word of God. The children of this age, at least, are precocious enough. There is no necessity for the Bible to teach the young idea how to shoot. Still, the Canticles are splendid poetry, and if you wrote or inspired them, you are entitled to a place in the hierarchy of genius. How miserably you had degenerated when you took to preaching! The passion was left, but the poetry was gone.

According to Matthew your father and mother were espoused, but before the knot was tied Mary astonished her husband with an unexpected rotundity. Not liking the aspect of affairs, he "was minded to put her away privily." I suppose the poor fellow was going to emigrate, and sing "The girl I left behind me." But one night an angel visited him in a dream, told him it was all correct, warned him not to decamp, and bade him marry the girl. When he awoke he believed it. He had a right to, yet he could hardly expect his friends to show the same credulity. I confess I am

not so satisfied as he was, and I doubt whether the most pious carpenter in Christendom would believe such a story about his own sweetheart on similar evidence. But that was the age of faith, and judging from the tales of old mythology, Joseph was not the first husband who fathered the offspring of a ghost.

Luke's narrative, however, seems inconsistent with Matthew's. According to his story there was no such *contretemps*. Joseph's felicity was not marred by any doubt of his bride's chastity. He appears (I beg pardon for speaking so of your father, but it was long ago) to have been an easy wittol. Perhaps, after all, as a friend of mine once heard a Jesuit preacher say in Italy, he was not deceived, for Joseph was your carnal father, and the miracle of your incarnation, like all other miracles, was operated by natural agency. This, however, is quite incompatible with Matthew's express statement (i., 25) that Joseph was merely a nominal husband until after your birth.

Your actual father, or, if I may so express it, your ultimate father, was not an ordinary ghost, but the Holy Ghost. Like the peace of God, this mystery passes all understanding. How could a ghost, however holy, become the father of a bouncing boy? Catholic divines have discussed this point elaborately, but their speculations are too obscene for repetition. I will not imitate their filth or their blasphemy. Yet I may remark, that when they speak of the holy pigeon or dove, they suggest the Pagan pictures of Leda and Jove. Between a paternal dove and a paternal swan, the difference is only one of ornithology. Correggio's magnificent picture of Jupiter and Io may be an adumbration of the truth, but I leave the mystery for your solution. When you illuminate my natural darkness on this sacrosanct wonder, I shall, with your permission, enlighten my fellows, and close the most bestial chapter of religious controversy.

At present I cannot understand a baby God. Did God mewl and puke in his nurse's arms? Did God kick and squeal in his bath? Did God stare foolishly at his little toes? Did God howl when he was pricked by a nasty pin? Was God suckled by his mother, or

brought up on the bottle? Did God increase the family washing bill? Was God put in a cradle and rocked to sleep? Did God have the measles? Did God have a bad time in teething? Did God learn to walk by the domestic furniture? Did God tumble down on his nose, or on the broader part he once displayed to Moses? Did God learn his A B C? Was God spanked when he misbehaved? Did God play at marbles and make mud-pies? Did God fight other boys in the street, sometimes thrashing, and sometimes being thrashed? Did God run home to his mother with a sanguinary nose? Did God, as he grew up, enter a carpenter's shop to learn the trade? Did God cut his almighty fingers with the chisel, and shave his celestial skin with the jack-plane?

These are pertinent questions. No one but a bigot would call them blasphemous. If those things really happened, I am ready to believe them; if they did not, the world should be disabused. I put my queries in the interest of truth. Your priests may howl, but that is their profession.

Your incarnation is nothing unique. We find its parallels in Oriental avatars, and in the heroes of Pagan mythology. The sons of God have always seen the daughters of men that they were fair, and on reading the reports of the Divorce Court we find they still exhibit the same old taste.

Centuries before you were born the Egyptian goddess Isis was depicted holding the divine child Horus in her arms. Christian paintings of the madonna and bambino are merely copies of ancient iconography. The type varies like the artist's genius, but the subject is the same. Nay, the whole story of the Annunciation related by Luke, was chiselled on the walls of the sanctuary in the Temple of Luxor before the Jewish scriptures were written, before Rome arose on her seven hills, before Athens "gleamed on its crest of columns," a beacon of civilisation to a barbarous world. Your holy nativity seems a legend borrowed from "the motherland of superstitions." I can come to no other conclusion, and if I am to be damned for my unbelief I protest against the injustice of my fate.

If you were only a man, I have nothing to fear ; if you are a god, you should satisfy my scruples before censuring my scepticism. Belief does not depend on will, but on evidence. A word from you would make the dark path of faith luminous. If you leave it in obscurity you cannot wonder if I stray. Surely the being who said Let there be light, and there was light, could easily dispel my darkness ; nor can I believe he will, at the end of my journey, flash on me the illumination of hell.

THE CRUCIFIXION.

DEAR SIR, DEAR GHOST, OR DEAR GOD,—

Last week I addressed you on the subject of your Incarnation. You have not yet replied, but I do not despair of an answer, for your movements were always slow. Eighteen centuries ago you began to redeem the world, and you have made little progress yet. If you are so long fulfilling your solemn promises, I need not wonder at your tardiness in answering my letter. Besides, I am in no particular hurry. My questions will keep, and I shall quietly await your convenience. Some day you may have a spare hour to attend to my communication. But I beg you will not send a reply by lightning, to make up for lost time, as my life is not heavily insured, and my wife would not like the bother of an inquest. You need not even incur the expense of a long telegram. The penny post will do. Meanwhile I venture to address you again on the subject of your Crucifixion. You can answer both letters at once.

Your four biographers were badly chosen. Their narratives are so discrepant, that no sensible man can credit them without corroborating evidence from other

sources. That, however, is not forthcoming. Your birth, your life, and your death, were all attended by prodigies, yet none of them is mentioned by a single profane writer, and they were disbelieved by the very people among whom they occurred. Will you explain this scepticism, and this conspiracy of silence ?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke bring you before Caiaphas for examination, while John places the trial in the house of Annas. Their account of the proceedings is simply grotesque. From beginning to end it is contrary to Jewish law and custom. The Sanhedrim was not a collection of roughs, but the great council of the State, subject only to the ultimate authority of the Roman governor ; and the idea that "the chief priests, and all the council," not only violated every rule of procedure, but actually surrounded a prisoner in court, and struck and spat upon him, is too utterly ridiculous for belief. Why are your biographers so inaccurate ? Like yourself, I was accused of blasphemy ; I was tried, sentenced, and imprisoned, by your disciples. But I did not leave the report of my trial to the hazard of accident. I engaged a competent shorthand-writer, whose notes were printed ; and on my release from the clutches of your bigoted friends, I published a full account of my imprisonment. What a pity you failed to take similar precautions ! Still, the mischief is not irreparable, and it is never too late to mend. You can acquaint me with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and I will circulate the information. Or you can authorise Convocation to appoint a new Revision Committee, and preside in person over their sessions. This would enable them to dispense with the assistance of the Holy Ghost, who invariably confuses and misleads his confidants. I say *his*, not in a dogmatic spirit, but because I am obliged to use a pronoun. I have no wish to decide whether the Holy Ghost is masculine, feminine, or neuter ; he, she, or it. Until I am instructed on this point, I hold my judgment in suspense. Yet I am desirous to know the truth, and I shall be obliged if you will satisfy my curiosity.

Your biographers all agree that you were crucified,

but doubts are suggested by other portions of the New Testament. Paul, whom you converted by a miracle or a sunstroke, preached Christ and him crucified. Yet, in his epistle to the Galatians, he says that you became a curse for us, "for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." Peter (you will remember him—cock-crowing, S'elp me God, Peter) in the Acts of the Apostles and in his first Epistle, repeatedly says that you were hanged on a tree. I am therefore unable to decide whether you were crucified or hung, but in either case you are to be pitied. Julius Cæsar, and other brave men, have agreed that a sudden death is the best. But the death of a malefactor in ancient times was both painful and ignominious. I really wish you had been allowed to die a natural death on a good feather-bed, and that the rich women, who subscribed largely to your expenses while you were on circuit, had given you a decent funeral.

One of the early Christian sects, the Basilidians, denied that you were executed at all. According to their theory, Simon the Cyrenean was crucified in your stead. You disappeared when he shouldered the Cross, and poor Simon, being miraculously made to resemble you, became a vicarious sacrifice. The idea is amusing, but I reject it. You were not remarkable for courage, but I scarcely believe you played the poor devil such a shabby trick. Another Christian fancy was that Judas Iscariot was obliged to act as your proxy. That at least implies a kind of poetical justice, and it might be called "Judas for Jesus, or the biter bit."

By the way, you might inform me what became of Judas. Did he bring back the price of your betrayal, and did the priests buy a field with it, as Matthew asserts; or did he keep the money, and purchase the field himself, as is distinctly stated in the Acts of the Apostles? Did he hang himself, according to the first authority; or did he fall down, and rupture his bowels, according to the second? And if both accounts are true, will you tell me whether the rupture preceded the hanging, or the hanging the rupture? I should also like it explained why Papias, in the second century, having (as it is alleged) the Gospel of Matthew before

him, stated that Judas "walked about in this world a great example of impiety," grew terribly corpulent, and was killed by being crushed between a chariot and a wall.

Your biographers tell us that you were crucified on a Friday, and all of them, with the exception of John, describe it as the first day of the Passover. They must, however, have been mistaken; for no trials or executions took place among the Jews on any feast day; and, according to the Jewish calendar, the first day of the Passover never was, and never can be, on a Friday.

It is a singular thing that the anniversary of your Crucifixion varies every year. You must have died, if you ever lived, on a particular day, which should be regularly celebrated. But Good Friday, as your devotees call it, is determined by the phases of the moon, a planet which is sacred to lunatics. Being decided by astronomical signs, the anniversary is probably borrowed from ancient sun-worship. Why do you not set our minds at rest on this point? It would cost you little trouble, and give us much satisfaction.

The hour of your Crucifixion is equally uncertain. Two of your biographers say that you expired at three in the afternoon. According to Mark, you were crucified at nine; according to Luke, you were tried that morning; and according to John, the court was still sitting at mid-day. Some discrepancies may be reconciled, but you could not have been tried at twelve and executed at nine. Here is another point on which you might enlighten us.

While you were on the cross, were you wounded in the side by a Roman spear? Matthew, Mark, and Luke, omit the circumstance. John is the only writer who mentions it, and he seems to have had a special reason for doing so. After your Resurrection, he introduces Thomas Didymus, who was entirely unknown to the Synoptics; and there are sceptics who urge that he devised the spear-thrust simply that Doubting Tommy might have a ready-made hole when he probed your side. This appears to me irreverent, if not blasphemous, and I merely mention it that the truth may

be established, and a subject of jest taken from these impious wittings.

John alleges that the spear drew blood and water. No blood would flow if you were dead, and if you were living no water, unless you suffered from the dropsy. May I suggest that this point deserves your attention?

With respect to the two thieves who were crucified with you, John barely alludes to them, and Matthew and Mark say they both mocked you. Luke, however, declares that one of them rebuked the other, and gained from you a ticket for heaven. Kindly tell me which I am to believe.

Pilate set an inscription on your cross in three different languages, which was perhaps a subtle compliment to the Trinity. Your biographers read it clearly, and wrote it in four different ways. Matthew says it was, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews"; Mark, "The King of the Jews"; Luke, "This is the King of the Jews"; and John, "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." Even on a point like this, where accuracy might be expected, they are in hopeless disagreement. Will you explain the discrepancy? Which evangelist is right, or are they all wrong?

Three hundred years after your Crucifixion the cross on which you suffered was found by St. Helena, the mother of Constantine. The inscription upon it was still fresh, but it was never copied. Had the clergy shown less discretion, or more solicitude, the world would have known the truth. As it is, we are still puzzled by the variance of your biographers, and unless you assist us we shall be puzzled till the day of judgment, when the truth will be too late.

Multitudes of sermons have been preached on the enigmatical words "It is finished," which, according to John, were the last you uttered. According to Luke, however, your last words were, "Father, unto thy hands I commend my spirit," while Matthew and Mark say that you uttered a loud cry and gave up the ghost. A centurion standing by exclaimed, "Truly this man was the son of God." Truly he was easily convinced. I hope I am not expected to show the

same credulity ; yet if you repeat the same cry in my hearing it may produce the same effect.

Your biographers inform us that the sun was eclipsed for three hours at your Crucifixion. Will you kindly explain why no Jewish or Pagan annalist ever heard of this supernatural darkness? Matthew informs us, in addition, that many dead saints rose from their graves, walked into Jerusalem, and publicly exhibited themselves. How is it that this unparalleled marvel escaped the notice of every profane writer? Did it really occur? And if so, did those resurrected saints return to their graves, or are they still an army of Wandering Jews? I am emboldened to ask these questions, because three of your biographers do not record the grave-splitting earthquake. I hope my curiosity is not blasphemous. I am sure it is natural. If the old telephone between heaven and earth is destroyed, kindly send a special messenger, and I will pay his expenses. But please warn him not to leave his message with the servant. If I am out when he calls, he can make an appointment for the next day, and I will pay his hotel bill. If he calls at my office, warn him against the printer's devil.

You might also tell me whether you cried out on the cross "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" If you did utter that ejaculation, were you calling to yourself or to another? Was it the cry of a deity playing a part, or the cry of a deluded enthusiast in the hour of despair? Was it a tragedy or a farce?

Pardon me also for inquiring why you allowed yourself to be crucified at all. It is obvious that Pilate tried to save you. Had you denied the charge of rebellion, he would have acquitted and protected you. But you rejected his assistance; you courted your doom; and your death was less a martyrdom than a suicide. What was the reason of this strange conduct? Were you stupefied with fear? Were you afraid to face the mob again, after their experience of your divinity? Or were you disillusioned, and had life no further charm?

Such questions proceed on the supposition that you were a man. If you were a god, your death is still

more amazing. You gained nothing by it, and we have profited as little. It may be possible, as the priests of your creed tell us, that your sufferings on the cross will mysteriously confer some benefit upon us in another world. But until you distinctly inform me so yourself I shall venture to doubt it. It appears to me that your omnipotence, and certainly your omniscience, would have been more judiciously displayed, had you exercised the creative faculty with which you brought the universe into existence from nothing. Surely the being who produced all things by the fiat of his almighty will, could as easily have regenerated the human race, without designing a monstrous drama in which one man betrayed his friend with a kiss and thousands of others assisted or connived at a judicial murder.

Judging from the history of the world since Christianity was established, I should say that your crucifixion has been more of a curse than a blessing. Instead of your sufferings moving the heart to pity, they have too often moved it to hatred and cruelty. The Crusaders captured Jerusalem on Good Friday, and entered the doomed city at the very hour of your Passion. They immediately proceeded to offer up a bloody sacrifice to their deity. Seventy thousand "infidels" were slaughtered, the Jews were burnt in their synagogue, and in the Mosque of Omar the blood was knee-deep and dashed up to the horses' bridles. Your holy champions, who were all decorated with a cross, interrupted their orgie of blood to pay their devotions. After piously kneeling on the various spots they supposed to have been hallowed by your presence, they resumed the massacre of your enemies, beginning with three hundred prisoners whose safety had been solemnly assured. The Saracens were flung from the tops of houses and towers; women with children at their breasts, girls and boys, were indiscriminately slaughtered. It was a hell of rapine, murder, and lust. No heart, among the warriors of the cross, melted with compassion. Where your blood was shed to save, they sacrificed myriads of victims; where you are said to have forgiven your enemies, they exhibited the cruelty of fiends. The carnage lasted a week, and when the

victors were tired of slaying, they sold the survivors as slaves.

Such were the deeds of the "Soldiers of Christ," who fought under the symbol of your Crucifixion. How different was the conduct of the Saracens when they recaptured Jerusalem a century later! Not a superfluous drop of blood was shed, and the noble Saladin softened the rigors of the capitulation to thousands, whose only claim on his generosity was that they were human. He ransomed a multitude of captives from his private purse, restored the mothers to their children, and the husbands to their wives. A Moham-medan infidel, he regarded your divinity as a superstition, but his humanity compels our admiration and love, and stands out in bold relief against the uniform savagery of your devotees.

Your Crucifixion had done no good for the Crusaders. What has it done for mankind? Worshipping "dead limbs of gibbeted gods," the world grew fouler; its mind was debased by associating images of carnage with its loftiest ideals; and history attests that the Cross never gleamed so brightly as when it rose above the fires of the stake, or shone over seas of blood. Every red drop that fell from your hands and feet and brows, turned into deadly poison, with which your priests have infected humanity. Heart and mind have been alike degraded, cruelty and superstition being twin curses; and at this day, the Christians who most closely resemble your first disciples, assume the watchword and trade-mark of "Blood and Fire," while their religious antics are worthy of the fetishists of Africa. Were you a god, and did you foresee this? I shrink from the terrible conclusion. It is too appalling. It makes the universe an infinite hell. Until you expressly tell me otherwise, and assure me that the only philosophy is despair, I shall prefer to think that the Jesus who perished on a Roman cross was a Jewish enthusiast, weak like most men, and mortal like all.

THE RESURRECTION.

DEAR SIR, DEAR GHOST, OR DEAR GOD,—

You have not yet vouchsafed an answer to my previous letters. I am a little disappointed, but I shall continue my epistles. When you have the leisure and inclination you will doubtless respond. Perhaps your heavenly messengers are fully occupied at present, and I must wait till one of them is disengaged. If the rest of the universe is as disordered as this planet, with its volcanoes, earthquakes, wars, diseases, starvation, misery, and political revolutions, I fancy they will not lack employment for a considerable time. Yet the matters on which I am addressing you are of vast importance, and I trust you will give me your earliest convenient attention.

This letter will deal with your Resurrection. According to the clergy, this event is the corner stone of Christianity. It should, therefore, be indisputable. The evidence for it should be clear, positive, and overwhelming. I am sorry to say it is not. Faith "believeth all things," as Paul says, and those who possess that virtue can dispense with proof. But my stock of faith is limited. You, or your father, or the Holy Ghost, gave me a sceptical turn of mind, and if you expect me to believe, you should proportion the evidence to my incredulity.

Some have doubted whether you really died on the cross. Pilate marvelled that you expired so soon, and when your body was taken down, your legs were not broken, like those of the two thieves. Considering this, some have held that your Resurrection and Ascension were arranged between yourself and your disciples, that you were never buried as the Gospels relate, because you were not dead, and that you retired to an Essenean monastery, where you spent the rest of your days in quiet obscurity. Such a notion seems far-fetched, however; and I take it for granted that you

“gave up the ghost,” as your biographers assert. Not that I quite understand *what* ghost you resigned. That is a point on which I crave a little information.

According to your biographers you were buried at the expense of your friend, Mr. Joseph of Arimathæa. He appears to have done the thing handsomely, and your obsequies were a little above your station in life. He laid your body in a new tomb, rolled a big stone against the entrance, and went home to supper. No doubt he wished you an eternal farewell. I cannot conceive that he expected to see you again, or he would have left you a free exit when you took it into your head to walk out.

In that sepulchre you performed a marvellous feat. You spent three days there between late on Friday night and early on Sunday morning. Many who are engaged on day work would like to know how you did it. Perhaps you reckoned according to the rules of your father's shop—I refer to Joseph, and not to the Holy Ghost. Saturday was one day, and the nights counted as two more.

The Apostles' Creed states that you—I suppose it means your soul—descended into hell during your burial; and it was then, I presume, that you “preached unto the spirits in prison.” Indeed, one of the apocryphal gospels, in use by some of your early followers, gives a lively account of how you harried the realm of Old Harry, emptying hell wholesale, and robbing the poor Devil of his illustrious subjects, from Adam to John the Baptist. If this story be true, how do you explain your promise to the penitent thief—“To day shalt thou be with me in Paradise”? Did you really say “To day shalt thou be with me in hell”? Or did you forget your intended trip to Gehenna, and had the poor thief to linger outside the gate of heaven until you arrived to pass him in?

With respect to the Jerusalem big-wigs who compassed your death, and proved that a single company of Roman soldiers were more than a match for a legion of angels, one of your biographers tells an astounding story. They informed Pilate that you had

promised to rise again after three days, and requested him to take precautions against your disciples' playing the part of body-snatchers. Pilate gave them a watch of soldiers. But there was an earthquake on the Saturday night, and an angel flew down from heaven and rolled away the stone, which he sat on, frightening your keepers into fits. In the confusion you seem to have walked off and borrowed a suit of clothes. Meanwhile the soldiers went and told the chief priests and elders what had happened. Those gentry gave them "large money," told them to say that your disciples stole the body while they slept, and promised to make it all right with Pilate.

Now this is a wonderful story, and I hope I am not impious in wishing it explained. How did the Jerusalem big-wigs know that you had prophesied your Resurrection when your disciples, as John tells us (xx., 9), were ignorant of it themselves? How could their deceiving the people be any protection against *you*? Why did they continue to treat you as "a deceiver" after you had convinced them to the contrary? Had they really the superhuman courage, or the asinine stupidity, to oppose and vilify one who had proved himself the lord of life and death? Did a company of Roman soldiers actually take a bribe to confess that they had slept at their posts, and had thus committed an offence punishable with death? And how came they to trust for their safety to the Sanhedrim, when that body was notoriously at loggerheads with the Governor?

Until you enlighten me on these points I shall decline to believe the story; and when Matthew says that "this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day," I fancy I see an indication that the narrative was concocted long after your lamented decease.

Will you also kindly inform me which of your friends first visited your tomb on the morning of your Resurrection? Matthew brings two women, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." Mark brings these two with a third called Salome. Luke ignores Salome, and substitutes Joanna. John brings Mary

Magdalene alone. In presence of these contradictions I know not what to believe. I am, indeed, inclined to think that Mary Magdalene, your hysterical adorer, dreamed the whole thing and imposed it on your disciples.

May I also ask to whom you first appeared? Matthew says you appeared to the ladies; Mark and John to Mary Magdalene; Luke to two gentlemen on the road to Emmaus. Not being endowed with miraculous powers, I cannot believe them all. Will you inform me which speaks the truth? You might also set my mind at rest as to your subsequent interviews with your friends, for my ingenuity is not capable of reconciling the statements of your biographers. Matthew says you appeared once, Luke twice, Mark thrice, and John four times. Were you, let me ask, a spectre or a resuscitated corpse? You gave doubting Thomas palpable proof of your substantial character, but on the other hand you crept through the keyhole of a closed door and vanished like a hedge-row ghost. I am still further puzzled by the statement that you ate a fish dinner before you travelled to heaven. These things are too hard for me, and I crave your assistance.

Your friend Paul complicates the matter still more, for he says that you appeared unto five hundred of the brethren at once, some of whom were alive when he wrote. Yet, according to the Acts of the Apostles, the total number of the brethren after your Ascension was only a hundred and twenty. Were Paul's wits, or at least his arithmetic, disordered by that sunstroke; or did you return to earth after your Ascension, when the brethren had multiplied, and give another farewell performance, positively for the last time?

I do not wish to bore you, but I venture to ask you another question. Why did you appear only to your disciples? How was it that no outsider ever caught sight of you? Your Resurrection, according to Paul, is the central fact of Christianity, the pledge of our immortality, and the promise of our redemption. Why did you not substantiate it beyond dispute? You might have challenged the whole city of Jerusalem to the proof. You might have publicly

appeared to your enemies as well as your friends, and Pilate might have forwarded a full account of the miracle to Rome, where it would have been preserved in the imperial archives. The whole world would then have been convinced. But, instead of this, you fifted about mysteriously, concealing a fact, which it was everyone's interest to know, from all but a favored few, who needed very little convincing. The Jews, among whom your Resurrection occurred, denied it, and they deny it to this day. Yet you could have easily convinced them, and your neglecting to do so has cost that unhappy people ages of misery and rivers of blood. When the great Czar Nicholas, one Easter morning, was walking round his palace, he passed a sentinel who happened to be a Jew. The lord of all the Russias gave the morning's salutation "Christ is risen." But the Jewish sentinel grounded his musket and said "Christ is *not* risen." The two men gazed at each other—czar and sentinel. They typified the conflict of centuries. "Christ is risen" say millions of aliens to the land of your birth. "Christ is *not* risen," say your countrymen. They have asserted it through ages of awful persecution. They have affirmed it through incredible sufferings and tortures. They have maintained it amidst the ruin of their homes, the massacre of their families, the violation of their wives and daughters, and the flames of a myriad stakes. Are they or their persecutors in the right? If you have the power to tell us, exercise it. Speak and set the weary world at rest.

THE ASCENSION.

Still no answer! You were always talking on earth, but now you have returned to heaven you are silent as the grave. Yet I will not despair. You may reply

some day. Meanwhile I prosecute my inquiries. This letter will deal with your Ascension.

Matthew and Mark say that an angel at your sepulchre told your disciples to go into Galilee, where you would meet them. Luke knows nothing of this message ; he keeps them in Jerusalem, and says you told them to remain there. John also omits the message, although he takes them to Galilee. Yet the Acts of the Apostles, like Luke, distinctly states that you appeared to your disciples, and personally "commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem." Pray do something to improve this defective harmony. I am not like Tertullian, who believed a thing because it was impossible, and considered its credibility enhanced by its absurdity. Not until a miracle is operated in my system can I rise to this altitude.

The Gospels and the Acts vary beyond reconciliation as to the time, the place, and the circumstances of your Ascension. I am obliged to put them all aside as worthless until you inform me which I may rely on.

Of your four biographers, two were admittedly not present at your Ascension. Mark and Luke were not among the twelve apostles. They do not even appear to have been among your disciples. Tradition marks them as followers of Peter and Paul. They were therefore not eye-witnesses of your celestial flight. They merely repeated hearsay, and their testimony is not worth a rush. Matthew and John, however, are said to have been present. Yet they do not mention your trips to heaven. Two writers who were *not* there tell us all about the event, while two writers who *were* there are absolutely silent !

Will you explain this startling difficulty ? By the standard of carnal reason, it is a powerful, nay an invincible objection to the reality of your Ascension. Many scholars, and those the best, within and without the Church, consider the second half of the last chapter of Mark as spurious. It does not appear in the earliest manuscripts. Let it be discarded, and Luke becomes the only authority for your Ascension. Yet he did not witness it, and he is reputed to have been a disciple of Paul, who did not witness it

either. Second or third hand rumor is poor evidence of a miracle. At the very best, therefore, without questioning (as I well might) that the third Gospel was written by Luke in the first century, I have reduced the authenticity of your Ascension to a vanishing point. If it *did* occur, another miracle is necessary to substantiate it, owing to the deficiencies of your biographers. Why not repeat the performance? You could do it publicly from an elevated position, commanding a wide prospect, so that myriads might see it. I would gladly act as your agent, and the gate money would compensate me for my losses and sufferings in probing these matters to the bottom.

Luke says that you ascended from Bethany, a short distance from Jerusalem, on the very day of your resurrection, or at the latest the next morning. Mark is not precise as to the time, but he positively asserts that you ascended from Galilee, which is at least sixty miles from Jerusalem. Only God can be in two places at the same time. If you were the deity you could accomplish the feat, and in that case you might have ascended from Bethany, Galilee, and fifty other places at once. But I fail to see how your disciples could have witnessed your Ascension at more than one point.

There is a very different story in the Acts of the Apostles. According to the first chapter you appeared to the eleven apostles (Judas having hung himself, burst his bowels, or ratted) several times during forty days. Finally, at Mount Olivet, in the midst of an interesting little discourse, you were "taken up," and "a cloud received" you "out of their sight." That is, you were lost in a cloud, as they were, and all who have since believed them.

I ask you whether, in common honesty, I can be expected to believe in your Ascension on such contradictory authorities? If the event really occurred, please tell me when and where. Was it on the day of your Resurrection, or the next day, or forty days after? Was it at Jerusalem, at Bethany, at Mount Olivet, or somewhere in Galilee? I am willing to believe, but I must have the event fixed in time and space. Surely you will accede to this modest condition.

According to the fourth Article of the Church of England, which is fairly based on Scripture, you ascended bodily, "with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of Man's nature." Yet Paul says that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven." Mark asserts that you went straight up to heaven, and "sat on the right hand of God." Subsequently you changed your position. When the heavens obligingly opened to give Stephen a view of "the glory of God," he saw you *standing* on the father's right hand. But from the Article just referred to it appears that you have taken to *sitting* again. Perhaps you vary your postures, like human beings when they are tired. I wish you could vary them still further, for the alternation of sitting and standing must be very monotonous, not to say fatiguing. What a pity your heavenly upholstery does not include the luxurious couches of the paradise of Mohammed.

If you actually sit or stand at the "right hand of God," you and he must be local and finite; nay, he must be organised like yourself. How does this accord with his infinitude? Heaven must also be local. Will you inform me where it is, or at least in what direction? How long did it take you to get there? How did you breathe in the interstellar ether? Did you digest the broiled fish and honeycomb on the way, or was the process completed in heaven? Have you taken any food since, and if not, how is your body supported? Kindly answer these interesting questions when you reply.

Let me also enquire *how* you travelled to heaven? Did you go by balloon? Did you sprout wings and fly? Were you carried by angels? Did you climb the ladder which Jacob saw in his dream? Or were you conveyed by the fiery horses and chariot that took Elijah to glory?

Before your Ascension, according to John, you gave your apostles the Holy Ghost; not the whole of that being, of course, but as much as they could entertain. According to the Acts of the Apostles, however, they were "filled with the Holy Ghost" *after* your Ascension. Is not this a contradiction? Being already

frighted, how could they take in a fresh cargo of the Holy Ghost?

Did you also, before your Ascension, utter those extraordinary words in the last chapter of Mark? Did you say that all who believed the Gospel should cast out devils, speak with new tongues, play with serpents, and drink poison with impunity? How is it that none of your modern devotees can perform these feats? I heard of one lunatic at large who boasted such signs of faith. He informed me of his miraculous capacities by letter, and wanted me to pay him a visit. Shrinking from such a dangerous enterprise, I requested him to call at my office, where a few tests were provided, but he never made his appearance. Can you produce a single Christian who manifests any of the signs which, according to your own declaration, should "follow them that believe"? Would the Archbishop of Canterbury trust himself in the serpent-house of the Zoological Gardens, with the door locked and all the cases open? Would Mr. Spurgeon swallow a dose of arsenic, prussic acid, or strychnine, if a sceptic mixed the draught? Only in one respect has your prediction been fulfilled. Some of your disciples in the Salvation Army, and in other revival bodies, do speak with strange tongues, which are probably as intelligible to themselves as they are to their neighbors. I infer, therefore, that these are the only professing Christians with a modicum of true belief.

According to Matthew (xxviii., 17), when you appeared to your apostles on a mountain in Galilee, some believed, but "some doubted." If they were sceptical with the evidence before them, my scepticism cannot be heinous when I have nothing to trust to but loose tradition and popular rumor. Your second coming was foretold by yourself before your death, and by two angels after your Ascension; and the event was to take place within the lifetime of many persons of that generation. Such is the clear meaning of the text, and it was so understood by the primitive Church. "The coming of the Lord draweth nigh," exclaimed James, while Paul taught that some who read his words would be "alive and remain unto the coming of the

Lord," when they would be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Generation has followed generation, yet you have not come. You are eighteen centuries behind date. If the error was yours, what reliance can be placed on the rest of your words? If it was your biographers', how can we trust them with respect to other incidents in your career? Personally, I can no more believe in your Ascension than I can believe that Mohammed ascended to the third heaven on the horse Borak, with a peacock's tail and a woman's face. Both stories appear fabulous. Yet I am open to conviction, and if you furnish me with the requisite evidence I am ready to yield my assent. Were I to yield it for any other reason, it would be credulity or slavishness on my part, and imposture or tyranny on yours. I will not think you so dishonorable; I cannot imagine myself so base.

THE MIRACLES.

You still maintain an obstinate silence. Yet I recollect that you were always loth to answer embarrassing questions. When on earth you evaded them, and now you are in heaven you disregard them. Perhaps I ought to relinquish my task, but as this is the last letter I contemplate (at least for the present), I may as well give it the same chance as the rest.

I shall address you in this letter on the subject of your Miracles. They give your biography the air of an Oriental romance, but do they add to the truth or utility of your doctrine? Propositions that commend themselves to our reason, and admonitions that find an echo in our hearts, do not require the assistance of miracles. There is always a presumption that statements and maxims which need such support are false, because they are unable to stand upon their own merits. Nor do miracles prove anything except the

power of the worker. You yourself admitted that the Devil could work them as well as the Deity. A being who achieves what transcends my power may excite my wonder, but he does not necessarily evoke my respect. That sentiment can only be elicited by his magnanimity and his benevolence. Still less does his *ipse dixit* enable me to dispense with proof. He may be powerful, but not omnipotent ; wise, but not omniscient. His knowledge in one direction may be balanced by ignorance in another ; and even if omniscient, he may be malignant, and bent on deceiving me to my ruin.

Besides, the age when you lived on earth abounded in miracles. They had no power to startle or surprise. You were "carrying coals to Newcastle," and there was no market for your wonders. They absolutely failed to impress the very people among whom they occurred. Even in your private circle, they produced such profound conviction, that your brethren held aloof, and when you were arrested your disciples forsook you and fled.

It is a curious fact that all your chief miracles are variations on well-known miracles of the Old Testament. Jehovah rebuked the Red Sea, and you rebuked the waves of Gennesareth. The Jews crossed the river Jordan dryshod, and you walked upon the lake of Tiberias. Moses fed the people in the wilderness with miraculous food, and you fed a multitude in the desert by the same agency. Moses struck water out of a rock, and you turned water into wine. Elisha made an iron axe swim, and you kept Peter from sinking. The same prophet cured leprosy, and so did you. Elijah raised from death a widow's son at Zarephath, and you raised from death a widow's son at Nain. Other instances might be given, but these will suffice. Your Miracles were not even original, and that at least should be expected when God enters the lists in person.

Your Miracles are said to be beautiful and edifying. Will you point out in what respect the cursing of the barren fig-tree merits the description? You were hungry, but it was not the season for figs, and to expect fruit was an absurdity. Yet you cursed the tree for its

regular habits, and it withered at your frown. Was not the action childish and wilful? Was it worthy of a man, much less of a God? Was it not a wanton destruction of good property? Might not the food it produced have saved the life of a starving wretch, who perished because you lost your temper?

You fed thousands of people with five loaves and two fishes. How was it done? Was the miracle achieved by their enthusiasm or your divinity? Was it anything more than a big imitation of Elisha's feat with the widow's cruse of oil? Did you create the extra bread and fish out of nothing, or did you instantaneously grow the corn, grind, leaven and bake it, and develop the ova into fresh fish, and artificially cook it? Why do you not repeat such a happy performance? Blight and famine occasion the miserable death of millions of the human race in every decade, not to mention those who die every year of slow starvation; yet you, who could supply their necessities without impoverishing yourself, never lift a finger to save them.

When you were tempted in the wilderness by Old Nick you refused to turn stones into scones. Did you drink anything? Were you able to anticipate Signor Succi's fluid? How did you feel during the forty days' fast? Were you very fat before or very thin after? And how is it you fasted exactly the same time as Moses? You might surely have managed another day or two, for Moses was an old man, and you were in the prime of life. What a pity you did not eclipse all record! You have not even beaten Dr. Tanner, and he *was* watched, which is more than can be said of you.

While you were fasting you were also feasting, for on the third day of the exhibition you were at a wedding party in Cana. This follows from the statements of the first and the fourth of your biographers. I cannot reconcile them, but I must believe them both. If I disbelieve Matthew I am lost; if I disbelieve John I am damned. Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.

This wedding party ran short of wine. It was time to cease drinking, for the guests had evidently paid

their due devotions to Bacchus. But, perhaps reflecting that it was a pity to spoil the spree for want of liquor, you obligingly turned more than a hundred and thirty-five gallons of water into wine, which was probably enough to make them all blind drunk. How Christians can be teetotallers after this passes my comprehension. But that is their business. What I am curious about is, how the miracle was done. Water contains oxygen and hydrogen in definite proportions, and nothing else. Wine contains these elements, and also carbon and other ingredients, being in fact a complex mixture. How did you supplement the oxygen and hydrogen? Were the other constituents of wine created on the spot? And is it possible to make wine by a swift chemical process?

You cast devils out of people who, if science be true, never possessed them. Miss Mary Magdalene was cured of seven. What a nice young lady for a tea party, especially if the seven came on at once! You cast a "legion" of devils out of one man, according to Mark and Luke, or two men according to Matthew. The demons entered the bodies of a herd of swine, and the animals belted into the sea. It was a pretty miracle, but you forgot to pay for the pigs. Naturally, therefore, the inhabitants sent a large deputation, desiring you to move on, for it was obvious that if you remained you would extinguish the pork trade. If you ever think of repeating this miracle, pray do not attempt it in Ireland. When you reply, kindly say if the devils perished with the pigs.

Some of your miracles of healing may have been due to excitement in the patients. Such tricks hath strong imagination, that it can make healthy people suddenly sick and sick people momentarily well. Paralysed persons have been known to rise from their beds on an alarm of fire. But leprosy is not a nervous disorder. It results from the vitiation of all the fluids of the body, and cannot be affected by imagination. Your leprous patients were not even washed, like Captain Naaman, who, by Elisha's order, dipped seven times in the Jordan. I cannot conceive how you cured them. Yet you may have had hereditary skill in the treat-

ment of this disease, for your father Jehovah had a great deal of practice in that line among the Jews.

Your method of curing blindness was very singular. Clay plaster and spittle ointment were the chief articles in your pharmacopœia. I do not understand what effect these compounds could have on disordered optics, nor am I aware that any of the blind men you restored to sight were examined, before and after the miracle, by competent physicians. In any case, the miracle was personal; it began and ended with the individual who was cured; it threw no light on the general subject of blindness; nor could it afford any guidance to a single doctor, or any help to his patients. Nay, your miracle is eclipsed every day in our hospitals, where skilful operations are performed for cataract, and total blindness is often cured without the disgusting manœuvre of spitting in the patients' eyes.

When you cured that infirm Hebrew at the miraculous pool of Bethesda (which, by the way, was quite unknown to Josephus and the Rabbis, and to all your biographers except John), you said to him "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee." Do you really mean that disease is the result of personal sin? How, then, do you account for inherited disease? Did its victims sin in their mothers' wombs? Why also is there so little disease in prisons, where there is more sin to the square yard than anywhere else in the world?

Besides healing diseases, you raised people from the dead. I have already mentioned the widow's son. Another case was that of the ruler's daughter. Mark says that you strictly enjoined the spectators to tell no man, while Matthew says it was famed abroad. Perhaps the injunction of secrecy was the best advertisement. The raising of Lazarus is only recorded by John. It was the most startling and dramatic of your Miracles, and according to John, it led to your Crucifixion. Yet it never reached the fairly-long ears of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. That is a greater miracle than the miracle itself.

What became of Lazarus after his resuscitation? Did he die again? Did he relate his experiences during the three days his body was entombed? Why

was he not produced at your trial? And why, if the miracle was notorious, did the priests and scribes conspire against one who was stronger than Death? Why also are the persons who are raised from the dead insignificant before, and unheard of after? The answer is obvious. Because if Homer and Shakespeare, Cæsar and Cromwell, rose from the dead, they would be expected to write and act according to their genius and character.

You produced money from a fish's mouth, but more astonishing tricks are performed by modern conjurors. Yet your walking on the water was a unique achievement. It was imitated by Peter, but he needed your assistance. Does faith, then, alter the specific gravity of bodies? What Christian has faith enough to demonstrate it from the top of a fifty-foot ladder?

Here I terminate my inquiries. I have said all I wish to for the present. At some future time I may address you another series of letters on your teachings and influence. Meanwhile let me conclude by asking why you took so much trouble to such little purpose. You were born of a virgin, your career was full of miracles, you allowed yourself to be crucified with thieves, you rose from your tomb, and you ascended to heaven. You did all this to redeem the world. Eighteen centuries have elapsed, yet the world is not redeemed. Poverty and vice, misery and disease, imposture and superstition, tyranny and slavery, still afflict the earth. Churches are built for your worship, while poor men die in garrets and hovels; and your priests live in honor and luxury, while the genius which is to enlighten and purify the world too often languishes under penury and reproach. Civilisation advances slowly from the impulsion of science and humanity; and while it moves forward, where are the watchdogs of religion? Biting in front or barking behind, filling the earth with persecution and slander, and showing their love of God by their hatred of Man. Can any good come out of Nazareth? was asked long ago. With all sincerity I repeat the question and await the answer.
