

B. G. Ralph-Brown. Y. P.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

WHO WAS

THE

FATHER OF JESUS?

Enquire Within

BY

G. W. FOOTE

LONDON:

R. FORDER, 28 STONECUTTER STREET, E.C.

1895

Price Twopence

LONDON :
PRINTED BY G. W. FOOTE,
AT 28 STONECUTTER STREET, E.C.

WHO WAS THE FATHER OF JESUS?

"WHO was the father of Jesus?" asked a teacher in a London Board school, and a boy replied "Joseph." The lad's answer was heard by a friend of the Rev. J. Coxhead, one of the clerical members of the Board, and was conveyed to the reverend gentleman, who lost no time in bringing it to the attention of his colleagues. Mr. Coxhead considered it awful that such an answer should be given to such a question. Joseph the father of Jesus! Angels, and ministers of grace, defend us! It was flat blasphemy. The doctrine of the Incarnation was in deadly peril if children were to be taught in this fashion.

Mr. Coxhead imparted his alarm to the majority of his colleagues, who carried a resolution that "Christian" should qualify the "religion" taught in the Board schools, and issued a circular to the teachers enjoining them to instruct the children in the doctrine of the Trinity, with special emphasis on the deity of Jesus Christ.

The teachers revolted against this circular, Nonconformists sent deputations to the Board to protest against the priestly machinations of the Church party, and a fierce controversy was waged in the newspapers. The agitation lasted for eighteen months, and culminated in an election which was contested with as much zeal as though the fate of the empire were trembling in the balance. Every stage of the struggle was marked by acrimonious charges and passionate recrimination. London was plunged in what the Rev. Hugh Price Hughes ingeniously called "the horrors of theological controversy."

Thus great events from little causes spring. Eighteen months' agitation, an unparalleled School Board election, and, in fact, the convulsion of London, all flowed from a schoolboy's reply to the question, "Who was the father of Jesus?" And perhaps there will be other long and fierce battles over the same transcendent problem.

Despite all the wrangling and hubbub, that schoolboy's answer seems to us a very sensible one. It showed, at any rate, that the obscenities of the orthodox faith had fallen harmlessly upon his young intelligence. Probably he was not old enough to understand them. All the boys he knew had fathers, though perhaps some were missing. It seemed to him perfectly natural that Jesus also had a father, and he had read in the New Testament that this father was Joseph. How could he understand the "virgin mother," the "Holy Ghost," the "overshadowing," the "immaculate conception," and the "Incarnation"? All this had been written by some ancient gentlemen in Greek, and certainly it was Greek to him.

Since this question, however, is of such importance that a wrong, or even a questionable, answer is enough to convulse the greatest city in the world, let us give it a full consideration.

Presumption is always in favor of the natural. It is rational to believe that any baby has two parents. This is taken for granted when a woman seeks an order for maintenance against the father of her illegitimate child. The magistrate never supposes a possible alternative. It never occurs to him that the child may be the offspring of a supernatural being. There is a father somewhere, and the father is a man.

Every natural presumption is universal. It applies without exception. The onus of proof lies upon those who assert the contrary. If a man has been buried, the presumption is that he will lie quietly. Those who say that he still walks about must prove the allegation. The certificates of the doctor and the cemetery are sufficient on the other side. Similarly, when a baby is produced in long clothes, the presumption is that it came into the world in the ordinary manner. A mother on earth and a father in heaven is unnatural. Every child of woman born has a father on this planet, and if he cannot be found it is not the fault of biology. It is simply a case for the police.

It is presumable, therefore, that Jesus Christ (if he ever lived) came into existence like every other little Jew of his generation. Those who say that his mother was a woman, but his father was not a man, must prove the statement.

They should also explain why a mother was necessary if a father was dispensable. A half miracle is doubly suspicious. It is as easy to be born without one parent as without two. Why then did Jesus Christ avail himself of the assistance of Mary ? Why did he not drop down ready-born from heaven ? He is said to have returned there as a man, after burial. Could he not also have come from there as a baby, without birth ? Why was the plain natural mixed with the uncertain supernatural, to the subsequent confusion of every honest and candid intelligence ?

Until we have evidence to the contrary, we are justified in saying that the father of Jesus was a man, and probably a Jew. Celsus, in the second century, twitted the Christians with worshipping the bastard child of a Jewish maiden and a Roman soldier ; and the same idea is found in the *Sepher Toldoth Jeshu*—the Jewish Life of Christ. But we shall not believe this aspersion on Mary without cogent evidence. Still, there is nothing in it of a supernatural character. It may be libellous, but it is not miraculous. Whether a soldier or a carpenter, the father of Jesus was *a man*.

There is plenty of proof of this in the New Testament, and proof that the man was Joseph. And this proof is all the more striking and convincing because it has clearly been left in the "sacred books" to the detriment of the Church doctrines.

Several passages show that the countrymen of Jesus, his neighbors, and even his brothers, believed him to be the son of Joseph. In "his own country"—that is, in Galilee—the people were offended at his pretensions, and exclaimed : "Is not this the carpenter's son ? is not his mother called Mary ? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas ? And his sisters, are they not all with us ?" (Matthew xiii. 55, 56). Luke (iv. 22) represents them as saying : "Is not this Joseph's son ?" John (vi. 42) gives their words : "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph ?" Other passages might be cited, but these will suffice. They show that the people of his own countryside, the people in and about Nazareth, regarded him as the son of Joseph.

Philip, the fourth apostle, after being called to follow Jesus, meets Nathaniel, and says he has found the one written of by Moses and the prophets—"Jesus of Naza-

reth, the son of Joseph" (John i. 45). Not one of the apostles, in person, ever utters a doubt upon this point. The brothers of Jesus (John vii. 5) did not believe in him, and on one occasion (Mark iii. 21, 31) they tried to put him under restraint as a lunatic; which is quite irreconcilable with any knowledge on their part of his supernatural character. Mary herself (Luke ii. 48) speaks to Jesus of Joseph as "thy father."

All these passages, with others which we omit, are very awkward for the orthodox. They prove conclusively—that is, if the Gospels are to be regarded as at all historical—that the neighbors of Jesus, his brothers, and even his mother, treated him as the son of Joseph. Nobody at that time appears to have known anything about the Holy Ghost.

It is a curious fact that in the newly-discovered Syriac Gospels, which the Rev. J. Rendel Harris regards as certainly "superior in antiquity to anything yet known," it is distinctly stated that "Joseph begat Jesus, who is called Christ." The farther we go back the more is the natural birth of Jesus a matter of common acceptation. Our third Gospel, which is generally supposed to be the oldest, opens with the public ministry of Jesus. There is not a word in it about his childhood, nothing about his having been born of a virgin mother. Paul's "authentic" epistles, which are older still, are just as silent about the supernatural birth of Christ. Neither is there a word about it in the fourth Gospel, which the orthodox say was written by John, the most beloved and intimate of all the twelve apostles. Positive and negative evidence abounds that Jesus was the son of Joseph, as well as of Mary, and born precisely like other children. The story of his supernatural birth, with all its far-reaching doctrinal issues, depends upon the authority of Matthew and Luke; and what that is worth we will proceed to investigate.

Let us first take Luke. There are many traditions about him which we are at liberty to disbelieve. He is said to have been a physician and also a painter; indeed, the Catholic Church, with its usual effrontery, exhibited pictures of the Virgin Mary pretendedly drawn by him, or

at least as copies of his original paintings. According to one tradition, he suffered martyrdom ; according to another tradition, he died a natural death at the age of eighty-four. His death occurred at several different places. His tomb was shown at Thebes in Bœotia, but travellers have found it a comparatively modern structure. The number of countries in which he is said to have preached the Gospel is a tribute to his prodigious and even preternatural activity. He is alleged to have been converted by Paul, of whom he became the constant companion ; a view which is reflected in the Acts of the Apostles. It has even been maintained that he wrote the third Gospel at Paul's dictation. According to Irenæus, he digested into writing what Paul preached to the Gentiles. Gregory Nazianzen says that he wrote with the help of the great Apostle. All this, of course, is very precarious ; but it is sufficient to show that Luke was not a personal follower of Jesus. He wrote down as much as he remembered of what Paul remembered of what other people had told him. His exordium puts him outside the category of eye-witnesses. He relates, not what he knew, but what was "most surely believed," on the testimony of those who handed down the information, and who "from the beginning were eye-witnesses, and ministers of the word." It is perfectly certain, therefore, that Luke could have had no first-hand knowledge of the supernatural birth of Christ. He merely recorded what was then the tradition of the Church, which is not adequate evidence to support a miracle, especially one so astounding that a famous old English divine, Dr. John Donne, declared that if God had not said it he would never have believed it.

The historical authority of the third Gospel is in a still worse plight if we accept the conclusion of the majority of modern critics, that it was not written by Luke, nor by any person living in the apostolic age, but is a production of the second century, and of unknown authorship. Who can credit a staggering miracle on the authority of a document written God alone knows exactly when, where, and by whom ?

Let us now turn to Matthew. What the Gospels tell us about him is trifling. He was a Jew and a publican—that is, a tax-collector. On one occasion he entertained Jesus

at dinner (Matthew ix. 10). And here endeth the story. All the rest that is told of Matthew is tradition. He was a vegetarian, he preached the Gospel extensively, he died a natural death, and he also suffered martyrdom. Even his martyrdom was ambiguous, for he was burnt alive and also beheaded. The earliest writers, such as Papias and Irenæus, say that he wrote the *logia*, or sayings, of Christ in Hebrew. But our first Gospel is a complete history, from the birth of Jesus to his ascension; it is also written in Greek, and by some one who was not conversant with the Hebrew language. Whatever may have been written by Matthew is universally allowed to have perished. But the orthodox have pretended that, before it was lost, it was translated into Greek, and thence again into Latin. They are unable to say, however, who made the translation, or even *when* it was made; nor can they tell us why the translation was preserved, and the inspired original allowed to perish.

Matthew *may* have written something, but it is for ever lost to the world; nor is there the slightest evidence that our Greek Gospel is a translation from it, but much evidence to the contrary. In the judgment of all competent critics, our first Gospel, like all the others, is not of apostolic origin. It cannot be traced back beyond the second half of the second century.

So much for the authorship and authority of Matthew and Luke. Now let us take them as they stand, and examine what they say.

Each of them gives a genealogy of Jesus, right up to Adam—a gentleman who never existed. There is a considerable difference, however, in the two genealogies; which proves that they were not derived from a well-kept family pedigree. They are doubtless as imaginary as the pedigrees made out at the Herald's Office for modern gentlemen who are knighted or ennobled.

As the Messiah was to be of the blood of David, and Joseph belonged to that "house," both Matthew and Luke trace the family descent through *him*. But if Jesus was *not* the son of Joseph, he was not really of the house of David, any more than Moses was of the house of Pharaoh.

It is extremely probable, as Strauss argues, that the

genealogies of Jesus were compiled before our Gospels were written, at a time when the supernatural birth of Jesus was not entertained. He was then believed to be the lawful son of Joseph and Mary, and the genealogies were compiled to show his descent from David, which was requisite to his Messiahship.

Luke speaks of Jesus, in his genealogy, as "being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph." This is a very eloquent parenthesis. As was supposed! By whom? Why, by the very persons who ought to know; by the countrymen, neighbors, and brothers of Jesus. They supposed him to be the son of Joseph, but they forsooth were mistaken, and their blunder was corrected long afterwards by a gentleman who was not even a Jew, and never lived in Palestine.

Having to represent Jesus as *not* the son of Joseph, but a child of supernatural birth, both Matthew and Luke give us circumstantial narratives of his entrance into the world. On some points they agree, on others they differ, and each relates many things which the other omits. Evidently they were working upon various sets of traditions. And just as evidently the whole of these birth-traditions were unknown to Mark and John, or considered by them as false or doubtful, and not worth recording.

Matthew starts with his genealogy, which Luke reserves till the end, and then plunges into the middle of his subject.

"Now the birth of Jesus was in this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost."

Wait a minute, Matthew! Not so fast! You, or any other man, can tell that a young woman is with child, but *by whom* is quite another matter. Let us see what you *know* on this subject. And for the sake of argument we will suppose you one of the twelve Apostles. As for Luke, he is out of court altogether; it being impossible for him to give more than hearsay, which no court of law would admit as evidence.

From the very nature of the case, Matthew could not have had any personal knowledge of who was the father of Jesus. Whether it was a man, or a ghost, or any other

being, Matthew was not in a position to know more than he was told. Well then, who told him? Unluckily he does not inform us. We have therefore nothing to rely upon but his own authority, which (we repeat) from the very nature of the case is absolutely worthless.

No one has a right to say that Joseph told Matthew. Even if he did, he could only say that he was *not* the father of Jesus. He could not say who *was*. At least he could not say so with any certainty. Nor was it a matter on which he was likely to be loquacious.

It may be argued that Matthew derived his information from Jesus. But there is no evidence of this in the Gospels. Jesus never called attention to any miraculous circumstances in connection with his birth. Even if a private conversation be alleged, as at least possible, what is its value? Jesus himself was no authority on the subject. It is a wise child that knows its own father. How could Jesus be aware, except by report, of what occurred nine months before he was born? It may be objected that he was God, and, therefore, omniscient; but this is begging the very question in dispute. We must begin the argument with his manhood, and go on to his godhead afterwards, if the evidence justifies the proceeding. It will never do to bring in the conclusion to prove the premises.

The only person who knew for certain was Mary. Did *she* tell Matthew? It is not alleged that she did. According to Luke, Mary "kept all these things." She does not appear to have told even Joseph. Is it probable then that she told a third person?

Matthew states that Joseph, finding Mary as ladies wish to be who love their lords, before he had married her, and certainly without his assistance, was "minded to put her away privily." He did not like the look of affairs, and he "thought on these things." No doubt! We are not disposed to quarrel with this part of the narrative.

Joseph's brain could not stand much thinking. He was better at dreaming. It was in a dream that he was ordered to take his flight into Egypt, in a dream that he was told to return to Palestine, and in a dream that he was warned to avoid Judæa and go into Galilee.

How natural, then, that "the angel of the Lord appeared

unto him in a dream," telling him to marry Mary, and informing him that the approaching little stranger was the progeny "of the Holy Ghost."

We had better reproduce the exact words of this angelic intimation :—

"Behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife : for that which is conceived of her is of the Holy Ghost" (i. 20).

Just reflect on the absurdity of this message. Had anyone, whether man or angel, told it to Joseph, he would naturally have exclaimed : "Who the devil is the Holy Ghost ?" Joseph had never heard of such a personage. The Holy Ghost was not then invented. Even in the Acts of the Apostles (xix. 2) we read that Paul found "certain disciples" at Ephesus who had "not so much as heard whether there be a Holy Ghost"—and, on the orthodox chronology, this was fifty or sixty years after the dream of Joseph.

Is it not perfectly clear that this story of the supernatural birth of Christ was made up long afterwards, and entirely amongst the Christians, who had accepted the Holy Ghost as one of the persons of their Trinity ? The very language put into the mouth of the angel betrays the concoction. Joseph was simply a Jew ; the time in question was before the birth of Christ ; and to talk to a Jew of that period about the Holy Ghost would have been mere nonsense—utterly unintelligible.

However, we are told that Joseph was perfectly satisfied, though he could hardly have been enlightened. He married Mary, and fathered her prospective baby ; but for some time he was only her nominal husband. "He knew her not," says Matthew, "until she had brought forth her firstborn son."

We dare not, in *this* pamphlet at least, dwell upon the extraordinary indecencies in which Christian fathers and divines have indulged with regard to the occult part of this affair. There is no reason why their pious obscenities should not be exposed, but we shrink from doing it in a pamphlet which is intended for readers of both sexes, of all ages, and of every degree of education.

What must be said here is, that the birth of a savior from a woman and a god is far from being a speciality of the Christian religion. It was common in the religions of antiquity. Even historical characters were sometimes assigned a semi-divine origin. Alexander boasted his descent from the god Ammon; Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was born exactly like Jesus Christ; and even in the most cultivated age of the most cultivated city in the world, the disciples of Plato declared that Ariston was only his putative father, his *real* father being the god Apollo. This legend prevailed in Athens while Plato's nephew was still living. And the most curious coincidence is that, in words very similar to those of Matthew, Diogenes Laertius, in his *Lives of the Philosophers*, relates that Ariston, being warned in a dream by Apollo, deferred his marriage, and did not approach his intended wife until after her confinement. Indeed, the Greek word translated "till" in Matthew i. 25 is the very same word used by Diogenes Laertius in relating the legendary birth of Plato.

Orthodoxy has pretended that Mary remained a virgin all her life, in spite of the birth of Jesus; that Joseph was *always* her nominal husband; and that Jesus had neither brother nor sister. They have made "first born" mean "only born," and "till" to cover, not only the period of her miraculous pregnancy, but all the time afterwards. Language, like common sense, has been mercilessly twisted in the interest of dogma.

It is perfectly clear from the New Testament that Jesus had natural brothers and sisters. We have already quoted the passage in Matthew (xiii. 55, 56) in which four of his brothers are mentioned, with a reference to "his sisters." Paul himself (Galatians i. 19) states that when he went up to Jerusalem he saw Peter and "James the Lord's brother." Paul never learnt on the spot, and at the time, what the Church discovered at a distance, and long afterwards; namely, that brother James, like all the others, was a *cousin* of Jesus. It is astonishing what a lot has been found out about "the Savior" by Christian divines, which was utterly unknown to the "inspired" writers of the New Testament.

Accepting the dogma of the miraculous birth of Jesus, without a tittle of evidence from any valid witness, the

“fathers” of the Christian Church carried it to its highest degree of intensity. Mary was represented as a virgin from birth to death; Joseph was represented as an old man, who was merely her guardian; finally, he also was represented as a life-long virgin. Epiphanius allowed that Joseph had sons by a former marriage; but this was too much for the fastidious faith of Jerome, who stigmatised the supposition as impious and audacious; and from that time it became a point of orthodoxy to regard the “brothers” of Jesus as his “cousins.”

It is not claimed, however, that these “fathers” were inspired, nor is the claim advanced on behalf of their successors in the subtle art of divinity. We are therefore free to take our notions from the New Testament, and the following conclusions may be deduced from it beyond a reasonable doubt: (1) That Jesus was the son of Mary, (2) that Joseph was her husband, (3) that Mary and everyone else spoke of Joseph as the father of Jesus, (4) that Jesus had four brothers and an unknown number of sisters, who were all reckoned as the natural offspring of his own father and mother.

We are thus forced back upon the argument we have already elaborated. All the natural, historical, and undesigned evidence is in favor of Joseph having been the father of Jesus. In support of the contrary position we have certain statements in the first and third Gospels, which are discredited by the complete silence of the second and fourth Gospels, as well as by the complete silence of Paul; and still further discredited by the fact that these statements—in themselves so marvellous and so loosely woven—are made by two really anonymous writers, neither of whom was in a position to know anything whatever about the subject, who could only relate what they had heard at second-hand, and who do not even hint that they derived any information from the *only person*—namely, Mary—who was in possession of *the facts*.

This difficulty, which has never to our knowledge been adequately emphasised, is at least perceived by Canon Gore. This writer admits that the miraculous birth of Jesus “does not rest primarily on apostolic testimony,” and that it was “not part of the primary apostolic preaching.” The apostles “had no knowledge given them

to start with of his miraculous origin," but when they came to believe it [whenever that was!] they "must have been interested to know the circumstances of the Incarnation."*

Canon Gore thus supports our contention that the twelve apostles who were constantly with Jesus for the space of three years, and who must surely have seen the members of his family, never heard a word, during the whole of that time, which led them to doubt that he was the natural son of Joseph.

Our further contention is also supported by this eminent preacher. "There were two sources," he says, "of original evidence, Joseph and Mary." Just as we do, therefore, he narrows the inquiry down to the question whether we "have their testimony in the opening chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke." And let the reader observe that no notice whatever is taken of the absolute silence of Mark and John, whom we cannot imagine to have been less "interested to know the circumstances of the Incarnation" than the other evangelists.

"Read St. Matthew's account of the birth," says Canon Gore, "and you will see how unmistakably everything is told from the side of Joseph, his perplexities, the intimations which he received, his resolutions and his actions."

"Unmistakably" is a big bold word, but it only expresses the certitude of the writer's own judgment. The author of the first Gospel does not allege, or even hint, that he received any information from Joseph; and if what he relates "has all the marks of being Joseph's story at the bottom," we are still in the dark as to its authenticity, for Canon Gore admits that "we cannot tell by what steps it comes to us"—which is the most important point in the whole investigation.

Luke's narrative is said to have "all the appearance of containing directly or indirectly Mary's story." But "appearance" is a very vague word in an argument, and in this case it means no more than the personal impression of an individual reader. There are no links between Mary and the writer of the third Gospel. He relates what was

* Canon Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God* (Bampton Lectures for the year 1891), pp. 77, 78.

"believed" at the time he wrote, and is dependent on what was "delivered" down by the original "eye-witnesses and ministers of the word." Such a confession deprives him of all independent authority. What he relates *may* be true, but its truth depends on the accuracy and veracity of his informants. Who these persons were is left in obscurity; and certainly it is an unwarrantable strain upon the language of his exordium to include Mary amongst them.

Canon Gore does not seem satisfied with his own argument, for he goes on to say that it is "a perversion of evidential order to begin with the miracle of the virgin-birth." We must first learn to accept the "apostolic testimony" and gain confidence in the "evangelical narrative," and then we shall have little difficulty in believing the mystery of the Incarnation. We must begin, that is, with minor wonders, and advance to major wonders in our successful practice of credulity; which is another way of stating the aphorism of Cardinal Newman, that evidence is not the *proof* but the *reward* of faith.

We have now concluded our inquiry as to "Who was the father of Jesus?" And the result is that the schoolboy's answer of "Joseph," with which we started, is justified by the most rigorous criticism. Once more the truth, which is hidden from the "wise," is revealed unto "babes and sucklings," and what is imperceptible to the spoilt eyes of a theological pedant is as clear as daylight to the unperturbed vision of a little child.

5/3/54

WORKS BY G. W. FOOTE.

- Flowers of Freethought.** *First Series*, 221 pp., bound in cloth, 2s. 6d. *Second Series*, 302 pp., bound in cloth, 2s. 6d.
- Bible Heroes.** Cloth, 2s. 6d.
- Letters to the Clergy.** *First Series*, 128 pp., 1s.
- The Grand Old Book.** A Reply to the Grand Old Man. An exhaustive answer to the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone's "Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture." 1s.; bound in cloth, 1s. 6d.
- Christianity and Secularism.** Four Nights' Public Debate with the Rev. Dr. James McCann. 1s.; superior edition, in cloth, 1s. 6d.
- Infidel Death-Beds.** Second edition, much enlarged, 8d. On superfine paper, in cloth, 1s. 3d.
- Darwin on God.** 6d.; superior edition, in cloth, 1s.
- Comic Sermons and Other Fantasias.** 8d.
- Will Christ Save Us?** A Thorough Examination of the Claims of Jesus Christ to be considered the Savior of the World. 6d.
- Reminiscences of Charles Bradlaugh.** 6d.
- A Defence of Free Speech.** Three Hours' Address to the Jury before Lord Coleridge. With a Special Preface and many Footnotes. 4d.
- Rome or Atheism—the Great Alternative.** 3d.
- Letters to Jesus Christ.** 4d.
- Interview with the Devil.** 2d.
- Philosophy of Secularism.** 3d.
- Atheism and Morality.** 2d.
- Bible and Beer.** 4d.
- Bible Handbook for Freethinkers and Inquiring Christians.** [Edited in conjunction with W. P. Ball.] Complete, paper covers, 1s. 4d.; superior edition, on superfine paper, bound in cloth, 2s.
- Crimes of Christianity.** Vol. I. [Written in conjunction with J. M. Wheeler.] Hundreds of exact references to Standard Authorities. No pains spared to make it a complete, trustworthy, final, unanswerable Indictment of Christianity. Cloth, gilt, 216 pp., 2s. 6d.

READ

THE FREETHINKER.

EDITED BY G. W. FOOTE.

Published every Thursday. Price Twopence.

London: R. Forder, 28 Stonecutter-street, E.C.