

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT EXAMINED.

THE

SUBJECT OF THE FOUR GOSPELS.

BY

JULIAN,

*Author of "The Popular Faith Exposed," "Bible Words: Human,
not Divine," "The Pillars of the Church," Etc.*

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PART IV.

THE SUBJECT OF THE FOUR GOSPELS.

IN the former paper we dwelt on the books called "Gospels," and showed them to be unworthy of credit; we will now take up the subject of the main character, Jesus, and show why the memoirs cannot be historically true.

The Birth of Jesus.—Fortunately, both Matthew and Luke have given us particulars of the birth of Jesus, which may be tested; so that we are not left without data. Matthew informs us that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in the days of Herod the King, there came wise men (Magi) from the East to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born—King of the Jews—for we have seen his star in the East, and are come to worship him?

After the murder of Julius Cæsar, Antony constituted his friend Herod "King of Judea." This was B.C. 40. He reigned somewhat less than 37 years, and died at the age of 70, B.C. 4. Towards the close of his life he suffered much from ulceration of the bowels, and, being ordered by his physicians to try the warm baths of Callirhoë, he was absent from Jerusalem about two years, and died at Jericho, on his way home; so that he was not in Jerusalem at all after B.C. 6. If, therefore, the Magi had an interview with him, it must have been before he started for Callirhoë—that is, before B.C. 6.

Now look what Luke says. He tells us that Jesus was born at Bethlehem when Cyrenius was governor of Judæa and Augustus Emperor of Rome. Cyrenius, or Quirinus, was pro-consul of Syria A.D. 5-14, and Augustus died A.D. 5; so that the birth of Jesus, according to Luke, was A.D. 5. According to Matthew, it was

B.C. 6 or 7, a difference of eleven or twelve years. As both these writers were guided into all truth by the Holy Ghost, I must leave it to that unerring authority to reconcile these two accounts. We, who are guided by common sense, cannot see how 6 or 7 B.C. is the same date as A.D. 5 or 6.

But there is just another little difficulty: how came Mary and Joseph to be wandering about Bethlehem for two years? They lived in Galilee, went to Bethlehem to be taxed, and, as the caravansary was full, took up their quarters in an out-house, a kind of cave used occasionally as a shed for oxen; and here Mary was confined.

A new star, we are told, appeared at the time in Persia, which the Magi, by some occult science, knew to announce the birth of a child in Judea, destined to become King of the Jews; but he never was. From Ispahan to Jerusalem, as a caravan travels, would be some 1,500 miles over pathless deserts, lofty mountains, and numberless deviations from a bee-line, or, as we say in England, "as the crow flies." Herod himself calculated that the journey would take somewhat less than two years. What business had Mary and Joseph to be loitering about this cave for the best part of two years? And a child about two years old is not generally swathed in swaddling-clothes and laid in a manger. Mary was well enough to go down into Egypt; why on earth did she not return home?

See what a host of fabrications hang on this fable. Jesus could not have been born B.C. 6 or 7, and also A.D. 5. As Herod was not alive, and was not at Jerusalem, the Magi could not have had an interview with him, and there was no slaughter of the Innocents. Mary and Joseph were not at Bethlehem, nor did they go down into Egypt.

The Death of Jesus Uncertain.—It has been stated already that three of the evangelists assure us that Jesus was crucified *after* the Pascha; but one of them insists that he was "crucified, dead, and buried" *before* that feast was held. As they all profess to speak what they did know, and some, at least, assure us they were eye-witnesses of the event, what are we to say?

Mark tells us that he (Jesus) was crucified at nine

o'clock in the morning, and at twelve o'clock, or noon-day, an Egyptian darkness covered all the land for three hours. This could not have been an eclipse, seeing it was full moon. John tells us that Jesus was not crucified, but under examination at twelve o'clock, or mid-day. If John is right, Mark must be wrong; for he could not have been three hours on the cross, and there was no miraculous darkness at the time.

Basilides (110-160) tells us that Christ was not crucified, but that Simon of Cynene suffered in his stead.

According to Irenæus, Jesus was about fifty when he died; but, according to general belief, he was about thirty-three. Irenæus, however, seems to be supported by the remark of the Jews: "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?" Suppose the latter to have been the age of Jesus at crucifixion, then, according to Irenæus, the crucifixion took place A.D. 50; according to Luke, it took place A.D. 38; according to Dionysius Exiguus, it was A.D. 33; according to Eusebius, A.D. 31; according to Jerome and Scaliger, A.D. 30; according to Anger, Bengel, Petavius, Winer, and Usher, it was A.D. 29; according to Ewald, it was A.D. 28; according to Idler, A.D. 23; according to Bunsen, A.D. 18; and according to Matthew, A.D. 17. A difference hardly consistent with historic accuracy.

Resurrection and Ascension Uncertain.—As the birth and death are uncertain, so are the resurrection and ascension. Matthew tells us it was a general belief among the Jews, long after the crucifixion, that the dead body was stolen out of the sepulchre during the night by some of the disciples. The sepulchre being in a private garden would render this more feasible; for no doubt the master, his gardener, and others of his household, would be allowed a freedom denied to strangers; and even soldiers and policemen can shut their eyes for a consideration. You say it would be a capital offence. Granted. But hundreds of examples can be quoted where gaolers have connived at the escape of their prisoners; and, in this case, all the high officers of Jerusalem would look over the offence. As for Pilate, we well know that he was completely under their thumb.

Nothing can be a greater proof of this than his giving up Jesus to death after declaring in open court that he could find no offence whatever in him. If it be said that Jesus was seen alive after his crucifixion, the reply is, Where is the proof that he ever died? Pilate evidently thought it most unlikely. He could not have been fastened to the cross above two hours, according to the Fourth Gospel; and we are told that criminals often lived on a cross for several days. If Jesus only swooned, then his appearance afterwards was by no means wonderful. Indubitably what appeared to the disciples was flesh and blood; for it ate food, was palpable to the touch, and in every respect resembled the man of Nazareth so well known.

In regard to the ascension, Matthew omits all mention of it. The last twelve verses of Mark, in which it is mentioned, are interpolated, and are marked as such in the new version. John says nothing about it, so that Luke is our only authority for the hypothesis, and the Gospel of Luke is a mere compilation, voted into the canonical Scriptures by only a single vote. Elijah's voyage through the air was a tale of Jewish mythology; and the ascension of Jesus was not difficult of credibility. The Jews believed that God and his angels, as well as Satan and his imps, held free intercourse with man, so that coming down from Heaven and coming up from Hell were common occurrences; but what is meant by up and down is not so easy of explanation.

Not Mentioned by Roman or Other Writers.—As Judæa was a Roman province belonging to that of Syria, and had a pro-consul of its own, it must have been filled with Romans in all the upper walks of society. There were the court and household of Pilate, a goodly army of Roman soldiers with their officers, the collectors of the tribute, and other officials almost without number, besides the constant intercourse on festival days and for purposes of commerce. So that any events of unusual occurrence would get noised abroad, and would spread like wildfire.

There was no lack of authors in those days—Jewish, Greek, and Roman, in every line of literature. In fact, it was the Augustan age of letters. And never since

the foundation of Rome were authors so numerous—dramatists, satirists, poets, gossip litterateurs, and so on. If the wonderful things recorded in the Gospels had really happened, they must have been known, they must have been talked about, they must have been referred to, by some of the literary gossips of the day. Miracles, like feeding thousands of people with a few small loaves and fishes, raising the dead to life again, ghosts walking out of their tombs, miraculous darkness covering all the land for several hours, earthquakes, mysterious voices from the clouds, rising through the air into the clouds—these things are so uncommon, so striking, they must have formed topics of general conversation, and must have found place in the literature of the day. It is incredible that no one, except the four interested partisans, should ever have referred to them. Yet the writers of the first century are wholly silent about them. They do not even mention the name of Jesus. Josephus was a Jew who actually lived in the country where these things are said to have occurred; but Josephus alludes not to them, although he wrote a history of the times. Philo, Pliny, Justus, etc., have not so much as named the name of Jesus or of any one of his apostles. None of them even hint at the marvellous works mentioned in the Gospels. The omission is so striking, so demonstrative, that something had to be done to supply it; and accordingly, in that uncritical age, when books were not broadcast over the land as they are now, and forgeries, before printing was invented, were easy, a purple patch, wholly out of character with the rest of the book, was foisted into the manuscript copy of Josephus; and, if, indeed, "The Annals of Tacitus" are not altogether a forgery, a line or two was thrust into them also, as a sort of by-the-by, ten times more suspicious than absolute silence. Perhaps there is no evidence so incontestable as such forgeries as these, that the Gospel narratives are not narratives of current events, but a sort of religious romance of a much later date.

Of course, it will be said, how can the name of Christ be accounted for, with such festivals as Christmas Day and all the rites connected with the Christian religion, if there is no foundation of truth in the Christian story?

Well, we ourselves have the weekly festivals of Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday; but who believes in the gods Tuesco, Woden, Thor, Frega, or Saturn? We have the annual festivals of January and March; but who believes in Janus or Mars? The Romans teemed with allusions to Romulus: streets were named after him; there were knights of Romulus, the highest of the aristocracy; there were colleges of Romulian priests; there were numerous festivals and rites alluding to the supposititious founder; there were serious histories, hymns, and popular songs; in fact, Rome is nothing without Romulus; yet Romulus was a mere myth; his godfather and virgin mother were mere myths; his ascent into Heaven is a mere myth; his being suckled by a wolf is a mere myth; his foundation of a city, his wonderful wars, and his civil institutions are mere dreams of the imagination. Here, then, is our answer, and I think it is unanswerable.

If Jesus was the Son of God, his Relationships were indeed Strange.—We are told that Jesus of Nazareth had Mary for his mother and the Holy Ghost for his father, and, furthermore, that he was God, the equal of God the Father, and that the three persons were inseparably one, both before the incarnation and after the ascension. Assuming this to be true, where does it land us? Look:—

1. He must have been his own grandfather, his own father, and his own son:—his own grandfather, seeing he was one with God the Father; his own father, seeing he was one with the Holy Ghost, and his own son, being the son of God the Father.

2. He was his mother's father or maker, his mother's husband, and his mother's son:—his mother's maker, seeing that by him all things were made, and without him nothing was made that *is* made; his mother's husband, seeing he is all one with the Holy Ghost; and his mother's son, seeing he was the son of Mary.

3. As God, no one could call him to account. As man, he must be called to account like other men. As judge, he must judge himself, and number himself with the goats or sheep.

4. Being one with God, God was one with him. On

the cross God forsook him. Therefore, on the cross he forsook himself. It is not easy for a man to jump out of himself.

5. Being man and God, he was not man, like other men. Being God and man, he was not God, like God the Father and God the Spirit. He was, therefore, neither one with God nor one with man. What, then, was he?

6. If, as he asserted, he could have avoided death, he died of his own free will, and, therefore, was virtually guilty of his own death. Look. If a man is thrown into a river, and could swim ashore if he liked, but does not choose to do so, he is guilty of *felo de se*, morally, if not legally. And if Jesus could have saved his life if he liked, but did not choose to do so, morally he was guilty of his own death; and so the Bible teaches, "I lay down my life of myself. I have power to lay it down or not." The case is not the same as that of a patriot dying in battle, or a martyr dying for his faith-sake. A patriot does not go into battle for the sake of dying, but risks his life out of love for his country, and loses it. A martyr does not believe for the sake of being burnt to death, but suffers death rather than live a living lie. The cases are not at all parallel. Jesus, we are told, went into battle with prepense to die. He was a martyr for the sake of being a martyr. A condition very different.

No Fall, no Redemption.—However, when all is said, we must remember that the whole story of Jesus, from beginning to end, is inextricably connected with Eve and the Forbidden Fruit. This myth has already been alluded to in a previous chapter, but cannot wholly be ignored in this connection. No one can really believe that extremely foolish and illogical story about the Fall to be sober history. It is such a mass of confusion and contradiction, such a Pelion upon Ossa of injustice, that it will not bear the slightest examination. A talking serpent chatting familiarly with a young woman, as a gossip, is the first absurdity. Then the serpent was no serpent at all, because it did not creep on the ground till after the fall; and, if not a creeping thing (*serpens*), it was no serpent. Nor was it, for it was the Devil in masquerade. The Devil pretended to

be a serpent before there was such a reptile as a serpent, and, because the Devil chose to assume this form and fashion, the whole ophidian order were deprived of feet. It is too ridiculous. Because the Devil assumed a false character, the Devil was not punished, but serpents, who had no more to do with it than the North Star. Eve believed the lying fiend; and, therefore, you and I, born thousands of years afterwards, are tainted with original sin. It is monstrous. Six thousand years ago a man named Adam ate sour graspes; and, therefore, your teeth and mine are set on edge. Because the Devil deluded a young woman, therefore it was absolutely necessary for God to become man that he might be put to death. Why, how is it that God did not break the neck of the lying fiend? He was able to cast him out of Heaven, and surely he might have flung him neck-and-crop out of the garden. Had he no will to crush sin in the bud? Why did he let Satan drive Adam and Eve out of Paradise, bring a flood of waters on the earth to destroy it, drag God's only and well-beloved son out of Heaven to be nailed to the cross as a malefactor, when, by a single word, he might have prevented all this iniquity, misery, and death? It cannot be! No, it cannot be! It is too revolting, too absurd. Yet, if not true—true every inch of it—the story of Jesus falls to the ground. The two stories hang on one thread. If one falls, both fall. Jesus may have lived, he may have been the wisest and best of the sons of men; but, if there was no Fall, there was no Redemption, and Church "orthodoxy" is the grossest of all heterodoxies. There is no middle path. If the tale of the talking serpent is a myth—and it cannot be otherwise—the tale of the Redemption is a myth also. If there was no Paradise Lost, there was no Paradise Regained.

The Prevailing Opinion of the First Five Centuries was "Arian."—What is now called Arianism for the sake of brevity was undoubtedly the prevailing faith of the first four centuries; and the first three Gospels favour this view of the "man Christ Jesus" far more than the subsequent one maintained by Athanasius. The space at my disposal is too short to enter upon a detailed proof of this subject; but, to the best of my knowledge, it

has never been denied that the Church of Pella, presided over first by James, and afterwards by Simon or Simeon, was, to all intents and purposes, in sympathy with the views afterwards set forth by the presbyter Arius.

The great contest between the manhood and divinity of Jesus pervaded the third and fourth centuries, but ran on, though less severely, for ages before and afterwards. Dr. Harold Browne tells us that the voice of the Church is final on all points of discipline and doctrine. Well, it may be so ; but the voice is most uncertain. In 360 the Council of Ariminum, convened by the Emperor Constantius, condemned Arianism ; but in 484 the Council of Carthage confirmed the doctrines held by Arius, and exiled all the bishops who entertained any other religious views.

Before these two councils, the great Council of Nicæa, in 325, had decreed Arius to be a "pernicious heretic," and put forth this loud protest : "The Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes all who say that there ever was a time when the Son did not exist." And it goes on to curse "all and any who believe the Son had no existence prior to his birth in Bethlehem, or that he was created out of nothing, or that say he was of another substance to the Father, or that he was capable of change." As, however, the father must be prior to the son, I fear this "voice" is *vox et præterea nihil*. And, as Jesus changed from God to a compound of God and man, grew in grace as well as in stature, and returned to Heaven an imponderable body, I cannot see how any one is to escape the *anathema maranatha* of Nicæa.

Notwithstanding these bellowings from Nicæa, the Church of Constantinople dared to convene three Councils (one in 336, another in 339, and a third in 360), all of which gave the lie direct to the judgment of Nicæa, and pronounced the views of Arius to be alone orthodox, scriptural, and true. Which was the "voice of the Church"—the packed Council of Nicæa, called expressly to condemn Arius, or the three subsequent Councils of Constantinople ?

No doubt Carthage and Constantinople were infinitely more important places than Nicæa in Asia Minor, and

Rimini in Italy. They were the chief cities of the civilised world—the London and Berlin of the time. They would command all the learning and scholarship of the world. The voice of the Church, spoken at Nicæa and Rimini, declared Arius to be a spawn of the Devil. The voice of the Church, spoken at Carthage and Constantinople, declared him the expositor of truth. The former repudiated the Arian bishops, the latter dismissed Athanasius and his followers.

The contest still ran on. In 403 the Council of Arles condemned Athanasius as “a pestilent fellow,” no better than Simon Magus, if indeed so good. Other Councils followed, and swore that the voice of the Church uttered at Arles was the voice of the “father of lies.” As all Councils were composed of Church dignitaries and leaders of the laity, it is not a little perplexing to know which is which; but of one thing we may be quite sure, that the voice of truth is always one and the same: “*Discute, quod audias, omne; quod credas, proba.*”

The “Logia” of Jesus.—We are constantly told that the words spoken by Jesus were so wise, so beyond the reach of human genius, that never man did speak, or could speak, as he did, and, therefore, he must have been divine. I candidly confess I cannot call to mind a single sentence to justify this laudation.

I suppose the most characteristic “logia” were those in the Sermon on the Mount; but how utterly impracticable are many of those precepts; and, if carried out, how utterly would society be subverted! The reference to the “lilies of the field” is very pretty; but the lesson taught is practically absurd. I think it is Paul who says: “If any provide not for his own, he is worse than an infidel;” but in the Sermon on the Mount it is: “Take no thought of the morrow;” “Lay not up treasures on earth.” Sufficient for the day are provisions for the day. Fathers, do not lay up for your children; do not provide for their education and for placing them in life. Mothers, lay up no store in your larders. Begin each day with an empty purse and empty larder, like sparrows and lilies; for you cannot make yourself an inch taller by trying ever so hard. Very true; but this does not bear upon the question. You might just as

well say, Do not buy a loaf of bread for to-morrow, or put a shilling in the saving's bank, because you cannot make a sun or moon, or add a cubit to an oak tree. It is a *non sequitur*, and very foolish. God will provide, says the preacher ; but he does not. Starving hundreds is the proof. If man does not provide, there is no hope for him. I do not think the provision of sparrows has much to do with the question ; for it would apply to rats, bugs, and all other vermin, the pests of the earth. How far garbage is a provision by God for rats is a long question ; but I am quite sure all that is said about the growth of the lilies will apply to nettles and poisonous weeds ; though perhaps it would not be so pastoral to say, Behold the choking weeds of a corn-field, which smother the good seed ; God provided them with their proper sustenance. Behold the vermin which annoy our warehouses and devour our corn—the bugs, the fleas, and the ticks—God provided them their food. This is less pretty, but just as true.

See what a wretched fallacy is this thriftless teaching. "Go to the ant, and learn of him." No, no, Solomon ! Lay up no store at all. If this precept were acted on, there could be no progress, no commerce, no little nest-egg to help our children to settle in life. The world would be a world of beggars, incapable of helping each other. Would this banish care ? If a mother knew not how to provide the next meal—if a father had neither house nor home, nor penny in his pocket, nor means of living, would he be free from care ? I trow not. He would be devoured with anxiety, worried to death ; paralysed in hope, without energy, without stimulus to exertion, without motive of improvement. A terrible, terrible world would this be then. It is bad enough now ; but it would be all workhouse then, with no one to pay the piper.

Of the same impracticable character is that direction : "Sell all thou hast and give unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in Heaven." If so, Heaven is not the award of faith, but the reward of alms-giving. Yet I remember something is said about "If I give all my goods to feed the poor, it profiteth me nothing." To carry out this direction would pauperise and paralyse

society. Of all the useless lumber that ever lived hermits were the worst. What good did the pillar saints do—standing on one foot on the top of a monument for thirty or forty years? What good did hermits do by never washing their bodies or changing their linen, or by feeding on roots and garbage far from the sight of man? Such foolery is a mere travesty of holiness. And I very much doubt whether their reward in Heaven will equal that of John Howard and Mr. Peabody.

I have instanced the unwisdom of the Nazarene in these few directions; but his whole teaching from beginning to end is wrong. It is intensely Jewish, and never rises above an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. "Honesty is the best policy" is the alpha and omega of the Gospel teaching, if for honesty you substitute credulity. Believe in Christ as the Messiah, and great shall be your reward in Heaven. Holiness has the promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. If you take up your cross now, you shall wear a crown hereafter. There is not one word about the dignity of morality, the manliness of benevolence, the self-reward of good action; it is always policy, selfish policy, never reaching beyond the little insignificant circle of "I myself I."

The Teaching of Jesus was that of a Jew.—"Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not" was the direction of Jesus to his seventy disciples. Can national exclusiveness go further? "I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" is a similar dictum. "It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it unto dogs." I maintain there is nothing like universality in such sentences as these—no large-heartedness. God is no respecter of persons, but the equal father of all. It is Jewish prejudice, Jewish exclusiveness. And even when it is said, "Go ye into all nations and teach the gospel to every creature," nothing more is meant than this: Go wherever the Jews are scattered abroad, and tell the Israel of God what I have taught you.

The Parables and Miracles Objectionable.—But I must be brief. As the teaching of Jesus is most objectionable, many of his parables and "miracles" are not less

so. The parable of the unjust steward is wretched morality. The miracle of Cana of Galilee, and the miracle of the devils driven into the swine, are quite indefensible. That some fourteen firkins of strong wine should be supplied to a family party, when all the guests had "well drunken," would make the feast worse than a Scotch orgie. Say there were fourteen guests, this would give a firkin apiece. A firkin is nine gallons, or thirty-six quarts. Pretty well that for a sober party well soaked already. Thirty-six pints of wine for Mary, and thirty-six for her son! Quite enough, I fancy, for a temperance club. But, after all, the most objectionable of the miracles is the raising of the dead. Take that of Lazarus, for example, always flourished in our faces as proof of proofs of the divinity of Christ, but, to my thinking, a demonstration to the very contrary. Of course Lazarus was a good man, for Jesus loved him dearly; and, being such, would go to Paradise immediately after death. Was it the part of a benevolent being to bring him from Paradise to earth again—from the joys which know no ending to a vale of tears? In Paradise he was reaping the reward of the battle of life well fought, the prize of his high calling; on earth he was in the thick of the fight once more, and the race was still to be run. There he could know no sickness; here sickness is the birthright of all. There death was swallowed up in victory; here death is the wages of sin. Was it the part of a God to call Lazarus from Heaven to earth? Jesus, we are told, knew what Heaven was, and he knew what earth is—a place of grief, sorrow, and disappointment. Was it the part of a God to bring the angel from before the throne, to tear from his brow his golden crown, pluck off his robe of righteousness, and lay again upon him the cross? Would you think that man did a kind act who reduced a prince to the state of a beggar; who drove him from palace to hovel; severed him from the wise and good, to herd with fallen men? Would it be an act of Divine benevolence to change his "pleasures for evermore" into want and misery?

If a God, Jesus knew what Heaven is, and he knew on earth that every man is "a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief." He must have known that no unkind act

could have been done than to call his friend from Paradise to a sinful world, where the Devil goes about daily seeking whom he may devour.

It was not only unspeakably unkind, it was infamously unjust, to put Lazarus on his trial again. He had won his crown, and ought to have been allowed to wear it; he had finished his course, and ought not to have been set another task. Suppose, in his second life, he had proved a Judas or Barabbas—and truly the injustice put upon him was enough to wean him from ever trusting again to the promises of God—suppose, I say, he had turned out an outcast, what then? No! no! He had changed the Church militant for the Church triumphant, and had no right to be degraded to the rank and file again. It was unthinking, cruel, unjust. Such a God could be no God at all.

A miracle of this sort might have served to display the power of Jesus—might gratify his vanity and love of popular applause—might astound a Jewish mob; but could only make the thoughtful grieve, and drive those who trusted in the word of God to utter infidelity.