

# The Princeton Theological Review

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## IS GOD ALMIGHTY?

### III. OMNIPOTENCE AND PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

“God either wishes to take away evils and is not able; or he is able and not willing; or he is neither willing nor able; or he is both willing and able. If he is willing and not able he is feeble, which does not belong to the nature of God. If he is able and not willing he is envious, which is equally foreign to God. If he is neither willing nor able he is both envious and feeble, and so is not God. If he is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, whence are the evils? or why does he not take them away?” It is in this way that Epicurus, according to Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*, xiii, formulated the problem of evil. A similar dilemma, stated in more up-to-date fashion by a soldier in the trenches who writes from “Somewhere in Hell,” is thus set forth in a letter to an American preacher in London: “The luck is all on your side; you still believe in things. Good for you. It is topping, if one can do it. But war is such a devil’s nursery. I got knocked over, but I am up and at it again. I’m tough. They started toughening me the first day. My bayonet instructor was an ex-pug, just the man to develop one’s innate chivalry. They hung out the bunting and gave me a big send-off, when we came out here to scatter the Hun’s guts. Forgive me writing so. I know you will forgive me, but who will forgive God? Not I—not I! This war makes me hate God. I don’t know whether he is the God of battle and enjoys the show, as he

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<sup>1</sup> Previous articles have discussed the Biblical Data and Omnipotence and Religious Experience. See this REVIEW, October, 1922, and April, 1923.

from the literary character of the New Testament books. "Even in the case of the least literary writings of the New Testament," our author says (p. 80), "we must beware of so emphasizing their popular character as to lose sight of the grace and beauty imparted to them in virtue of the subject-matter with which they deal and the spiritual genius of their authors." Thus also (on page 32) the overpressing by Deissmann of the distinction between "letters" and "epistles" is rightly rejected. More doubtful is Dr. Milligan's detection of similarity between the openings of the Pauline Epistles and those of the papyrus letters. Surely the differences, even in form, are far more striking than the resemblances. The papyrus letters with great constancy, begin with the formula, "So and so to so and so, greeting" (ὁ δεῖνα τῷ δεῖνι χαιρεῖν). Here, as Zahn has pointed out, the "greeting" is an infinitive (probably the object of a verb λέγει understood), whereas in Paul the greeting is given by nouns ("grace" and "peace") in the nominative case subject of an understood optative of the verb "to be." But a far more important difference is to be found in the use to which the openings are put. The openings in the papyrus letters are purely formal (like our "Dear Sir"), whereas in Paul they are varied according to the contents of the individual epistles and are made to express the deepest things that the writer had to say. By revealing anew the constancy of the form by which ancient letters were opened, the papyri have made only the more interesting the fact that Paul did not follow that form.

It is decidedly one-sided, we think, when Dr. Milligan says (p. 32) that the Pauline Epistles "were intended, in the first instance, not for publication, or for after-ages, but to meet the immediate practical needs of the Churches and individuals to whom they were in the first instance addressed." One may question, indeed, how far the future history of the Church was ever revealed to Paul, but at any rate it is a mistake to suppose that any one of the Pauline Epistles was intended simply to be read once and then thrown away like the letters which have been found on the Egyptian rubbish-heaps. On the contrary, all of the Epistles were intended for the edification of the Church of God. It should never be forgotten that the Epistles of Paul were written consciously in the plenitude of apostolic authority. Their authority, like the authority of other New Testament books, was not something merely attributed to them subsequently by the Church, but was inherent in them from the beginning.

The most interesting thing of all about the papyri is that they reveal to us with startling vividness the actual daily life of ordinary persons of New Testament times. And this aspect of them is well brought out in Dr. Milligan's admirable book.

Princeton.

J. GRESHAM MACHEN.

*Life of Christ.* By GIOVANNI PAPINI. Freely translated from the Italian by DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, [1923]. Pp. 416.

The enormous popularity of Papini's *Life of Christ* is one of the

encouraging signs of the times; for it shows that despite all the efforts which have been made by modern historians to relegate the supernatural Jesus of the Gospels to the limbo of discarded fancies there are not wanting great multitudes to whom He still appeals. The personal experience of the author, it is true, has had something to do with the popularity of the book. Papini was formerly a modern of the moderns, a thoroughgoing opponent of religion. But now he preaches the faith which formerly he laid waste. Believers glorify God for the change which has been wrought in the former opponent, and perhaps even unbelievers, in the gloom of their agnosticism, are led to wonder whether Papini's experience may not also become theirs. There is a moving power in the following words (p. 18) which certainly affords one explanation of the enormous success of the book:

"How the writer came to discover Christ again, by himself, treading many roads, which all brought him to the foot of the Mount of the Gospel, would be too long and too hard a story to tell. But there is a significance not perhaps wholly personal and private in the example of a man who always from his childhood felt a repulsion for all recognized forms of religious faith, and for all churches, and for all forms of spiritual vassalage and who passed, with disappointments as deep as the enthusiasms had been vivid, though many experiences, the most varied and the most unhackneyed which he could find, who had consumed in himself the ambitions of an epoch unstable and restless as few have been, and who after so many wanderings, raving and dreamings, drew near to Christ."

But the book is important for its own sake, even apart from the absorbing story of the man who wrote it. Despite all the faults and limitations—and they are perfectly obvious—there is a certain sincere and contagious exuberance about this latest life of Christ which makes it far more than an echo of what has gone before. The reader must indeed approach the book in the proper way. If he hopes to find in it a satisfactory harmony of the Gospels, a careful weaving together of all the Gospel materials, still more if he is looking for a detailed answer to critical objections, he will be sadly disappointed. At times he will be almost aghast at the loose ends which have in many places been allowed to remain. Thus the author says in his introduction (p. 11): "The author bases his book on the Gospels; as much, let it be understood, on the synoptic Gospels as on the fourth. . . . He who accepts the four Gospels must accept them wholly, entire, syllable by syllable,— or else reject them from the first to the last and say, 'We know nothing.'" And yet, despite this uncompromising acceptance of all the Gospels, the chronological outline given in the Fourth Gospel is almost completely ignored (though the raising of Lazarus and many other things in that Gospel are included), and here and there assertions of the New Testament seem to be categorically denied. At times the contradictions of the book seem to be so strange that one wonders whether the translator—who certainly presents the thought of the author in a worthy and

beautiful English style—may not be at fault in detail. For example, it is a little difficult to understand the account of the agony in the garden. In view of the author's belief in the sinlessness of Jesus approved by temptation, and even in view of the sequel in the very same passage, it is astonishing to read (pp. 303 f.) that "the prayer [of Jesus] to the Father was at the instigation of Satan, was a beginning of cowardice," and then to read immediately below that "all that faith and revelation tell us of His divinity rises up against the idea that He can ever have been subjected to temptation." Should the words "have been subjected" in the last quotation not be changed to "have succumbed"? The translator admits in the "Translator's Note" at the beginning that certain paragraphs and even chapters of the book have been omitted. If these omissions are to blame for the strange and disturbing exclusion of the early Judaean ministry and of the Johannine discourses of Jesus, then they are inexcusable.

At any rate, if the reader's enjoyment and profit is not to be spoiled, the fundamental character of the book must always be borne in mind. This is a book to be read rapidly as a whole, not to be studied in detail. At times the momentum of the author's eloquence seems almost to have carried him beyond what he can possibly mean. At other times the invectives against wealth, bankers, and money as a medium of exchange would have to be considerably pruned before they could be made to accord with Jesus' real teaching and example. But we must remember the character of the book. It is not a studied product of minute research, but the first expression given by a sincere convert to his new and overpowering conviction. As such it deserves perhaps its immense popularity. The Lord Jesus has here received His tribute of homage from one whom He has transformed. And above all one should note that it is the real Jesus who here appears. Papini is an artist, but his motive is not primarily artistic; he is interested in sober fact. Despite his impatience of the niceties of detailed criticism, he is interested in the intellectual defence of the faith. And his book possesses some apologetic value. The most important single argument for Christianity will always be the Gospel picture of Jesus. That picture has made its due impression upon the mind of Papini. Jesus Himself has here converted a man whom He has chosen for His own. Only, it should be noted that the Jesus who has thus put forth His saving and illuminating power in the life of Papini is not the pitiful reduced Jesus of modern reconstruction but the divine Saviour presented in the Word of God.

*Princeton.*

J. GRESHAM MACHEN.

*The Apostolic Age.* A Study of the Early Church and Its Achievements. By WILLIAM BANCROFT HILL, D.D., Frederick Weyerhaeuser Professor of Biblical Literature in Vassar College. New York, Chicago, London and Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, [1922]. Pp. 382. Price \$2.00.

Dr. Hill's interesting book is cast chiefly in the form of a continuous narrative of the events of the Apostolic Age. This narrative method has