

# The Bible Student.

CONTINUING

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It was in the first bloom of that reaction against sound religious thought which trod on the heels of the moral corruption of the Restoration and the decline in earnestness in the Church of England accompanying that decay of manners, that the British world was startled by the publication of an anonymous little treatise called *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696). It was the work of a theological adventurer named JOHN TOLAND. His object was not to vindicate the claims of Christianity to the reasonable consideration of men; nor yet to develop the *rationale* of its distinctive teachings; nor to expound the elements and exhibit the adaptation to man's nature and condition of that "wisdom of God in a mystery," which hitherto hidden, was at length revealed to the apostles by the Spirit, and so transmitted to us. His object, on the contrary, was to declare that nothing that seemed to him mysterious was a part of Christianity—that its whole content is "reasonable," in the sense that it is level to and not above reason. Meanwhile he was loud in his asseverations that

**How to Get  
Rid of  
Christianity.**

his alembic left all the "essentials of Christianity" untouched. A generation later (1730), when the Deistic movement had attained its height, it fruited in the more mature work of MATTHEW TINDAL, also published anonymously, and never finished, which bears the title of *Christianity as Old as Creation*. It did not trace Christianity back into the eternal counsels of the Godhead and show how from the beginning, in the purposes of the Divine love, all its glorious provisions of mercy lay prepared; nor did it begin with the great promise of the Seed at the gate of Eden, and exhibit the gospel latent in the Old Testament even from the first. Its alternative title already betrays its quite contrary purport: *Or, it reads, the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature*. His design was, the author tells us, to strip religion "of the additions which policy, mistake, and the circumstances of the time have made to it," and so to restore it to a form in which it is worthy of an "infinitely wise and good God." This is, of course, his euphemism for the discharge from Christianity of all that makes it Christianity as distinguished from

bare natural religion—of all that is “positive” in it, of all its historical elements. As Dr. JOHN CAIRNS sharply puts it: “Christianity is as old as the creation, only if it reëchoes Deism; but if it add anything to natural religion it is an upstart and impostor.” Meanwhile TINDAL also was tenacious of the Christian name, and would fain have it believed that he was Christianity’s purifier, rather than its assailant. Obviously the disengagement of “Christianity” from all connection with “mysticism” and “historical events,” is no novelty of the nineteenth century.

Let us go back some twelve hundred years further into the Christian past. We shall find **An Early Instance.** then preaching at Rome a British monk named MORGAN—though we may possibly know him better by its Latinized form of PELAGIUS. He has a zeal for morality that is highly commendable and that wins him a far reaching fame; but he has a conception of Christianity that simply eviscerates it of all that makes it a gospel. His feet are planted indeed on purely naturalistic ground; “do and live” is his one proclamation, and his motto, as HARNACK justly says, might well have been Cicero’s words, “No one ever yet thanked God for a virtue”—virtues being things that self-respecting men would desire, and all men must needs frame for themselves. Yet he is himself quite sure not only that he is a Christian, but that no dogma of Christianity is endangered by his teaching. When taken to task for his denial of the whole essence of the gospel, he vigorously asserted that all that he taught was within the limits of the orthodox dogma, and irritably demanded that he be left in quiet to prosecute his Christian

work. When at last he was brought to trial, his one zeal was to avoid condemnation. His teaching traversed no dogma of the Church; he was ready to anathematize any teaching that traversed any dogma of the Church; and when faced with his own, he frankly anathematized it, and went on as frankly teaching it. Dr. SAMUEL D. MCCONNELL of Brooklyn has permitted himself to be misled, through sympathy with some of his teachings, into speaking of him as “that sweet saint PELAGIUS;” surely he had forgotten the grossness of his tergiversations. Even HARNACK, who certainly is not biased against him by any doctrinal prejudices, can offer only a very qualified defence: “We must reflect that at that time priests and theologians lied shamefully in self-defence, in speeches, protocols, and writings; public opinion was much less sensitive, especially when accused theologians were exculpating themselves.” Of course, this devotion to established dogma did not last beyond its protective usefulness; and there were bold spirits among the Pelagians as well as crafty ones. We are not surprised, therefore, to note the change in tone in JULIAN OF ECLANUM, to whom the dogma of the western church is “stupid and godless”—while it is “culture” to which he makes his appeal. “We have the cultured on our side” is now the cry—to which AUGUSTINE calmly replies that this too “is a contention of all heretics, already soiled and worn by frequent use.” Already, therefore, at the opening of the fifth century it was no new thing in the church for “men of culture,” heirs of the garnered wisdom of the past, and creators of the coming wisdom of the future, to array themselves in the name of Christianity itself against the whole content of Christianity,

and to insist on eviscerating Christianity of all that makes it Christianity, under color of cleansing it of hurtful accretions.

Nevertheless, it is probable that this attitude is more characteristic of the nineteenth century than of any preceding century. It certainly is more characteristic of the nineteenth century than of the immediately preceding one. And there is an obvious reason for it. This is found in the nature of the philosophical background of nineteenth century religious thought. The idealistic thinkers that followed Kant slowly but irresistibly recovered for culture an eye and capacity for ideas, until, in the enthusiasm of reaction from the bald rationalism of the preceding age, the new culture came near to having an eye and capacity for nothing but "ideas." The historical elements of Christianity ceased to interest men; the "ideas" alone attracted them. And it was inevitable that under the heat of this new zeal for the underlying conceptions the whole of Christianity should, in many minds, be sublimated into nothing else but "ideas"—which they would naturally identify with their own. Perhaps the purest, as he is one of the earliest, exponents of this new attitude is DAVID FREIDRICH STRAUSS. For STRAUSS by no means proposed at first to break with Christianity. He proposed to recover Christianity in its purity. He did not propose, indeed, to stand on the old basis—whether of orthodoxy or of rationalism. His very claim to be heard depended on his claim to emancipation—to the "internal liberation of the feelings and intellect from certain religious and dogmatical presuppositions," which he

had "early attained by means of philosophical studies." But he would by no means allow that his criticism, by which the historical record of the life of Christ was sublimated into myth, affected in the least the Christian faith. "The author is aware," he says, in the preface of the first edition of the *Life of Jesus* (1835), "that the essence of the Christian faith is perfectly independent of his criticism. The supernatural birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension, remain eternal truths, whatever doubts may be cast on their reality as historical facts. . . . A dissertation at the close of the work will show that the dogmatic significance of the life of Jesus remains inviolate." In these words is sounded the key-note of our century's critical assault on Christianity. The philosophical foundation may have changed; the degree of radicalism with which the historical elements of Christianity have been evaporated may have varied endlessly; but on every side of us and throughout the whole extent of the century, precisely what has been attempted by writer after writer, is the liberation of Christianity from all accidents of time and space and the transmutation of it into the "ideal." The treatise of Dr. EDWIN A. ABBOTT, called *The Kernel and the Husk*, embodies, in title and treatment alike, the effort of the age to shell the husk off of Christianity and leave nothing but the kernel remaining. Naturally, what the kernel that remains is found to be, is just the preconceived body of convictions of each individual husker; and the whole movement is revealed as a persistent attempt to be rid of distinctive Christianity altogether and to substitute for it some more or less developed, some more or less pure, form of natural religion.

We have been led to make these remarks by the impression left on our mind on reading **Prof. Bacon** a paper published **And Abraham** in *The New World* for December last, by Prof. BENJ. W. BACON, D. D., Litt. D. of Yale University. It bears the title *Abraham the Heir of Yahweh*. It is not the radicalism of Dr. BACON'S construction of the history that has impressed us, though that is very extreme. How extreme it is may be inferred from the fact that it is perhaps more radical than even Dr. CHEYNE'S *Abraham* in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, which itself would seem to leave but narrow room for radicalism beyond it. Dr. CHEYNE seems willing to allow that Abraham "may be a genuine personal name," and accordingly remarks that "it cannot be unreasonable to hold that there is a kernel of tradition in the narratives." This "kernel of tradition" is not very large. "Hebrew legend may have told of an ancient hero (in the Greek sense of the word) bearing this name and connected specially with Hebron;" but "the real existence" of this hero "is as doubtful as that of other heroes." Even this meager "kernel" of historicity appears to be disallowed by Prof. BACON. For him every indication seems to point to the conclusion that what we call "Abraham" is "simply Israel's projection of its ideal self into the unknown past." For the rest, the two articles leave but little to choose between. Both are clear that the real Abraham—had he existed—would not have been worth our knowing. "That elusive phantasm of the prehistorical past, whose foot-prints, if we could trace them in the trackless desert, would be no better worth our reverence than those of any other prehistorical sheikh," whose "actual life, if made

known to us in photographic reality by some miracle of archaeology, would hardly prove edifying,"—if we could lay our finger on it, would it not be as "religiously worthless as the nameless chiefs who led the Arab hordes to Egypt in the invasion of the Shepherd kings?" These are Prof. BACON'S words, but Dr. CHEYNE would scarcely contradict them. "How inconsistent," he exclaims, "is the spiritual theism accredited to Abraham with sound views of historical development." Both agree that the Abraham of our records is an Abraham of pure imagination. "The framework of the narrative," says Dr. CHEYNE, "may be derived from myths and legends, but the spirit comes from the ideals stored up in the minds of the narrators. A school of writers . . . devoted themselves to elaborating a typical example of that unworldly goodness which was rooted in faith and fervently preached by the prophets." We cannot, therefore, speak of "that life of faith which historically began with Abraham;" we must rather say: "that life of faith, which though germinally present from the earliest times, first found clear and undoubted expression in the writings of the prophets in the recast legends of Abraham." Prof. BACON calls our attention to the layer on layer of fanciful Abrahams which overlie one another in the Bible stories: each age having its own ideal which it read into the typical figure, in a long series "from the nameless compilers of the folk tales of Genesis down to Jesus and Paul." This ideal Abraham is the only Abraham we could take interest in; for us, "the true Abraham is the ideal, and *this* Abraham lived only in the mind of prophet and seer." All this is very bad. But it is not this which has most attracted our interest in Prof. BACON'S article.

What has most impressed us in Prof. BACON'S article is the low estimate which he places on the value of reality. He evaporates Abraham into an ideal, and then asks, What difference does it make? There never was such an Abraham as Jesus and his apostles thought there was; and there never was such an Abraham as the Old Testament depicts—in any of its *strata*: but there is no loss. "What harm if the figure by which Israel typified its indefinitely remote past be found similar to the eponym heroes of other nations, so far as the absence of all real historical recollection is concerned? The distinction will still remain, that the ideal traits, one by one attached to the name as Israel's national idea gradually advanced towards the conception of itself as impelled by a divine 'call' and destined to a divine 'inheritance,' have created the world's typical hero of faith, the heir of the divine purposes of grace. The pearl is there, whether the nucleus about which it originally formed is discoverable or not." This is so extraordinary that one stops to look afresh before he is persuaded that he has read aright. Can it be that Prof. BACON feels no sense of loss when the Abraham of the Bible is transferred from the domain of the real to that of the ideal? It is certainly true that he professes not to. He chides "the average Christian" who, "when told that these critics question the existence of Abraham, imagines that some of his dearest religious possessions are threatened." He himself glories in the change: "Abraham is of value to us not for what he did, but for what he has been made to stand for in the thought of the great reformers in the after centuries." He even generalizes from this instance as to the superior value of the ideal to the real.

The study of Abraham is of interest to him chiefly as the illustration of this law: "of all names of religious story, that of Abraham furnishes the supreme instance of the independence of the real upon the ideal." It is "the vision," he cries, that "is the truth, the things that are not seen, the eternal." This was intelligible language on the lips of STRAUSS, the Hegelian Pantheist. Is it intelligible on the lips of this son of the Puritans? Surely some one should tell Prof. BACON what the loss is when the real is evaporated and the ideal substituted for it. Perhaps it will repay us, at the risk of saying some very primary things, to set down here some of the losses we must suffer.

Let us confine our attention in the first instance to Abraham himself.

**God as a Fact** Do we lose anything  
**And God as a** when the Abraham  
**Dream.** of the Bible is transferred from the region of fact to that of fancy? Well, that depends on how we estimate things. But we certainly lose this: *The God* of the Abraham of the Bible. Dr. BACON talks, indeed, of the ideal Abraham being "the vehicle for momentous truth." But in the case supposed, it is not truth; it is fancy. If the story of Abraham is a product of the imagination, men have only fancied a God who would do these things; and the God of Abraham is just as imaginary as Abraham himself. Is it to lose nothing, to lose the knowledge that such a God *exists* as the God of Abraham; that God has actually dealt with men as he is described to have dealt with Abraham; that God actually called Abraham and actually began in him a Kingdom in which all the families of the earth shall be blessed? No doubt, if this is all a dream, it is a beautiful

dream: but, however beautiful, it is a *dream*. While, if it happened, it is *so*. And that is what we lose, when the Biblical Abraham is dismissed into the region of shadows. The God that called Abraham, and blessed him, and gave him the great promise, and led him in the life of faith, and pronounced upon him the glorious benediction, is dismissed into the realm of shadows too. Idle to say that the God exists, though the man fades away; only the conception of the God remains. Happy those, certainly, in whose hearts the conception arose. Happy those who can hope that such a God is, and that he has such a purpose for the world. Happier still, however, those who know that such a God is, and that he has actually so dealt with men, and that he is still bringing them to the longed for city with the foundations. The conception of a good God is worth much: the reality is surely worth more.

And what is the loss, if we proceed beyond Abraham and accept **Real and Ideal Christianity.** Dr. BACON'S generalization that it is the ideal and not the real that really counts in the religious life? Just Christianity itself. Nothing else. Is Prof. BACON really ready to apply his rule throughout? Is it of no importance whether the Son of God actually came in the flesh? Is it of no importance whether he actually died on the tree for our sins? Whether he actually rose again for our justification? Whether he actually ascended to heaven and sits there on his throne, the Lord of the world? Beautiful dreams these! But if only beautiful *dreams*! How dreadful to have only an *imaginary* Savior and an *imaginary* salvation. But this is precisely what we must come to on the principle that it is the ideal, not the real that counts in the

religious life. It makes no difference what actually happened so only prophets and sages and apostles have risen to these great conceptions,—if the independence of the ideal on the real is the most important lesson of religious thinking,—why, then, we must be prepared to satisfy ourselves with a Christianity innocent of a real Redeemer and a real Redemption. Are we content to be saved from sin only in idea,—to “go to heaven” only in imagination?

And this leads us to a right estimate of the assertion that is now so

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evaporating (to its own satisfaction) the historicity of the Bible narratives. That depends on what Christianity is. If it is a religion that is founded on the actual,—if it is a religion of fact,—if it has any historical content,—it is evaporated with its history. If it is a religion of “ideas,” it is of course unaffected by the destruction of any history that may have become accidentally associated with it. But in that case, it is not Christianity in any intelligible sense; it is nothing but a natural religion—a religion of “eternal verities,”—as inoperative as all the rest of its fellows *actually* to save, though it may be infinitely superior to its fellows in the loftiness of its conceptions. A God who is only an idea, and who never intervenes in the world of fact, can never *actually* save a soul that is real from sin that is real. For the actual salvation of an actual sin-stricken soul we require an actual Redeemer who has actually intervened in the actual course of history. The issue of to-day is accordingly no other than the issue in the fifth century and in the eight-

teenth century and in the second third of our own century—the issue is just Christianity itself. Christianity is a historical religion, all of whose doctrines are facts. He who assaults the trustworthiness of the record of the intervention of God for the redemption of the world, is simply assaulting the heart of Christianity. And he will soon be forced to say what Prof. C. C. EVERETT of Harvard says, in an essay in the same number of *The New World* with Dr. BACON's, and that happens immediately to precede that of Dr. BACON: "In my own thought the specialty of Christianity is found in the fact that it has no specialty." We beg Prof. EVERETT's pardon for adducing this sentence here; he doubtless means it in a somewhat different sense from that in which we are adducing it—though we could wish his main thought of Christianity was further from that which we would express by it. If there is to be no historical content in our religion, in a word, Christianity is, but another form of that religious aspiration common to all men, clothed in forms which are a product of the chance conditions of the men who have created it. The issue is in short—Is Christianity given of God, or made by man?—is it a magnificent dream or is it a divine reality?

It would seem quite obvious, then, that at the bottom of the prevalent

**Are We to Save Ourselves?** critical assault on the historicity of the Bible there lies something far more

deadly than even the criticism itself. It is common to speak of this as an anti-supernaturalistic bias; but often with an inadequate conception of what this anti-supernaturalistic bias is. There is much more included in it than a distaste for "miracles," taken in a narrow sense. It embraces also a distaste for a super-

natural redemption and a supernatural salvation. Men could not speak so lightly of the independence of the ideal on the real,—and could not ask so innocently what dear religious possession is threatened by the destruction of the realities of the intervention of God for redemption, if they retained a keen sense of the supernaturalness of redemption. Dr. WILLIAM MCINTOSH, in a trenchantly anti-supernaturalistic book published some years ago, under the title of *The Natural History of the Christian Religion*, showed in the most poignant way that anti-supernaturalism in the historical construction of our religion necessarily implies a corresponding anti-supernaturalism in our apprehension of its actual working. It is true. We are careless of the reality of the divine intervention in human affairs, only when we are not keenly conscious of the need of a real divine intervention for our personal salvation. VON HARTMANN divides the categories into "autosoteric" and "heterosoteric" salvation. An "autosoteric" theory of salvation lies always at the basis of carelessness as to the reality of the supernatural events recorded in the history of redemption. And that is as much as to say that he who feels the need of a Savior other than his own will, *cannot* be content with a merely ideal Christ—or with a merely ideal Abraham. W.

The interpretation of II Tim. iii. 16 is a matter of prime importance, since it is the classical passage concerning the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures. The Revised and Authorized versions differ slightly in its translation. The latter runs, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, etc." The former has "Every Scripture inspired of God is also

II. Timothy, iii. 16.