

THE ATTITUDE OF THE JEWS TOWARD JESUS.

BY DR. ISIDOR SINGER.

I.

IN view of the well-known fact that the overwhelming majority of so-called Jewish converts in Austria and Germany—there are very few of these pseudo neo-Christians in Russia, and almost none in other parts of Europe or on this continent—enter the Church for merely selfish reasons, a Jewish wit offered the following definition of them: “A Jewish convert is one who pretends to believe in dogmas and to follow traditions which the educated Christian himself is gradually abandoning.” I know this statement will be a hard blow to those pious Christian souls who contribute to the Jewish Missions; but there is consolation for the millions of genuine followers of Christ in the other fact that thousands, yea, tens of thousands, of educated and noble-minded Jews in our day, while firmly standing upon the monotheistic platform of the Synagogue, are gradually giving up the attitude of their forefathers toward the central figure of Christianity—which was a pathetic mingling of ignorance, antipathy and fear.

I can bear witness to this momentous change from my own personal experience. When I was a boy—that is, between thirty-five and forty years ago—in my little native town in Moravia, had my father or any other member of the congregation heard the name of Jesus uttered from the pulpit of our synagogue, he would have immediately left the building in indignation, and the rabbi would have been summarily dismissed. To-day, however, it is not strange in many synagogues, especially in this country, to hear sermons preached eulogizing this same Jesus; and nobody, except a few Pharisaic followers of the neo-Romantic

school of Judaism, thinks in earnest of protesting against claiming — with some dogmatic reservations, of course — Jeshua ben Joseph as one of the noblest twigs of the old branch of Judah.

II.

In 1899, at the suggestion of Dr. I. K. Funk, a number of the most eminent Jewish theologians, historians and philosophers in Europe and the United States were circularized with a view to ascertaining what some of the representative contemporary Jews have to say about Jesus and His teachings. Twenty-six gentlemen participated in the symposium: twelve theologians (six American, six European); seven students of religion, historians, philosophers (one American, six European); and seven prominent laymen (four American, three European). The chairman of this little Sanhedrin was Dr. K. Kohler, the leading Jewish theologian of the American continent and president of the Hebrew Union College at Cincinnati, Ohio. The following quotations from some of the contributions to this symposium are of profound interest, as indicating the attitude of intelligent Jews toward Jesus to-day. The views of Dr. Kohler, being of the most authoritative character, deserve the place of honor. He said:

"... Jesus, the living man, the teacher and practiser of the tenderest love for God and man, the paragon of piety, humility and self-surrender, whose very failings were born of overflowing goodness and sympathy with the afflicted, the Jews had no cause to reject. He was one of the best and truest sons of the synagogue. . . . What reason had the Jews for hating and persecuting Him who came only to weep with the sorrowing, to lift up the down-trodden, to save and to heal? He was a man of the people; why should the people have raised the cry, 'Crucify Him!' against Him whose only object in life was to bring home the message of God's love to the humblest of His children? . . .

"But He was more than an ordinary teacher and healer of men. He went to the very core of religion and laid bare the depths of the human soul. As a veritable prophet, Jesus, in such striking manner, disclaimed allegiance to any of the Pharisean schools and asked for no authority but that of the living voice within, while passing judgment on the law, in order to raise life to a higher standard. . . .

"The Jew of to-day beholds in Jesus an inspiring ideal of matchless beauty. . . . His name as helper of the poor, as sympathizing friend of the fallen, as brother of every fellow sufferer, as lover of man and redeemer of woman, has become the inspiration, the symbol and the watchword for the world's greatest achievements in the field of benevolence. While continuing the work of the synagogue, the Christian

Church with the larger means at her disposal created those institutions of charity and redeeming love that accomplished wondrous things. The very sign of the cross has lent a new meaning, a holier pathos, to suffering, sickness and sin, so as to offer new practical solutions for the great problems of evil which fill the human heart with new joys of self-sacrificing love. . . .

"All this modern Judaism gladly acknowledges reclaiming Jesus as one of its greatest sons. But it denies that one single man, or one church, however broad, holds the key to many-sided truth. It waits for the time when all life's deepest mysteries will have been spelled, and to the ideals of sage and saint that of the seeker of all that is good, beautiful and true will have been joined; when Jew and Gentile, Synagogue and Church, will merge into the Church universal, into the great city of humanity, whose name is 'God is there.'"

Let us now listen to a voice from the grave, that of Dr. Gustav Gottheil, late Rabbi of Temple Emanuel, New York:

"... To place the Master of Nazareth by the side of the Jewish prophets can surely be no dishonor to them, nor can it dim the lustre of His name. If He has added to their spiritual bequests new jewels of religious truth, and spoken words which are words of life, because they touch the deepest springs of the human heart, why should we Jews not glory in Him? Show us the man, help us to understand his mind, draw from his face the thick veil behind which his personality has been buried for the Jewish life by the heartless zeal of his so-called followers, and you will find the Jewish heart as responsive to truth and light and love as that of all other nations."

The group of non-theological Jewish scholars may be fitly led by one of the greatest living students of religion, Dr. Morris Jastrow, Jr., Professor of Semitic Languages at the University of Pennsylvania, who said:

"From the historic point of view, Jesus is to be regarded as a direct successor of the Hebrew prophets. His teachings are synonymous with the highest spiritual aspirations of the human race. Like the prophets, He lays the chief stress upon pure conduct and moral ideas; but He goes beyond the prophets in His absolute indifference to theological speculations and religious rites. It is commonly said that the Jews rejected Jesus. They did so in the sense in which they rejected the teachings of their earlier prophets; but the question may be pertinently asked, Has Christianity accepted Jesus? Neither our social nor our political system rests upon the principles of love and charity, so prominently put forward by Jesus.

"The long hoped-for reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity will come when once the teachings of Jesus shall have become the axioms of human conduct."

Let us now cross the ocean, and go over to Paris to listen to the celebrated writer, Dr. Max Nordau, and the great French philologist, Théodore Reinach. Dr. Nordau said:

"... Jesus is soul of our soul, as He is flesh of our flesh. Who, then, could think of excluding Him from the people of Israel? St. Peter will remain the only Jew who said of the son of David, 'I know not the man.' If the Jews up to the present time have not publicly rendered homage to the sublime moral beauty of the figure of Jesus, it is because their tormentors have always persecuted, tortured, assassinated them in His name. The Jews have drawn their conclusions from the disciples as to the master, which was a wrong, a wrong pardonable in the eternal victims of the implacable, cruel hatred of those who called themselves Christians. Every time that a Jew mounted to the sources and contemplated Christ alone, without His pretended faithful, he cried, with tenderness and admiration: 'Putting aside the Messianic mission, this man is ours. He honors our race, and we claim Him as we claim the Gospels—flowers of Jewish literature and only Jewish.'"

Dr. Théodore Reinach, member of the French Parliament, formerly president of the *Société des Etudes Juives*, said:

"Although we know very little with certainty concerning the life and teachings of Christ, we know enough of Him to believe that, in morals as well as in theology, He was the heir and continuator of the old prophets of Israel. There is no necessary gap between Isaiah and Jesus; but it is the misfortune of both Christianity and Judaism that a gap has been effected by the infiltration of heathen ideas in the one, and the stubborn (only too explainable) reluctance of the other, to admit among its prophets one of its greatest sons. I consider it the duty of both enlightened Christians and Jews to endeavor to bridge over this gap."

Let us now recross the Atlantic and listen to the short, but pregnant, sentence of the recognized leader of American Judaism, the great banker and philanthropist, Jacob H. Schiff, who said:

"We Jews honor and revere Jesus of Nazareth as we do our own prophets who preceded Him."

The selections from this symposium cannot be more fittingly closed than by the beautiful words of one of the worthiest representatives of the Jewish lay-world, Harris Weinstock, a wealthy merchant of the Pacific coast, whose book on "Jesus the Jew," partly an outcome of the symposium, reflects with rare eloquence and laudable sincerity the inner struggles of the liberal-minded and educated Jewish layman of our day:

"With the growing enlightenment and the broadening atmosphere under which the modern Jew lives, the progressive Jew looks upon the

Nazarene as one of Israel's great teachers, who had a potent influence on civilization, whose words and deeds have left an undying imprint upon the human mind, and have done heroic work toward universalizing the God of Israel and the Bible. This change of sentiment toward Jesus is largely due to the intelligent and progressive preaching of our modern rabbis, who seem to appreciate the glory Jesus has shed upon the Jewish name, and the splendid work He did in broadening the influence of the Jewish teachings. . . .

"No Jewish education can be complete that does not embody within it a comprehensive knowledge of Jesus the Jew, His life, His teachings and the causes which led to His death. . . ."

III.

After thoughtfully perusing these testimonials, the Christian reader will probably ask himself whether he has just been dreaming a beautiful dream. But no. It is reality; and not only the Synagogue, but also the Church, feels that spring is near and that the doors are opened wide to let out the musty air of the centuries and let in the fresh breeze of religious harmony. A New Theology is knocking at the pulpits of priest, pastor and rabbi. Every one of them feels the old theological platform giving away under his feet. The hour seems to be at hand when Roman Catholic, Protestant and Jew, and whoever believes in one personal God and the moral order of the Universe, shall be able and willing to gather about the same monotheistic banner. Are we Jews ready to claim the New Testament, which was written in an Aramaic idiom, written almost entirely upon the soil of Palestine by Hebrew writers for a mainly Hebrew audience—are we ready to claim this work as a continuance of the Old Testament, tearing out the white leaf which separates Malachi from St. Matthew? Have we children of the twentieth century, indeed, the inner strength that will enable us to rise to the sublime spiritual platform of the prophet Malachi, who in our Bible keeps, so to say, the watch on the border line of the two dispensations—when he asked: "Have we not all one father; hath not one God created us?" Is the time ripe for Hebrew scholars to take up the study of the New Testament with the earnestness and zeal with which Christian scholars study the Old Testament? Have we the men among us to write and finance an enterprise advocated by the writer of these lines, many years ago: the publication of a translation of the New Testament and the Apocrypha, and a thoroughly critical commentary on them, by a band

of Hebrew scholars? They would feel more at home in this field than the majority of Christian theologians, who are unable to grasp fully the Oriental meanings and allusions of this "Christian Midrash," as August Wuensche, the famous Protestant Orientalist, calls the New Testament. Only to him, indeed, who is familiar with Hagadah and Halakah are the dialogues of Jesus with His disciples and followers absolutely clear. And here may I be permitted to suggest to some scholar of the progressive Cincinnati School — the Hebrew Union College — that he give us a supplementary volume to R. T. Hereford's excellent treatise on "Christianity in Talmud and Midrash," by pursuing the subject through the vast Hebrew literature of the Middle Ages, down to our own days? I appeal to our theological school in the West, because the authorities of the orthodox Rabbinical seminary of New York would reject such a suggestion as a shockingly indelicate one.

In brief, the question is: Has modern Judaism, after an interval of 1,839 years, the will and the force to resume the great monotheistic world-propaganda which our ancestors, blinded by national passions, had abandoned shortly before their war with Rome?

As early as the second century, B.C., according to the best Greek and Roman authorities, there was no island, no town in the vast Roman Empire without its Jewish or Judeo-heathen colony, thus preparing the soil for Judaism's child, Christianity. Later on, Hillel and his school became the centre of a powerful missionary activity, and Gamaliel, the teacher of the apostle Paul, belonged to this school. And of the great Gamaliel's son, Simon Gamaliel, who was murdered by the Jewish zealots in the beginning of the Roman-Jewish war, the following principle has been handed down by tradition: "If a heathen presents himself to enter Israel's tents, stretch out your hands to lead him under the wings of the Godhead." Even to-day, pious Jews all over the world, in reciting the thirteenth of the eighteen Benedictions (*Shemone Esre*), the central piece of the Jewish daily prayer-book, which dates back, in some of its parts, to the first century, B.C., pray for the welfare of the proselyte. Jews are still to-day proud of Poppæa, the wife of Nero, and of the great Roman lady, Fulvia, both great admirers of the Jewish religion; and we point with great satisfaction to King Izates of Adiabene and his mother

Helena, who embraced Judaism in the middle of the first century, A.D., to be followed, nine hundred years later, by the royal house and the people of the Chazars. And is the book of the prophet Jonas, at bottom, anything else than a plea in favor of pagan missions?

The continuous stress and uniform jeremiades of nearly all of the Jewish charitable institutions not only in this country, but throughout the entire household of Israel, has certainly a deeper *voelker-psychologische* meaning than many of the professional social workers and philanthropists may dream of. There is, of course, no excuse for the rich Jew or well-to-do Jew for not doing his full duty by his poor brother. But in this systematic indifference of the modern Jew with regard to exclusively sectional and racial institutions, may we not, indeed, discern a semi-conscious tendency to reach out into a broader, common brotherhood? Have we not the right to expect that the day will come when the Jewish community, over the heads of its either benighted or hypocritical religious leaders, will give up the Law definitely and officially, forsaking the old Oriental Sabbath and the totemistic dietary laws, and even giving up the "Jewish" cemetery? As if every part of God's earth were not holy ground in which the mortal remains of our dear ones might fittingly be laid to rest!

The Jewish Diaspora, during the first millennium of the Christian era, willingly submitted to the decisions of the Rabbinical schools of Palestine and Babylonia, exchanging for a further period of about eight centuries this Oriental religious tyranny for one of European extraction. Thus, our poor ancestors grew into a "community hating everybody and hated by everybody," to use the expression of Tacitus.

The time now seems to have come to shake off, once and for all, this intolerable Pharisaic yoke; and no other Jewish community on earth is so well qualified to start on this work of salvation for the house of Israel and for humanity at large as that of the United States, which is a kaleidoscopic composition of the Jewries of the entire globe. In order to inaugurate its great spiritual world-mission, it will only have to modify its central religious dogma so as to read: "Hear not only O Israel, but all humanity, the Lord our God is One God."

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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

FOLK-LORE.

"THE Religion of Primitive Peoples"* inaugurates a series of "Studies in the History of Religions" which, if the volumes already announced on Buddhism and Islam are as weighty, as crammed with scholarly research and personal knowledge, will render notable credit to the Catholic Church which sets its *imprimatur* on the first leaf of this the first of them. Monseigneur Le Roy, already the author of a book upon the Pygmies, was himself a missionary for many years in Central Africa and has the records of his order to draw upon as well as his own notes. He knows the little black men and loves them. He has, moreover, like all Frenchmen (it is a commonplace of criticism), a style which is both clear and elegant, and adds to that the pleasantness, the logical quickness and dexterity, and the ready humor, proper to a trained priesthood. It is impossible not to enjoy, for example, the misadventure of a European who violated a Tabu and thereafter served experimentally to justify it; or the bungling of an anthropologist who spoke out of his ignorance about the Catholic Church; or, on the other hand, his picturesque if elaborate analogies between that thick-forested and well-watered sub-tropical world and the intelligences which people it. Nor could we spare his beautiful and touching conviction that all real religion is right religion and that "God who at sundry times and in divers manners" has declared Himself since the creation is the God of Central Africa and of all primitive peoples. But we could wish that he would not leave all the good manners and all the essential logic to the devil and his allies. Why should an anthropologist utter himself on such irrelevant questions as the

* "*La Religion des Primitifs*." By Monseigneur A. Le Roy. Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne et Cie, 1909.