

THE CRUCIFIXION¹

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[THE author, who has written several books on early Christian history, has in preparation a work entitled *Le Mystère du dieu mort et ressuscité: Histoire du dieu Jésus*, of which the article that follows is apparently a summarized fragment.]

SCHOLARS who have studied the history of Jesus have been divided up to the present into two schools — those who believe that the Crucifixion was an actual sentence inflicted upon Jesus by the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, and those who believe that it is a myth. A study of other mystery religions contemporary with the beginning of Christianity leads us to suggest a third hypothesis — that the Crucifixion, while a historical fact, was not the infliction of a court sentence, but was the accomplishment of an antique sacrificial rite derived from a very ancient Palestinian religion which recognized Jesus as its deity and which, after lying latent for centuries in the shade of Judaism, suddenly revived during the first century of our era.

This hypothesis assumes, as do most scholars to-day, that Christianity revealed itself to the Græco-Roman world less as a regenerative social and spiritual movement than as a doctrine of redemption based upon the expiatory sacrifice represented by the death of Jesus. M. Alfred Loisy says: 'What conquered the Græco-Roman world was the mystery of salvation founded

upon the death of Jesus conceived as the Redeemer.' M. Maurice Goguel expresses the same view: 'The outstanding feature of apostolical Christianity was the doctrine of redemption by the death of Christ.' M. Charles Guignebert, Director of Christian Studies at the Sorbonne, expresses himself to the same effect. Most Bible critics, and in fact substantially all Roman Catholic and Protestant Biblical scholars from the most orthodox to the most liberal, agree in this opinion.

That raises the question whether this doctrine of atonement by sacrifice existed from the very birth of Christianity. Was it a part of the earliest and most primitive teaching of the original Church, or is it a later development? Rationalist critics of Christian tradition believe the Crucifixion was an ordinary judicial sentence carried out by the Jewish or Roman authorities, which was later interpreted as an expiatory sacrifice. Roman Catholic scholars declare that the Crucifixion was simultaneously a judicial execution and an expiatory sacrifice. But there is a third possible hypothesis — that the Crucifixion was actually a ritual expiatory sacrifice, which was later conceived as also the infliction of a judicial sentence.

This brings us to the question, Which of the four Gospels is the earliest? Better said, Which of the authors of the Gospels first put into writing the oral tradition of Jesus' life and death, and thereby fixed to some extent the narratives of the three others? For a long

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time the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, which is the first in the Canon, was considered the first in chronological order. Rationalist scholars to-day generally ascribe priority to the Gospel according to Saint Mark. The Gospels according to Saint Luke and Saint John are evidently later in their present form, but scholars have recently raised the question whether their narratives may not incorporate still older written records which were perhaps earlier than any which we have at present. The Gospels according to Saint Mark and according to Saint Matthew also may possibly be new versions of more ancient texts. It is hypothetically possible, moreover, that an original Gospel once existed, anterior to any that we now possess, which was subsequently lost. We see, therefore, that the problem is one of great uncertainty and difficulty.

The uncertainty extends even to the language in which the original Gospel was written. For a long time the Greek text was supposed to be a translation from the Aramaic, which was presumably the mother tongue of Jesus. The same conjecture has been made as to the Gospel according to Saint Mark. It is equally possible, as has been suggested by other scholars, that the latter is a translation into Greek of a very early Latin text, originally designed for the use of the Christians at Rome who spoke Latin — or rather the *sermo plebeius*, which was a popular form of Latin.

Regardless, however, of which was the earliest of the four Gospels, or which approaches closest to an original Gospel no longer extant, or in what language the very first of all the Gospels was written, we can say with assurance that this earliest narrative of the life of Jesus, which may indeed be essentially identical with one of the four extant Gospels, was one of the

greatest masterpieces of human literature.

It was a masterpiece because it was creative as well as descriptive. We know that the materials upon which the Gospel story was probably based were a collection of the Sayings of Jesus and a collection of Evidences — that is to say, of Old Testament prophecies which Jesus was said to have fulfilled. From these two formless sources the original author constructed a drama unique in history, which his fellow Evangelists copied and developed. A moment's reflection tells us that a writer must have been blessed with the rarest gifts of creative and descriptive writing to conceive and execute such a work. . . .

Rationalist critics agree that most of the Gospel narrative of Jesus' life, suffering, and death is taken from the Evidences, from the Sayings of Jesus, and from the Confessions of Faith of the early congregations. Now let us try to picture to ourselves what these sources of the earliest Gospel were like. We can form an opinion of them, perhaps, from the Sayings of Our Lord lately discovered in Egypt, which appear to be a continuation of the earlier Sayings. They consist of a series of otherwise disconnected sentences, each preceded by the ritual expression, 'The Lord said.' The Evidences, likewise, could have been nothing more than a dry series of citations from the Hebrew prophets which Jesus had fulfilled: 'The deaf shall hear, the lame shall walk, the blind shall see,' followed by the simple abstract statement that the deaf did hear, the lame did walk, the blind did see, without further detail. They were, in substance, a mere catalogue of prophecies followed by a catalogue of fulfillments. None of these written sources possessed action, drama, the vital thrill of life. Yet there must have been something palpitant with

life in the legend, or tradition, concerning Christ which passed from mouth to mouth throughout the Hellenic Orient.

Now in the gifted vision of the first of the Evangelists the fulfillment of each prophecy became a tremendous historical event; the utterance of each saying became a mighty human episode. Every incident becomes a picture, a recital, a drama. To the poet's eye each of these incidents occurred in a particular place at a particular time. The sea, the boat, the storm, the sky, the mountains, all the attendant scenery, unroll before his gaze. People emerge and play their parts, the crowd files past, the disciples acquire personality; and above all Jesus himself towers through the shadow of the centuries. And now comes the stroke of genius. The Christ is pictured as a man and yet He exhales the mystery of a god. He has the heart of a man, which beats so true to human reality, to human psychology, in all its infinitely delicate nuances; He has a voice so vibrant with all the subtle inflections of a great soul that only a supreme creative artist could have conceived Him. . . .

The result is a divine story — or, rather, a succession of short isolated episodes almost independent of each other, but grouped around one principal figure and possessing the impalpable quality by which men have in all times expressed their conception of divinity. And the miracle is that, unlike Homer, Ovid, Shakespeare, and other great creative geniuses of secular art and literature, this author obviously possessed little culture or education. His meagre vocabulary and simple syntax prove this. But those handicaps do not detract in any respect from the greatness of his genius.

One feature of the Gospel texts suggests that even the earliest of those

we now possess is a translation. They lack the forceful, pregnant words, the striking turns of speech, that characterize great writers, and that abound in the Epistles of Saint Paul, although these are even simpler in composition and scantier in vocabulary. But, beneath the simplicity of the Gospels, what lucidity! No stream of language ever flowed more limpid or bore a greater burden of mystery. And the climax of this great masterpiece is the account of the Crucifixion.

The Last Supper, the night on Mount Olivet, the arrest, the appearance before the two tribunals, — the Jewish and the Roman, — the mob, the condemnation, the flagellation, the ascent to Calvary, the Crucifixion, the death, the sepulchre, the Resurrection! Religious historians are apt to overlook the extent to which power of expression, formal literary excellence, may contribute to the propagation of a doctrine. That has nothing to do with its historical authenticity. One of our great contemporary poets said to me not long ago that the personality of Jesus as revealed in the Gospels was so compelling that he must believe him an historical character. I replied that since the earliest of the Gospels was written almost fifty years after the Crucifixion, at a point then several weeks' journey away from Palestine, and after one of the greatest political upheavals recorded in history, it was inconceivable that the thousand delicate details that give verisimilitude to our conception of Jesus as a person could have been preserved undistorted until that time. We must remember that a personality can never be portrayed truly by broad strokes alone, but only by innumerable subtle shadings and nuances that no memory could retain for fifty years. I also pointed out that as a general proposition an historical person described by

an incompetent writer ceases to be real and lifelike, but that a character of fiction described by a true artist becomes a living reality. . . .

While we may trust to the artistic effect of a work in judging its beauty and excellence, we cannot rely upon that effect to confirm its historical accuracy. Now, if we disregard the emotional element of the Gospel narrative, and subject its factual contents to detailed criticism, we discover in it numerous inconsistencies and contradictions. I shall not pause to enumerate them here, further than to note that Jesus was arrested, brought before two separate tribunals, and executed in the space of a few hours, and that the Jewish court is represented as holding a night session in the very midst of a great religious festival. These are impossibilities that a person familiar with judicial procedure in Jerusalem would have recognized instantly, and they prove that the writer must have lived far away from the events and places he described. . . .

The Gospels assert, and the Church teaches, that Jesus was executed by virtue of a judicial sentence pronounced by the procurator Pilate, but that this judicial execution became a sacrifice of atonement by which He voluntarily accomplished His task of redeeming the world. The death of Jesus, then, is both a judicial execution and an expiatory sacrifice — or, rather, an expiatory sacrifice which, instead of being performed by ritual methods, was carried out under the guise of a judicial sentence. Now this interpretation transcends the sphere of history. It takes us into the field of theological doctrine. It presupposes the accomplishment of a supernatural plan. God the Father, having decided to send His Son into the world, or the Son having decided in agreement with the Father to come to the world, to

expiate the sins of men, a judicial execution was the means by which, after reviewing all the forms of death possible, the two Divine Persons, evidently assisted by the third, decided to accomplish Their design. In other words, a judicial tradition and a sacrificial tradition are inseparably associated in the Evangelical account of the Crucifixion. Now what do the Epistles of Saint Paul tell us?

No story of the Crucifixion occurs in Saint Paul's Epistles. These are letters addressed by the Apostle to the early Christian churches, about the middle of the first century — that is to say, about twenty or thirty years after the Crucifixion occurred. But, although the letters were written for special occasions, they were not ordinary communications. They were intended to be read solemnly before the congregation, just as an episcopal letter might be read to-day. More than that, they were intended to be chanted, for they are rhythmic — at least in the original. But we must not conceive Saint Paul as a prelate striving to put his commands in verse — even free verse. His rhythm resembles that of all primitive inspirationalists, whether prophets or dervishes. In a poetical form that seems to flash from his subconsciousness, Saint Paul deals with questions as they arise, moved solely by his desire to give the churches he has organized the guidance that the 'Spirit' reveals to him. Our difficulty is to distinguish in the Epistles of Saint Paul what he originally wrote from what has been added subsequently. . . . In the verses which we may confidently ascribe to him he stands out as a genius scarcely inferior to the author of the earliest Gospel, but very different from him in character. The Evangelist is a bard with the soul of a dramatist. He puts everything he describes upon the stage. Saint Paul

is neither a bard nor a dramatist. He is a mystic and a prophet. He seeks to convert his readers with all the passion of his soul. He is a poet, but a poet of action. The style of the Evangelist is limpid and simple; the style of Saint Paul is often abrupt, incoherent, almost chaotic. With the rudest pen of any early Christian author, with a style abounding in faults, with an incredible poverty of words and shocking sins of syntax, he nevertheless marshals his thoughts more powerfully and compellingly than any subsequent religious writer down to Pascal. For example, when he seeks to describe, in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians (v. 5), the spiritual grace that God grants Christians to sustain them in worldly persecution, he uses the term, 'the earnest of the Spirit,' or 'the pledge of the Spirit.' We can translate any of the Gospels as easily as we can Homer. No one has adequately translated Saint Paul.

This brings us to the question, What do these Epistles tell us of the Crucifixion. In one place Saint Paul recalls to the Galatians (iii. 1) that before their eyes 'Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you.' That picture which Saint Paul drew of the Crucifixion for this congregation would be inestimably precious if we possessed it. Unfortunately, it never was incorporated in his writings where it might have had authority equal to that of the Gospel version. In fact, we find nowhere in his Epistles more than the abstract affirmation that Jesus was crucified. The only thing a little more precise occurs in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (ii. 8) where we read that 'the princes of this world . . . crucified the Lord of glory'—a statement which needs careful study, and which, taken by itself alone, conveys little information.

No description of the Crucifixion,

therefore, even the briefest, is to be found in Saint Paul's Epistles. But if they afford us no clue as to how he conceived that tragic event, it is easy enough to discover how he did not conceive it. In order to do so, however, we must guard against what I should call the harmonizing fallacy. It is a fallacy that besets all critics, rationalist or orthodox. To illustrate: We know from the Gospels that Jesus was betrayed by Judas. On the other hand, we read in Saint Paul that Christ was 'delivered' (Romans viii. 32). Now critics afflicted with the harmonizing fallacy immediately assume that this means delivered by Judas, and affirm that Saint Paul knew of the betrayal. Thus they have harmonized Saint Paul and the Gospels. Now Saint Paul never mentions Judas, and for a good reason. In the same way, when a pious priest who knows that Jesus is the son of the Virgin Mary reads in the Epistles that Jesus was born 'of a woman,' he immediately substitutes 'of a virgin,' which the Epistles never state. One good critic writes: 'Saint Paul's Epistles have for their fundamental theme Jesus of Nazareth, His life and His death.' In the first place, Saint Paul never uses the word 'Nazareth' or 'Nazarene.' As for taking for his theme the life of Jesus, the Epistles make absolutely no reference to His life, though they do refer to His death. In fact, there is remarkably little relating directly to the personality of Jesus in the Epistles. The truth is that the pious and distinguished scholar just quoted never reads an Epistle of Saint Paul without unconsciously reading into it the text of the four Gospels.

We can affirm categorically, then, that the Epistles of Saint Paul do not mention the arrest, the trial, the sentence, or any other judicial proceeding in connection with the death of

Jesus. Not only do they fail to mention them specifically, but they do not even make a remote allusion to them. When Saint Paul speaks of the Crucifixion, he never refers to Pontius Pilate, the Romans, Caiaphas, Herod, Judas, the holy women, or any other person associated with the Crucifixion as described in the Gospels. Not only does he never speak of them by name, but he never alludes to them indirectly. Let me emphasize this, because it is a point of extreme importance. Saint Paul is addressing the Christian Church in every line of his letters. He repeatedly mentions the crucified Jesus, yet never does he refer either directly or indirectly to any one of the actors in the tragedy so poignantly portrayed in the Gospels. There is not a whisper of the intervention of the Jews or the Romans, not a detail or an allusion to the trial of Jesus before His judges. A person whose only knowledge of Christian teaching was derived from the Epistles of Saint Paul would know that Jesus had been crucified, but he would not know, or even suspect, that he had ever been accused of a crime, or arrested, or brought before one or more tribunals, or condemned to death and executed as a criminal.

Certain critics cite three passages which they infer refer to these things. Saint Paul says in Romans xv. 3 that Jesus was 'reproached.' They read into this meagre statement direct substantiating evidence that Jesus was sentenced by the Roman procurator and delivered by him to be insulted by his soldiers. But Saint Paul, in saying that Jesus was reproached, does not say by whom, and for us to supply 'by the soldiers of Pilate' is to fall hopelessly into the harmonizing error.

In his Epistles Saint Paul says several times that Jesus suffered, as in II Corinthians i. 5 and 7, Romans viii. 17, and Philippians iii. 10. This is assumed

to be decisive proof that he suffered a judicial penalty. But the Greek words, *πάθημα, συμπάσχω*, which Saint Paul employs, and their derivatives, seem to refer specifically to spiritual suffering. Saint Paul never speaks of suffering in the sense of suffering as a penalty, but of suffering in the sacrificial sense employed in the sacred dramas. The third point is that Paul says in II Corinthians xiii. 4 that Jesus was crucified 'through weakness.' Jesus, then, was weak. In reality Saint Paul wishes to say that Jesus, having renounced for the time being His character as God, as is described in the famous extract from his Epistle to the Philippians, ii. 7 and 8, assumed 'the form of a servant,' and he teaches that we should humble ourselves like Him, in order to be exalted with Him.

These are the three statements that are supposed to prove that the Epistles represent Jesus as condemned to death by order of the procurator and executed by his legionaries. But the facts speak for themselves. There is no allusion in Saint Paul to a trial, a condemnation, a judicial execution. On the other hand, the Apostle's conception of the Crucifixion throughout is that of an expiatory sacrifice, although he does not specifically state that it was such, since the technical word 'propitiation (*ἱλαστήριον*)' employed in Romans iii. 25 may be taken figuratively. All critics, whether orthodox or not, are agreed that the doctrine of expiatory sacrifice is found on every page of the Epistles and inspires them throughout.

Most critics, both rationalist and orthodox, take the position that Saint Paul knew of the trial and judgment of Jesus although he never mentioned them. They reason that Saint Paul was a preacher and not a narrator. He assumed that his correspondents knew the story of Jesus, and so thought it

unnecessary to refer to the details of his life. But even admitting this as a general argument, it hardly accounts for the utter absence of any allusion whatsoever to them. Not once in all of his Epistles, not once in all of his writings to the faithful, did Saint Paul make any passing reference or allusion, no matter how remote, to the episodes and the personages of the Gospel story. That he should have omitted to do so in many instances is plausible enough, but that he should never have done so in a single instance is extraordinary. Never a reference in Saint Paul to the arrest, to the trial, to the judgment, to the mob, to the tragic journey of the Cross, to any incident of that unforgettable and tragic drama! . . . I am convinced that if Saint Paul had known the tragedy of the Passion we should find some evidence of it in his writings.

In our twentieth century it is difficult for us to reconstruct in our imaginations the barbarity of punishment by crucifixion. It was one of the most torturing punishments both physically and morally that the cruelty of man has invented. Therefore it is incredible that a Christian who was living at the time that Jesus suffered that punishment, and who, although he did not see it personally, would have known of it from the mouths of eyewitnesses, should never have let an expression of horror at that fearful event escape his pen. When we reflect upon the almost physical agony that this dreadful drama, as related by the Evangelists, has caused the faithful for centuries, it seems marvelous indeed that an exalted mystic like Saint Paul should never have made a single reference to that suffering in any of his Epistles.

It may seem to the reader that we are going to a great deal of trouble to show that a thing that is absent from

the Apostle's writing was also absent from his mind. But the burden of proof is on the other side. It is easy to show, moreover, that the trial and sentence and legal execution of Jesus are passed over without mention, not only in Saint Paul's Epistles, but also in most early Christian writings, except of course the Gospels and a part — only a part — of the Acts. The silence of Revelation is as significant almost as that of the Epistles of Saint Paul. A vague allusion, apparently, to a penal punishment does appear in the Epistle to the Hebrews (xii. 2). On the whole, however, the evidence is remarkably strong that the tradition of a legal execution was far from being generally accepted at the time the earliest of the Gospels was written.

So we have in the first Christian writings two accounts of the death of Jesus. One represents it as a judicial execution, the other as a sacrifice of atonement. Both conceptions occur in the Gospels; the latter is the only one to be found in the Epistles of Saint Paul.

We might argue from this that since Saint Paul's Epistles were written a quarter of a century before the Gospels they represent the earlier tradition. But it can be fairly objected to this that because a document was written earlier it does not necessarily contain the earliest version of the facts. That is a question upon which men may agree to disagree. It is sufficient to show that the idea of a judicial execution is not only absent, but unknown, in Saint Paul's Epistles, and that the sacrificial doctrine is carried over into the Gospels along with the idea of a judicial execution, to infer that the original conception of the Crucifixion was of a ritual sacrifice, which was subsequently transformed into the idea of a judicial execution possessing the merits of a sacrifice.

There is nothing in this theory that need scandalize or surprise the lay reader. It accords with all the conditions of religious origins. The Church's declarations of faith and dogmatic definitions are symbolical forms in which sociological truths are clothed in their own time and place. Fraud and deception are unimaginable in the genesis of great revolutionary movements such as accompany the birth of a new religion. The famous formula, *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, is the magnificent postulate which the Church uses to affirm the authority of her dogmas. But it is a political and not a religious formula. Historically it is not a fact. The truths of faith are not static; they are dynamic. They are not fixed and rigid; they are ever changing. That is true of the whole life cycle of a religion. It is particularly true of the infancy of a religion. This explains the incessant process of trial and error exemplified in the evolution of Christian doctrine during the first century or more of our era. Trial and error — that is, accommodation to spiritual environment.

We must not imagine for a moment, however, that the writer of any of the sacred Books deliberately falsified or

modified his message. We must remember that the writers of those books were not critical historians, like those who eighteen centuries later study their texts. They were the very opposite of critics; they were men filled with living faith. Deliberate falsification does not enter into the founding of a great religion. Even when a writer or compiler or copyist adds to, subtracts from, or modifies his text, he cannot be charged with falsifying. Such falsification is impossible — in the first place, because the processes of faith do not obey the same law as the processes of reason, and, in the second place, because deliberate falsification never has more than ephemeral success. Fraud begins when politics come into play. A religion is never born, and never spreads, unless it springs from the profundities.

Transpositions take place so slowly, so deliberately, that they are not perceptible to the contemporary mind. By the time the writer takes up the pen they have become accepted doctrine, a new expression of the collective soul. Someone well said long ago that a sacred book testifies, not to the incidents which it records, but to the spirit of the age which gave it birth.

JOHN PAUL JONES¹

BY BLAISE CENDRARS

MY novel, *John Paul Jones, or Ambition*, I took with me while traveling; but I took it to work on, and not to read.

I wrote the book during a trip to Brazil. I wrote it in the forest, by the sea, in a city, on board trains and steamboats, and among East European immigrants, especially Germans, who have come to take the place of negroes in this great country that is gradually being built up to the north and west, where ground is being cleared for coffee and rubber plantations, and where there is room for a hundred million more people. I wrote it while listening to the discussions of planters who were following land values, reading foreign exchange figures, and taking notes on prospectors' reports. I wrote it in the midst of all kinds of living things that seemed to move within me too, since I was always keeping an eye open for business and opportunities to make money, holding conferences and discussions, distributing automobiles, railway equipment, airplanes, books, Paris pearls and dresses, and collecting everything that had to do with negro folk lore and the traditions of South American Indians.

In other words, if I did not often frequent the archives, I had only to transcribe what I saw around me to place John Paul Jones in his real historical background. A touch here and there, and I had written a living book.

If I did not often frequent the ar-

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chives, I am under no illusions concerning the documents, which have chiefly been proved a marvelous source of error and discussion.

I like theories and men, but I do not like their prejudices. How I maltreat anyone who irritates or pesters me! For I have n't much time to lose, and I don't care much for theories that turn into dogmas and promptly go sour and die.

I do not like peace of soul. I reserve myself the right to wake everything up.

I never forget that the past is above all else a moving thing, just like the present, and that everything that has lived still lives, changing, altering, moving, transforming itself, and that truth contradicts itself a hundred times a day — like the good joke it is.

Scholars, savants, specialists, and above all cloistered historians, should dress up their brains as women deck their bodies, and follow the styles of whatever year they are describing. They should shorten here, draw in there, open a little in front and show a trifle more skin. How many pairs of brain lobes are as well turned out as two lovely breasts?

But no. They barricade themselves in their archives, hide behind documents, twist themselves up in texts, though anyone with eyes in his head can discern between the lines their flat-nosed hypocritical faces, their profiles like moral cockroaches, and their bodies like larvæ.

Since they infallibly stick out like this between the lines, since they nib-