

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VIII.

JESUS THE RABBI.

BY LESTER REDDIN, B.D., MILTON, PA.

THE years of the public ministry of Jesus (26-29 A.D.) fell within a period of very great didactic activity on the part of the leaders of thought in Israel. Such destitution of religious instruction as is predicated of the land of Judah in the period immediately preceding the reforms of Asa, when the people were "without a teaching priest" (2 Chron. xv. 3), could not now be found in Palestine. In the conception of these people, religion was the paramount concern for themselves, their children, and their neighbors; therefore their most vigorous endeavors were for the conservation and propagation of the faith which they had received as a heritage from their fathers. Not only had their zeal for proselyting the Gentiles reached that degree of intensity which called forth from the lips of him who spake as "never man spake" the hyperbolic statement, "Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte" (Matt. xxiii. 15); but even greater effort was put forth for the instruction of the native sons of the Covenant in the distinctive tenets of Judaism. When the Nazarene first appeared on the scene of John's baptism and began to gather disciples about him, the echo of the voices of Hillel and Shammai could still be heard in Jerusalem; Gamaliel, a supposed descendant of King David, was now rising to the height of his influence as the chief exponent of the more liberal type of Rabbinism in the city which was once the capital of his royal ancestor. Perhaps young Saul of Tarsus was just completing his theolog-

ical studies at the feet of this great teacher when Jesus, early in his ministry, "went up into the mountain" and "taught" those who had gathered around him. The maxim of Hillel, "An ignorant man cannot be truly pious," had become a settled conviction; and, consequently, the Scribe, whose function was no less the teaching of the Law than its theoretical development, was by no means an inconspicuous person in Jerusalem. No effort was spared to popularize religious instruction. A "parochial school" (בית הספר) in connection with each synagogue afforded instruction in the Law to boys above the age of six or seven years, thus preparing them for membership in the synagogue, and citizenship in the community. The Scribal College (בית המדרש), analogous to the modern theological seminary, gave more technical instruction in the text and traditional interpretation of the Law to those who in turn became teachers of the people.

Perhaps this condition of affairs was due, in large measure, to a reaction from the "national apostasy" brought about by the secularizing tendencies of the Hasmonæan princes, especially their alliance with the party of the Sadducees, who, as Professor Buhl says, were "prepared to sacrifice the sacred uniqueness of Israel for worldly advantages." A more auspicious means for the conservation of the interests of religion could not have been chosen than a general diffusion of a knowledge of religious principles and practices. True fidelity to the cause of any religion is dependent on deep-seated convictions in the hearts of its devotees, and such convictions are the result, not of wielding the sword, however skillfully done, but of education. In other words, it is impossible to inculcate moral and religious principles by means of physical force; the task requires a pedagogical procedure.

The leaders in the educational propaganda were the Phar-

isees, the spiritual successors of the Hasidæans, the "Puritans" of that day. In contrast with the Athenian philosophers who "spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or hear some new thing," those who sat "in Moses' seat" sought to perpetuate the doctrines handed down from the ancients.

I. THE NONDESCRIPT TEACHER.

In the fullness of time Jesus appeared as a teacher truly "come from God." He entered upon his work greatly handicapped, however, as compared with his contemporaries. He had no such credentials as would commend him to the ruling class in Jerusalem; he had never been taught in their schools (בתי מדרשות); he hailed from a section of Palestine, i.e. Galilee, which by the learned aristocracy of Jerusalem was considered far inferior to Judea, not only in the matter of religious devotion, but in the matter of general culture as well. He never identified himself with the fraternity of professional teachers; he freely criticized them when he had occasion to do so; he charged them with "teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" rather than the commandments of God. But he courageously assumed the rôle of a religious teacher. He utilized every opportunity afforded him by the hunger of the multitude, the drawing of water from the well by the housewife, the tears of the grief-stricken sisters at the grave of their brother, the collection for the Temple treasury, and the Sabbath worship in the synagogue for the introduction of his subjects to the minds of his pupils. This he considered no insignificant part of his work on earth. The voluntary yielding up of his life he frequently refers to as the supreme act of obedience to his Father (John x. 17; cf. Luke xii. 50), and service to men (Matt. xx. 28); but he does not fail to emphasize the importance of his didactic

office. Nine times he refers to himself as teacher (*διδάσκαλος*) or as teaching (*διδάσκειν*); ten times he calls his followers "disciples" (*μαθηταί*, "learners"). Nor did he fail to impress with his teaching those who came under his influence: they listened attentively to the instruction that he spontaneously gave them, and so impressed were they with him and with the force of his message that they requested further instruction concerning the manner in which they should pray (Luke xi. 1), the coming of Elijah (Matt. xvii. 11; Mark ix. 12), the meaning of the parable of the tares of the field (Matt. xiii. 36), the frequency with which they should forgive the offending brother (Matt. xviii. 21), and the time of the inauguration of the Kingdom (Acts i. 6). He measured up to the expectation of the Samaritan woman who looked for the coming of a Messiah who should tell her "all things"; Nicodemus, a noted teacher in Israel and a member of the sanhedrin, speaking, perhaps, for others as well as for himself, by addressing Jesus as "Rabbi" recognized his right to be heard as a religious teacher, and he furthermore expressed a sincere conviction of the divine appointment of this Great Teacher.

II. HIS PEDAGOGY.

Jesus manifested, in an unwonted degree, that strength of personality, that masterful command of his subject, that sympathetic knowledge of his pupils, so indispensable to the success of a teacher. His remarkable insight into human nature, manifested in his tactful pedagogical methods, confirms the assertion of the Evangelist, "He knew what was in man and needed not that any one should tell him" (John ii. 25). In the matter of presenting "first things first," of preparing the minds of his hearers for an unwelcome truth by patient and painstaking preliminary training, of presenting his message

in language and thought-forms familiar to the people, he was well abreast of the best pedagogical methods of our own day. It is a plausible assumption that a wise music teacher would first teach the beginner in music to read the notes on the staff and to manipulate the key-board of the instrument rather than set her to play Beethoven's "Sonata Appassionata." The instructor in mathematics would never think of calling upon a pupil in the primary grade to demonstrate the Pythagorean proposition concerning the right-angled triangle; but, on the contrary, he would teach him notation, numeration, and the fundamental operations of arithmetic. Likewise Jesus, when he began the training of his disciples, gave them only such instruction as they were able to comprehend, and he wisely withheld new truths from them until they were able to "bear them" (John xvi. 12; Mark iv. 33). For example, the announcement of his passion, which, even at the late date at which it was given, fell with such horror on their ears, was purposely withheld until the disciples had learned from his words and works to believe in him as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. xvi. 16 ff.).

Noteworthy is the consideration which he had for the individuality of his pupils. He recognized that not all men are cast in the same psychological mold, and therefore he never required any one to be other than himself. He dealt with each one according to his characteristic endowment, his courage or his timidity, his ease or his difficulty in apprehending the truth. He was not willing that any one should fail, from the lack of patient restatement and elucidation, to grasp the great truths which he taught. He was ever ready to answer a question in order to remove a doubt or a perplexity from the mind of one of his pupils (*vid.* John xiv. 22). Even the question "How can these things be?" he did not resent when coming

from the lips of an honest inquirer after the truth, notwithstanding he refused to answer the question, perfectly legitimate as to its form and content, "By what authority doest thou these things?" when propounded in the spirit of antagonism. He pronounced a beatitude upon those whose credulity does not always require sensible evidence for its support; and there is an ineffable tenderness in his words to Thomas, who was unable to accept the report of the resurrection of his Lord without an ocular demonstration of its correctness. He very considerably refrained from giving a categorical answer to the question of the imprisoned and forlorn Baptist: "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" He saw that what John — now in a mood akin, perhaps, to that into which his ancient prototype fell under the juniper tree — most needed, was to have rehearsed to him the facts upon which the answer to his question must be based, so that he might have the heart discipline which he would receive from making his own synthesis, that he might once more have set in motion within his heart those chords which vibrated spontaneously at the sight of the Spirit's descent upon Jesus at his baptism.

III. HIS MESSAGE.

His message comprised religion and ethics only, not science or philosophy. It is true, he could see in the lilies of the field a beauty far excelling the regal splendor of King Solomon, but he never discoursed upon the geographical distribution, the different habits of growth, and the commercial value of the two hundred genera of the family *Liliaceæ*. In his parabolic teaching he points out many interesting analogies between the laws of agriculture and fruit-growing on the one hand and the great spiritual realities on the other,

e.g. his parables of the sower, the grain of mustard seed, the wheat and the tares, the barren fig tree, the vine and its branches; but here he seizes on the most commonplace facts, perfectly familiar to his hearers, and uses them to illustrate spiritual truths.

1. *His Ethical Message.* It is as a teacher of ethics that Jesus is to-day accorded by far the more liberal hearing. Thousands who have no personal interest in religion, whether Christian or pagan, have, either through choice or through the force of environment, adopted many of the ethical principles of Christianity as the measure of their own conduct and the criterion by which they judge the conduct of others. The ancient people of Jehovah who have never accepted the Christian interpretation of "the Man of Galilee" are coming more and more to recognize the value to the world of his ethical teaching. Rabbi Solomon Schindler says: "It cannot be denied that to a great extent our present civilization has evolved from Christian principles; we are surrounded from all sides by Christian customs and usages; our public schools, although they are claimed to be non-sectarian, are enshrouded by an atmosphere of Christian tendencies; take all in all, you must concede that Christianity is a factor in life which it would be unwise to overlook in our calculations."

Although our esteemed writer of the Jewish faith denies, in another connection, that Jesus was the founder of Christianity, he recognizes the presence and potency among men of those principles which he readily concedes to be "Christian," and which, according to the Gospel records, were taught by the Rabbi of Nazareth to his first followers.

Strange to say, in view of the foregoing, in the ethical teaching of Jesus, originality does not hold as large a place as was formerly supposed. Nor did he make the unreserved

claim for the precedence, as to point of time, of his statements that is often made by his followers. Indeed, to his mind, the force of his ethical precepts depends not so much upon the priority of his own utterance as upon the authority back of that utterance. Therefore he repeated much that had already been given, and added the weight of his own authority thereto. Even those things that are often said to be most distinctively Christian are but the repetition of that which God had already been pleased to reveal through the Old Testament. For example, when he gave utterance to that sublime ethical maxim, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," euphoniously called the Golden Rule, he distinctly states that "This is the Law and the Prophets." His teaching concerning the indissolubility of the marriage tie was quite at variance with the standards of his own day, and, to the minds of his hearers, incongruous with the Mosaic legislation designed to regulate divorce; but he declares that he is only stating a principle as old as the human family, and he seems to insinuate that they should have known this principle, by way of inference, from the statement in the early part of Genesis concerning the creation of man and the institution of the family.

That which is most unique in his ethical teaching is the principle which he lays down for governing one's conduct toward one's enemy. Such conduct must have both an active and a passive aspect. On the passive side, men are forbidden to retaliate the wrongs sustained at the hands of others: "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." On the active side, they are enjoined to return words and deeds of love for such injuries: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you."

Although this principle had been discussed centuries before Christ, as is evinced by the *Memorabilia* of Confucius compiled by his pupils, it is not enjoined by any of the world's great ethicists until it is uttered, with the dynamic "*I say unto you,*" by Jesus of Nazareth. To the question, "What think you of the principle that injury should be recompensed with kindness?" he whose virtue is said to have equaled heaven and earth replied: "With what then will you recompense kindness? Recompense injury with justice, and kindness with kindness." Jesus, indeed, placed a high premium on justice; he classified "justice, mercy, and faith" as "the weightier matters of the Law," and he reproves, in no uncertain tone, certain of his contemporaries for their disregard for such weighty matters; but it is not always the duty of men to mete out justice to their fellows. There are cases in which this prerogative is reserved by the Judge of all; it is God who will "avenge his own elect."

2. *His Religious Message.* Jesus places the greater emphasis upon his work as a religious teacher. With him spiritual things are of paramount importance. On the evening preceding his passion he says, in addressing his Father, "I glorified thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do." He makes obvious to us the character of that work which he complacently speaks of as accomplished, by his further statements in this prayer, such as, "I manifested thy name unto the men whom thou gavest me," and "I made known unto them thy name." There comes almost spontaneously to one's mind the contrast between these words and the admonition which Confucius gave to his pupils concerning their attitude toward the divinities. "While respecting spiritual beings," said the great sage of China, "to keep one's self aloof from them may be called wis-

dom." The ethics of Jesus loses much of its dynamic when dissociated from his religious teaching. The "Golden Rule" is often quoted without the *gold*; the gold is the *therefore* with which the speaker introduces the sentence, thus *subjoining* his precept, in which is epitomized the whole catalog of the reciprocal duties of men, to an antecedent statement designed to show that man's obligation to his fellow is grounded in the paternal kindness of God to men.

(1) *God*. In his teaching concerning God we discover a very distinct advance beyond the revelation which God had made of himself through Old Testament history and prophecy. The lofty conception of the being and perfection of God, however, which the saints of the old dispensation presented, he neither corrected nor supplanted; he merely added to it. The self-existence — implicit in the very name *יהוה* — of God (Ex. iii. 14), his unity (Deut. vi. 4; Isa. xlv. 6), eternity (Ps. xc. 2), omnipresence (Ps. cxxxix. 7 ff.; Jer. xxiii. 23, 24; 1 Kings viii. 27), omnipotence (Gen. xviii. 14; Job xlii. 2; Jer. xxxii. 17), are all doctrines that are abundantly taught in the Old Testament. That this God loved his own covenant people was indubitable, and it was the confident expectation that he would send his Messiah who should deliver his people from the hand of their oppressor (Luke i. 71). But the love of God in its world-embracing aspect had not been fully revealed until it was proclaimed to "a teacher in Israel" by the greater "Teacher come from God." The love of God for sinful men is the keynote of that evangel which he commands his disciples to carry to the whole world, the diapason of that festal music which fills the father's banquet hall on the occasion of the prodigal's return. It is through the boundless love of God that the scope of the "good tidings of great joy," at first proclaimed by the angel of the Lord

for "the whole people" (*παντὶ τῷ λαῷ*) of Israel (Luke ii. 10), has been enlarged so as to include the "all peoples" (*πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*) of the great commission (Matt. xxviii. 19).

His teaching concerning the spiritual nature of the true worship of God, while presenting a striking divergence from the prevalent conception of worship in his day, is not essentially different from the teaching of the prophets (cf. Ps. li. 16 ff.; Isa. xxix. 13; Ezra xxxiii. 31).

(2) *Himself*. Cognate to his doctrine of the love of God is his doctrine of his own person and work. It is the love of God for the world that led him to give his Son for the life of men, and Jesus confidently declares himself to be the Son of God. This divine sonship he represents as *sui generis*. The peacemakers, those who, by their benevolence to their enemies, evidence a spirit akin to that of the Heavenly Father, and those who "shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world and the resurrection from the dead," he calls "sons of God." But he speaks of himself as the "only-begotten Son" of God, thus differentiating his sonship from that of all others. It is as son that he knows the Father and reveals him to men, that he is the medium through whom the Father gives life to men, that he executes judgment on behalf of the Father.

He is inherently and essentially the Son of God "whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world"; he is officially the Messiah whose coming had been foretold by the prophets. Wherefore he freely applied to himself the Messianic predictions and references in the Old Testament. "They are they which testify of me," he said of the Scriptures as known and read in his day. In the Book of Enoch and certain Rabbinic documents there are references to the pre-mundane existence of the Messiah. Whether the con-

ception in the minds of these writers was that of an ideal or a personal and conscious preëxistence is far more than can be definitely determined. We know, however, that Jesus makes claim to a conscious existence antedating the creation of the world. He horrified certain of his auditors who boasted of their descent from Abraham when he said: "Before Abraham came into being (*γενέσθαι*) I am (*εἰμί*) and in his high priestly prayer, in which we get the clearest insight into his own consciousness, he speaks of the glory which he had with the Father "before the world was."

Jesus styled himself "the Son of Man." It would not be feasible in this connection to enter upon a discussion of the history and association of this phrase in canonic and apocryphal literature; but, as applied by Jesus to himself, the term has a manifest Messianic connotation. As Son of Man he claimed prerogatives which even Moses the lawgiver and David the greatest of Israel's kings never dared to assume. The Son of man has authority to forgive sins, is Lord of the Sabbath, has authority over the angels, and shall sit in glory upon the throne of the consummated kingdom.

(3) *The Kingdom.* By no means the least important of the lessons taught by him who was called "Teacher and Lord" is his doctrine of the Kingdom. The phrase "Kingdom of [God] Heaven," which served at once as fitting vehicle to convey his thought and as psychological stratagem to capture the attention of his auditors, was not of his own coinage. It was appropriated from the religious vernacular of his day. In the Talmudic literature, which presumably reflects the Jewish ideas of the time of Jesus, the phrase *מלכות שמים* is of frequent occurrence. It is the opinion of Edersheim that, while there is a difference of "spirit" between the New Testament and contemporary Jewish thought as revealed in

the Targums and Talmud, "the form in which the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven is presented is substantially similar." But from the request of the sons of Zebedee for positions of honor and trust in relation to the King and the interrogation of the Twelve concerning the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, it is clear that the disciples associated the ideas of organization and territory with the Kingdom; and, as they could not have gotten such ideas from their Teacher, the inference is that they held these views in common with their former co-religionists. It would appear from the controversies between Jesus and his opponents that their conception of the requisites to the enjoyment of the benefits of the Kingdom was altogether different from his.

By the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" he means the Messianic dispensation as viewed in its correlative aspects of sovereignty exacting allegiance of men and magnanimity insuring blessing to men; adapted in its method to the nature and conditions of mankind, and presenting the phenomena of growth and consumption. Now he speaks of one aspect, now of another; now of the Kingdom in its final issue, now as subject to the laws of growth and development. The jurisdiction of the Kingdom over men issues from the fact that God himself is King, and his Son, the Messiah, is Vicegerent. The duty thus incumbent upon men takes precedence of all earthly obligations. One must be willing, if occasion should arise, to leave house, wife, brothers, parents, and children, for the sake of the Kingdom. The blessing offered is the *summum bonum* in the category of spiritual benefits. Entrance into the Kingdom, which is conditioned upon conformity to certain requirements of character and conduct, is tantamount to eternal salvation. Its growth is analogous to the growth of the mustard seed or the diffusion of the yeast

through the flour. Its method in dealing with men is set forth in the parables of the dragnet and the tares of the field. It is the Kingdom in its eschatological glory, in which the many who come from the four points of the compass shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The inauguration of this period of ultimate triumph, when the angels shall gather out of the Kingdom all things that "cause stumbling" and them that do iniquity, and the righteous shall enter upon their inheritance, shall be synchronous with the end of the world (Matt. xiii. 41 ff.; xxv. 31 ff.).

With that singular prescience by which he could predict the denial by Peter and the betrayal by Judas, Jesus could foresee the spread of his doctrines through the faithful labors of his apostles and their successors, but he was none the less grieved at the contrariety of the men of his own generation toward his message. On that great "day of controversy," that is, Tuesday of the week of his passion, he pronounced fearful woes upon the teaching constituency of Jerusalem, who had, until the end, withstood him and his message, who were "shutting up the Kingdom of Heaven against men"; but the pathetic expression of commiseration with which he closed this series of woes indicates that he spoke out of an intense pity for men so negligent of their own welfare, rather than a feeling of personal revenge.