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Dr. Martineau's "Messianic Mythology."

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR S. D. F. SALMOND, D.D.

THERE are two Dr. Martineaus, and it makes a world of difference with which we have to do. There is Dr. Martineau, the Theist—the man of positive faith, the thinker of constructive gift, vindicating as few can the reality of the moral intuitions and the being of God. And there is Dr. Martineau, the Unitarian—the man of negations, the critic of destructive faculty, attenuating Christianity, and dissolving the beliefs which have been the inspiration of the Christian centuries. In previous works of larger order, especially the *Types of Ethical Theory* and *A Study of Religion*, we have the former Dr. Martineau holding out a hand that we can grasp with prompt and cordial gratitude. In these we hear the persuasive voice of a teacher who wins at once our trust and honour, who discovers to us the eternal foundation of things, to whom we owe much for his spiritual philosophy, his assertion of the truth of conscience and the sovereign law of duty, his defence of the Theistic faith against an aggressive Materialism. But, in the book which gives us the ripest issue of the thoughts of his lengthened life, it is the other Dr. Martineau who presents himself, and forces us into the unwelcome position of antagonism and strenuous protest. It is an ungracious task to speak of assumptions and fallacies, failures and mistakes, imperfect acquaintance with essential facts, partial handling of evidence. This, however, is the task which is imposed upon us, alas, by the gift of Dr. Martineau's old age. For these things, we are forced to say, appear in his latest work.

The *Seat of Authority in Religion* is an elaborate assault upon historical and doctrinal Christianity. It is, in the first place, an attack upon the religion of Christ, as it is admitted to have been understood almost from the time of Christ Himself. It is, in the second place, and in order to this, an attack upon the Christian records and the Protestant basis of faith. It is important to state the case so. For, unquestionably, what rules the entire reasoning of the book is a violent repugnance to the Christianity of the Churches, and to the beliefs in which, ever since Christ's voice was heard on earth, the mass of Christian people have recognised the distinctive message of the Gospel in its power and in its comfort. He has parted with these beliefs, and with his own first conceptions of Christianity. He tells us he has done so with pain. But he has parted with them absolutely. Nor is it only that he has broken with them. He has come to think of them

as pernicious. He speaks of this frankly, even passionately. What the Christian world has been resting on is "an immense and widening mass of Christian mythology, from the first unstable, and now at last apparently swerving to its fall." And he adds: "Let it fall; for it has corrupted the religion of Christ into an Apocalyptic fiction—and that so monstrous in its account of man, in its theory of God, in its picture of the universe, in its distorted reflections of life and death—that if the belief in it were as real as the profession of it is loud, society would relapse into a moral and intellectual darkness it has long left, and the lowest element of modern civilisation would be its *faith*" (p. 325). This is sufficiently strong. Yet it is no momentary outburst. We have measureless denunciation of the Christianity of the Christian ages again and again; and, in his closing paragraphs, we have the tremendous indictment repeated in equally absolute terms, and in a way that indiscriminately and most unjustly mixes up things which greatly differ. "The blight of birth-sin," he says, "with its involuntary perdition; the scheme of expiatory redemption with its vicarious salvation; the incarnation with its low postulates of the relation between God and man, and its unworkable doctrine of two natures in one person; the official transmission of grace through material elements in the keeping of a consecrated corporation; the second coming of Christ to summon the dead, and part the sheep from the goats, at the general judgment;—all are the growth of a mythical literature, or Messianic dreams, or Pharisaic theology, or sacramental superstition, or popular apotheosis. And so nearly do these vain imaginations preoccupy the creeds that not a moral or spiritual element finds entrance there, except 'the forgiveness of sins.' To consecrate and diffuse, under the name of 'Christianity,' a theory of the world's economy, thus made up of illusions from obsolete stages of civilisation—immense resources, material and moral, are expended, with effect no less deplorable in the province of religion than would be, in that of science, of hierarchies and missions for propagating the Ptolemaic astronomy, and inculcating the rules of necromancy and exorcism" (p. 650).

So starting from the Unitarian position, Dr. Martineau has travelled far beyond aught that Unitarianism once contemplated, and has added negation to negation. Abandoning the original Unitarian conception of the person of Christ, he

has given up, along with that, the entire Messianic vocation of Christ, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and all the distinctively Christian doctrines connected with these. His contention is that instead of the religion taught by Jesus Himself, which was a simple, ethical religion, and one in which He made little or no claim for Himself, there was substituted at a very early period a peculiar theory *about* Jesus, what He was and what He did; that this was from the first a false theory; and that its falsehood and injuriousness became more conspicuous as it was continued and developed by the Church. The Confessions of the Churches, in short, "make Him into the object instead of the vehicle and source of their religion; they change Him from the 'Author,' because supreme Example, into the *End* of faith; and thus turn Him, whose very function it was to leave us alone with God, into the idol and incense which interpose to hide Him." He concedes that there may have been some excuse for the invention of this theory and the honour given it. It may have been needed in order to "conciliate the weakness of mankind." But it has long ceased to serve any such pedagogic purpose. It now "alienates their strength." It may once have helped to "give to Christianity the lead of human intelligence, to secure first mastership in the schools, authority in the Court, and the front rank in the advance of civilisation." But now it "reverses these effects, irritating and harassing the pioneers of knowledge, compelling reformers to disregard or defy it, and leaving theological thought upon so low a plane that minds of a high level must sink to touch it, and great statesmen and grave judges and refined scholars are no sooner in contact with it, and holding forth upon it, than all robustness seems to desert the intellect, and they drift into pitiable weakness" (pp. 339-360).

To make good this bold contention and prove that the Christianity of the Church is not the Christianity of Christ Himself; that from its very beginning it was something only remotely related to that, and continues to be something essentially distinct from it; that in truth it is but a vast edifice of mythology, which must be destroyed and put out of the way for the good of the race, is an arduous task for any one to face. How does Dr. Martineau grapple with it? At times in an uncertain and well-nigh perfunctory fashion, and at times with a great expenditure of strength, but a strength that is misdirected. It is a remarkable thing that, on some of the most vital issues, his argument is at once the feeblest and the most lacking in freshness. On the Resurrection of Christ, for example, he has nothing of his own to give us. He simply repeats the old reasonings

which are so familiar, which have been so often met, and which have been recognised to be inadequate by reputable inquirers who have no prepossessions in favour of the doctrines or doings of the Churches. How did the belief in a risen Christ arise? It was due, says Dr. Martineau, not to the fact that Christ actually did rise, but simply to the "enthusiasm of trust and love" with which His disciples regarded Him, which, though "beaten back by the tragedy of Calvary, was sure to reassert its elasticity." One might imagine that some adequate stimulus or occasion for this was needed, especially as the "enthusiasm" so "reasserted" had to act quickly and become the creator of the belief that Christ had risen. Dr. Martineau seems to feel this, and where finds he the stimulus?—In the return of the stricken disciples to Galilee and the northern scene which recalled His image. But would not this extraordinary revolution in their thoughts at least demand some time? Yes, says Dr. Martineau, at least the time for "the consolidation of this belief must be considerably extended." And how does he secure it? In the first place, by the surprising assertion that the return to Galilee meant a walk of 150 miles! And, in the second place, by simply telling us that "nothing forbids us to allow whatever time may be required," any fancied necessity for the opposite being imposed only by the "later conception of a bodily resuscitation." The entire phenomena, indeed, are purely matters of the "inward chronometry" of the disciples' souls. What they did believe in, too, was only that Christ *lived*. Even to Paul it would have made no difference "if the Jewish authorities had rifled the tomb and publicly replaced the body on the uplifted cross" (p. 370). But what of the testimony to their having *seen* Christ? No doubt, says Dr. Martineau, they did say that they had *seen* the risen Christ; and he adds that "had they not been able to do so, they could hardly have conveyed to others the profound assurance of His heavenly life, which, in their own minds, so largely depended on the impressions of their personal experience." But all these appearances of the risen Christ which are reported are "the *effect* of their faith in the immortal Christ," not its cause. They are so many psychological facts in the consciousness of a few of His immediate followers; and if this explanation of them is difficult to reconcile with the evangelic narratives, these narratives must so far go by the board. There Dr. Martineau leaves us, with a far feeblest perception of the problem, and a far weaker attempt to grapple with it than we have in Ewald and Keim.

The great Christian beliefs expressed by the terms *Incarnation*, *Atonement*, *Judgment* are similarly disposed of. Space does not admit of any

detailed criticism of his method of consigning these to the limbo of the mythologies. He deals with them all as speculations of the New Testament writers, which any student of history can now easily account for. In the case of the Incarnation there is a somewhat elaborate, and by no means unconstructive attempt to trace the connections of the *Logos* doctrine. But the incarnation of a Divine person is a "kind of fact which transcends all evidence, and which human testimony never can approach." So the question is left, without any attempt to face the problem created by Christ's own testimony to Himself. The view of Christ's person which is given in the Fourth Gospel is pronounced to be not historical, but "an idealisation of the evangelistic traditions," an idealisation which, as the figure of the real Jesus receded into the distance, quite naturally "formed itself in the mind of His disciples, and spoiled them for the simplicity of its first impression."

But nowhere do we see Dr. Martineau in greater straits, and nowhere is his method of dealing with the problems of the New Testament more surprising than in his treatment of the Messianic doctrine. He seems to exhaust his vocabulary of strong and stinging terms in repudiating the Messianic view of the Jesus of history. It is the beginning of Christian mythology. The Messiah is but the "figure of an Israelitish dream." The belief in Jesus as the Messiah is the theory which has "coloured and distorted" the Gospel narratives. It is allowed, indeed, to be a belief which has served a remarkable purpose in providence. For without it we should in all probability have had no Life of Jesus at all. It was "the needful vehicle for carrying into the mind and heart of the early converts influences too spiritual to live at first without them. It has saved the Hebrew Scriptures for religious use in the Christian Church, instead of leaving them no home but the Jewish Synagogue." If we have memoirs of Jesus at all we owe them "to the very theory which has so much coloured and distorted them." But the theory itself is utterly false and injurious. How injurious it has been, in Dr. Martineau's estimate, Dr. Martineau can scarce find words to express. It is "the first deforming mask, the first robe of hopeless disguise, under which the real personality of Jesus of Nazareth disappeared from sight." It is the theory that has "corrupted the interpretation of the Old Testament, and degraded the sublimest religious literature of the ancient world into a book of magic and a tissue of riddles. It has spoiled the very composition of the New Testament, and, both in its letters and its narratives, has made the highest influence ever shed upon humanity subservient to the proof of untenable positions and the establishment of unreal relations."

If unmeasured language could solve intractable and unwelcome problems, these sentences, and others of like kind, should make quick work of

some inconvenient questions which Dr. Martineau has to face. What is the problem? And how does he meet it? The problem is this—We know that the Jews of Christ's time expected a Messiah; we know, too, what kind of Messiah they looked for; and we know, further, that within a comparatively short period after His death the belief in Him as the promised Messiah greatly prevailed, and though it implied a total revolution of the hereditary idea of the Messiah, it took possession even of men like Paul, and became the theme of their preaching and the inspiration of their lives. How could this faith originate and prevail if the Jesus of history was the Jesus of Dr. Martineau—a Jew who did no miracles, but simply taught a pure morality, and spoke of God, and died an ignominious and premature death, and did not rise from the dead? This is the obvious problem, and it is one so serious and difficult that Strauss freely owned that this faith in Jesus as the Messiah is not to be comprehended if He did not Himself implant it in the minds of His first disciples. Different replies to this problem have been proposed by students of the life of Christ. What is Dr. Martineau's solution? It is that the "identification of Jesus with the Messiah was the first act of Christian mythology;" that He Himself never claimed to be Messiah; that the Messianic theory of His Person was made for Him, and palmed upon Him by His followers. This is indeed a bold and unusual position. How does he seek to justify it? He points to what he calls "several slight but speaking indications," which seem to him to infer it. They are certainly "slight," as he very fitly terms them, and so precarious that it is only by a series of large assertions that he makes them in any degree plausible. He has to strip the title "Son of God" of its Theocratic or Messianic force. In order to this, he has to assert that the title received that force from the Christians themselves; that its Messianic interpretation in the second Psalm was a "purely Christian invention;" and, that "neither in the true text of the anterior Apocalyptic literature, nor in the Hebrew Scriptures, does it ever appear in that sense." As regards the Gospels, it is pronounced to be a title which is applied to Jesus by the oldest of the four only in the case of beings of superhuman insight. The case of the high priest (Mark xiv. 61, 62) is reasoned away as an improbability. It is set aside, in short, as a posthumous predicate of Jesus. But even when this is done, Dr. Martineau is only at the beginning of his difficulties. Nothing is effected unless he is able also to remove the expression "Son of Man" out of his way. But this cannot be done by declaring it a posthumous title. He has to admit that this was the expression habitually used by Jesus when He spoke of Himself. He acknowledges it to be of such importance that

on it depends the question as to "the range and character of His self-conscious mission." He makes the further admission that, to the Evangelists, it was a Messianic term. His object, consequently, is to show that the Evangelists' use of it was not historically true; the Messianic meaning being "a Christian after-thought, thrown back upon the personal ministry of Jesus." With this in view he pronounces the testimony of the Book of Enoch inconclusive, on the ground that the relative section may be a Christian interpolation, and the testimony of the Book of Daniel equally so, on the ground that we cannot determine whether "the misinterpretation of these visions which appropriated the phrase 'Son of Man' to a supposed personal head of the theocracy was pre-Christian, and furnished the disciples in Palestine with a familiar Messianic 'title.'" As regards the frequent occurrence of the term in Ezekiel with the individualised sense, he thinks its force is exhausted if it is limited to the idea of the "conscious weakness, unworthiness, nothingness of the human agent, when called to be the organ of a Divine intent." And coming to its employment by Christ Himself, he takes it there to have had simply the sense which he ascribes to it in Ezekiel. It is a note of dependence and trustful self-surrender. How this is to be made to fit the passages (such as Matt. viii. 20) which Dr. Martineau seems to accept as genuine, is not apparent. But beyond those in which he makes some attempt to exhibit the reasonableness of the non-Messianic interpretation, there are many more which admittedly are impervious to any such process of sapping and mining. He has to acknowledge the fact that "in numerous discourses attributed to Jesus by the Evangelists the term is undoubtedly restricted to this [Messianic] meaning." Holtzmann surmounts this difficulty by supposing that the title is an indefinite one, intended to cover "one knows not what tender and mystical significance." But with this Dr. Martineau is not satisfied. Neither can he unite with those who fall back upon the supposition of a change in the connotation of the name within the brief limits of our Lord's ministry, the Messianic sense being absent from it at first and only added to it later. He cannot do this, because he finds discourses of the kind in question "on both sides of Peter's confession." Hence he is driven to the theory that a change in the use of the term took place between "the ministry of Jesus and the fall of the Jewish State." That is to say, the first disciples and their Palestinian converts were caught by the spirit of the time (which was a time "prolific in Apocalyptic dreams"), and worked out the idea that the Master whom they believed to live in the unseen world was to be the Messiah, and to realise in His own Person the Kingdom of God which, in His earthly

career, He had announced. This is Dr. Martineau's theory. How forced and artificial an explanation it is, appears best from other suppositions which he has to make in seeking some confirmation of it. He has to suppose, for instance, that the writers of the Gospels threw back this new sense upon the term as it came from Christ Himself, and so represented Him, yet without any consciousness on their part of any liberty being taken with Him, as using it in a sense in which He did not use it. He has to suppose further—and surely this at least is a most unreasonable supposition—that they were "unaware that it was a characteristic expression of His, by which He loved to designate Himself;" and that, in this strange ignorance of His common ways of speech, they patched his discourses with "shreds of Jewish Apocalypse," and even attributed to Him "whole masses of eschatology" concerning the signs of the "Son of Man." Recognising, too, the importance of Peter's great confession at Cæsarea Philippi, he is under the necessity of making it out (by a process partly critical, partly exegetical, which we cannot stay to examine) that Peter felt Christ's reply to be a *repudiation* of the Messiahship which was then acknowledged. And yet, again, he has to empty of its testimony the great discourse on the signs of His coming and the end of the world. This discourse, as we have it, is undoubtedly Messianic, and Dr. Martineau admits that "nothing perhaps has left so strong an impression of the Messianic self-announcement of Jesus." But he distinguishes between what the Evangelists meant to convey as announced by Jesus, and what was actually announced by Him, and concludes that the discourses on the "last things," which are reported in the synoptical Gospels, are "as much Christianised Jewish Apocalypse as the Book of Revelation." He confesses that it is next to impossible to prove this, because the documents which are supposed to have furnished the interpolations have perished. On what, then, does he rely as his warrants for the conclusion? First, upon the Evangelist Luke's report of Christ's words, "Therefore said the Wisdom of God, I will send unto them prophets," etc. In this he thinks he finds something analogous, *i.e.* "an example of quotations by Evangelists from an Apocalyptic writing called the 'Wisdom of God,' Jewish in essence, Christian in application, so incorporated with their biographical narrative as to be thrown back some thirty-nine years before its origin, and appear as a vaticinium *ante* eventum." As to this no one can say that it is unreasonable to suppose that a lost Jewish writing may be referred to there. In point of fact, critics of the eminence of Ewald and Bleek agree in accepting the supposition. But, on the other hand, as it is put by Dr. Martineau, it is mixed up with other suppositions far less reasonable, and it is opposed

even in its simpler form by other critics equally worthy of respect, such as Neander, Gess, and so far Ritschl. The weighty authority of Meyer, too, is against it, who is of opinion that Jesus quotes one of His own earlier sayings, and does it as if the Wisdom of God spoke by Him. He holds the other view to be controverted by the fact that it would be out of analogy with the other quotations made by our Lord Himself, as well as by the circumstance that the evangelic traditions, as appears from Matthew xiii. 34, gave the words in question as Christ's own words. This first reason, therefore, furnishes very slender ground for Dr. Martineau's conclusion. Has he a second to adduce? Yes, he has both a second and a third. But to most readers, the mere statement of these will probably be evidence enough of the very uncertain ground on which Dr. Martineau proceeds in this part of his argument. For what are these second and third reasons? The one is the circumstance that Christ does not say "When I shall come in my glory," but "When the Son of Man shall come in His glory;" from which solemn use of the third person for the first he draws the extraordinary inference that these sayings are supplementary elements interwoven with the historical colloquies, and left to betray themselves by lack of literary art in "the writers. The other is the use of the phrase *coming* of the Son of Man." For, says Dr. Martineau, if Christ had really spoken in His Messianic capacity of the particulars of His Parusia, He would have described it not as a *coming* but as a *return*.

But enough has been said for the time being on Dr. Martineau's criticism as applied to this great term. In his venture to prove that Christ did not Himself claim to be Messiah, and that the Messianic idea of Him is a mythological idea, he has other things to explain away. For example, Paul's witness to the Messianic vocation of Christ is disposed of by the assertion that he knows only the risen Christ, and thinks all through of His heavenly life. But it is needless to go into these matters. It is enough to say that Dr. Martineau's contention that Christ did not identify Himself with the Messiah breaks down in the case which he himself admits to be the crucial case—that of the application of the title "Son of Man." Even if he were more successful with the polemic which he directs against the various occurrences which he has referred to, he would still have to grapple with such sayings as that in Mark ii. 10, in which the official sense seems too deep-seated to be so easily removed as in a footnote he attempts to do with it. But on this question Dr. Martineau has against him the authorities he would naturally desire to have on his side. He refers himself to the weighty opposi-

tion of Harnack, who declares the term "Son of Man" to mean "nothing else than Messiah," and (in opposition to Havet and certain others, who take up more or less Dr. Martineau's position) tells us that the section of the evangelical tradition which reports Jesus to have represented Himself as the Messiah is one which seems to him to stand the sharpest test of criticism. But not to weary our readers with an enumeration of the many authorities of the highest name and of different schools who are against Dr. Martineau in this matter, let us refer only to two whose opinion should carry weight, the one for his critical, the other for his literary eminence, who yet deal with this question in a way so different from Dr. Martineau. The one is Keim, who speaks of it as the name in which even at the beginning Jesus summed up His claims, and pronounces the Messianic sense to be historically established. He notices how it is objected that the condition of our sources does not warrant us in carrying back the Messianic sense at any rate to the beginning of Christ's ministry; that in any case the title may have been "obscure and equivocal;" and that, on Christ's own lips, it may have altered its force as His work advanced, taking on a deeper and more definite meaning in the later stage than it had at first. But his verdict is, that an exact historical investigation "destroys the first objection, and with it in the main the second also, and the third." The other authority that we choose to refer to at present is the author of *Ecce Homo*. In him we have a writer sufficiently free from the prejudices of the orthodox surely, and one with whom we should expect Dr. Martineau to have much in sympathy. But how different are his conclusions! He, too, has his criterion for testing the veracity of his sources. He, too, is careful not to start with more than a "rudiment of certainty." But, looking to such passages as chap. viii. 29, 30, xii. 6, xiv. 62, he concludes that Mark's Gospel furnishes clear evidence of the fact that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. He thinks that the same fact may equally well be gathered from the other Gospels, so that we have the consent of the witnesses for it. Further, he points out that this is not a matter about which the Evangelists were likely to be mistaken, not an isolated incident which might depend upon the testimony of a single witness, but one of the "habitual acts and customary words of Jesus," one of the "public and conspicuous acts and words which it would be difficult to falsify in the lifetime and within the knowledge of those who had been witnesses of them." Christ's death, too, would be inexplicable, he tells us, on any other supposition. So his conclusion is that it cannot reasonably be doubted that this claim to be the Messiah was made by Christ Himself.