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Was, then, our Lord mistaken?

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THIS paper is an attempt (only an *attempt*) to answer the question from the point of view of the devout believer in our Lord's Divinity—of one who assents *ex animo* to the Creed of Constantinople (commonly called the Nicene Creed), and that not merely with submission but with joyful conviction. Any answer must be ruled out which does not agree with the tremendous fact, 'and was made man.' Nor can any be allowed which is not congruous with that other great and notable fact that the Divine Spirit of God 'spake by the prophets.' The Incarnation, the Inspiration of Scripture—except one hold fast by these, any answer he may find will have no validity for the devout believer.

At the same time the question is a live one, and at the present moment a pressing one. If we take our Lord's sayings, as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, at their face value, it is evident that He expected to return very soon. Thus He said to the members of the Sanhedrim assembled to compass His death, 'from henceforth shall the Son of man be seated at the right hand of the power of God' (Lk 22⁶⁹): 'and ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mk 14⁶²). That these sayings belong together is clear from the context: and so Mt 26⁶⁴, 'henceforth ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.' It is very noteworthy that the Greek phrase *ἀπὸ ἀπρι* used by St. Matthew here was rendered 'hereafter' by the A.V., so that the reader might suppose that it referred to some still far-distant day. It was not unnatural to take that liberty with the phrase, but it was unjustifiable. *ἀπὸ ἀπρι*, like St. Luke's *ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν* certainly implies the *near* future, not the remote, not even the indefinite. Using the word 'presently' in its English rather than in its Scottish meaning, we might paraphrase our Lord's words thus, 'ye shall presently see the Son of man . . . coming with the clouds of heaven.' If He was reported accurately (and the mere fact of this unfulfilled prophecy being reported at all so long afterwards is an almost certain proof of its genuineness), it seems on the face of it clear that He expected to

return during the lifetime of His judges—an expectation which He had already expressed emphatically on other occasions (Mt 10²³ 16²⁸; Mk 13³⁰, as compared with 13^{30, 24, 26}, etc.). That our Lord *did* thus expect to return in glory almost immediately—that this 'eschatological' or 'apocalyptic' expectation formed an integral part of His teaching—nay, that it fairly dominated the claims which He made on the personal loyalty and obedience of the faithful—has been closely pressed upon this generation by a number of earnest men. And, whatever may have been urged to mitigate the consternation produced, it cannot be described by a milder word than consternation. It seemed, when first realized, a staggering blow to faith to have it proved out of our Lord's own mouth that He expected to return in glory almost immediately, whereas He has not so returned yet. Of course there are ways of solving or shelving the difficulty. It must be admitted that faith, when uneducated and unintelligent, is singularly credulous. Anything whatever, no matter how false or silly, will serve the turn if it only have the appearance of being an argument. We are not concerned with these explanations here. They are hopelessly artificial. For us, real and serious difficulties must be met by explanations which are real and serious too. Of such there would seem to be only two.

I. The first meets the difficulty squarely enough by casting all the blame upon the three Evangelists. They were themselves full of the eschatological expectations so common in that age amongst that people—especially in connexion with the apocalyptic title 'Son of Man.' Therefore they misunderstood and misreported our Lord, and put into His mouth definite predictions which He never made. And they point to the acknowledged fact that such predictions of return are absent from the Fourth Gospel. But if you destroy the credibility of the Synoptic Gospels, if you find them guilty of so gross a misrepresentation, you confound the defences of the Christian faith, you practically allow that we know little or nothing about our Lord except that He taught in Galilee, and was 'crucified under Pontius Pilate.' Unless the Gospels may be taken

as substantially true, it seems hardly worth while to remain a Christian. Moreover, the very fact that these extremely uncomfortable sayings of our Lord remained part and parcel of the gospel testimony, and were indeed first published to the world (as by St. Luke) at a time when the grave difficulty of them must have been already apparent, is a very strong critical argument for their genuineness, as well as for the honesty of the records in which they stand. That they do not appear in the Fourth Gospel may be quite reasonably explained by the obvious fact that the author of that gospel was deliberately minded to set forth in his own way a side of our Lord's teaching, very necessary for the Christians of his day, which had been but slightly revealed by the Synoptists.

II. The other explanation which meets the difficulty fairly and squarely—the only other, we may venture to say—is that which has the courage to acknowledge that these predictions of an almost immediate return in glory *were* made by our Lord, *were* not fulfilled, and therefore *were* mistaken—in a sense. No devout believer will readily entertain a notion which at first sight looks dishonouring to the Divine Master; we must therefore inquire carefully whether that is necessarily the case. It is agreed (let us say) that our Lord *was* and is most truly God—consubstantial with the Father as touching His Divine nature. It is agreed that our Lord *was* and is most truly Man—consubstantial with us as touching His human nature. He who does not clearly acknowledge *both* these 'consubstantials' is out of harmony with the faith of Nicæa and Chalcedon. But if any one thinks it is a simple thing to understand *how* these two 'consubstantials' can possibly be clasped together in a single Personality, he is grievously mistaken. It remains the deepest, as it is the sublimest, of all mysteries. Equally impossible is it to say beforehand, on grounds either of reason or of faith, *how* the qualities and attributes proper to these two 'consubstantials' will assert themselves in the action and passion of a life lived under human conditions, such as is described in the Gospels. Let no man think that the matter ever was, or ever can be, other than excessively difficult. From the first age devout believers have contended over it with opposite convictions pathetically sincere and even passionate. First it was, Is it possible that the Redeemer suffered and died? 'Oh no,' cried a multitude of Docetists, 'He was God, and God

cannot suffer, it were blasphemy to suppose that God could die.' They were ruled out, and our Canonical Gospels make it plain that He *did* indeed suffer and die. We accept it as a matter of course: it makes for us a very great part of the ineffable charm of the gospel; and we never stop to notice that both mere human reason and obvious Christian reverence were on the side of the Docetists. Taking your stand on the truth of the Incarnation, how can you say, *without guidance*, that One who was personally God could either suffer or die? Would not the Divine nature repel these things? Well, we *have* the guidance—the Gospels keep us straight—so straight that we hardly grasp the possibility of going astray. Then it was 'Could our Lord be really tempted? could He possibly feel the drag and draw of that strong tide which so often brings us within measurable distance of sinning?' 'Oh no,' they said, 'far be it from any true believer to think that One who was God could possibly be tempted! is it not written expressly that God *cannot* be tempted with evil? How, then, could Jesus be tempted seeing He was God?' Indeed, that might well seem conclusive (and would seem conclusive, I venture to say, to many of our self-elected champions of orthodoxy to-day), if it had not been for the Epistle to the Hebrews, which, after some hesitation, was received into the Christian canon. Again we have guidance: we are told distinctly and authoritatively that He *was* tempted in all points like as we are. So we have to submit our judgment (unwillingly perhaps), and acknowledge as a matter of fact that in this also it was the human quality, not the Divine, which asserted itself in the actual manifestation of the God-man. It does surely throw a vivid and unexpected light upon the tremendous mystery of the Incarnation. Here is a condition (openness to temptation) *impossible* to God, *necessary* to man. Which will prevail in Jesus? The Scripture tells us it was the human. In some way which we cannot fathom, the Divine impossibility of being tempted *yielded* to the human necessity of meeting and overcoming temptation.

On all-fours with this last runs a controversy which has lately agitated certain theological circles. Was our Lord omniscient? or was He ignorant of certain things? He *said* indeed that He was (Mk 13³²), but can we allow that He really meant it? He appeared to 'grow in wisdom'—but must we not explain that away? And then they quote

obiter dicta of divines who lived so long ago as Pope Leo I. or so recently as Canon Liddon. Now it goes without saying that if you take your stand simpliciter on the fact that He was God, you will be quite certain that He *must* have been omniscient, for God cannot be ignorant of anything whatever. Similarly, before you received the Epistle to the Hebrews, you would have felt quite certain that He could not have been tempted: and before St. John wrote his Epistles you would probably have felt convinced that He could not suffer, really. Some people seem to fancy that the difficulty is disposed of when they say that He died, or was tempted, 'in His human nature.' Of course He was: no one ever imagined that He died or was tempted in His Divine nature. But the difficulty is this: He was personally God the Son, the Logos. It was God the Son who was made man—it was God the Son who died on Calvary, who was tempted in the wilderness, and elsewhere. And God cannot die, nor can He be tempted. Put it how you will, the difficulty remains insoluble, insurmountable. Nevertheless, like so many other far lesser difficulties, *solvitur ambulando*. The Word was made flesh, and walked among us as the man Christ Jesus, and the impossible happened, and the inconceivable manifested itself quite simply and naturally. But it is only solved *ambulando*, i.e. by letting go, of *a priori* theories, and the insisting (from one particular point of view) on what *must* be the case, and watching instead what did actually happen, when God was made man. What did actually happen is told us in the Gospels, and in the New Testament at large. Contrary to all preconceived opinion of what was possible, He *was* tempted, He *did* suffer cruelly, He died. Contrary to much opinion which still prevails, He was ignorant of some things, probably of many: He sought information, He learnt by experience. That is the impression naturally made upon our minds by the narratives of the Synoptists. This impression may, it is true, be destroyed by *a priori* reasoning from the point of view of our Lord's Divinity. But then we have seen clearly that on such a theme *a priori* speculation is worthless; and also that it would have led us for certain to positions distinctly false and heretical. No one can possibly reason out the consequences of the Incarnation, wherein our God becomes also our brother. Whether, in any particular department of the ensuing manifestation, what *we* look upon

as the necessarily Divine will overwhelm the essentially human, or the essentially human will exclude the necessarily Divine, cannot possibly be known by reason or argument. All we can do is to 'come and see' in the inspired record how this Life of God incarnate was in fact manifested. If this record be consulted simply, trustfully, without prejudice, it will appear that as our Lord could suffer and could be tempted, so He could be ignorant of some things, and could use (without any difficulty, or any hint of 'condescension') the unscientific and historically inaccurate language of ordinary men about other things. If we allow ourselves to be guided by the inspired records we shall conclude that in all those matters which are not of primary religious importance, which are left by the Almighty to investigation and research, our Lord was just a child of His age and land and race. Had He been omniscient—and that from earliest infancy—He would have been inhuman: but the records contradict this on every page.

To-day, another chapter in the same old controversy is being opened. Granted all that the Creeds affirm concerning our Lord, is it possible that He made mistakes—that He made the mistake of thinking that He was, as Son of Man, 'timed' (if I may say so) to appear again almost immediately? There are one or two considerations which may be urged against a hasty answer in the negative. One is that according to the true Latin adage *Humanum est errare*—the liability to error is a part of human nature. That might no doubt be understood of moral error, as if *errare* were tantamount to *peccare*—and then it could not possibly be true of our Lord who was sinless. The Scripture tells us that (if we need to be told) as to actual sin—the fact of His Virgin-birth guarantees it as to any hereditary taint of sinfulness. But 'errare' may be absolutely innocent—may refer only to that liability to intellectual error which seems inseparable from any humanity we know about. If He, being God, nevertheless suffered, like other men; was tempted, like other men; grew in wisdom and learnt by experience, like other men: need we repudiate off-hand the suggestion that He made mistakes, like other men? May it not be just another of those results of the stupendous mystery of the Incarnation of God which we could not have foreseen, could not have dogmatized about, beforehand—but which we may

recognize in the sacred records, and acknowledge humbly, and with awe assent unto? It is indeed true that we could not believe it if it implied any failure of that great mission on which He came, namely, to reveal the Father unto us. Any 'error' which could hurt the souls of men, or dishonour or obscure the Father, or make more hard the narrow way, must be ruled out at once. For our Lord was (as man) absolutely obedient to the Father, and was filled with the Holy Spirit of God, so that He could not have been suffered to fall into any error which was 'contrary' to us men and to our salvation. But in things which, religiously speaking, *did not matter*, He might be left—to speak—to His human self.

Another consideration is, that our Lord in certain regions of His ministry was certainly in a special way a 'minister of the circumcision,' as St. Paul says. He stood in a peculiar relationship towards the former covenant, and as far as this relationship was concerned He was 'as one of the prophets,' He was indeed 'the prophet' foretold of Moses. Now the Holy Ghost Himself, the very, infallible, Spirit of truth, *spake by the prophets*. They were God-inspired men, and spake as the Spirit moved them; and yet they all made the same mistake concerning the coming of Christ which He might be thought to have made concerning His own second coming. They all antedated it, they all saw it (and therefore spoke of it) as much nearer to them in time than it really was—saw it in fact, generally speaking, as though it stood in close connexion of time and place with something then at hand. So, *e.g.*, the prophet Micah, in that glorious prophecy of his fifth chapter, says of Him who was to be born in Bethlehem, 'this man shall be our peace, when the Assyrian shall come into our land.' It is easy for us to interpret 'the Assyrian' of some spiritual foe, but of course Micah did not mean it so. He meant the actual Assyrian, who was *the enemy par excellence* in his day, as the German is now. Like all the prophets he foresaw the Great Deliverer, the ever-victorious Son of David, going forth conquering and to conquer, against a background of those hopes and fears which were even then present to his mind. Now if this was the way of the Spirit of God; the Spirit of truth, in the case of all those prophets by whom He spake, may it not also have been the way of the Spirit in the case of the Son of Man? May not He too have been

subject as man to that law of prophetic foreshortening which affected them all in their vision of future things? The true faith is that He foresaw these things, and spake of them beforehand, not as God, but as the perfect man, wholly guided and governed by the Holy Spirit. However absolutely true it is that He was co-equal with the Father as touching His Godhead, it is certain that that tremendous fact did *not* interfere with the free self-development and self-manifestation of His perfect manhood. The question 'how *can* these things be?' does not trouble us, because we know that it lies beyond the comprehension of human thought. We only know it was so; and knowing this, we are not startled to find that, as a matter of fact, the Holy Ghost spake by Him concerning things future in much the same way as He had spoken by the prophets.

Once more, maybe, we are taught that the way to learn is not to make theories beforehand and then try to force the facts observed into conformity with them; but rather, with a willing and obedient mind, to observe and register the facts, and to suffer them to guide us to the right conclusions. The queen of sciences, Theology, does not differ in this fundamental respect from any other science, *so far as the manifestation of the Son of God in time and place is concerned*. And that manifestation, as we know, is the key and clue to all the rest. 'Such as the Son is,' in all that human life and ministry and passion of His, 'such is the Father, and such is the Holy Ghost.' 'If ye had known *me*, ye should have known my Father also.'

To return. *Humanum est errare*. That will be true even in heaven. Error—liability to mistake—will always adhere to the limited, the conditioned, the human, so far as is compatible with the guidance and governance of the Holy Spirit. If *He* permits it, it can be neither sinful nor harmful. It becomes a part of His economy in the interests of truth and of mankind. So it was in the case of the prophets. So it would seem to have been in the case of the Son of Man. We should not have expected it to be so—but there are many things found in Him very different from our expectations. Should it appear certain to any of us that our Lord *did* use language about His return in glory, language which was not actually fulfilled, language which gave rise to expectations which proved to be fallacious, we shall not be staggered. It will but reveal to us something unexpected in the working

out of the great mystery of the Incarnation, in the actual manifestation of the life of God in human nature. We are not going to set our preconceived notions in battle array against the observed facts of the case. We are not going to lose our faith

because the mystery of the Incarnation turns out in some notable particulars to be even more wonderful than we had thought. Once more 'the foolishness of God is wiser than men: the weakness of God is stronger than men.'

In the Study.

The Application.

I. WHAT has become of the Application? 'That sermon just lacked one thing,' said a man recently, as he left church with his wife; 'if it had had an application it would have been perfect.' 'What is an application?' she asked. 'I never heard an application in my life.' So that is one generation that has not known the application. But there must be more than one. For Dr. Dale, in his Yale Lectures for 1877, already spoke of 'what our fathers used to call the application of their sermons'; and Canon Hay Aitken speaks of 'the application that used to close the discourses of the evangelical fathers.'

What is the reason of its disuse? Canon Hay Aitken thinks it had become 'somewhat stiff and formal,' and coming punctually at the end of each discourse it was disregarded, 'much as a fable is usually expected to end with a moral which children are always careful not to read.' And so there came a reaction, which has lasted even until now.

Perhaps it was a mistake to leave the application of the sermon always to the end. We must recover the application, but we need not make it the formal close of the sermon every time. If the bearings of the subject on life and duty have been kept steadily in view all along, this is not necessary. If they have not, it is apt to be formal. People are little moved by admonitions that are railed off in a place by themselves, or that only come in by rule at the end as a concession to pulpit traditions. The mere suspicion that anything of that sort is said *pro forma*, or in cool blood, is fatal to its moral effect. Besides, it looks as if, until the 'application' is reached, both preacher and hearers might safely forget that the gospel has to do with the actual needs of living men. One must never suffer an audience to take the sermon for an academic or intellectual exercise through five-sixths

of its length, only redeemed for pulpit use by a sting in its tail.

¶ Sometimes we may preach a sermon which is 'application' from the first sentence to the last, as an eloquent friend of mine once delivered a speech an hour long which was enthusiastically described as 'all peroration.' Mr. Finney's sermons were not unfrequently of this kind. I do not mean that he 'perorated' all through, but that the whole sermon was 'application.' I heard him very often during his visit to England when I was a student, and it seemed to me that the iron chain of the elaborate theological argument which sometimes constituted the substance of his discourse—an argument on Free Will, or on the Evil of Sin, or on the Moral Necessity which obliged God to punish Sin—was fastened to an electric battery. Every link of the chain as you touched it gave you a moral shock. But even in Mr. Finney's sermons the supreme impression usually came at the end; the effect was cumulative.¹

¶ The published addresses of D. L. Moody are so astir with personal appeal from beginning to end that we can hardly say there is more of it in one part of the discourse than in another. 'Am I in communion with my Creator or out of communion?'—'Do not think I am preaching to your neighbours, but remember I am trying to speak to you, to every one of you, as if you were alone'—'And can you give a reason for the hope that is in you?'—'Father, you have been a professed Christian for forty years; where are your children to-night?'—'O prodigal, you may be wandering on the dark mountains of sin, but God wants you to come home'—'Oh, may God bring you to that decision'—such are the keen moral search-lights that flash out all along from introduction to conclusion. Brief statements of doctrine, scripture expositions (always purposeful, though not always correct), lifelike description, numerous pertinent illustrations, and *continuous application* are the materials of these revival talks that have been so greatly blessed in turning men to God.²

II. Yet, as the end used to be, so it still is, the most natural and perhaps the most effective place for the appeal of the sermon. For the end is more than the beginning. An English preacher of the last generation used to say that he cared very little what he said the first half-hour, but that

¹ R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching*, 146.

² J. A. Kern, *The Ministry to the Congregation*, 345.