

# New Testament Problems

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## II.

# New Testament Problems

By REV. DR. RUMBLE, M.S.C.

This small book deals with a few of the problems and difficulties concerning the New Testament raised at various times by very different types of people. Before commencing our treatment of them, however, a word must be said about the "common-sense" attitude we should adopt towards difficulties in general.

In the first place, the fact that we do not always see at once the solution of a difficulty does not prove that there is no solution of it. Meantime there is more than enough evidence for the truth of the claims of Christ, and it is only reasonable that we should act according to the facts we do know rather than refuse to do so because of the obscure things we do not yet understand.

If we refused to act until we understood everything, we would never act at all. As a matter of fact, life itself would be impossible if we could never be certain of anything without elaborate investigation and the solution of every possible difficulty. No reasonable person makes such drastic demands in any other realm of knowledge. Residual difficulties in science do not prevent the acceptance of what is already scientifically established.

Where Sacred Scripture is concerned, it can safely be said that no man on earth is even aware of all its difficulties. Even the most learned of biblical scholars know only some of them. Always there will be room for further difficulties to which

they have not yet adverted. Efforts to solve difficulties, therefore, never will come to an end. It follows that it would be most unreasonable to withhold one's belief in Christ until all difficulties have been solved to one's own satisfaction. If a man made that a condition of his belief, then, if we answered all his present difficulties and he became a Christian, logically he could remain a Christian only until he had discovered another difficulty. Thereupon he would have to repudiate his faith in Christ until such time as he had received a satisfactory answer to his new difficulty, when he would renew his faith — until the next difficulty! Such a playing fast and loose with our religious duties to God is absurd. The claims of Christ are true or not. They cannot be true or false alternately according to this or that person's varying states of mind.

No man, of course, is asked to ignore, renounce or violate reason. But he is asked to use his reason properly. That Christ lived and proved His claim to be God are facts easily verified. And it is far more reasonable to accept Him despite difficulties which after all one should normally expect, than to make the difficulties an excuse for unbelief despite the known facts about Him.

Men of the greatest intelligence in all ages, men who have seen the difficulties we see and many more besides, men who cannot be accused of want of reason or of carelessness in their examination of the subject, have had no hesitation in their acceptance of the Christian religion on the basis of what they have definitely and clearly seen to be the established facts. They have reasonably acted according to all that they do know, refusing to ignore what is already certain because there are further aspects of the subject which they have not yet fully understood.

Keeping all that in mind, then, let us go on to the exploration of our present small collection of problems.

## I. Gospels Reliable

Four evangelists, St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke and St. John, each in a different gospel, have given us accounts of the life of Christ. But are these witnesses fully reliable, or could they all have been victims of the same hoax?

That question at least pays the four evangelists the compliment of implying that they were sincere. Still, it suggests that they were deceived and that their narratives cannot be accepted as indeed true. There is, however, an insuperable obstacle standing in the way of such a suggestion. It must be remembered that the four evangelists wrote their gospels at different times between some thirty and sixty years after the death of Christ. Christians had already multiplied before the first of the gospels was written by tens and even hundreds of thousands. Certainly more than thirty years before St. John wrote his gospel, St. Peter addressed an epistle to Christians "dispersed through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bythina." (1). St. Paul, also more than thirty years before St. John wrote his gospel, wrote to the Romans congratulating them because their faith was known "throughout the whole world." (2). And St. John himself, in the Apocalypse or Book of Revelation wrote to the seven Churches in Asia, namely, at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamus, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. (3). If the four evangelists were the victims of a hoax there were far too many living who would at once have detected that they were not giving the real facts and would have been only too ready to undeceive them.

Moreover, as the four gospels successively appeared, the most learned among Christians, Jews and pagans thoroughly sifted them; yet the worst enemies of the Church, whether Jews or pagans, devoted their efforts to trying to prove the

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(1). 1 Pet. 1:1. (2). Rom. 1:8. (3). Apoc. (Rev.), 1:11.

teachings wrong, but not that the facts had not been faithfully recorded. The "four hoaxed men" idea simply will not bear examination.

## II. Discrepancies

If, however, the gospels are infallibly true in all that they record, how is one to account for the differences and even the apparent contradictions between them?

To those putting such a question we shall have to reply by asking them whether they have read the gospels with sufficient care and attention; or, if they have done that, whether they have correctly understood the passages they think to be in conflict with one another.

That there are differences in the accounts given us we willingly admit; but despite variations in detail and in outlook, the four gospels do present quite consistent accounts of Christ. Differences of presentation and outlook in them — although they are not "biographies" in our modern and technical sense of that word — are no greater than one would expect to find in a "life" of, say, Napoleon, by different authors who approached the subject from different angles. And those very differences confirm our judgment of the reliability of the authors. If there had been no discrepancies, enemies would have been the first to suggest a fake, accusing the evangelists of writing in collusion and slavishly copying from one another. As it is, the impression of the genuineness is unavoidable, save with those determined not to believe in them.

Very often, examples given of supposed inconsistencies are due simply to a lack of serious attention to the text, different and supplementary details given in what are essentially fragmentary accounts being mistaken for contradictions.

Thus it has been urged that St. Matthew declares that, on

a given occasion, Christ "healed all that were sick." (4), whereas St. Mark gives a different version by saying that "he healed many that were troubled with divers diseases." (5). But there is no trace of contradiction here. St. Matthew tells us that Christ healed all the sick who were then brought to Him. St. Mark gives the additional details that they were many and that their diseases were of various kinds. In other words, St. Mark does not say that Christ healed many in the sense of "only some" of those who were sick. He says that those who were sick were many; and the other evangelist tells us that Christ healed them all. Endless difficulties can be manufactured from misquotations of Scripture, and there is only one answer to such objections. Read Scripture again, and more carefully.

In other instances, it is a matter of reasonable interpretation. According to St. Mark, for example, at the baptism of Christ a voice came from heaven saying to Him: "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." (1). But according to St. Matthew the voice from heaven said: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." (2). A moment's reflection, however, should suffice to show that there is no real conflict here. The two evangelists were describing the same thing from different points of view. They are in full agreement as to the substance of the message. St. Mark gives the words as addressed to Our Lord. But Our Lord did not need to be told what He already knew. The message to Him was for the sake of the bystanders and having those in mind, St. Matthew recorded the words as they would describe them, namely, the voice said that "this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." It is merely a case of the same thing narrated in different ways.

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(4). Matt. VIII, 8:16.      (5). Mark 1:32.      (1). Mark 1:11.      (2). Matt. 3:17.

### III. Life of Christ

Is it possible to give the life of Christ without any “miraculous trimmings?” To people who ask that we have no choice but to say that if the miraculous elements — which are not “trimmings” — were eliminated from the life of Christ, we would not have the life of Christ at all.

A very brief summary of His life would run somewhat as follows. About 750 years after the founding of Rome, according to the ancient Roman calendar, a child was born at Bethlehem in Palestine. The child’s mother was a Jewish girl named Mary. He had no human father, for He was miraculously born of a virgin mother under the direct influence of God.

At about the age of thirty this child, named Jesus Christ, began to teach publicly certain religious doctrines and rules of conduct. He laid stress on the Fatherhood of God, claimed that He was the Eternal Son of God who had come into this world from heaven to redeem men from sin, and declared that He was the “Messiah” predicted by the Jewish prophets as the redeemer of Israel. He wrought many miracles to justify His claim, and founded a Church which was to continue His work by establishing the rule of God in human hearts, thus making them members of the Kingdom of God.

After He had devoted some three years to this work, the Jewish authorities persuaded the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to have Him put to death. They were angered by the attacks Christ made on their religious hypocrisy, and fearful lest His teachings might lead to a revolt and cause political trouble with Rome. On the day we call Good Friday, therefore, Christ was crucified outside Jerusalem. But on Easter Sunday He miraculously rose from the dead, on various occasions appeared to His disciples during the ensuing forty days, and then ascended into heaven.

Such are the facts. Ultimately, He will return to judge the



whole of the human race. Even from this brief account, it will be seen that the miraculous elements simply cannot be excluded from such a life.

#### IV. The Magi

Rationalists, in their efforts to undermine the supernatural character of Christ, charge the author of St. Matthew's gospel with having invented the story of the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem, under the guidance of a star. They object, historically, that Josephus, the Jewish historian, gives a full and accurate account of Herod's reign, yet makes no mention of his encounter with the Magi; and, scientifically, that "stars have their appointed courses, and no star wanders about and stops over one particular village." Neither of their alleged grounds for their objection is really rational in the circumstances.

There is no point in quoting against an historian who does deal with some particular event some other historian who does not happen to deal with it. In so far as Josephus omitted to mention Herod's encounter with the Magi, his account was not a full one. Granted the accuracy of Josephus in such matters as he does mention, one cannot argue that because all that he narrates really happened, therefore he narrates all that really happened.

Scientifically, it is true that stars have their appointed courses, to which they are held by the physical laws governing this universe. But the account in St. Matthew's gospel does not require us to believe that any existent star left its appointed course. God produced a miraculous phenomenon outside the ordinary laws of nature which He Himself established. In His omnipotence, He would have no difficulty whatever in causing a light to appear in the heavens, to act as a guiding star leading the Magi to Bethlehem, just as He

led the Jews in their wanderings by a miraculous sign appearing as a pillar of cloud by day and glowing like fire at night, symbolizing His presence and guidance. (1).

To the question as to whether God *could* produce such a phenomenon as that of a moving star-like object to guide the Magi, the answer would undoubtedly have to be in the affirmative. To the question as to whether He *did so*, the answer is that St. Matthew records the event. To disprove the reality of the event, one would have to disprove the reliability of St. Matthew as a truthful historian; and that requires more than merely rejecting what he says merely because one does not happen to like it. On those grounds one might claim to have disproved a neighbor's title-deeds to the property next door for the sole reason that one happened to dislike him personally.

The man without religious faith rejects anything savoring of the supernatural. He does not believe in the supernatural because he does not believe in it. But his unbelief does not undermine the reasons for the faith of those who do believe.

## V. Massacre of the Innocents

There are those who say that they cannot believe in the wholesale massacre of all male children under two years of age in Bethlehem by Herod. (2). They argue that neither secular Roman historians, nor Josephus, the Jewish historian, mention it, and that St. Matthew invented the incident in order to pretend that it was a fulfilment of a prophecy by Jeremiah. (3).

In dealing with this, we must first warn against exaggerations. The description of the incident as a "wholesale mas-

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(1). Exod. 13:21. (2). Matt. 2:16-18. (3). Jer. 31:15.

sacre" is a tendentious appeal to the imagination, not to reason. The population of Bethlehem and the neighboring district at the time was about 1000. On the usual average of some 30 births annually per 1000, with sexes equally divided, there would be approximately 15 male children under one year of age, and 30 under two years of age. Most authorities say that 30 male children killed would be an overestimate; and they put the number at between 15 and 20.

In general, it should not be surprising that secular Roman historians did not mention the incident, for they were not interested in giving detailed accounts of events in remote provinces, and still less in discussing matters connected with any of the various popular religions. Nevertheless, the pagan Roman writer Macrobius, records that Caesar Augustus heard that Herod had put to death a number of small children up to two years of age, among whom was Herod's own infant son; whereupon the Emperor remarked cynically that "it would be better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." (4).

The silence of Josephus, the Jewish historian, concerning the incident is easily understood. He certainly knew of the ferocious cruelty to which Herod was liable on the slightest provocation. For Josephus narrates how, in fits of anger and jealousy, Herod murdered his own wife, her grandfather, her brother, and even his own two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. The slaughter of the children at Bethlehem was exactly the kind of thing he was likely to do, in order to exterminate Christ, once he had heard of that possible rival. Josephus, however, writing his history of the Jews at a time when Christianity was hated by the Roman Emperors, and desiring to win their favor towards the Jewish people, would naturally treat Christians as a contemptible sect and one of no account, re-

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(4). "Saturnaliorum Conrriorium libri septem"

stricting himself to a few allusions to them scarcely more explicit than those to be found in Pliny or Tacitus.

None of these considerations diminishes in the least the value of the positive declaration in St. Matthew's gospel.

What is to be said, however, of St. Matthew's "quotation" of Jeremiah's words: "A voice was heard in Rama, Rachel weeping for her children?" (1). That passage, in its original setting, obviously refers to the carrying off of the exiled tribes to Babylon; and Rachel, the ancestress of the Benjaminites, is figuratively depicted as inconsolable over the loss of her children and the sad trials awaiting them in a strange land.

St. Matthew uses this incident mentioned by Jeremiah as an *illustration*, not as a *prophecy*. He does not introduce it with the usual formula "in order that it might be fulfilled," but merely says "*then* was fulfilled that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet." He merely compares what happened now under Herod with what happened on the occasion referred to by Jeremiah, using Rachel as a representative of the motherhood of Bethlehem. If one said that Hitler's persecution of the Church in Germany was Nero's persecution of the early Christians over again, every normal person would understand the figure of speech.

In conclusion, there are no grounds whatever for denying the reality of the massacre of the children at Bethlehem. Moreover, did it not occur, there were enough living enemies of Christianity to contradict the statement of St. Matthew as soon as it appeared. Their silence is eloquent. Celsus the pagan philosopher and one of the most bitter enemies of Christianity, who lived in the second century, would certainly have denied it if he could. He did not. Even the Rabbinical work, "Toldoth Jeshu," declares the event to have occurred. Ration-

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(1). Jer. 31:15.

alists, once more, are not rational in their denial of its authenticity.

## VI. The Flight Into Egypt

Did St. Matthew make up the "flight into Egypt" story, in order to force a fulfilment of Hosea's words: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt?" (2), words which referred to the exodus of the Jews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses? Most certainly not.

It is true that the immediate reference of Hosea's words is to the liberation of the Hebrew people from Egypt. But God had metaphorically called the Hebrew people His son. "Israel is my son, my first-born," He had said. (3). Now what was said of Israel metaphorically applies strictly and literally to Christ, who was truly His Son. Israel was a prophetic type of Christ. Therefore just as the chosen children of God left Palestine, went to Egypt, and then returned to Palestine again, so St. Matthew sees a new and higher fulfilment of God's dealings with Israel in the calling back from Egypt of Him who was THE Son, Immanuel, or "God with us."

If there is one thing certain, it is that the obscure prophecy did not suggest the incident, but that the incident brought to St. Matthew's mind the passage in Hosea. He certainly would not have dreamed of inventing a journey into Egypt in the life of Christ merely in order to pretend a return journey as a fulfilment of it. In quoting Hosea, he did not change the past tense of the verb into a future tense. He left it as a description of a past event. But he saw the similarity between what had happened in the case of Israel and what had happened in the case of Christ as regards the return from Egypt. He saw that the words had a deeper significance in relation

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(2). Hosea (Osee) 11:1.      (3). Exod. 4:22.

to Christ as the true Son of God than it had in relation to Israel as the adopted son. Hosea himself did not see this. And St. Matthew does not pretend that he saw it. All that St. Matthew wants to convey is that the incident was typical of Christ. If Hosea could speak in such a way of Israel, with how much more reason could it be said of Christ! Granted the event, such thoughts are inevitable. Without the event, they would never have spontaneously arisen.

## VII. Jesus of Nazareth

St. Matthew says of Our Lord that "coming, He dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was said by the prophets: That He shall be called a Nazarene." (1).

Now there is no record of any such prophecy in those precise words to be found in the Old Testament; nor indeed is the village of Nazareth mentioned there. Sceptical critics have therefore said that the village of Nazareth was simply non-existent, but was invented by St. Matthew to fit in with a supposed prophecy that Jesus would be a "Nazarene;" and even here, they say, St. Matthew was mistaken, confusing the fact that Jesus was a "Nazirite," a member of a particular Jewish sect, with His being a "Nazarene."

All this is sheer guesswork on the part of the sceptics. There are no grounds whatever in support of it. That the village of Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament is not evidence of its nonexistence. There were hundreds of small villages throughout Palestine which received no mention in the Old Testament. All that one can reasonably conclude from the omission of any reference to it is that the village was so small and obscure that it played no part of importance in the national life. Even for us Christians, it owes its importance

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(1). Matt. 2:23.

entirely to its connection with the life and activities of Christ. It can be added here that it is mentioned in ancient Rabbinical lists as a place of residence favored by some of the Jewish priests.

That St. Matthew mistook the supposed-fact that Jesus was a "Nazirite" for His being a "Nazarene" is equally far-fetched. There is not the slightest evidence to show that Jesus was a "Nazirite," or that St. Matthew confused the two words. Nor did St. Matthew even have the intention of quoting any specific prophecy in this connection. The word "Nazarene" was in current use as an expression of contempt, as being associated with the obscure and despised little village of Nazareth, and St. Matthew intended merely a general and figurative reference to various prophecies of the Old Testament that the Messiah would be held in contempt, "the despised and most abject of men," (2), all of them being summed up by saying that He would be a "Nazarene," a popular expression which found its counterpart in the sarcastic question; "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?," which Nathanael was to ask later concerning Him. (3).

## VIII. The Transfer to Capharnaum

The gospels tell us that Jesus, "leaving the city of Nazareth, came and dwelt in Capharnaum on the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and of Nephtalim; that it might be fulfilled which was said by Isaiah the prophet: Land of Zabulon and land of Nephthalim, the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people that sat in darkness hath seen a great light; and to them that sat in the region of the shadow of death, light is sprung up." (1).

The prophecy to which St. Matthew there alludes is contained in the ninth chapter of Isaiah. Sceptics have not been

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(2). Is. 53:3.      (3). Jn. 1:46.      (1). Matt. 4:13-16.

slow to suggest that the reference in Isaiah is merely to the conspiracy of two kings. Pekah and Ramaliah, against Judah, and nothing else. They deny that the passage has any prophetic value in regard to a future Messiah, and even accuse St. Matthew of inventing a transfer of Our Lord's headquarters from Nazareth to Capharnaum to make things fit in with yet another imagined messianic prediction. This, however, is but one more example of the captious and entirely irrational criticism of unbelievers who are prepared to fall back on any excuse, however flimsy and quite regardless of evidence, in order to escape having to admit the truth of the gospels.

Besides its local reference, the passage in Isaiah unquestionably has a prophetic and messianic content. After predicting judgment upon Judah, Isaiah proclaims the dawn of a new hope in the future birth of a descendant of David who will establish the kingdom of peace; yet this will first come, not in Judah, but in the northernmost part of the land of Israel. St. Matthew, making allegorical use of the geographical terms in the prophecy, rightly applied it to the fact that Jesus made Capharnaum the centre of His activities. Capharnaum was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and in the territory of Zabulon and Nephtalim.

That the passage in Isaiah has a prophetic and messianic significance is evident to any reasonable and qualified person who bothers to read on beyond the words quoted by St. Matthew. For in that very same ninth chapter, Isaiah indicates his vision of the future by breaking out into a song of joy which has manifest reference to the Messiah to come: "For unto us a child is born; unto us a child is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting



Father, the Prince of Peace.” (2). After those words, to deny the messianic import of the ninth chapter of Isaiah is folly itself.

## IX. The Miracles

Are the miracles attributed to Christ in the New Testament really credible? Or could it be said that the moral teachings of Christ so impressed the disciples that they believed Him divine, and then, because they believed Him divine, attributed all kinds of miracles to Him to fit in with their belief? After all, that has undoubtedly happened in other legendary accounts of various religious leaders!

Now it is true that what is here suggested has happened in other legendary accounts of other religious leaders. But the account of Christ given in the New Testament is not to be ranked with such legendary creations of the imagination. The account in the gospels has not even a remote likeness to them. There is nothing resembling the gospels in any other literature of any period of human history. They exist as absolutely unique books. They record, not fairy tales of the “once-upon-a-time” variety, but definite things which happened at a particular date, and of which persons still living at the time of their publication had been witnesses.

Difficulty in accepting the miracles recorded in the gospels arises, not from any defect of evidence, but merely because they seem unlikely in comparison with events normally experienced. But, granted the stupendous fact that God became man, it is not in the least unlikely that His entry into human life and His departure from our midst would be attended by special circumstances, and that during His life on earth He would manifest special qualities and powers. The unlikely thing would be the absence of miracles in such a case.

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(2). Is. 9:6.

A study of the New Testament shows that Christ impressed His disciples first by the miracles in support of His divinity, and only then by His teachings. St. Paul stakes all, not on the teachings, but on the miracle of the resurrection of Christ. He urged people to believe in Christ because of the resurrection; and then, because of that, to accept Him together with His teachings.

In the year 55 A.D., before any of the gospels had been written, St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that Christ rose from the dead on the third day after His crucifixion, and that He was seen by Peter, also by the eleven apostles, and again by more than five hundred brethren at once, many of whom were living even as he wrote. (1). St. Paul, therefore, was writing of events which had happened less than twenty-five years earlier, events of which he knew that many others then living had knowledge as well as himself. And he was so absolutely certain of his facts that he declared Christianity to be worthless and not deserving of any consideration at all, if the resurrection did not take place. (2). But he knew that it did, and that others knew it also.

Rationalists themselves, despite their arguing in such a way, are really convinced that miracles are the foundation and support of the Christian faith, and not merely the later invention of faith. This is evident from their desperate efforts to get rid of them, either by denying the facts, or by trying to explain them away with a ruthless disregard of evidence.

They will say that the son of the widow of Naim (3), the daughter of Jairus (4), and Lazarus (5), all of whom Christ raised from the dead, were not really dead, but in a trance or coma; and they will say that, despite the fact that the very

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(1). 1 Cor. 15:4-6.      (2). 1 Cor. 15:19.      (3). Lk. 7:11-16.      (4). Mk. 5:22-42.  
(5). Jn. 11:34-44.

documents which tell them of the existence of these people make it quite clear that they had indeed died.

They will say that when Jesus appeared to the disciples walking on the sea (6), He was really walking on the shore, the light at the time making it seem as if He were walking on the water itself. The fact that St. Peter, bidden to come to Him across the water and losing confidence was actually sinking in deep water where Christ Himself stood, needing to be supported by Him, and both then walking back to the boat whence Peter had come, is simply and conveniently ignored.

When Christ commanded the wind and the sea during the storm on the lake (7), He did not really address His words to the wind and the sea, according to these rationalists, but to the disciples themselves, telling them not to be afraid but just to keep still in the boat! The disciples themselves knew otherwise, and said, one to another: Who is this (thinkest thou) that the wind and the sea obey Him? His words were for the sake of the disciples, to manifest that it was by an act of His divine will that the great calm came.

Christ's miracles of healing rationalists attribute to His knowledge of psychology and use of the entirely natural power of suggestion. Yet when the ruler came to Cana from Capernaum to ask Him to cure his ailing son (8), Jesus at once cured the boy by an act of His will, without going the fifteen miles to Capernaum in order to visit the patient as the ruler had requested. There was no question of working upon the boy's susceptibilities by suggestion or by any other natural psychological means.

But there is no need, nor indeed time, to go through all the subterfuges to which rationalists resort. They should really stand self-condemned in the eyes of all reasonable men.

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(6). Matt. 14:25-33.      (7). Mk. 4:37-40.      (8). Jn. 4:46-54.

## X. The Unjust Steward

One of the most frequently misunderstood of the parables by which Our Lord sought to convey His teachings is that of the unjust steward. (1). Many people declare themselves bewildered by His apparent approval of a flagrant act of dishonesty and injustice. But Our Lord had not the slightest intention of doing that. He merely told the story of an unjust steward to convey an important lesson to His disciples.

The story was substantially as follows: Once upon a time there was a manager who defrauded the proprietor of the business. Found out, and faced with dismissal, he falsified the accounts of those who owed money to the firm, reducing their indebtedness considerably. This put them under an obligation to himself, so that he had hopes that they would provide for him after his dismissal. When the proprietor heard of this, he said that the dishonest manager was at least a shrewd and clever fellow in thus looking ahead and providing friends for himself in the future. Such, briefly, was the story Christ told.

Difficulty arises in its interpretation from imagining that we must find a practical application for every detail in a parable, instead of concentrating on the one main lesson it is intended to convey. Usually the details belong merely to the scenery, as it were, of the parable. Our Lord did not intend the owner of the business to represent God. He did not intend to commend the wicked action of the unjust manager. He told the plain story of a rogue whose prudence even the owner, as a cynical man of the world, had to admire.

The lesson Our Lord intended was that it is an astonishing thing indeed that Christians are not as keen about their eternal spiritual welfare as many a scoundrel is about his temporal material welfare. Today one could equally well tell Christians

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(1). Lk. 16:1-9.

to look at Communists, to see the sacrifices they are prepared to make for their godless cause, and to be ashamed to be outdone by them instead of making the same, or even greater sacrifices for the right cause. This would not be to commend the cause of Communists or their tactics. It would be merely to contrast the consuming zeal of Communists with the inexcusable apathy of Christians.

Our Lord went on to tell us what our attitude should be, as Christians, towards worldly goods, and the use we should make of them.

If we are truly bent on serving God, we will learn to control earthly possessions instead of letting them control us. Either we master them, or they master us. That is why Our Lord added: "No man can serve two masters . . . you cannot serve God and mammon." If we let earthly possessions master us and become slaves to worldly interests, then it would be only a pretence to say that God is our Master. On the other hand, if God is our Master, earthly interests and worldly possessions certainly will not be.

If we happen to possess wealth, popularly called the "mammon of iniquity" or "filthy lucre" because of the evils so often associated with its accumulation or with its unscrupulous use, we should employ the means at our disposal to do good and to benefit the poor if we desire to be received into an everlasting home by those poor who will one day be reigning with God in heaven.

The parable, together with Our Lord's explanation of it, provides very clear and very important teaching concerning the use and abuse of wealth.

## XI. The Unforgivable Sin

It is Christian teaching that all sins without exception, granted sincere repentance of them, can be forgiven. Yet, in

apparently the most uncompromising terms, Christ Himself specifically excludes the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit from possibility of forgiveness. "Every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men," He declared, "but the blasphemy of the Spirit shall not be forgiven." (1).

At first sight that looks like a contradiction, but once we get the true meaning Our Lord had in mind we see that it is not. Christ wrought many miracles in the presence of the Pharisees in order to prove that He was their Redeemer and to give them a chance to accept their redemption. But this very evidence of God's power they deliberately and maliciously ascribed to the devil. That was blasphemy against the Spirit of God. How can a man be saved if he is of such malice that he not only refuses the very means of salvation offered to him by the Spirit of Divine Love, but blasphemously declares all signs commending the truth to them to be the work of the devil? Such a distortion of the very arguments for God into arguments against God proceeds from a state of soul subject to the most evil dispositions.

It is to be noted that Our Lord did not say that blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven *even though a man repents of it*. He was but stressing that a man guilty of such an evil act runs a fearful risk of developing such a malicious outlook that he will never *want* to repent. Unlike all other sins, the malicious refusal of the very means of salvation offered by the Holy Spirit of Divine Love argues to such hardened dispositions of soul that a man is unlikely ever to change and even desire forgiveness. And one cannot perseveringly reject forgiveness yet have it.

This warning, however, about what can ordinarily be expected to happen does not exclude the possibility of an ex-

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(1). Matt. 12:31.

traordinary and exceptional conversion, with consequent forgiveness when one has ceased to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. True, God does not owe it to the repentant sinner to forgive him. But justice to Himself demands that He be true to His own promise of mercy to the sinner who does repent, and justice also to the rights of Christ who paid the price of man's redemption on the cross. Holy Scripture tells us that God wills not the death of the sinner, but that he be converted and live (2); that Jesus is always able to save those who come to God by Him (3); and that if a repentant man's sins be as scarlet, they shall be made whiter than snow (4).

## XII. Second Coming of Christ

Christ undoubtedly taught, as a future historical event, that He would come again on the last day appointed for human life in this world to judge all mankind, and that all "shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with much power and majesty." (5).

So we are told how the final drama of human life will be ushered in. If the Son of God came the first time in apparent humility, poverty and suffering to expiate the pride, avarice and self-indulgence of men, He will come the second time in all His majesty and glory to judge the whole human race.

But Our Lord made it quite clear that we are not to be told when this final and universal judgment will take place. "Of that day or hour no man knoweth, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father alone." (6). God reserves that knowledge completely to Himself, and has no intention of revealing it to any of His creatures, angelic or human. Even the Son of God, come into this world to teach men what God

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(2). Ezech. 33:11.  
(6). Matt. 24-36.

(3). Heb. 7:25.

(4). Is. 1:18.

(5). Matt. 24:30.

wanted to be revealed to them, did not include in the knowledge to be given them the time appointed by God for the final reckoning.

Now there are passages, above all in the writings of St. Paul and of St. John, which seem to imply the early return of Christ; but closer study of these passages shows that they do not necessarily have that meaning, whilst there are other passages elsewhere which make it clear that they did not pretend to any certainty on the matter and that their real purpose was to warn people that, since Christ could return at *any* time, it was their duty to be ready *all the time*. If one keeps always in the love and friendship of God, it does not really matter when the end comes for him.

The Apostles were all well aware of the threefold teaching of Christ, that He would come again to judge the living and the dead, that when He would come it is not given to man to know, and that those will indeed be blessed who, when He does come, are "found watching." (1). St. Paul even found it necessary to correct a growing popular impression that the Second Coming of Christ would occur soon. "Be not easily moved from your sense," he wrote to the Thessalonians, "nor be terrified . . . as if the day of the Lord were at hand." (2).

As opposed to many "Adventist" sects which make the imminent Second Coming of Christ almost the basic element of their religion, the Catholic Church does not, and never has officially taught that this ultimate climax is close at hand. All Catholics, in the Apostles' Creed, profess their faith that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. All Catholics are taught by their Church so to live that, should He come in their own lifetime, they will be found "watching," or faithful to Him. But Catholics are not obliged to believe

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(1). Lk. 12:37.      (2). 2 Thess. 2:2.



that He will come within their own lifetime, or in anything like the near future. In practice, of course, at each individual's death Christ has "come again" for that individual; and Catholics therefore are constantly warned to live in the light of their meeting with Him at the supreme moment of each one's earthly career.

If it be asked whether the early return of Christ is likely, the only sound reply is that no one is in a position to offer a worthwhile opinion on the subject. A study of the many and various signs recorded in the New Testament seems to afford no reason to believe that His Second Coming is near at hand. One could even argue that, as mankind lived at least thirty to fifty thousands of years before Christ, it is possible that, with Him as the centre of history, mankind will live for another thirty to fifty thousand years; in which case we would rank among the "early Christians," the Church being still only in its infancy. Equally possible, of course, is that the Second Coming of Christ could take place tomorrow.

In practice, whether the Second Coming of Christ is close or not, it is for us to continue trying to save and sanctify our own souls, and to do our best for all our fellow human beings by prayer, good example, and zeal for their welfare, in accordance with the commandment Christ gave to His Church to go and to teach all nations until the consummation of the world. (3).

### XIII. Gethsemane

According to the gospels, the three chosen Apostles, Peter, James and John, whom Our Lord took with Him as companions in the garden of Gethsemane, were sleeping during His experiences there. How, then, could they know of His

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(3). Matt. 28:19-20.

sweat and blood, and the words of His prayer, and that an angel appeared to Him, comforting Him? This difficulty has occurred to many; but it is not really very formidable.

In the first place, while the gospels say that the Apostles slept, they do not say that they slept all the time. They tell us distinctly that three times Our Lord returned to them and woke them, reproaching them for their indifference to His own sorrow and suffering. During their waking moments, then, they could have observed such details as have been recorded.

But there is no need to hold that the Apostles witnessed for themselves every single detail recorded as a fact in the gospels. Our Lord Himself could have told them additional details later on, as He certainly must have done in the case of all that transpired during His temptation in the desert at the beginning of His public life. Or again, particular details could have been made known to them by divine revelation, as St. Paul declared that he learned of what happened at the Last Supper. (1). Such incidental revelations would not alter the fact that the Apostles saw or heard for themselves by far the greater part of the events and discourses of Christ recorded in the gospels.

One thing is certain. The evangelists accurately knew and accurately recorded whatever is written in the gospels, however they acquired their information.

#### VIV. "The Dead Arose"

We are told in the New Testament that, at the death of Christ, "the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose; and came out of the graves after His resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared to many." (2).

Precisely how this is to be understood is a difficult problem.

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(1). 1 Cor. 11:23.      (2). Matt. 27:52.

But the fact that it is in the Bible is as much a guarantee of its truth as of any other teaching of the Bible for anyone who accepts Holy Scripture as the inspired Word of God. We cannot explain it away merely because we find it difficult to understand, or do not like it, as if it were only an imagined episode. Were we to work on that principle, we could get rid of whatever we wished from Holy Scripture if we did not happen to approve of it. The record is there, and it is the inspired Word of God. The thing to do is to try to understand it as best we can.

A few interpreters have thought that the actual bodies of the saints did not really rise from the graves, but that their souls, merely giving the impression of possessing bodies, manifested themselves as "apparitions" to various people in Jerusalem. That opinion, however, does not seem a very likely one.

Still less likely is the opinion that they rose in their actual bodies and resumed normal and natural lives. Why should they, having completed one life of probation in this world, have to enter upon another; and, moreover, have to undergo a second physical death?

Most Catholic Scripture scholars, therefore, hold that the dead who rose from the graves did so in their glorified bodies, and did not have to die again. They were not in a merely natural human state. Their bodies had undergone a change similar to that of the risen body of Christ. God gave them the power to manifest their risen bodies to many in Jerusalem to symbolize Christ's victory over death. But as He Himself ascended, body and soul, into heaven forty days after His resurrection, they were already in a condition to be able to ascend also into heaven, body and soul. Whether or not they did go to heaven with Him when He ascended no one can say. Some commentators think it likely that they did; others think it likely that they must wait for that final happiness until the

day of the general resurrection. There is a mystery here, however, which no man can solve, and we must leave it a mystery.

## XV. "Three Days and Three Nights"

When, despite all the miracles He had wrought, the scribes and Pharisees persisted in asking Jesus for a "sign" justifying His claims, Our Lord, alluding to His death, burial and resurrection, said to them: "As Jonas was in the whale's belly three days and three nights: so shall the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights." (3). Puzzled people ask how this was verified, since Jesus died on Friday and rose from the grave early on Sunday morning.

Now if the expression "three days and three nights" is taken literally as it stands, then it is obvious that Our Lord was in the grave only two nights, that of Friday and that of Saturday. But the expression is not to be taken literally just as it stands. The Jews used the expression popularly much as we use the word "fortnight." Literally the word "fortnight" is an abbreviation of "fourteen nights." But when a man says that he will be back in "a fortnight" he usually speaks in general, and does not mean exactly fourteen nights. Again, Jesus Himself said that "on the third day" He would rise again. (1). As He was placed in the grave on Friday, Saturday would be the second day, and Sunday the third day; which shows that Jesus Himself intended only the two nights of Friday and Saturday.

"Three days and three nights," therefore, was a Hebrew expression for any period extending even partially over three days; and that Our Lord was in the grave part of Friday, all day Saturday, and part of Sunday, was enough to comply with the Jewish way of speaking.

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(3). Matt. 12:40

(1). Matt. 20:19.

## XVI. Ascension of Christ

What happened at the ascension of Christ? We are told that, forty days after His resurrection, having given His apostles final instructions and promises, Our Lord led them out from Jerusalem to Bethania and there, "as they were looking, He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight." (2)

The crass materialist asks whether Christians are expected to believe that He passed into mid-air. But Christians are neither asked to believe that, nor do they believe that. Their belief is expressed in the Apostles' Creed: "He ascended into Heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead."

Any suggestion of His merely remaining in mid-air is sheer caricature. The visible phenomenon of His being lifted above ordinary levels of earth impressed upon the apostles symbolically that He was entering into some higher state of existence. After He had been raised some little distance above them, a cloud formed beneath His feet, removing Him from their sight. Difficult as it may be to understand what happened to Him then, it is not so difficult to explain. He had risen from the dead, not in a "natural" body, but in a "spiritualized" body, which was independent of all earthly conditions and limitations. From time to time, He had allowed His "spiritualized" body to manifest itself to His apostles; but now He willed that its supernatural qualities should permanently assert themselves, and He simply passed into another and mysterious state of being beyond all conditions of which we have any experience.

Faith in this bodily ascension of Christ to the glory of Heaven itself is no more difficult than faith in the bodily in-

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(2). Acts 1:9.

carnation of the Eternal Son of God in the first place, and His birth into this world at Bethlehem.

## XVII. St. Paul's Conversion

In Acts 9:7, the account of St. Paul's experiences on the road to Damascus tells us that "the men who went in company with him stood amazed, hearing indeed a voice, but seeing no man." Yet in Acts 22:9 St. Paul himself is described as saying: "And they that were with me saw indeed the light, but they heard not the voice of him that spoke with me." Surely hearing the voice and not hearing the voice constitutes a straight-out contradiction! But here again we have one of those seeming inconsistencies which is not really an inconsistency at all. What is needed is merely a little more attention than usual to the details of the narratives.

From the outset, we should remember that St. Luke wrote the whole of the Acts of the Apostles, and that he was a most careful writer. Were there any real contradiction, it would not have escaped his notice and he certainly would have avoided it. We can, therefore, dismiss the thought of any real inconsistency.

What, then, is the explanation? In Acts 9:7, those who were with St. Paul are said to have heard a voice, but to have seen no man. In reality, they heard what to them were unintelligible sounds apparently addressed to St. Paul "out of thin air." They saw no man responsible for those sounds. In Acts 22:9, we are given the additional details — not contradictory details — that they indeed saw, not a man, but a blinding light which frightened them; but, St. Paul declares, "they heard not the voice of him that spoke with me," meaning that "they did not hear what he said to me." St. Paul is bringing out the fact that the message was reserved to him only, that what was intelligible to him was not intelligible to others who, as has

been said, heard only unintelligible sounds giving the impression of a human voice.

## XVIII. Famous Trinity Text

In the Catholic Douay Version of the Bible there is a famous passage in 1 Jn. 5:7-8 which reads: "And there are three who give testimony in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost. And these three are one. And there are three who give testimony on earth: the spirit, the water, and the blood. And these three are one."

The "Witnesses of Jehovah," who do not believe in the Holy Trinity, make much of the well-known fact that the first section of this passage, namely, "There are three who give testimony in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost. And these three are one," is a later interpolation, and not part of the original text. And they quote against its authenticity such authorities as Westcott and Hort (1881), Nestle (1948), Bover S. J. (1943), and Augustine Merk S. J. (1948). None of those authorities, of course, was a "Witness of Jehovah." The "Witnesses of Jehovah" have merely made use of the scholarship of both the Protestant and Catholic authorities they quote.

The history of this particular interpolation is of very great interest. In the fourth century, using the best Old Latin and Ancient Greek manuscripts, St. Jerome made a new Latin translation of the New Testament, known as the Latin Vulgate; and his translation did not include the words: "And there are three who give testimony in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost. And these three are one."

Probably in the following century in Spain, however, a scribe, making another copy of the Latin Vulgate, and thinking of the Christian doctrine of the Blessed Trinity, wrote the words in the margin as a comment suggested by the words: "There

are three who give testimony on earth: the spirit, the water, and the blood. And these three are one." A later copyist, thinking it was part of the text which had been overlooked and written in the margin, wrote it into the text itself. Such things can easily happen; and scholars are constantly examining and comparing all earliest Greek and Latin manuscripts they can find in order to correct such mistakes.

Another and equally famous example besides the one we are considering occurs, not in the Catholic Douay Version, but in the Protestant Authorized Version. There, in Matt. 5:13, we have the words at the end of the Lord's Prayer: "For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." Protestants recite those words to this day when saying the Lord's Prayer. But they are due to a copyist's error, who wrote the words into the text from a marginal note, adding to the text words not spoken by Our Lord at all when He taught the "Our Father" to His disciples. As has been said, it was easy for such things to occur; and it is for scholars to discover where they have occurred and to correct them.

But let us return to our present case. The Spanish copyist died, and with no suspicion of his mistake, others multiplied transcriptions of his manuscript. So it came about that most future copies of the Latin Vulgate contained the interpolated words as verse 7 of 1 Jn. 5. There are, however, about fifty ancient copies of the Latin Vulgate as it originally came from St. Jerome, in which the words do not occur.

In the 15th century, further complications arose. Copyists transcribing Greek manuscripts translated the words into Greek and began to insert them into Greek manuscripts also, thinking that the Greek manuscripts which lacked them were defective.

Now the Catholic Douay Version into English was made in the 16th century from a copy of the Latin Vulgate which con-



tained the words; and the Protestant Authorized Version was made shortly afterwards from one of the later Greek manuscripts which also contained the words.

Today both Catholic and Protestant scholars agree that, although there is nothing wrong with the words themselves, they were not actually part of the original Scriptures. At most they prove that the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity was indeed the belief of all Christians in those early ages when the comment was first written into the margin of a copy of St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate.

The "Witnesses of Jehovah" gain absolutely nothing in their efforts to disprove the doctrine of the Trinity by quoting the findings of Catholic and Protestant scholars in this matter, scholars who themselves most firmly believe still in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. If, then, the "Witnesses of Jehovah" did succeed in persuading anyone by such considerations not to believe in the Trinity, it would be a case of the blind leading the blind, neither knowing enough about the subject and both falling into the ditch.

Needless to say, apart from the verse we have been discussing, there is ample evidence from many passages in the New Testament which most certainly were part of the original writings to prove beyond doubt the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

## XIX. The Apocalypse or Book of Revelation

The Apocalypse, or "Revelation," as it is entitled in the Protestant Bible, is the last Book in the New Testament. It was written by St. John the Apostle in the Island of Patmos about the year 96 A.D. The Book contains a description of visions granted by God to St. John, and it is one of the most difficult of all Books in the Bible to interpret. As St. John was given a spiritual and supernatural sight of things which

could not be adequately described in human language, one would almost have to be lifted to the same level of supernatural insight in order fully to understand it.

The Book is "apocalyptic," or an unveiling of mysteries; and it teems with imagery and symbolism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the interpretation of all its details is not easy. No one can claim such full comprehension of everything it contains that nothing remains obscure. Many of the particular prophetic references in the Book will probably become clear only when the events to which they are related have actually occurred. Catholic biblical scholars have given different interpretations of various passages, but they do not propose their explanations as more than tentative or probable; and the Catholic Church leaves them free to maintain what they consider the most likely meaning, provided their teaching in no way conflicts with any defined article of the Christian faith or with the known sense of any other passage contained elsewhere in the Bible.

Despite difficulties, however, the general theme of the Book is quite clear. It was primarily meant as a warning to the Christians of St. John's own time against laxity and infidelity; but it declares also the constant warfare which will be the lot of the Church through all the ages, predicting the ultimate triumph of Christ and of His Church against all adverse forces.

St. John was writing for Christians in the dark and threatening times of pagan persecution; and he stresses the fact that the might of all earthly power is but temporal, while spiritual things are eternal and will last forever. He declares that the persecutors of the Church are inspired by the devil, but that God is stronger than Satan and that the future is in the hands of Christ.

The apparent defeat of Christ by His death on Calvary was really the Victory of Christ; and in the end He will come in

all His power and majesty to judge the nations and put an end to human history as we know it. Therefore Christians should bear present trials and difficulties with courage and patience, knowing that those who endure with Christ will share also in the eternal glory of Christ.

With that very brief analysis this little book must close. Naturally, within its space-limits, only a few New Testament problems could be discussed. But it is hoped that the varied examples chosen will not be without interest for their own sake, and that the treatment of them, however inadequate, may prove of some assistance in the understanding of yet other passages of Holy Scripture.

In the end, of course, the really important thing is that we should take to heart the message contained in the last of the Books of the New Testament, as given above, making sure ourselves of inheriting all that Christ, Our Lord and Savior, has made possible for those who believe in Him, love Him, and do their best to serve Him during the few short years of their probation in this world.







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