

And we who are arrested with the opening sentences of his book read on with increased interest and ever-widening sympathy. For the book touches us on many sides and always deeply. It is a study in magic, says the author. What have we to do with the study of magic? It is a study in religion, he adds. And we find that religion is magic and magic religion, and both have most surprising affinities with the very faith we hold most dear. Who can understand the religion of the Old Testament who misses or misunderstands the things that are written in this book?

But most of all, it is a study of man. It is one of the most scientific, it is perhaps altogether the most absorbing, of the additions that have recently

been made to the young science of Anthropology—to the young science of Man in the largest, fullest sense. They have just started a great quarterly with the title *Man*. This is one of the books that have made that possible and even inevitable. It is long since we learned that the proper study of mankind is man; it is only quite recently that we have begun it. Dr. Frazer's *Golden Bough* is almost its introduction.

The new edition is much enlarged—three volumes in place of two. The enlargement is due to additional illustrations of the arguments, additional arguments also to illustrate. What book, brochure, or scrap of periodical writing, bearing on his subject, has the author missed?

## St. Luke and the Incarnation.

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'That which is to be born shall be called holy, the Son of God.'—Luke i. 35 (R.V.).

THE text which I have chosen will plainly indicate the subject on which I am about to speak. I am about to speak of the mystery, as it is rightly called in our Litany, of the Holy Incarnation of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. It is, indeed, a subject deep and mysterious, a subject that has been a stumbling-block to many, but still a subject on which it is our duty, in times such as these in which we are now living, reverently to meditate, and to draw from it all the boundless consolations which it ministers to the humble and believing heart.

Only too often the subject is set aside as something too deep for us ever to understand, something that we must believe but can never, never realize. That God should come down from heaven, be incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, be born as we are born, live as we live, and as we must also say, die as we die, does seem to be something, thus broadly stated, that, on this side the grave, must ever remain to us, however real and true, as absolutely inconceivable.

It was so felt even from the very first, and the two earliest attempts that were made to explain away the adorable mystery remain to this very day, in one form or another, in the background of much that is directly written or dimly entertained in

reference to the Incarnation. Of those two earliest tendencies of poor human thought we can only speak in very general terms, as, like all false doctrines, the errors they involved only showed themselves in their real deformity as time went onward. It cannot, however, be reasonably doubted that one of these tendencies was as old as the days of St. John; and that when, in his First Epistle, he says that 'every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God; and every spirit which confesseth not Jesus, is not of God'—and when again, in his Second Epistle, he speaks of the deceivers 'that confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh'—that, when he was thus speaking, the holy apostle was referring to what was afterwards called Docetism, or the strange and wild persuasion that our dear Lord was man only in appearance, and was born and died only in semblance and in deceptive manifestation. The other tendency was probably older still, and apparently showed itself among the earliest Jewish Christians under the form that our Lord was verily the carpenter's son, but that, at His baptism, or at some other epoch, the Divine power entered into Him so that He came to be the Son of God.

On these ancient tendencies of poor human thought we need not pause for a moment to show that both were what St. John pronounced the first of them to be—antichristian, emanations from the spirit of Antichrist; but we may certainly recognize them as the true sources of all the errors that connected themselves in old times with the mystery of the Incarnation. Even now they exercise some influence on modern thought in the contemplation of some of the blessed circumstances which Christmas-tide especially brings before us. It is not to be denied that some of the great teachers of our own days have felt and avowed their difficulties in regard to the literal truth of the Incarnation; and it cannot also, I fear, be denied that many really earnest and devout Christians are only too ready to put aside the closer consideration of the blessed doctrine, as involving what, in their judgment, transcends all powers of human thought and understanding.

But it is clearly the judgment of our Church that the great doctrine of the Incarnation ought not to be so put aside, nay, rather that each earnest worshipper should have a clear and right knowledge of what is meant by the apostle when he declares to us that the Word who, in the beginning, was with God, and who was God, became flesh, and dwelt among us. What could be a clearer indication of the mind of our Church in regard to belief in this holy mystery than this—not only that it instructs us by the great and lucid Creed which it has bidden to be sung or said thirteen times in each passing year; but further, that it teaches us in the Collect for Christmas Day that the eternal Son was to be born of a pure Virgin, and, in the proper preface in the Communion Service for that day (in language which has ever seemed to me of the most reverential clearness), has even vouchsafed to explain the very mystery of that Virgin-birth. Can words be more fully and more solemnly clear than those which the Prayer-Book directs the celebrant to utter on Christmas Day in the presence, as it were, of angels and archangels, and of all the company of heaven,—that Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, was made very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary, His mother.

We are thus fully justified in saying that it is completely contrary to the mind of our Church that the Incarnation should be put aside as a

mystery that transcends all possibility of being understood by, and realized by, the faithful worshipper. There is indeed, in the fact of the Incarnation, a mystery that passeth all understanding—the mystery that God did so love the human race that He had vouchsafed to call into existence, fallen though it was, and gone far from its holy ideal—that He did still so love it as to give His only begotten Son to be born in it, and be its Redeemer as well as its Perfecter. This is a mystery indeed, a mystery that can never be understood until the eternal truth that God is Love is understood in all its fulness, and we begin to know hereafter what here can only be known in part, and in holy expectancy. But into these deep thoughts it is not well for us here even to attempt to enter. All that I am desirous in these few and simple words to bring home to you is not the Incarnation in those higher aspects in which it was regarded by early thinkers like Irenæus, and by great writers that have followed him, viz. as being cosmical, and as involving relations to all that has been called into being. It is not the Incarnation so considered that I am now desirous to dwell upon, but the Incarnation as it relates to us men and our salvation, and is revealed to us in all plainness and simplicity in the Scriptures.

To many, alas! these plain and simple revelations have, as I have already said, seemed to involve such mystery, and so much that the mind cannot clearly realize, that the tendency to regard the whole narrative, as it is put before us by St. Matthew and St. Luke, as doubtful and unhistorical, is steadily increasing. The general truth that Jesus Christ did come into the world is not denied, but the belief that He came into the world in the manner that the first and third evangelists describe, especially as relates to the Virgin-birth, is regarded by many as not absolutely vital, and so as not absolutely necessary to salvation. And why is it so regarded? Because it involves the supernatural, and the supernatural in a form that is contrary to the whole experience of mankind. How is it then that all real and true Christians do believe it, and not only believe it, but rightly deem it to be the very foundation and corner-stone of Christian truth? Why do they thus believe it? By many it has been considered sufficient to say because it rests on the authority of the Church, and has been believed in from the very beginning. Such an answer is undoubtedly

an answer of great weight and validity; but have we not that which to many minds is of far greater weight and validity? Have we not historical evidence which, when calmly and dispassionately considered, will be found by every fair and reasonable mind to impart almost irresistible conviction? Have we not the declaration of one of the apostles of Jesus Christ, and an appeal to prophecy, on the very truth that is the chief stumbling-block to so many, the Virgin-birth? Have we not also, what must be considered as even more important, a full and circumstantial statement of one who though not an apostle was a companion of St. Paul, a physician,—this should not be overlooked,—and one who made it his especial duty to collect from eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word the carefully traced out narrative that bears the name of the Gospel according to St. Luke? Of such evidential importance is this narrative that the argument for the truth of all the circumstances related by St. Luke, in connexion with the birth of our Lord from the blessed Virgin, has been worked out, especially recently, with a fulness and care which I am sincerely persuaded must carry conviction to any heart that had not been prejudiced and pre-occupied against acceptance of the supernatural. This argument, of course, I cannot attempt to lay before you in its completeness, but I may still lay before you two or three considerations which, in the working out of the argument, are of primary importance, and which, when simply mentioned, seem to carry with them a suggestive force which may not have been adequately felt in our general musings on the holy narrative of the Lord's nativity.

In the first place, this, it is rightly urged, must never be overlooked, that the main features of the narrative could only have come from the blessed Virgin Mary herself, either directly to the carefully inquiring evangelist, or to some one to whom the blessed Virgin had related them, and by whom they had been communicated to St. Luke. And what a consideration this is. Could she whom all generations shall call blessed unto the very end of time, could she have been in any way mistaken? Such a question in its mildest form is painful; in any other form it is to anyone bearing the name of a Christian unthinkable. It is thus through the blessed Virgin herself that the full revelation has been made to mankind.

In the second place, if the evangelist had only received the recital of the facts indirectly, the same one who had communicated them could hardly have been other than one of the earliest believers, and most probably one of the apostles. For we are distinctly reminded that Mary, the mother of the Lord, was with the small holy company that, after the Lord's Ascension, joined the apostles in the Upper Room and continued steadfastly with them in prayer. Would not those earliest days have been days of holy reminiscence, would not every event in our Lord's earthly life have been dwelt upon with all the quickened powers of spiritual retrospect, and, in that holy retrospect, could it have been possible that the Annunciation, and all the circumstances it involved were not dwelt upon, when the mother of our Lord was present, who alone could tell the mysterious history of the angel visit, and all in the fulness of time that followed? May it not further be said, as accounting for the silence in other parts of Scripture (except in St. Matthew) as to any of the details of the Incarnation, that such things would sink into the very souls of those who heard them; and remain there, deep and eternal truths, which, as we may well believe, would never have been likely to form a part of their general teaching. The Resurrection was the standing witness of the truth of the Incarnation; and Christ and the Resurrection formed, as we are told, the, so to say, outward and general teaching of the first preachers of the gospel.

Much more might be said, but probably enough has now been said to give some conception of the nature of the argument for the historical truth of the Incarnation that may be derived from the opening chapter of the Gospel of the beloved physician—that opening chapter which many believe, and not without strong grounds for their belief, was supplied directly to the evangelist by the blessed Virgin herself. But be that as it may, I hope enough has been said to encourage every earnest thinker to dwell with unshaken confidence on all that Scripture reveals to us of the Incarnation of our Lord, and never, never to put these revelations aside as mysteries which only faith can understand and accept. They must ever be regarded by every faithful believer, as our Prayer-Book regards them, as real and living truths on which all our hopes here and hereafter will be found ultimately and permanently to depend.