

# THE MONIST

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## THE CHRIST OF PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN FAITH. IN THE LIGHT OF RELIGIO- HISTORICAL CRITICISM.<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

#### THE JESUS OF HISTORY AND THE CHRIST OF FAITH.

IT is a great and lasting glory of nineteenth century scientific theology that it has taught the distinction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, which are identified by ecclesiastical dogmatics. By careful and painstaking critical investigations it has shown how the dogma of the god-man came into existence, gradually, as the result of a process of combination in which religious ideas of various origin were blended with the recollections of the primitive Christian congregation respecting the life of their master. It has attempted further, by eliminating later elements and by going back to the oldest sources, to get as near as possible to the historical reality regarding the founder of our religion, and to make the understanding and the heart of the modern world more familiar with his figure, stripped of its veil of myths, in its purely human greatness as the worshipful portrait of a lofty religious and moral hero.

The value of this undertaking is incontestable, even though sober common sense cannot shut its eyes to the fact that there are also involved many illusions with reference to the significance of the results thus obtained.

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<sup>1</sup>Translated from the original manuscript by Prof. W. H. Carruth, University of Kansas.

the new-born child and recognized in him the thirty-two signs of the "great man" (the incarnation of the celestial Buddha).

After he had seen this sign the seer Asita began to weep and to sigh deeply. To the king's question whether perchance he foreboded any danger for the young prince Siddhartha, he replied: "No, I am not weeping on his account, but on my own, for I am old and frail; but this young prince will be clothed with the perfect wisdom of a Buddha, and then he will teach for the salvation and joy of the world and of the gods as well, the law which has virtue for its beginning, middle and end, and portray it in its clearest and most perfect sense. After they have heard it from his mouth creatures, heeding the law of their development, will be entirely freed from birth and age, from disease, trouble, complaint, pain and suffering of every sort; those inflamed with the fire of passion he will cool with the water of the good law; those bound in darkness and those who wander in the evil way he will lead upon the right path of happiness (of Nirvana); those bound in the fetters of natural corruption he will free from such fetters; he will open the eyes of wisdom in the blind whose eyes are clouded by the deep darkness of ignorance; he will lead myriads of beings out of the sea of life that is surging on this side showing the way into immortality. And we! we shall not live to see the work of this precious savior! That is why I weep and sigh, for it is too late for me to receive salvation from sickness and passion" (*Lalita vistara*, I, 91-94).

#### JESUS AND SIDDHARTHA.

The resemblance of these Buddhistic legends to the evangelical story of the childhood of Jesus, especially according to the gospel of Luke, is self-evident. Moreover, there are several parallels to the account of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, Luke ii, 41-52. When Prince Siddhartha was taken to school he surprised and shamed his teachers by his superior knowledge of all the 64 writings comprising the learning of the Hindu schools. Once, when he had gone into the country, in order to observe agriculture,<sup>1</sup> he became

<sup>1</sup>According to another version it was at the time of the spring festival, when the king used to draw the first furrows with a golden plow; impelled by curiosity to witness this festival, the nurse had left the young prince alone.

absorbed in pious meditation under the shadow of a tree, when five strangers, sages or saints (rishis), coming along that way, recognized by the majestic glory radiating from the future Buddha that he must be a son of God, if not the incarnation of the sun-god himself. In the meantime the prince was missed at home, and no one could answer the king's question as to where he had gone, and they began to search for him everywhere. At last he was found under the tree, whose shadow had not moved the whole day, still absorbed in meditation, surrounded by the holy men, radiant with the light of majesty, like the moon in the midst of the stars. His father was startled by this sight, but the son addressed him with the voice of Brahma, full of dignity: "Leave thy plowing,<sup>1</sup> O father, and look higher!" Thus he rebuked his father's lack of higher thought and aspiration, just as the twelve-year-old Jesus rebuked his mother, Luke ii, 49. Thereupon he returned with his father to the city, and remained there, conforming to the customs of the world, but his mind occupied wholly with the thought of going away in order to become the perfectly pure being (Buddha). (*Lalita vistara*, I, 115, 118, 122.)

#### BABISM—A RECENT PARALLEL.

How deeply the notion of successive incarnations of the divine spirit in historical personages is rooted in the mind of Asiatic nations was seen even in the nineteenth century in the rise of the religion of Babism in Persia.<sup>2</sup> Its founder, Mirza Ali Mohammed, had come forward in his youth as the enthusiastic reformer of the official Mohammedan religion and the passionate opponent of the degenerate hierarchy, and he soon had a large number of adherents, who were devoted to him with worshipful zeal, (in the year 1844). The founder claimed unconditional authority, and called himself "the Bab," i. e., the gate, through which alone one could gain the knowledge of God. He believed himself to be the supreme incorporation of the divine breath or word, whose former revelations had

<sup>1</sup>This presupposes that the ceremony of the plow at the spring festival was the occasion of the boy's being lost.

<sup>2</sup>Gobineau: *Les religions et les philosophies de l'Asie centrale*, p. 145 ff.

appeared in Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. All these divine representatives are in fact only different manifestations of the same divine being, and are all alike in having their immediate origin from God, and, being more closely united with God, return to him more quickly than other men. What distinguishes them from one another is merely the form of their manifestation, conditioned by their time. Just as Jesus was a reproduction of Moses adapted to his time, and Mohammed a reproduction of Jesus, so the Bab is a reproduction of Mohammed. But although he is in his time the supreme manifestation of the divine spirit, he is not the last, but will have successors just as he had predecessors. With this conviction the Bab went to his martyrdom with joyful serenity. He predicted that the spirit of God dwelling within him would immediately after his death pass over to one of his disciples. "The one whom God shall reveal" shall continue the work of the Bab and deliver the world from the injustice now prevailing. And, in fact, after the execution of the Bab at Tebriz (1850) his sect maintained itself under new leaders and has still many adherents. One of its later leaders, Behá (died at Acre, 1892) was regarded by the faithful as the incarnation of the godhead, and was actually called "God" and "King or Creator of Gods."<sup>1</sup> But a protest was made to these preposterous claims by another party, and thus arose occasion for the discussion of the old question: What is the relation of the divine being to his human manifestation?

## II.—CHRIST AS THE CONQUEROR OF SATAN.

From the beginning it was the settled conviction of the Christian communion that Christ had come for the purpose of destroying the works of the Devil. This belief found expression in various forms.

1. Before entering upon his career as Messiah, Christ successfully withstood the temptations of Satan. According to the accounts in the gospel of Matthew (iv, 1-11) and of Luke (iv, 1-13) this

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, *The new History of the Bab*, 1893, p. 395.