

**THE CRUCIFIXION:
VIEWED FROM A
JEWISH STANDPOINT**

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The Crucifixion: Viewed from a Jewish Standpoint by E. G. Hirsch

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E. G. HIRSCH

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A LECTURE DELIVERED BY INVITATION BEFORE THE
"CHICAGO INSTITUTE FOR MORALS, RELIGION
AND LETTERS."

BY DR. E. G. HIRSCH.

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Wherever religion builds her altars, flames a burning bush, and he who would draw near to it in the proper spirit, must be mindful of the caution addressed to the old Hebrew shepherd: "Veil thy countenance, take off thy shoes, for the ground on which thou standest is holy." Religion is ever thought about the highest and deepest themes and motives of life. He who has no religion, may scoff at the convictions of another; but one who himself cherishes as the best he has, his own religious principles, will only reverently enter upon the discussion of his neighbor's religious creed, and even when he differs from him or has reason to reject one or the other fact upon which his brother rears his temple, he will never for the mere purpose of denial, or to fill a vacant hour with a ribald jest, presume to raise his voice in the other man's sanctuary.

The subject which I am to handle, is fraught with great difficulties. It centers in a tragedy which for millions of the human family symbolizes the supreme moment of all history. The cross, which is the sign of that majestic and awful event, has spelled for thousands and thousands the message of hope, making life bearable under stress, testing to the utmost human endurance. As such token of redemption, it welcomes the new-born babe, and speeds the parting soul to the realms of light. How often has it steeled with courage despairing hearts! How often has it whispered words of love unto lonely souls! Its gleam sends joyfully the soldier to the battle; consoles him when wounded, and upholds him when facing

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terror and danger! But the very same crucifix, which for so many is emblematic of the noblest and highest that ever graced earth, recalls, too, a charge under which now for fifteen centuries the Jews have pined, an accusation which brought upon and still brings upon the kinsmen of him who was the central figure of the supposed drama, sufferings beggaring description, and distrust most bitter to bear. Is that charge well-founded? No Jew can be indifferent to what the answer to this question will be. He need not deny, and he will not deny, the providential mission of Christianity, nor the rich blessings which it conferred upon the races of men. Whatever the Jew's religious bias may be, believer in divine government, as he is, he will, confronted with so stupendous a phenomenon, as is the growth and power of Christianity, willingly acknowledge that under God's purposes, this grand movement was necessary, dowered and destined to lift toward the stars beings altogether too prone to grovel in the dust. But for all this, the Jew, remembering his own history, cannot shirk the duty of examining the accounts upon which the charge is based, that his ancestors at the most promising period of his history, laid heavy hands upon one who was, if not more, the noblest type of humanity. Assuming this task, no thought can be further from his mind than the desire to change the religious convictions, or to shake the religious hopes of even the least among his fellow-men. Not in defiance, but in defense, must the Jew voice his views on that catastrophe which has forever made gloomy Golgotha most glorious in the eyes of Christendom, while at the same time it has rendered the name of that hill a synonym, not of love, but hatred, to which were exposed the children of those whom he who died there with a prayer on his lips in behalf of his enemies, would willingly have called his brethren.

Today, one might, if so minded, dispose of the whole matter most briefly, and in a few words, by urging as correct what many non-Jewish writers have claimed, and to prove which, many thick and learned books have been published, that Jesus never lived. Of course, if there never was a

teacher of Nazareth, there never could have been such a close of his life as the concluding chapters of the gospels tell us there was. If Bruno Bauer's theory, as most finely spun in his work, "Christ and the Cæsars," is accepted, the Jew is at once purged of the guilt of having put to death the Messiah. But I, for one, cannot concede that the figure of the Nazarene is altogether an after-thought or an after-formation. Though the critics of the school to which Bauer belongs, and which today is ably represented by Dutch professors, display considerable scholarship to make out the case, that Christianity is the impersonal outcome of an alliance between Stoicism and Hellenistic Alexandrian Judaism, and Jesus the assumed and freely invented personal incarnation of an impersonal movement; I, with many others, must hold that such great historical processes always take their rise from personal sources. After due allowance for whatever circumstances may have contributed toward the making of Christianity, and toward its spread in the world, and after the deduction of whatever the conditions of the Judean and non-Judean mind at this critical period have undoubtedly produced, we are still face to face with a remainder for which the non-personal forces give no satisfactory explanation. There is no doubt that Stoic philosophy acted as the plow, preparing the ancient world for the reception of the new seed. Nor can it be questioned that without Alexandrian Judaism, Christianity would be suspended like the coffin of Mohammed, in mid-air. But the point of contact where two movements of this kind meet, lies always in one great heart, is always one great creative mind, in whom, unconsciously and yet potently, all the scattered rays gather, who thus becomes the focus which sends out again with greater intensity, flashes of light into succeeding darkness. If now it be said that Paul the Apostle is this great personality creating Christianity, much truth is voiced in this statement, and still the whole truth is not exhausted. Of course, without the activity of Paul, Christianity would never have become what it has. As a dogmatic system, it has to recognize in him of Tarsus its founder, but he utilized a personal Jesus as the incar-

nation of his Christ idea. Such a personal life was not the free invention of his imagination; he himself had heard the story of the life of Jesus from others who had known him. Around the carpenter's son of Nazareth he wove Messianic ideas of his own, as modified by the thoughts which Judean Greek philosophy and the Stoic schools had worked out.

But while I will not question the personal element in the origination of Christianity, I must insist, all the more strenuously, upon the fact that the accounts which pass as a biography of Jesus, are the works of men, and of a period that never had from personal contact or conversation, knowledge of him. In other words, we have no biography of the teacher of Nazareth. He must have spent his life in comparative retirement. The influence he exercised upon his co-temporaries could not have been as deep and great as we generally suppose from our acquaintance with the gospels. For how can one account otherwise for the strange fact, that not one of the historians or writers living at or shortly after the time during which we must suppose him to have moved about in Palestine teaching and exhorting, preserves even his name. Josephus does not mention him; for the often-quoted passage in which an allusion to him occurs, is unmistakably an interpolation. In the Jewish writings of that period, as in the non-expurgated editions of the Talmud, there are about twenty passages which seem to have a reference to him. But the connection and the character of these plainly indicate that they are the echo, blurred and indistinct, of some New Testament tradition. Historical data concerning the life and the end of the founder of Christianity, are not found in the Talmud. The Palestinian sources are utterly silent on this whole matter, even the name under which Jesus there is indicated, is, at the earliest, a creation of the third century. What the Babylonian Talmud offers in this connection, consists of a few conceptions which were formed clearly after Christianity had become the religion of state, about the beginning of the fourth century, and are derived from notions, which, based upon the condition of the Christianity of that time, were transferred, although without his-

torical value, and altogether uncorroborated by tradition, to the founder of the religion. The early ecclesiastical fathers know little more of Jesus than a few anecdotes, and the writings of St. Paul show that the apostle was not acquainted with the details of his life. The gospels, this is the incontrovertible result of modern criticism as carried on by eminent Christian scholars in Germany and Holland, are not the works of the men whose names they bear. They are not the recorded recollections of eye-witnesses. Even if we discredit the theory of the Tuebingen school, we must acknowledge, and the more conservative scholars acknowledge, that our four gospels are a collection of fragments which received their present shape, at the earliest, during the opening years of the second Christian century. Bauer may have overstated the case when he claimed that first there was a gospel written in Aramaic, now lost, the so-called Hebrew gospel, reflecting altogether the opinions of the Ebionites, and believed to be the work of Matthew and Peter, from which the present Matthew is a free elaboration of a less narrow Judæo-Christian character, and with a broader universalistic tendency; Luke, originally a Paulinian gospel, but remodeled later, representing the Judæan or Ebionite party; Mark, occupying a neutral ground between these two, and consisting of extracts from both.

But even according to the most recent criticism which has largely departed from the Tuebingen school, Mark is considered to be the earliest form in which the life of Jesus was reduced to writing. But it was preceded by a collection of sayings now worked into the account by both the authors of Matthew and Luke, each one following in doing this, a plan of his own, the former being more artificial, because more systematic. Taking then the most conservative estimate of the date of our gospels, we must conclude that at least two generations intervened between those who wrote down the events and those who could have been eye-witnesses to them. This date, however, upon closer examination, proves to be still too early. If we bear in mind that the gospels in many particulars betray a strange lack of acquaint-