

**ECCE VERITAS, AN ULTRA-
UNITARIAN
REVIEW OF THE LIFE AND
CHARACTER OF JESUS**

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Ecce Veritas, an Ultra-Unitarian Review of the Life and Character of Jesus by Sylva

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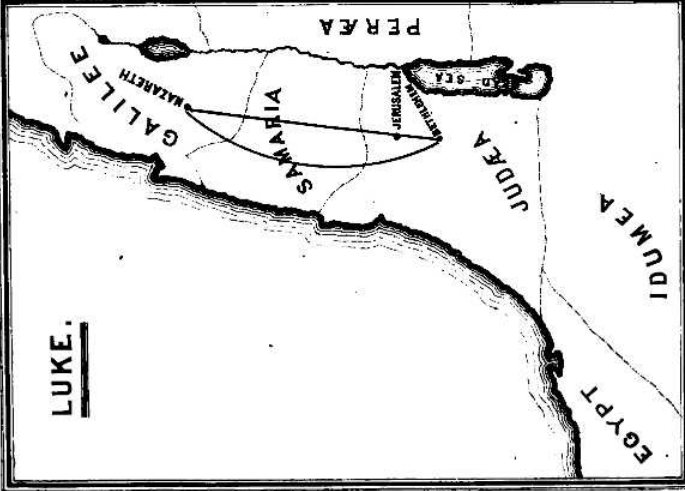
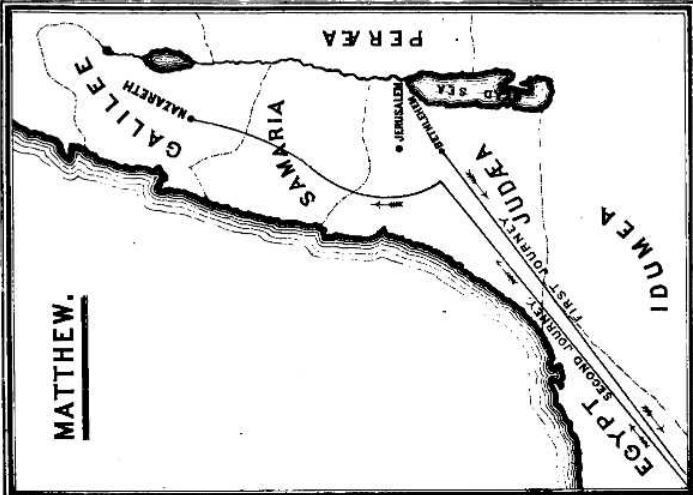
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SYLVA

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AN

ULTRA-UNITARIAN REVIEW

OF

THE LIFE AND CHARACTER

OF

JESUS.

"PROVE ALL THINGS; HOLD FAST THAT WHICH IS GOOD."

"SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES; FOR IN THEM YE *THINK* YE HAVE ETERNAL LIFE."



LONDON:

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1874.

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PREFACE.

THE Church of Christ is a dualism. Between its spirit and its letter there exists a conventional, yet none the less an arbitrary, connection. The union is a forced union,—for, while the spirit of Christianity animates and adorns every branch of the Christian community and is always the same spirit, its dogma presents itself under aspects so diversified that it may be said to consist of an infinite series of types and gradations. Dogma divides Christianity, first, into sects; then subdivides it to sect within sect; and finally, to a countless assortment of private opinions. Its spirit, which is that of all true religion, has done great good and is capable of doing more. Its dogma, carried to its legitimate consequence, has done irreparable mischief and is capable of doing little else.

But this "Spirit of Religion," though the ineffable charm and great redeeming trait of every form of Christianity in varying degree, is by no means a Christian monopoly. That monopoly has been claimed at one time or another by every religious community under the sun; yet it is none the less certain that while a sterling piety is the common property of all who love and seek it, it is the special trait—the sole inheritance of none.

To assert that this religious spirit is equally present, in equal proportion, in each and every creed, would be to advance a hypothesis that stands opposed to the whole teaching of history and experience. Still we cannot too strongly protest against the common delusion that piety is the peculiar privilege of the sects terming themselves Christian.

By the *spirit* of Christianity we understand—good works—good will—sound morals—self-restraint—resignation to the divine will—love—worship—thankfulness. By dogma we understand—faith in the infallibility of human opinions, unwavering credulity as to the occurrence of certain events, veneration of the mysterious, strong attachment to ancient doctrines mainly because they *are* ancient; as, also, faith in the efficacy of particular forms, rites, ceremonies, symbols, &c.

But when, as in some forms of religious worship, the mere letter of any given creed fills so absolute and unyielding a place, the noblest element of that religion—its spirit—has little or no chance of freely asserting itself. Where there is so much of formalism, opinionativeness, or external pretence, the true religious spirit is almost always at a discount. Vital religion opens and expands the heart, widens and quickens every goodly human sympathy, promotes love, charity, confraternity. Dogma narrows, contracts, sours, isolates: mars every noble purpose; every divine impulse; every sense of

human equality before God: presupposes The Almighty, in his capacity of righteous judge, to be partial to nations or individuals, to be guided in his judgments less by the *motives* than by the *opinions* of his creatures. Dogma, however, is declared by theologians of all ages to be "necessary to salvation;" and it is, therefore, a matter of supreme importance to determine at the outset of a religious career which particular ecclesiastical dogmas are reliable, and which contribute but to a more certain damnation. It is a subject in which all men have an equal interest, and upon which every individual ought to possess the soundest information. Each man ought to think for himself, and work out for his own guidance an *independent* opinion: an opinion founded, not upon prejudice or caprice, but upon patient investigation and impartial judgment.

Christianity as a dogma depends mainly, if not wholly, on the truth or untruth of "The Biography of Jesus."

Now this biography, to be true as a *whole*, must be true in all its principal *parts*. If it will not bear healthy criticism as a whole it is because the parts are unsustainable. In every veracious biography we have a narrative of events and a description of persons. If, however, the separate incidents composing any given narrative break down and wither away when subjected to the sceptical process, equally fatal will such criticism prove itself to the history considered as a perfect whole.

"*Ecce Veritas*" is not intended as a reply either to "*Ecce Homo*" or "*Ecce Deus*," but as a contrast. It cares less about the *human* Jesus—or the *divine* Jesus—than about the *true* Jesus.

"*Ecce Deus*" is most ably written. Its author is learned, earnest, and eloquent: but by prefacing all his ideas and observations with the dogma of the Incarnation, he begs the whole question, yet continues his argument as though he had not begged it. The book, well written, is full of thought; but its logic, sometimes happy, is occasionally lamentable. We have an instance of this as follows. Being struck by some of the undeniable defects of the New Testament story, "*Ecce Deus*" attempts to overcome the difficulty by a most marvellously bold assertion. "The history of Jesus defective!"—exclaims "*Ecce Deus*"—"What of that! History cannot be written." This is tantamount to saying that the true history of Jesus has *not* been written; more, that it *cannot* be written. This is to concede to the rationalist everything he would ask, for it is to grant that the Evangelical accounts are *unhistorical*. But what is the essential logic of all this? What does "*Ecce Deus*" mean us to understand? The history of Jesus, according to this authority, is not written, for "no history can be written;" therefore, the history of Jesus is *true*; and, being true, it is impious to disbelieve it. A truer and more modest proposition would have been—"A *complete* and *perfect* history is *difficult* to write." But with such a proposition as this "*Ecce Deus*" is not content, for the reason, perhaps (obvious enough), that an incomplete and imperfect history—like that of the Evangelists—is *not* difficult to write.

"*Ecce Homo*" is the work of a profounder mind; but there is one charm in a book far greater than profundity—a charm in which "*Ecce Homo*" is, unfortunately, deficient, and that is—simplicity. It has another and greater defect. It has a sublime contempt for vulgar facts, for mere dingy commonplaces. Hard facts and dry figures are not musical, are not rhythmical. They make sad havoc with the even flow of one's ideality—of one's perorations—especially when one is rather apt to get into the clouds.

"*Ecce Deus*" makes Jesus too much of a God to have been an equal partaker of our common humanity. "*Ecce Homo*" begins by insisting on his perfect humanity; but depicts him, nevertheless, as a being far too perfect to be less than divine. To the arguments of "*Ecce Deus*" his divinity is a prerequisite. But the prerequisite of "*Ecce Homo*" to which it attaches, justly, a greater importance, is *his historical character*; and it insists on dealing with Jesus as one whose history *can and has been* written.

"*Ecce Veritas*" insists that whatsoever is asserted about Jesus, whether it relates to his divinity or humanity, his actions or doctrines, must first be shewn to be *true*: or, failing that, consistent, probable, possible. Before it will debate what sort of "Man" he was, or what sort of "God," it insists on first knowing whether or to what extent he was mere "Myth." It demands this all the more earnestly that an unsparing criticism always does least harm to that which is most true.

Jesus—as the Christ—is the corner-stone of Christianity, and Christianity demands of us, at the peril of our souls, that we do believe in him or disbelieve in him; and *according to the evidence we shall receive* (the evidence, *i.e.*, of his existence, character, place in history, and divine attributes) must our verdict be given. But before we can consider such evidence it must be "put before us." Must be put before us in so clear and simple a manner that the humblest amongst us may be able to weigh, compare, and rightly comprehend it; so that all may be placed in a position to decide, each for himself.

From such a multitude and diversity of opinions as to the character of Jesus it is by no means easy, nor would it be important, to select the only right one, were it not that "a particular belief" is necessary to salvation: but, being necessary, we ought to see unfolded before us the whole history and teaching of Jesus just as it is found recorded in the common English Bible: to see each incident, and each doctrine, stripped of every needless ambiguity; freed from all mere clerical dictation. Then, and not till then, shall we be able to discover, by actual comparison, what sort of agreement there is among the Evangelists themselves. It is a very stupid mistake—none the less stupid that it is old-fashioned—to suppose that biblical criticism is the sole duty of the scholar, the particular business of divines; or that it requires uncommon powers of mind, an erudition so vast that it never ought to be undertaken except by the fortunate few who are exceptionally gifted by nature, art, and inspiration.

A book, called the Bible, is printed in the English vernacular; is put into the hands