THE OUTLINE OF HISTORY

BEING A PLAIN HISTORY OF LIFE AND MANKIND BY

H. G. WELLS

REVISED AND BROUGHT UP TO DATE BY RAYMOND POSTGATE

With Maps and Plans by J. F. HORRABIN

VOLUME I

GARDEN CITY BOOKS
Garden City, New York
MANUFACTURED IN THE U. S. A.
We are told that a great darkness fell upon the earth, and that the veil of the temple was rent in twain; but if, indeed, these things occurred, they produced not the slightest effect upon the minds of people in Jerusalem at that time. It is difficult to believe nowadays that the order of nature indulged in any such meaningless comments. Far more tremendous is it to suppose a world apparently indifferent to those three crosses in the red evening twilight, and to the little group of perplexed and desolated watchers. The darkness closed upon the hill; the distant city set about its preparations for the Passover; scarcely anyone but that knot of mourners on the way to their homes troubled whether Jesus of Nazareth was still dying or already dead.

The souls of the disciples were plunged for a time into utter darkness. Then presently came a whisper among them and stories, rather discrepant stories, that the body of Jesus was not in the tomb in which it had been placed, and that first one and then another had seen him alive. Soon they were consoling themselves with the conviction that he had risen from the dead, that he had shown himself to many, and had ascended visibly into heaven. Witnesses were found to declare that they had positively seen him go up, visibly in his body. He had gone through the blue—to God. Soon they had convinced themselves that he would presently come again, in power and glory, to judge all mankind. In a little while, they said, he would come back to them; and in these bright revivals of their old-time dream of an assertive and temporal splendour they forgot the greater measure, the giant measure, he had given them of the Kingdom of God.

§ 5

The story of the early beginnings of Christianity is the story of the struggle between the real teachings and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth and the limitations, amplifications, and misunderstandings of the very inferior men who had loved and followed him from Galilee, and who were now the bearers and custodians of his message to mankind. The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles present a patched and uneven record, but there can be little question that on the whole it is a quite honest record of those early days.

The early Nazarenes, as the followers of Jesus were called, present from the first a spectacle of a great confusion between these two strands, his teaching, on the one hand, and the glosses and interpretations of the disciples on the other. They continued for a time his disciplines of the complete subjugation of self; they had their goods in common, they had no bond but love. Nevertheless, they built their faith upon the stories that were told of his resurrection and magical ascension, and the promised return. Few of them understood that the renunciation of self is its own reward, that it is itself the Kingdom of Heaven; they regarded it as a sacrifice that entitled them to the compensation of power and dominion when presently the second coming occurred. They had now all identified Jesus with the promised Christ, the Messiah so long expected by the Jewish people. They found out prophecies of the crucifixion in the prophets—the Gospel of Matthew is particularly insistent upon these
prophecies. Revived by these hopes, enforced by the sweet and pure lives of many of the believers, the Nazarene doctrine began to spread very rapidly in Judea and Syria.

And presently there arose a second great teacher, whom many modern authorities regard as the real founder of Christianity—Saul of Tarsus, or Paul. Saul, apparently, was his Jewish and Paul his Roman name; he was a Roman citizen, and a man of much wider education and a much narrower intellectualty than Jesus seems to have been. By birth he was probably a Jew, though some Jewish writers deny this; he had certainly studied under Jewish teachers. But he was well versed in the Hellenic theologies of Alexandria, and his language was Greek. Some classical scholars profess to find his Greek unsatisfactory; he did not use the Greek of Athens, but the Greek of Alexandria, but he used it with power and freedom. Professor Gilbert Murray calls it "very good." "He is affected by the philosophical jargon of the Hellenistic schools and by that of Stoicism. But his mastery of sublime language is amazing." He was a religious theorist and teacher long before he heard of Jesus of Nazareth, and he appears in the New Testament narrative, at first, as the bitter critic, antagonist, and active persecutor of the Nazarenes.

The present writer has been unable to find any discussion of the religious ideas of Paul before he became a follower of Jesus. They must have been a basis, if only a basis of departure, for his new views, and their phraseology certainly supplied the colour of his new doctrines. We are almost equally in the dark as to the teachings of Gamaliel, who is named as the Jewish teacher at whose feet he sat. Nor do we know what Gentile teachings had reached him. It is highly probable that he had been influenced by Mithraism. He uses phrases curiously like Mithraistic phrases. What will be clear to anyone who reads his various Epistles, side by side with the Gospels, is that his mind was saturated by an idea which does not appear at all prominently in the reported sayings and teaching of Jesus, the idea of a sacrificial person who is offered up to God as an atonement for sin. What Jesus preached was a new birth of the human soul; what Paul preached was the ancient religion of priests and altar and the propitiatory bloodshed. Jesus was to him the Easter lamb, that traditional human victim without spot or blemish who haunts all the religions of the dark white peoples. Paul came to the Nazarenes with overwhelming force because he came to them with this completely satisfactory explanation of the disaster of the crucifixion. It was a brilliant elucidation of what had been utterly perplexing.

Paul had never seen Jesus. His knowledge of Jesus and his teaching must have been derived from the hearsay of the original disciples. It is clear that he apprehended much of the spirit of Jesus and his doctrine of a new birth, but he built this into a theological system, a very subtle and ingenious system, whose appeal to this day is chiefly intellectual. And it is clear that the faith of the Nazarenes, which he found as a doctrine of motive and a way of living, he made into a doctrine of belief. He found the Nazarenes with a spirit and hope, and he left them Christians with the beginning of a creed.

But we must refer the reader to the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline
Epistles for an account of Paul's mission and teaching. He was a man of enormous energy, and he taught at Jerusalem, Antioch, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome.

Possibly he went into Spain. The manner of his death is not certainly known, but it is said that he was killed in Rome during the reign of Nero. A great fire had burnt a large part of Rome, and the new sect was accused of causing this. The rapid spread of Christian teaching certainly owes more to Paul than to any other single man. Within two decades of the Crucifixion this new religion was already attracting the attention of the Roman rulers in several provinces. If it had acquired a theology in the hand of Saint Paul, it still retained much of the revolutionary and elementary quality of the teachings of Jesus. It had become somewhat more tolerant of private property; it would accept wealthy adherents without insisting upon the communization of their riches, and Saint Paul has condoned the institution of slavery ("Slaves, be obedient to your masters"), but it still sets its face like flint against certain fundamental institutions of the Roman world. It would not tolerate the godhead of Cæsar; not even by a mute gesture at the altar would the Christians consent to worship the emperor, though their lives were at stake in the matter. It denounced the gladiatorial shows. Unarmed, but possessing enormous powers of passive resistance, Christianity thus appeared at the outset plainly as rebellion, striking at the political if not at the economic essentials of the imperial system. The first evidences of Christianity in non-Christian literature we find when perplexed Roman officials began to write to one another and exchange views upon the strange problem presented by this infectious rebellion of otherwise harmless people.

Much of the history of the Christians in the first two centuries of the Christian era is very obscure. They spread far and wide throughout the world, but we know very little of their ideas or their ceremonies and methods during that time. As yet they had no settled creeds, and there can be little doubt that there were wide local variations in their beliefs and disciplines during this formless period. But whatever their local differences, everywhere they seem to have carried much of the spirit of Jesus; and though everywhere they aroused bitter enmity and active counter-propaganda, the very charges made against them witness to the general goodness of their lives.

During this indefinite time a considerable amount of a sort of theocrasia seems to have gone on between the Christian cult and the almost equally popular and widely diffused Mithraic cult, and the cult of Serapis-Isis-Horus. From the former it would seem the Christians adopted Sun-day as their chief day of worship instead of the Jewish Sabbath, the abundant use of candles in religious ceremonies, the legend of the adoration by the shepherds, and probably, also, those ideas and phrases, so distinctive of certain sects to this day, about being "washed in the blood" of Christ, and of Christ being a blood sacrifice. For we have to remember that a death by crucifixion is hardly a more bloody death than hanging; to speak of Jesus shedding his blood for mankind is really a most inaccurate expression. Even when we remember that he was scourged, that he wore a crown of thorns, and that his side was pierced
by a spear, we are still far from a “fountain filled with blood.” But Mithraism
centred upon some now forgotten mysteries about Mithras sacrificing a sacred
and benevolent bull; all the Mithraic shrines seem to have contained a figure
of Mithras killing this bull, which bleeds copiously from a wound in its side,
and from this blood a new life sprang. The Mithraist votary actually bathed
in the blood of the sacrificial bull, and was “born again” thereby. At his
initiation he went beneath a scaffolding on which the bull was killed, and the
blood ran down on him. Here we seem to be dealing with a survival of the
primitive blood sacrifice at seedtime, which was perhaps the primary religious
idea of the earliest temple civilizations.

The contributions of the Alexandrine cult to Christian thought and practices
were even more considerable. In the personality of Horus, who was at once
the son of Serapis and identical with Serapis, it was natural for the Christians
to find an illuminating analogue in their struggles with the Pauline mysteries.
From that to the identification of Mary with Isis, and her elevation to a
rank quasi-divine—in spite of the saying of Jesus about his mother and his
brothers that we have already quoted—was also a very natural step. Natural,
too, was it for Christianity to adopt, almost insensibly, the practical methods of
popular religions of the time. Its priests took on the head-shaving and the
characteristic garments of the Egyptian priests, because that sort of thing
seemed to be the right way of distinguishing a priest. One accretion followed
another. Almost insensibly the originally revolutionary teaching was buried
under these customary acquisitions. We have already tried to imagine Gautama
Buddha returning to Tibet, and his amazement at the worship of his own
image in Lhassa. We will but suggest the parallel amazement of some earnest
Nazarene who had known and followed his dusty and travel-worn Master
through the dry sunlight of Galilee, restored suddenly to this world and visiting,
let us say, a mass in St. Peter’s at Rome, at learning that the consecrated
wafer upon the altar was none other than his crucified teacher.

Religion in a world community is not many things but one thing, and it
was inevitable that all the living religious faiths in the world at the time, and
all the philosophy and religious thought that came into contact with Christian-
ity, should come to an account with Christianity and exchanged phrases and
ideas. The hopes of the early Nazarenes had identified Jesus with the Christ;
the brilliant mind of Paul had surrounded his career with mystical significance.
Jesus had called men and women to a giant undertaking, to the renunciation
of self, to the new birth into the kingdom of love. The line of least resistance
for the flagging convert was to intellectualize himself away from this plain
doctrine, this stark proposition, into complicated theories and ceremonies, that
would leave his essential self alone. How much easier is it to sprinkle oneself
with blood than to purge oneself from malice and competition; to eat bread
and drink wine and pretend one had absorbed divinity; to give candles rather
than the heart; to shave the head and retain the scheming privacy of the brain
inside it! The world was full of such evasive philosophy and theological stuff
in the opening centuries of the Christian era. It is not for us here to enlarge
upon the distinctive features of Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Philonism, and the
like teachings which abounded in the Alexandrian world. But it was all one world with that in which the early Christians were living. The writings of such men as Origen, Plotinus, and Augustine witness to the inevitable give and take of the time.

Jesus called himself the Son of God and also the Son of Man; but he laid little stress on who he was or what he was, and much upon the teachings of the Kingdom. In declaring that he was more than a man and divine, Paul and his other followers, whether they were right or wrong, opened up a vast field of argument. Was Jesus God? Or had God created him? Was he identical with God or separate from God? It is not the function of the historian to answer such questions, but he is bound to note them, and to note how unavoidable they were, because of the immense influence they have had upon the whole subsequent life of western mankind. By the fourth century of the Christian Era we find all the Christian communities so agitated and exasperated by tortuous and elusive arguments about the nature of God as to be largely negligent of the simpler teachings of charity, service, and brotherhood that Jesus had inculcated.

The chief views that the historian notices are those of the Arians, the Sabellians, and the Trinitarians. The Arians followed Arius, who taught that Christ was less than God; the Sabellians taught that he was a mode or aspect of God—God was Creator, Saviour, and Comforter, just as one man may be father, trustee, and guest; the Trinitarians, of whom Athanasius was the great leader, taught that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost were three distinct Persons, but one God. The reader is referred to the Athanasian Creed for the exact expression of the latter mystery, and for the alarming consequences to him of any failure to grasp and believe it. To Gibbon he must go for a decisive statement of these controversies. The present writer can deal with them neither with awe nor derision; they seem to him, he must confess, a disastrous ebullition of the human mind entirely inconsistent with the plain account of Jesus preserved for us in the Gospels. Orthodoxy became a test not only for Christian office, but for Christian trade and help. A small point of doctrine might mean affluence or beggary to a man. It is difficult to read the surviving literature of the time without a strong sense of the dogmatism, the spites, rivalries, and pedantries of the men who tore Christianity to pieces for the sake of these theological refinements. Most of the Trinitarian disputants—for it is chiefly Trinitarian documents that survive—accuse their antagonists, probably with truth, of mean and secondary motives, but they do so in a manner that betrays their own base spirit very clearly. Arius, for example, is accused of adopting heretical opinions because he was not appointed Bishop of Alexandria. Riots and excommunications and banishments punctuated these controversies, and finally came official persecutions. These fine differences about the constitution of the Deity interwove with politics and international disputes. Men who quarrelled over business affairs, wives who wished to annoy their husbands, developed antagonistic views upon this exalted theme. Most of the barbarian invaders of the empire were Arians; probably because their simple minds found the Trinitarian position incomprehensible.
It is easy for the sceptic to mock at these disputes. But even if we think that these attempts to say exactly how God was related to himself were presumptuous and intellectually monstrous—nevertheless we are bound to recognize that beneath these preposterous refinements of impossible dogmas there lay often a real passion for truth—even if it was truth ill-conceived. Both sides produced genuine martyrs. And the zeal of these controversies, though it is a base and often malicious zeal, did at any rate make the Christian sects very energetically propagandist and educational. Moreover, because the history of the Christian body in the fourth and fifth centuries is largely a record of these unhappy disputes, that must not blind us to the fact that the spirit of Jesus did live and ennable many lives among the Christians. The text of the Gospels, though it was probably tampered with during this period, was not destroyed, and Jesus of Nazareth, in his own manifest inimitable greatness, still taught through that text. Nor did these unhappy quarrels prevent Christianity from maintaining a united front against gladiatorial shows and against the degrading worship of idols and of the god-Cæsar.

§ 6

So far as it challenged the divinity of Cæsar and the characteristic institutions of the empire, Christianity is to be regarded as a rebellious and disintegrated movement, and so it was regarded by most of the emperors before Constantine the Great. It encountered considerable hostility, and at last systematic attempts to suppress it. Decius was the first emperor to organize an official persecution, and the great era of the martyrs was in the time of Diocletian (303 and following years). The persecution of Diocletian was, indeed, the crowning struggle of the old idea of the god-emperor against the already great and powerful organization that denied his divinity. Diocletian had reorganized the monarchy upon lines of extreme absolutism; he had abolished the last vestiges of republican institutions; he was the first emperor to surround himself completely with the awe-inspiring etiquette of an eastern monarch. He was forced by the logic of his assumptions to attempt the complete eradication of a system that flatly denied them. The tests in the persecution was that the Christian was required to offer sacrifice to the emperor.

“Though Diocletian, still averse to the effusion of blood, had moderated the fury of Galerius, who proposed that everyone refusing to offer sacrifice should immediately be burnt alive, the penalties inflicted on the obstinacy of the Christians might be deemed sufficiently rigorous and effectual. It was enacted that their churches, in all the provinces of the empire, should be demolished to their foundations; and the punishment of death was denounced against all who should presume to hold any secret assemblies for the purpose of religious worship. The philosophers, who now assumed the unworthy office of directing the blind zeal of persecution, had diligently studied the nature and genius of the Christian religion; and as they were not ignorant that the speculative doctrines of the faith were supposed to be contained in the writings of the prophets, of the evangelists, and of the apostles, they most probably sug-