

JESUS AND HIS STORY. By Ethelbert Stauffer. (S.C.M. Press; 12s.)

This book is an expanded version of a work which appeared some time ago in Germany. It is an attempt to give an account of the life of Christ which will satisfy the strictest canons of historical method. Because the Christian Church produced the four gospels in defence of theological theses, the author judges that they are untrustworthy: they need to be checked by reference to witnesses independent of the Christian tradition. He is prepared to use even hostile witnesses, because he believes it possible, by comparing and contrasting the evidence of both sides, to discover the primitive facts which both acknowledge or presuppose. Mandaean texts, from which the author believes he can disentangle authentic traditions derived from the disciples of St John the Baptist, Islamic writings, Chinese lives of Christ (written in the seventh century, and based on Syrian tradition), and even coins of the period, are all laid under tribute.

Of the contemporary evidence, the author lays special emphasis on the Jews' heresy laws and their rules of procedure for trials which, as he shows quite convincingly, provide us with a chronological factual guide for the course of events in our Lord's last years. He also uses late Jewish apocalyptic writings which, he says, are important for the understanding of Christ's message: they reveal that it was not Christ himself who was indebted to the Qumrân tradition, but rather the apostles and evangelists—the chief sources, that is, of our knowledge of him.

To show how the author's method works out in practice it will be sufficient to cite his treatment of the question of the virgin birth. From the gospels we learn that Jesus was vilified as 'a glutton and a wine-bibber'; the offensiveness of the expression testifies to its authenticity—it is not something that the apostles would have dared invent. But in the Palestinian Jewry of antiquity this expression was used to attack the legitimacy of a man's birth: such a person was supposed to betray his origin by the manner of his life. Hence, using it of Jesus was equivalent to saying that Joseph was not his father. Similarly, a man was never called after his mother—as 'the son of Mary' (Mark vi, 3)—unless the father was unknown. We find echoes of this in rabbinic writings which expressly stigmatize our Lord as illegitimate. Hence, 'Jesus was the son of Mary, not of Joseph. That is the historical fact which is recognized equally by Christians and Jews, friends and foes' (p. 25). In like manner the author demonstrates Christ's Davidic ancestry, his birth in Bethlehem, his miracles, his resurrection, his divinity, and many other points witnessed to by the gospels.

For his chronology the author relies on St John's gospel, and this for the reason that, while it is easily possible to insert the synoptic

frame into the Joannine construction, the reverse is impossible. He therefore dates the crucifixion as Friday, 14th Nisan, the last supper being an anticipation of the official passover meal and minus the paschal lamb. Fotheringham showed, as long ago as 1910, that during the whole period of Pilate's government it was only in A.D. 30 and 33 that 14th Nisan fell on a Friday. Our author, however, dating the Baptist's first public appearance as A.D. 28 and attributing a four years ministry to our Lord, arrives at A.D. 32 as the year of his death. He does not discuss the difficulty against this date.

More serious objection can be taken to the author's uncritical assumption that the 'brethren' of Jesus (Matt. xiii, 55-56, etc.) are the children of Joseph and Mary, and his assertion that the evangelists misrepresent our Lord's words. He says, for instance, that the Q sayings 'include a variety of sayings drawn from the Baptist's theology, or originating in the primitive Church, and these have little or nothing to do with Jesus' (p. 127). He particularizes on Matthew x, 5 which, he says, 'betrays the deep-rooted Jewish hatred for the Samaritans. . . . That is a Jewish or a Jewish-Christian saying, at any rate not one of Jesus' (p. 64). In comparison with defects of this kind, the author's confusing Philip the Tetrarch with Herod Philip, the husband of Herodias (p. 76), is of little importance.

In spite of the above defects, which put the work beyond the reach of the ordinary Catholic, scholars will find it well worth study. It is, as the author claims, a pioneer work, and the method employed makes clear the historical value of many gospel passages previously attacked. Moreover, careful correlation between the words of our Lord and the events in which he took part throws much new light on both. The author provides, in nearly thirty pages of notes, abundant references to his sources, and to his own preparatory articles. In these, he says, he gives a full account of the pros and cons of the theses he here maintains. We can certainly agree with the blurb that the result of his work 'is a portrait, definite, dramatic and full of fascinating detail, of a Jesus whose majesty is all the more tremendous when seen afresh against the original background'.

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