

REVIEWS

THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. By Père M.-J. Lagrange, O.P.
Translated by members of the English Dominican Province.
Vol. I. (Burns, Oates; 10s. 6d.)

There is no need to stretch the truth in order to write the advertisement for this book. For some fifty years Père Lagrange had given his whole mind to the work of understanding the Scriptures, until he had attained to a mastery of them that might very reasonably be regarded as the peak of such endeavour in the whole history of the Church. Apart from a few brief items his written work had been directly scientific in purpose, and it seemed too much to hope that he might yet alter his policy to address himself straight to the mind of the ordinary Christian, to do his own coining of some of the precious material he had unearthed. He was, however, persuaded by friends and disciples to do so, and the work he then produced had for its subject the one that above all might have been looked for. He wrote his *L'Évangile de Jésus-Christ*—of which this present work is the first volume of a translation. A modern Jerome interpreting the Gospels for the immediate benefit of the simple Christian.

But to pass from advertisement-writing to the more intrinsic part of a reviewer's duty. It was Lagrange's view—which is briefly proclaimed in his preface here—that a Life of Christ if judged by the ordinary conception of biography is an impossible thing to write. Adequate information is lacking. In particular, the Gospels do not furnish a sufficiently clear chronology for the purpose, and—most important of all—they defy any attempt to resolve their fourfold history into one simple synthetic whole. It would generally be agreed that such is indeed the state of affairs. But the positive, exciting statement of it is this: that the Gospels *are* our Life of Christ, and there can be no other. The four evangelists enjoy a heavenly monopoly. They cannot be used as sources or as components of another man's work. If he intends biography here, a man will find himself obliged to write *with* the Gospels, from within them, becoming an exegete for the purpose; and so to use them that he leaves untouched, unresolved into any patent higher synthesis, their respective points of view, doctrinal and historical stresses, etc. He would have to be strictly inspired to make one new Life out of these four.

What we should agree to call a Life of Christ is something, therefore, that cannot be achieved except by means of great learning. Without possessing vast historical and literary know-

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ledge and skill a "biographer" cannot strictly interpret the evangelists (unless by God's special help)—he can only use them, exploit them. (Which he has every right to do, but not while pretending to write something in the manner of a Life.) Instead of a *deploying* of the Gospels, you will have so-and-so's *reactions* to them. Or if such a work does attempt humbly, directly to interpret, to present the Gospels, unless it possesses this rare equipment it can do no more than provide a body of extrinsic information useful only for the theatricals of the mind. And in fact this is what we are accustomed to being offered by our "Lives of Christ": loads of fresh information concerning the amount of wine the Jews were given to drink at their wedding feasts, or the width of the hem of the vestment that Zachary wore when he entered the sanctuary. From all of which the general impression is formed that to be learned in the Scriptures means chiefly to be able to tell the same story over again but with richer and richer detail of local colouration.

Whereas in such a work as this we have an author who on the one hand can offer comments on the text which are organically relevant, which are as an irradiation of the Gospel meaning rather than a matter of pious observation in its regard; and on the other hand an author whose information, while providing all the physical facts needed to appreciate the four causes at work and to stage them appropriately, can also throw light on the mind and the intentions of the writers, on the tones and stresses to be found in their work.

That such service is here rendered might not at first be recognized, for the technique conceals itself. Behind what may seem to be a mere transcription from the Gospels, there may lie an expert decision which by choosing to quote at precisely this point has afforded the one setting in which the meaning of the passage can be fully grasped, etc. Similarly, there may be a first feeling of disappointment at the meagre ration of producer's comment, of edifying reflection provided. But this will be found to be a contemplative as well as a cultured austerity of expression. Telling of how Jesus sat by the well of Samaria, tired and thirsty from his journey, the only comment made is this: "Jesus was tired and sat down on the edge of the well to rest His weary limbs after the climb from the valley, while His disciples went to the town to find food. This detail is preserved for us by the writer who speaks of Jesus as the Word, the Son of the Father, who is God like His Father; but the same writer knows that Jesus has taken upon Himself all that capacity for suffering which is the common lot of humanity. He is tired out and thirsty." Not a word of emotional content, not a touch of the picturesque, but

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just a few words of theology. It is a moment for contemplative consideration of the bare realities. Lagrange had never sinned by dispensing others from the duty of fundamental thinking and feeling for themselves; he does not do so now—refuses to be popular in that sense.

It offers a great practical advantage that Lagrange so ordered this work that it follows paragraph by paragraph the divisions of his own *Synopsis Evangelica*. The reader if he pleases can procure that compilation¹ and keep one eye steadily on the texts that are in process of being rendered.

The work of translating a French style so condensed and allusive, so doggedly individualistic, often so informal, must have been cruelly difficult. And it is the most notable weakness of the English that it often reflects the anguish of it. It also seems to reflect in a certain unevenness of quality its composite, collaborative origin. Nevertheless it would be extremely ungenerous, or rather unjust, not to praise the work for the far and away higher than average level of workmanship that it has attained.

RICHARD KEHOE, O.P.

INTRODUCTION TO ASCETICAL AND MYSTICAL THEOLOGY. By Archbishop Goodier, S.J. (Burns, Oates; 7s. 6d.)

These most valuable lectures delivered at Heythrop College have the unmistakable ring of authenticity and bear a gravity of world-wide experience. In an introduction the importance of such a study is stressed. "First, there is need to resist, and to counteract, the merely materialistic outlook which is about us everywhere. . . . Even among those who still call themselves Christians . . . there commonly prevails a very distinct Pelagianism: a belief that the whole of a man's perfection depends on the man himself, on his own efforts and no more; . . . a repudiation of man's dependence on the grace and help of God that he may do anything good." Secondly in order to guide others there is need of accurate knowledge of Ascetical and Mystical Theology. Thirdly, the marked revival of interest even outside the Church in asceticism and mysticism demands an ability to meet it and direct it aright. Fourthly, "even for an understanding of the pagan world a knowledge of Ascetical and Mystical Theology is absolutely necessary" and without it "all the great Asiatic religions are almost unintelligible."

The difference between asceticism and mysticism is accepted though in real life the two are concomitant. There is no true

¹ *A Catholic Harmony of The Four Gospels*. Adapted, with an introduction by Mgr. J. M. T. Barton, D.D. (Burns, Oates; 7s. 6d.)