

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH, INFANCY, AND YOUTH OF JESUS

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CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH, INFANCY, AND YOUTH OF JESUS

1. **The Nativity.**—Augustus was sitting on the throne of the Roman empire, and the touch of his finger could set the machinery of government in motion over well-nigh the whole of the civilized world. He was proud of his power and wealth, and it was one of his favorite occupations to compile a register of the populations and revenues of his vast dominions. So he issued an edict, as the Evangelist Luke says, "that all the world should be taxed," or to express accurately what the words probably mean, that a census, to serve as a basis for future taxation, should be taken of all his subjects. One of the countries affected by this decree was Palestine, whose king, Herod the Great, was a vassal of Augustus. It set the whole land in motion; for, in accordance with ancient Jewish custom, the census was taken, not at the places where the inhabitants were at the time residing, but at the places to which they belonged as members of the original twelve tribes.

2. Among those whom the edict of Augustus thus from afar drove forth to the highways were a humble pair in the Galilean village of Nazareth—Joseph, the carpenter of the village, and Mary, his espoused wife. They had to go a journey of nearly a hundred miles in order to inscribe themselves in the proper register; for, though peasants, they had the blood of kings in their veins, and belonged to the ancient and royal town of Bethlehem, in the far south of the country. Day by day the emperor's will, like an invisible hand, forced them southward along

the weary road, till at last they climbed the rocky ascent that led to the gate of the town,—he terrified with anxiety, and she well-nigh dead with fatigue. They reached the inn, but found it crowded with strangers, who, bent on the same errand as themselves, had arrived before them. No friendly house opened its door to receive them, and they were fain to clear for their lodging a corner of the inn-yard, else occupied by the beasts of the numerous travelers. There, that very night, she brought forth her first-born Son; and because there was neither womanly hand to assist her nor couch to receive Him, she wrapped Him in swaddling-clothes and laid Him in a manger.

3. Such was the manner of the birth of Jesus. I never felt the full pathos of the scene, till, standing one day in a room of an old inn in the market-town of Eisleben, in Central Germany, I was told that on that very spot, four centuries ago, amidst the noise of a market-day and the bustle of a public-house, the wife of the poor miner, Hans Luther, who happened to be there on business, being surprised like Mary with sudden distress, brought forth in sorrow and poverty the child who was to become Martin Luther, the hero of the Reformation and the maker of modern Europe.

4. Next morning the noise and bustle broke out again in the inn and inn-yard; the citizens of Bethlehem went about their work; the registration proceeded; and in the meantime the greatest event in the history of the world had taken place. We never know where a great beginning may be happening. Every arrival of a new soul in the world is a mystery and a shut casket of possibilities. Joseph and Mary alone knew the tremendous secret—that on her, the peasant maiden and carpenter's bride, had been conferred the honor of being the mother of Him who was the Messiah of her race, the Savior of the world, and the Son of God.

5. It had been foretold in ancient prophecy that He should be born on this very spot: "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel." The proud emperor's decree drove southward the anxious couple. Yes; but another hand was leading them on—the hand of Him who overrules the purposes of emperors and kings, of statesmen and parliaments, for the accomplishment of His designs, though they know them not; who hardened the heart of Pharaoh, called Cyrus like a slave to His foot, made the mighty Nebuchadnezzar His servant, and in the same way could overrule for His own far-reaching purpose the pride and ambition of Augustus.

6. **The Group Around the Infant.**—Although Jesus made His entry on the stage of life so humbly and silently; although the citizens of Bethlehem dreamed not what had happened in their midst; although the emperor of Rome knew not that his decree had influenced the nativity of a king who was yet to bear rule, not only over the Roman world, but over many a land where Rome's eagles never flew; although the history of mankind went thundering forward next morning in the channels of its ordinary interests, quite unconscious of the event which had happened, yet it did not altogether escape notice. As the babe leaped in the womb of the aged Elizabeth when the mother of her Lord approached her, so, when He who brought the new world with Him appeared, there sprang up anticipations and forebodings of the truth in various representatives of the old world that was passing away. There went through sensitive and waiting souls, here and there, a dim and half-conscious thrill, which drew them round the Infant's cradle. Look at the group which gathered to gaze on Him! It represented in miniature the whole of His future history.

7. First came the Shepherds from the neighboring fields. That which was unnoticed by the kings and great ones of this world, was so absorbing a theme to the princes of heaven, that they burst the bounds of the invisibility in which they shroud themselves, in order to express their joy and explain the significance of the great event. And seeking the most worthy hearts to which they might communicate it, they found them in these simple shepherds, living the life of contemplation and prayer in the suggestive fields where Jacob had kept his flocks, where Boaz and Ruth had been wedded, and David, the great Old Testament type, had spent his youth, and there, by the study of the secrets and needs of their own hearts, learning far more of the nature of the Savior who was to come than the Pharisee amidst the religious pomp of the temple, or the scribe burrowing without the seeing eye among the prophecies of the Old Testament. The angel directed them where the Savior was, and they hastened to the town to find Him. They were the representatives of the peasant people, with the "honest and good heart," who afterwards formed the bulk of His disciples.

8. Next to them came Simeon and Anna, the representatives of the devout and intelligent students of the Scriptures, who at that time were expecting the appearance of the Messiah, and afterwards contributed some of His most faithful followers. On the eighth day after His birth, the Child was circumcised, thus being "made under the law," entering into the covenant, and inscribing His name in His own blood in the roll of the nation. Soon thereafter, when the days of Mary's purification were ended, they carried Him from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord in the temple. It was "the Lord of the temple entering the temple of the Lord;" but few visitors to the spot could have been less noticed by the priests, for Mary, instead of offering the sacrifice usual in such cases, could only afford two turtle doves, the offering of the poor. Yet

there were eyes looking on, undazzled by the shows and glitter of the world, from which His poverty could not conceal Him. Simeon, an aged saint, who in answer to many prayers had received a secret promise that he should not die till he had seen the Messiah, met the parents and the child, when suddenly it shot through him like a flash of lightning that this at last was He, and, taking Him up in his arms, he praised God for the advent of the Light to lighten the Gentiles and the Glory of His people Israel. While he was still speaking, another witness joined the group. It was Anna, a saintly widow, who literally dwelt in the courts of the Lord, and had purified the eye of her spirit with the euphrasy and rue of prayer and fasting, till it could pierce with prophetic glance the veils of sense. She united her testimony to the old man's, praising God and confirming the mighty secret to the other expectant souls who were looking for redemption in Israel.

9. The shepherds and these aged saints were near the spot where the new force entered the world. But it thrilled susceptible souls at a much greater distance. It was probably after the presentation in the temple and after the parents had carried back their child to Bethlehem, where it was their intention to reside instead of returning to Nazareth, that He was visited by the Wise Men of the East. These were members of the learned class of the Magians, the repositories of science, philosophy, medical skill, and religious mysteries in the countries beyond the Euphrates. Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus tell us that in the regions from whence they came, there then prevailed an expectation that a great king was to arise in Judæa. We know also from the calculations of the great astronomer Kepler, that at this very time there was visible in the heavens a brilliant temporary star. Now the Magi were ardent students of astrology, and believed that any unusual phenomenon in the heavens was the sign of some remarkable event on earth; and it is possible that, connecting this star, to which

their attention would undoubtedly be eagerly directed, with the expectation mentioned by the ancient historians, they were led westward to see if it had been fulfilled. But there must also have been awakened in them a deeper want, to which God responded. If their search began in scientific curiosity and speculation, God led it on to the perfect truth. That is His way always. Instead of making tirades against the imperfect, He speaks to us in the language we understand, even if it express His meaning very imperfectly, and guides us thereby to the perfect truth. Just as He used astrology to lead the world to astronomy, and alchemy to conduct it to chemistry, and as the Revival of Learning preceded the Reformation, so He used the knowledge of these men, which was half falsehood and superstition, to lead them to the Light of the world. Their visit was a prophecy of how in future the Gentile world would hail His doctrine and salvation, and bring its wealth and talents, its science and philosophy, to offer at His feet.

10. All these gathered round His cradle to worship the Holy Child,—the shepherds with their simple wonder, Simeon and Anna with a reverence enriched by the treasured wisdom and piety of centuries, and the Magi with the lavish gifts of the Orient and the open brow of Gentile knowledge. But, while these worthy worshippers were gazing down on Him, there came and looked over their shoulders a sinister and murderous face. It was the face of Herod. This prince then occupied the throne of the country—the throne of David and the Maccabees. But he was an alien and low-born usurper. His subjects hated him, and it was only by Roman favor that he was maintained in his seat. He was able, ambitious, and magnificent. Yet he had such a cruel, crafty, gloomy, and filthy mind as you must go among Oriental tyrants to meet with. He had been guilty of every crime. He had made his very palace swim in blood, having murdered his own favorite wife, three of his sons, and many others of his relatives.

He was now old and tortured with disease, remorse, the sense of unpopularity, and a cruel terror of every possible aspirant to the throne which he had usurped. The Magi had naturally turned their steps to the capital, to inquire where He was to be born whose sign they had seen in the East. The suggestion touched Herod in his sorest place; but with diabolical hypocrisy he concealed his suspicions. Having learned from the priests that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, he directed the strangers thither, but arranged that they should return and tell him the very house where the new King was. He hoped to cut Him off at a single blow. But he was foiled; for, being warned by God, they did not come back to tell him, but returned to their own country another way. Then his fury burst forth like a storm, and he sent his soldiers to murder every babe under two years of age in Bethlehem. As well might he have attempted to cut a mountain of adamant asunder as cut the chain of the divine purposes. "He thrust his sword into the nest, but the bird was flown." Joseph fled with the Child to Egypt, and remained there till Herod died, when he returned and dwelt at Nazareth; being warned from Bethlehem, because there he would have been in the kingdom of Archelaus, the like-minded son of a blood-thirsty father. Herod's murderous face, glaring down on the Infant, was a sad prophecy of how the powers of the world were to persecute Him and cut off His life from the earth.

11. **The Silent Years at Nazareth.**—The records which we possess up to this point are, as we have seen, comparatively full. But with the settlement at Nazareth, after the return from Egypt, our information comes to a sudden stop, and over the rest of the life of Jesus, till His public ministry begins, a thick covering is drawn, which is only lifted once. We should have wished the narrative to continue with the same fulness through the years of

His boyhood and youth. In modern biographies there are few parts more interesting than the anecdotes which they furnish of the childhood of their subjects, for in these we can often see in miniature and in charming simplicity the character and the plan of the future life. What would we not give to know the habits, the friendships, the thoughts, the words, and the actions of Jesus during so many years? Only one flower of anecdote has been thrown over the wall of the hidden garden, and it is so exquisite as to fill us with intense longing to see the garden itself. But it has pleased God, whose silence is no less wonderful than His words, to keep it shut.

12. It was natural that, where God was silent and curiosity was strong, the fancy of man should attempt to fill up the blank. Accordingly, in the early Church there appeared Apocryphal Gospels, pretending to give full details where the inspired Gospels were silent. They are particularly full of the sayings and doings of the childhood of Jesus. But they only show how unequal the human imagination was to such a theme, and bring out by the contrast of glitter and caricature the solidity and truthfulness of the Scripture narrative. They make Him a worker of frivolous and useless marvels, who moulded birds of clay and made them fly, changed His playmates into kids, and so forth. In short, they are compilations of worthless and often blasphemous fables.

13. These grotesque failures warn us not to intrude with the suggestions of fancy into the hallowed enclosure. It is enough to know that He grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. He was a real child and youth, and passed through all the stages of a natural development. Body and mind grew together, the one expanding to manly vigor and the other acquiring more and more knowledge and power. His opening character exhibited a grace that made everyone who saw it wonder and love its goodness and purity.

14. But, though we are forbidden to let the fancy loose here, we are not prohibited, but, on the contrary, it is our duty, to make use of such authentic materials as are supplied by the manners and customs of the time, or by incidents of His later life which refer back to His earlier years, in order to connect the infancy with the period when the narrative of the Gospels again takes up the thread of biography. It is possible in this way to gain, at least in some degree, a true conception of what He was as a boy and a young man, and what were the influences amidst which His development proceeded through so many silent years.

15. We know amidst what kind of home influences He was brought up. His home was one of those which were the glory of His country, as they are of our own—the abodes of the godly and intelligent working class. Joseph, its head, was a man saintly and wise; but the fact that he is not mentioned in Christ's after-life has generally been believed to indicate that he died during the youth of Jesus, perhaps leaving the care of the household on His shoulders. His mother probably exercised the most decisive of all external influences on His development. What she may be inferred from the fact that she was chosen from all the women of the world to be crowned with the supreme honor of womanhood. The song which she poured forth on the subject of her own great destiny shows her to have been a woman religious, fervently poetical, and patriotic; a student of Scripture, and especially of its great women, for it is saturated with Old Testament ideas and moulded on Hannah's song; a spirit exquisitely humble, yet capable of thoroughly appreciating the honor conferred upon her. She was no miraculous queen of heaven, as superstition has caricatured her, but a woman exquisitely pure, saintly, loving, and high-souled. This is aureole enough. Jesus grew up in her love and passionately returned it.

16. There were other inmates of the household. He had brothers and sisters. From two of these, James and Jude, we have epistles in Holy Scripture, in which we may read what their character was. Perhaps it is not irreverent to infer from the severe tone of their epistles, that, in their unbelieving state, they must have been somewhat harsh and unsympathetic men. At all events, they never believed on Him during His lifetime, and it is not likely that they were close companions to Him in Nazareth. He was probably much alone; and the pathos of His saying, that a prophet is not without honor save in his own country and in his own house, probably reached back into the years before His ministry began.

17. He received His education at home, or from a scribe attached to the village synagogue. It was only, however, a poor man's education. As the scribes contemptuously said, He had never learned, or, as we should say, He was not college-bred. No; but the love of knowledge was early awake within Him. He daily knew the joy of deep and happy thought; He had the best of all keys to knowledge—the open mind and the loving heart—and the three great books lay ever open before Him—the Bible, Man, and Nature.

18. It is easy to understand with what fervent enthusiasm He would devote Himself to the Old Testament; and His sayings, which are full of quotations from it, afford abundant proof of how constantly it formed the food of His mind and the comfort of His soul. His youthful study of it was the secret of the marvellous facility with which He made use of it afterwards in order to enrich His preaching and enforce His doctrine, to repel the assaults of opponents and overcome the temptations of the Evil One. His quotations also show that He read it in the original Hebrew, and not in the Greek translation, which was then in general use. The Hebrew was a dead language even in Palestine, just as Latin now is in Italy; but He

would naturally long to read it in the very words in which it was written. Those who have not enjoyed a liberal education, but amidst many difficulties have mastered Greek in order to read their New Testament in the original, will perhaps best understand how, in a country village, He made Himself master of the ancient tongue, and with what delight He was wont, in the rolls of the synagogue, or in such manuscripts as He may have Himself possessed, to pore over the sacred page. The language in which He thought and spoke familiarly was Aramaic, a branch of the same stem to which the Hebrew belongs. We have fragments of it in some recorded sayings of His, such as "Talitha, cumi," and "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." He would have the same chance of learning Greek as a boy born in the Scottish Highlands has of learning English, "Galilee of the Gentiles" being then full of Greek-speaking inhabitants. Thus He was probably master of three languages—one of them the grand religious language of the world, in whose literature He was deeply versed; another, the most perfect means of expressing secular thought which has ever existed, although there is no evidence that He had any acquaintance with the masterpieces of Greek literature; and the third, the language of the common people, to whom His preaching was to be specially addressed.

19. There are few places where human nature can be better studied than in a country village; for there one sees the whole of each individual life and knows all one's neighbors thoroughly. In a city far more people are seen, but far fewer known; it is only the outside of life that is visible. In a village the view outwards is circumscribed; but the view downwards is deep, and the view upwards unimpeded. Nazareth was a notoriously wicked town, as we learn from the proverbial question, Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Jesus had no acquaintance with sin in His own soul, but in the town He had a full exhibi-

tion of the awful problem with which it was to be His life-work to deal. He was still further brought into contact with human nature by His trade. That He worked as a carpenter in Joseph's shop there can be no doubt. Who could know better than His own townsmen, who asked, in their astonishment at His preaching, Is not this the carpenter? It would be difficult to exhaust the significance of the fact that God chose for His Son, when He dwelt among men, out of all the possible positions in which He might have placed Him, the lot of a working man. It stamped men's common toils with everlasting honor. It acquainted Jesus with the feelings of the multitude, and helped Him to know what was in man. It was afterwards said that He knew this so well that He needed not that any man should teach Him.

20. Travelers tell us that the spot where He grew up is one of the most beautiful on the face of the earth. Nazareth is situated in a secluded, cup-like valley amid the mountains of Zebulon, just where they dip down into the Plain of Esdraelon, with which it is connected by a steep and rocky path. Its white houses, with vines clinging to their walls, are embowered amidst gardens and groves of olive, fig, orange, and pomegranate trees. The fields are divided by hedges of cactus, and enamelled with innumerable flowers of every hue. Behind the village rises a hill five hundred feet in height, from whose summit there is seen one of the most wonderful views in the world—the mountains of Galilee, with snowy Hermon towering above them, to the north; the ridge of Carmel, the coast of Tyre, and the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean, to the west; a few miles to the east, the wooded, cone-like bulk of Tabor; and to the south, the Plain of Esdraelon, with the mountains of Ephraim beyond. The preaching of Jesus shows how deeply He had drunk into the essence of natural beauty and revelled in the changing aspects of the seasons. It was when wandering as a lad in these fields that He

gathered the images of beauty which He poured out in His parables and addresses. It was on that hill that He acquired the habit of his after-life of retreating to the mountain-tops to spend the night in solitary prayer. The doctrines of His preaching were not thought out on the spur of the moment—they were poured out in a living stream when the occasion came—but the water had been gathered into the hidden well for many years before. In the fields and on the mountain-side he had thought them out during the years of happy and undisturbed meditation and prayer.

21. There is still one important educational influence to be mentioned. Every year, after He was twelve years old, He went with His parents to the Passover at Jerusalem. Fortunately there has been preserved an account of the first of these visits. It is the only occasion on which the veil is lifted during thirty years. Everyone who can remember his own first journey from a village home to the capital of his country will understand the joy and excitement with which Jesus set out. He traveled over eighty miles of a country where nearly every mile teemed with historical and inspiring memories. He mingled with the constantly growing caravan of pilgrims, who were filled with the religious enthusiasm of the great ecclesiastical event of the year. His destination was a city which was loved by every Jewish heart with a strength of affection that has never been given to any other capital—a city full of objects and memories fitted to touch the deepest springs of interest and emotion in His breast. It was swarming at the Passover-time with strangers from half-a-hundred countries, speaking as many languages and wearing as many different costumes. He went to take part for the first time in an ancient solemnity suggestive of countless patriotic and sacred memories. It is no wonder that, when the day came to return home, He was so excited with the new objects of interest, that He failed to join His

party at the appointed place and time. One spot above all fascinated His interest. It was the temple, and especially the school there in which the masters of wisdom taught. His mind was teeming with questions which these doctors might be asked to answer. His thirst for knowledge had an opportunity for the first time to drink its fill. So it was there His anxious parents, who, missing Him after a day's journey northward, returned in anxiety to seek Him, found Him, listening with excited looks to the oracles of the wisdom of the day. His answer to the reproachful question of His mother lays bare His childhood's mind, and for a moment affords a wide glance over the thoughts which used to engross Him in the fields of Nazareth.

22. It has often been asked whether Jesus knew all along that He was the Messiah, and, if not, when and how the knowledge dawned upon Him; whether it was suggested by hearing from His mother the story of His birth, or announced to Him from within. Did it dawn upon Him all at once, or gradually? When did the plan of His career, which He carried out so unhesitatingly from the beginning of His ministry, shape itself in His mind? Was it the slow result of years of reflection, or did it come to Him at once? These questions have occupied the greatest Christian minds and received very various answers. I will not venture to answer them, and, especially with His reply to His mother before me, I cannot trust myself even to think of a time when He did not know what His work in this world was to be.

23. His subsequent visits to Jerusalem must have greatly influenced the development of His mind. If He often went back to hear and question the rabbis in the temple schools, He must soon have discovered how shallow was their far-famed learning. It was probably on these annual visits that He discovered the utter corruption of the religion of the day and the need of a radical reform of both doctrine and practice, and marked the practices and the

persons that He was by and by to assail with the vehemence of His holy indignation.

24. Such were the external conditions amidst which the manhood of Jesus waxed towards maturity. It would be easy to exaggerate the influence which they may be supposed to have exerted on His development. The greater and more original a character is, the less dependent is it on the peculiarities of its environment. It is fed from deep well-springs within itself, and in its germ there is a type enclosed which expands in obedience to its own laws and bids defiance to circumstances. In any other circumstances, Jesus would have grown to be in every important respect the very same person as He became in Nazareth.

CHAPTER II

THE NATION AND THE TIME

Paragraphs 25-39.

25-26. The Interval between Malachi and Matthew.

27. The Political Condition of the Country.

28-38. Its Religious and Social Condition—

28, 29. External Religiosity but Inner Decline; 30. Pharisees; 31. Scribes; 32. Sadducees and Herodians; 33. Different Classes of Society; 35-38. Messianic Hopes.

CHAPTER II

THE NATION AND THE TIME

25. We now approach the time when, after thirty years of silence and obscurity in Nazareth, Jesus was to step forth on the public stage. This is, therefore, the point at which to take a survey of the circumstances of the nation in whose midst His work was to be done, and also to form a clear conception of His character and aims. Every great biography is a record of the entrance into the world of a new force, bringing with it something different from all that was there before, and of the way in which it gradually gets itself incorporated with the old, so as to become a part of the future. Obviously, therefore, two things are needed by those who wish to understand it—first, a clear comprehension of the nature of the new force itself; and secondly, a view of the world with which it is to be incorporated. Without the latter the specific difference of the former cannot be understood, nor can the manner of its reception be appreciated—the welcome with which it is received, or the opposition with which it has to struggle. Jesus brought with Him into the world more that was original and destined to modify the future history of mankind than anyone else who has ever entered it. But we can neither understand Him nor the fortunes which He encountered in seeking to incorporate with history the gifts He brought, without a clear view of the condition of the sphere within which His life was to be passed.

26. **The Theater of His Life.**—When, having finished the last chapter of the Old Testament, we turn over the

leaf and see the first chapter of the New, we are very apt to think that in Matthew we are still among the same people and the same state of things as we have left in Malachi. But no idea could be more erroneous. Four centuries elapsed between Malachi and Matthew, and wrought as total a change in Palestine as a period of the same length has almost ever wrought in any country. The very language of the people had been changed, and customs, ideas, parties, and institutions had come into existence which would almost have prevented Malachi, if he had risen from the dead, from recognizing his country.

27. Politically, the nation had passed through extraordinary vicissitudes. After the Exile, it had been organized as a kind of sacred State under its high priests; but conqueror after conqueror had since marched over it, changing everything; the old hereditary monarchy had been restored for a time by the brave Maccabees; the battle of freedom had many times been won and lost; a usurper had sat on the throne of David; and now at last the country was completely under the mighty Roman power, which had extended its sway over the whole civilized world. It was divided into several small portions, which the foreigner held under different tenures, as the English at present hold India. Galilee and Peræa were ruled by petty kings, sons of that Herod under whom Jesus was born, who occupied a relation to the Roman emperor similar to that which the subject Indian kings hold to our King; and Judæa was under the charge of a Roman official, a subordinate of the governor of the Roman province of Syria, who held a relation to that functionary similar to that which the Governor of Bombay holds to the Governor-General at Calcutta. Roman soldiers paraded the streets of Jerusalem; Roman standards waved over the fastnesses of the country; Roman tax-gatherers sat at the gate of every town. To the Sanhedrim, the supreme Jewish organ of government, only a shadow of power was

still conceded, its presidents, the high priests, being mere puppets of Rome, set up and put down with the utmost caprice. So low had the proud nation fallen whose ideal it had ever been to rule the world, and whose patriotism was a religious and national passion as intense and unquenchable as ever burned in any country.

28. In religion the changes had been equally great and the fall equally low. In external appearance, indeed, it might have seemed as if progress had been made instead of retrogression. The nation was far more orthodox than it had been at many earlier periods of its history. Once its chief danger had been idolatry; but the chastisement of the Exile had corrected that tendency forever, and thenceforward the Jews, wherever they might be living, were uncompromising monotheists. The priestly orders and offices had been thoroughly reorganized after the return from Babylon, and the temple services and annual feasts continued to be observed at Jerusalem with strict regularity. Besides, a new and most important religious institution had arisen, which almost threw the temple with its priesthood into the background. This was the synagogue with its rabbis. It does not seem to have existed in ancient times at all, but was called into existence after the Exile by reverence for the written Word. Synagogues were multiplied wherever Jews lived; every Sabbath they were filled with praying congregations; exhortations were delivered by the rabbis—a new order created by the need of expounders to translate from the Hebrew, which had become a dead language—and nearly the whole Old Testament was read over once a year in the hearing of the people. Schools of theology, similar to our divinity halls, had sprung up, in which the rabbis were trained and the sacred books interpreted.

29. But, in spite of all this religiosity, religion had sadly declined. The externals had been multiplied, but the inner spirit had disappeared. However rude and sinful

the old nation had sometimes been, it was capable in its worst periods of producing majestic religious figures, who kept high the ideal of life and preserved the connection of the nation with Heaven; and the inspired voices of the prophets kept the stream of truth running fresh and clean. But during four hundred years no prophet's voice had been heard. The records of the old prophetic utterances were still preserved with almost idolatrous reverence, but there were not men with even the necessary amount of the Spirit's inspiration to understand what He had formerly written.

30. The representative religious men of the time were the Pharisees. As their name indicates, they originally arose as champions of the separateness of the Jews from other nations. This was a noble idea, so long as the distinction emphasized was holiness. But it is far more difficult to maintain this distinction than such external differences as peculiarities of dress, food, language, etc. These were in course of time substituted for it. The Pharisees were ardent patriots, ever willing to lay down their lives for the independence of their country, and hating the foreign yoke with impassioned bitterness. They despised and hated other races, and clung with undying faith to the hope of a glorious future for their nation. But they had so long harped on this idea, that they had come to believe themselves the special favorites of Heaven, simply because they were descendants of Abraham, and to lose sight of the importance of personal character. They multiplied their Jewish peculiarities, but substituted external observances, such as fasts, prayers, tithes, washings, sacrifices, and so forth, for the grand distinctions of love to God and love to man.

31. To the Pharisaic party belonged most of the scribes. They were so called because they were both the interpreters and copyists of the Scriptures and the lawyers of the people; for, the Jewish legal code being incorporated in

the Holy Scriptures, jurisprudence became a branch of theology. They were the chief interpreters in the synagogues, although any male worshipper was permitted to speak if he chose. They professed unbounded reverence for the Scriptures, counting every word and letter in them. They had a splendid opportunity of diffusing the religious principles of the Old Testament among the people, exhibiting the glorious examples of its heroes and sowing abroad the words of the prophets; for the synagogue was one of the most potent engines of instruction ever devised by any people: but they entirely missed their opportunity. They became a dry ecclesiastical and scholastic class, using their position for selfish aggrandisement, and scorning those to whom they gave stones for bread as a vulgar and unlettered *canaille*. Whatever was most spiritual, living, human, and grand in the Scriptures they passed by. Generation after generation the commentaries of their famous men multiplied, and the pupils studied the commentaries instead of the text. Moreover, it was a rule with them that the correct interpretation of a passage was as authoritative as the text itself; and, the interpretations of the famous masters being as a matter of course believed to be correct, the mass of opinions which were held to be as precious as the Bible itself grew to enormous proportions. These were "the traditions of the elders." By degrees an arbitrary system of exegesis came into vogue, by which almost any opinion whatever could be thus connected with some text and stamped with divine authority. Every new invention of Pharisaic singularity was sanctioned in this way. Peculiarities were multiplied until they regulated every detail of life, personal, domestic, social, and public. They became so numerous, that it required a lifetime to learn them all; and the learning of a scribe consisted in acquaintance with them, and with the dicta of the great rabbis and the forms of exegesis by which they were sanctioned. This was the chaff with which they fed the people in the syna-

gogues. The conscience was burdened with innumerable details, every one of which was represented to be as divinely sanctioned as any of the Ten Commandments. This was the intolerable burden which Peter said neither he nor his fathers had been able to bear. This was the horrible nightmare which sat so long on Paul's conscience. But worse consequences flowed from it. It is a well-known principle in history, that, whenever the ceremonial is elevated to the same rank with the moral, the latter will soon be lost sight of. The scribes and Pharisees had learned how by arbitrary exegesis and casuistical discussion to explain away the weightiest moral obligations, and make up for the neglect of them by multiplying ritual observances. Thus men were able to flaunt in the pride of sanctity while indulging their selfishness and vile passions. Society was rotten with vice within, and venerated over with a self-deceptive religiosity without.

32. There was a party of protest. The Sadducees impugned the authority attached to the traditions of the fathers, demanding a return to the Bible and nothing but the Bible, and cried out for morality in place of ritual. But their protest was prompted merely by the spirit of denial, and not by a warm opposite principle of religion. They were sceptical, cold-hearted, worldly men. Though they praised morality, it was a morality unwarmed and unilluminated by any contact with that upper region of divine forces from which the inspiration of the highest morality must always come. They refused to burden their consciences with the painful punctilios of the Pharisees, but it was because they wished to live a life of comfort and self-indulgence. They ridiculed the Pharisaic exclusiveness, but had let go what was most peculiar in the character, the faith, and the hopes of the nation. They mingled freely with the Gentiles, affected Greek culture, enjoyed foreign amusements, and thought it useless to fight for the freedom of their country. An extreme section of them

were the Herodians, who had yielded to the usurpation of Herod, and with courtly flattery attached themselves to the favor of his sons.

33. The Sadducees belonged chiefly to the upper and wealthy classes. The Pharisees and scribes formed what we should call the middle class, although also deriving many members from the higher ranks of life. The lower classes and the country people were separated by a great gulf from their wealthy neighbors, but attached themselves by admiration to the Pharisees, as the uneducated always do to the party of warmth. Down below all these was a large class of those who had lost all connection with religion and well-ordered social life—the publicans, harlots, and sinners, for whose souls no man cared.

34. Such were the pitiable features of the society on which Jesus was about to discharge His influence—a nation enslaved; the upper classes devoting themselves to selfishness, courtiership, and scepticism; the teachers and chief professors of religion lost in mere shows of ceremonialism, and boasting themselves the favorites of God, while their souls were honeycombed with self-deception and vice; the body of the people misled by false ideals; and seething at the bottom of society, a neglected mass of unblushing and unrestrained sin.

35. And this was the people of God! Yes; in spite of their awful degradation, these were the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the heirs of the covenant and the promises. Away back beyond the centuries of degradation towered the figures of the patriarchs, the kings after God's own heart, the psalmists, the prophets, the generations of faith and hope. Ay, and in front there was greatness too! The word of God, once sent forth from heaven and uttered by the mouths of His prophets, could not return to Him void. He had said that to this nation was to be given the perfect revelation of Himself, that in

it was to appear the perfect ideal of manhood, and that from it was to issue forth the regeneration of all mankind. Therefore a wonderful future still belonged to it. The river of Jewish history was for the time choked and lost in the sands of the desert, but it was destined to reappear again and flow forward on its God-appointed course. The time of fulfilment was at hand, much as the signs of the times might seem to forbid the hope. Had not all the prophets from Moses onward spoken of a great One to come, who, appearing just when the darkness was blackest and the degradation deepest, was to bring back the lost glory of the past?

36. So not a few faithful souls asked themselves in the weary and degraded time. There are good men in the worst of periods. There were good men even in the selfish and corrupt Jewish parties. But especially does piety linger in such epochs in the lowly homes of the people; and, just as we are permitted to hope that in the Romish Church at the present time there may be those who, through all the ceremonies put between the soul and Christ, reach forth to Him, and by the selection of a spiritual instinct seize the truth and pass the falsehood by, so among the common people of Palestine there were those who, hearing the Scriptures read in the synagogues and reading them in their homes, instinctively neglected the cumbrous and endless comments of their teachers, and saw the glory of the past, of holiness and of God, which the scribes failed to see.

37. It was especially to the promises of a Deliverer that such spirits attached their interest. Feeling bitterly the shame of national slavery, the hollowness of the times, and the awful wickedness which rotted under the surface of society, they longed and prayed for the advent of the coming One and the restoration of the national character and glory.

38. The scribes also busied themselves with this element

in the Scriptures; and the cherishing of Messianic hopes was one of the chief distinctions of the Pharisees. But they had caricatured the prophetic utterances on the subject by their arbitrary interpretations, and painted the future in colors borrowed from their own carnal imaginations. They spoke of the advent as the coming of the kingdom of God, and of the Messiah as the Son of God. But what they chiefly expected Him to do was, by the working of marvels and by irresistible force, to free the nation from servitude and raise it to the utmost worldly grandeur. They entertained no doubt that, simply because they were members of the chosen nation, they would be allotted high places in the kingdom, and never suspected that any change was needed in themselves to meet Him. The spiritual elements of the better time, holiness and love, were lost in their minds behind the dazzling forms of material glory.*

39. Such was the aspect of Jewish history at the time when the hour of realizing the national destiny was about to strike. It imparted to the work which lay before the

* I have not thought it necessary to describe the state of the world beyond Palestine; for although the gifts Jesus brought were for all mankind, yet His own activity was confined almost entirely to the house of Israel within its original home. In a history of Early Christianity, or even a life of the Apostle Paul, it would be necessary to extend our view over the whole disc of civilization which surrounded the Mediterranean, and in which the world's center, which has since shifted to other latitudes, was then to be found; and to show how marvellously, by the dispersion of the Jews through all civilized countries, the elementary conceptions of God which were necessary for the reception of Christianity had been diffused beforehand far and wide; how the conquests of Alexander had, by making the Greek language universally understood, prepared a vehicle by which the Gospel might be carried to all nations; how a pathway for it had been provided by the Roman power, whose military system had made all lands accessible; and, above all, how the decay of the ancient religions and philosophies, the wearing out everywhere of the old ideals of life, and the prevalence of heart-sickening sin, had made the world ready for Him who was the Desire of all nations.

Messiah a peculiar complexity. It might have been expected that He would find a nation saturated with the ideas and inspired with the visions of His predecessors, the prophets, at whose head He might place Himself, and from which He might receive an enthusiastic and effective co-operation. But it was not so. He appeared at a time when the nation had lapsed from its ideals and caricatured their sublimest features. Instead of meeting a nation mature in holiness and consecrated to the heaven-ordained task of blessing all other peoples, which He might easily lead up to its own final development, and then lead forth to the spiritual conquest of the world, He found that the first work which lay before Him was to proclaim a reformation in His own country, and encounter the opposition of prejudices that had accumulated there through centuries of degradation.