

# **THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY**

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The rise of Christianity by Albert Kalthoff & Joseph McCabe

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## CHAPTER I.

WAS THERE AN HISTORICAL  
JESUS?

It sometimes happens in the scientific discussion of a problem that we make a considerable advance towards its solution by abandoning some point of view from which we have fruitlessly striven to master it, and confronting it from a fresh position. The experience suggests itself forcibly in the controversy with regard to the historical character of Jesus. Starting from the theory that the evangelical writings of the New Testament must be regarded as sources of evidence for the life-story of an historical individual, liberal theology has lost itself in a labyrinth from which it cannot escape. Even in circles where the dogma of a personal founder of Christianity is still rigorously maintained, people are beginning to see that very little biographical material can be obtained from the Gospels. During a discussion at Dortmund, for instance, Professor Kähler of

TO VINDICATE  
THE GOSPELS

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Halle, an adherent of the orthodox school, said that "we have not a single authentic word that was uttered by Jesus." Professor Steck of Berne, a liberal theologian, describes the present situation of the Gospel question in the following terms (in the *Protestantische Monatshefte* for March, 1903):—

The truth is that not only must the Gospel stories of miracles be regarded as the outcome of legend-making or symbolical poetry, but the rest of their contents, unassailable in itself, must be granted to be intimately bound up with that element, and must not be considered as authentic history. Any man who has made some study of the question, and closely examined the contents of these remarkable writings—who has, in other words, clearly recognised subjective influence in the different stamp set on the words of Jesus by the several Evangelists—must long ago have awakened from the dream that we have here a sufficiently solid ground for the construction of a biography. The parables and the Sermon on the Mount, like the other sayings of Jesus, are found to be permeated with elements that can only have originated in the Christology of the community, not in the self-consciousness of Jesus. For instance, the well-known saying, which might be taken as a genuine utterance of Christ as far as its general contents go, "Whoever will come after me must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." (*Matt.* xvi. 24; *Mark* viii. 34; *Luke* ix. 23), cannot possibly have been spoken in this form before the crucifixion of Jesus. Thus there is a good deal in the Gospels that plainly bears the stamp of the consciousness of the community; and,

if we start from quite critical premises, we must come to the conclusion that we have no absolute certainty that any single saying in the Gospels was uttered in that precise form by Jesus himself.

Between these representatives of two totally different ecclesiastical schools we find the many attempts at compromise which, while granting that the documents do not really provide a biography of Jesus, nevertheless make every effort to construct one. Is it not time we recognised that the postulate of this kind of theology is false? Ought we not to approach the question from another side altogether?

I will deal here only with the negative side of the Christ-problem—the denial that Christianity takes its rise from an historical individual—in so far as it seems necessary to introduce readers who are unacquainted with the main lines of my social theology into the positive research of the present work. That Christianity should be regarded as a particular development of social life, and not as the work of a personal founder of a religion; that the rise and character of Christianity should not be sought in the “historical Jesus” whom liberal theologians put at the commencement of the system—all this must be so plain to one

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who is acquainted to some extent with the methods of modern science that I may seem to have devoted far too much attention to the subject in my earlier works.

There is, even in scientific matters, a kind of hypnotic suggestion by which certain groups of ideas survive and impose themselves so effectively that a man often thinks he is looking at them with his own eyes when he is really examining them through the glasses of others and conceiving them in the thoughts of others. It is only by a suggestion of this character that I can understand the persistence of the idea of a life of Jesus. How such a literature arose originally is not difficult to understand. As the mental development of the race advanced from the transcendental world of the older metaphysic to the full reality of life, from dogmatic truth, imposed by an external authority, to a greater independence and self-reliance, the position of the older theology was shattered. It was compelled either to use all the available material for strengthening its position, or else to enter upon a revision of its fundamental assumptions. In this revision, however, theology has been hampered by its inherent weaknesses ; it has not been clear either as to



the methods that should be employed, or the end that should be held in view.

Theologians saw clearly enough that it was impossible to retain the contradictory narrative in all its Platonic-Christian naïvete, but they had not the courage or the energy to accommodate their faith entirely to the monistic temper of modern thought. They desire relief from all that has become irksome—emancipation from Rome and its priests, and even from the letter of Protestant formulæ—but German theologians at least have not yet reached a positive freedom, a consciousness of the independent, creative life of the modern spirit. They seek to retain and immortalise in science the dualism that has been cast out of the general life. They claim a separate province and a separate method of work, different from that of all other science, which is based on a division of labour. They have of late solemnly declared, in the person of one of their most influential representatives, Professor Harnack, that it is the science of religion ; but that merely means that theology refuses to apply fully and frankly the methods and laws of general scientific thought in its own province.

This opens out at once a clear field for

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“lives of Christ.” Since modern thought no longer tolerated the attempt to trace the rise of Christianity to the transcendental world of Platonic-Christian ideas, it seemed natural to convert the God-Man, to whom the Church traced its origin, the Christ with both divine and human nature, into a single individual, a natural human being. The next step was for theological science to construct the biography of this human Jesus; at first after the fashion of the older Rationalism, merely changing the supernatural features ascribed to Jesus in the Bible into natural ones, then in the spirit of critical theology, which regarded these narratives as later interpolations in the natural depiction of Jesus, and so sought to determine what was original and what was a later accretion.

Theologians imagined that they had thus met the claims of historical science. But, apart from the inherent difficulties that revealed themselves in the writing of the life of Jesus, and that eventually turned out to be impossibilities, the modern demand for intellectual independence and the religious temper that looked far into the future came into hopeless conflict with this historical postulate of the theologian. Protestant theology was

dominated, in its search for the historical Jesus, by the idea that Christianity was absolutely pure and divine in its origin—something quite distinct, even in its human embodiment, from the general life of the time, something that only contracted in the course of time the elements which the more advanced conscience even of modern theology has had to repudiate. But a theology that finds itself compelled, as we have seen lately in the case of Harnack, to postulate a degeneration from an originally pure principle at the very beginning of the story, is quite alien to the methods of historical science generally. It forfeits the very name of science. Clearly, it was not scientific, but sectarian, principles from which theology started, when it endeavoured to remove from the older figure of Christ all the features that had become distasteful to the theologians of the nineteenth century, and to ascribe them to later historical influences. To do this it needed the fiction that there was in the historical Jesus an absolute principle of Christianity and (as Christianity was considered the standard religion) of religion generally, so that it gave men an ideal by which they might test the religious and moral