

THE FOURTH GOSPEL AND ITS PRESENT-DAY MESSAGE ON ETERNAL LIFE.

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THE authorship of the Fourth Gospel is not a matter of indifference. Some who consider that the Evangelist was an unknown writer of the beginning of the second century, standing in no direct or even indirect relationship to the Lord when He was on earth, insist upon the immense value of his book for a true interpretation of His Person and Work. This seems to us to prepare the way for that perilous divorce of the Jesus of history from the Christ of experience which is so fatal, alike on the grounds of Christian faith and Christian unity. We confess that we are amongst those who with Dr. Garvie "cannot understand how it can be of no interest to Christian piety whether Jesus was or was not as the gospel represents Him, whether He spoke, did and suffered as He is represented."¹ On the other hand, it does not come amiss to put on one side from time to time the problems of authorship and to take the gospel at its own valuation. Its primary purpose was to strengthen the belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that, believing, its readers might have life through His name (St. John xx. 31). The author may have had other objects in view which do not appear on the surface, but we are on firm ground when we take his declared intention in all seriousness, and mainly consider his gospel from that point of view. We propose, therefore, to take his leading idea of "Life," and see its bearing on the subject of Immortality as we view it to-day.

The late Dr. Swete said that "eternal Life, one of the watch-words of the Fourth Gospel, is connected in Chapter iii with faith in Jesus; in Chapter vi it is seen to come from eating His flesh and drinking His blood; in Chapters x and xvii it is represented as His direct gift." In Chapter iv "it is viewed as the result of the life of the Spirit in man, the issue and consummation of spiritual life, differing from it not in kind, but only in permanence and in maturity."²

¹ *The Beloved Disciple*, p. 237.

² *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 138.

Christ gives life to the world (vi. 27, 33)—Nothing in truth can exist apart from Him, for all things, that is all that was, is, and will be, became. Through His agency, and apart from Him, there became not even one single thing that hath been made. In Him was Life (i. 3, 4). Not only was He the Giver of Life (v. 21), but He was and is the Life, Life itself (i. 4; v. 26; vi. 35, 48; xi. 25; xiv. 6; cf. 1 John v. 11, 12). In consequence the gift of life is not to be regarded as something detached from Him as when a person makes over a garden by deed of gift which, once made, the recipient may enjoy to its fullest extent without bestowing even a thought upon the giver. The Giver and the Gift are both inseparable,¹ the Father who is always regarded as the Fountain of Life (v. 21, 26; xvii. 2; 1 John v. 11, 20; cf. the unique phrase, the Living Father, vi. 57) imparting that Life to the Son, and through Him, whose very Life it is, to the Believer, so that "He that hath the Son hath life and he that hath not life" (1 John v. 12). This Life which our Lord brings is continuous, "Because I live, ye also shall live" (xiv. 19), and it is eternal (iii. 15, 16, 36; iv. 36; v. 24; vi. 27, 40, 47, 51, 54, 58, 68; viii. 51; x. 28; xi. 25; xvii. 3). It is a present fact which the believer may have here and now, and has not to wait for till after death, "He that believeth in or trusteth in the Son hath (*ἔχει*, here now) eternal Life" (iii. 36). "Verily, verily I say unto you that he who heareth My word and believeth on Him that sent Me hath (*ἔχει*) eternal Life (v. 24). "This is the will of Him that sent Me that every one who beholdeth the Son and believeth on Him, may have (*ἔσται*, here and now) eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (vi. 40). "I give to them eternal life" (not as A.V. "I will give," x. 28). "And this is (*ἔσται*) life eternal that they may know (come to know by experience) Thee, the only true God, and Him whom Thou hast sent" (xvii. 3). The possessor of eternal life passes out of the sphere of judgment (iii. 18; v. 24). He tastes of death but he does not behold it in the sense of becoming thoroughly acquainted with it (viii. 51, 52; cf. 1 John iii. 14). The great change then in a man's life does not take place at death, but at the moment when he becomes partaker of eternal life, and this happens under

¹ Feine, *Theologie des neuen Testaments* (Zweite Auflage, Leipzig, J. C. Hinrich), p. 569, considers that it is a peculiarity of Johannine thought that the gifts which Christ brings are not to be regarded so much as something offered by Christ as that Christ embodies them in His own person. St. Paul certainly held it as well (Col. iii. 3, 4).

present conditions. It is an Eternal Now reaching out into the Future (iv. 14; v. 25, 28; vi. 27, 51; xiv. 19).¹ "Death," that which we call death, physical death, is but an episode in the believer's career, it brings to light the reality which is already his. He becomes more fully aware of the riches of Christ which he already has begun to enjoy. The limitations which are inseparable from the earthly existence disappear, the fuller vision will have come (I John iii. 2, 3).

Let us now consider the help which this view of "Eternal Life" gives us to-day, confronted as we are with the old question as to whether there is a life after death or not.

Science as it is ordinarily understood is neither for nor against Immortality, or, if the expression is to be preferred, "the survival after death." This need occasion no surprise, for the world which Science considers does not comprise the whole of experience. Certain aspects of reality are selected, and are made the subject matter of investigation, the results of which have been most wonderfully productive, they cannot be neglected. Science is mistress in her own house, but the danger arises when she strays beyond her own province and forgets her own limitations. The world she surveys is a world that has certain features left out of it, and therefore her abstract nature must be taken into account. There are data of experience which do not come within her scope. Take

¹ Scott, *The Fourth Gospel* (2nd ed., Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1908) p. 248 ff, says that death "denotes not so much a single event as the whole exclusion from the higher life." The natural man, who has not participated in the change effected by the new birth, is in a state of "death." "He that believeth on Me is passed" (already in that very act) "from death unto life" (v. 24). Scott goes on to say, "There are passages in which John might appear to depart deliberately from his view of life as present, and to fall back on a primitive eschatological view" (v. 28; vi. 39, 40, 44, 54), but as against Spitta, *das Johannes-Evangelium* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1910), pp. xix, xxii, xxiii, pp. 121, 151, 157, and Wendt, *die Schichten im vierten Evangelium* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1911), p. 23, p. 126 ff, he rightly retains them as part of the original gospel. But Scott considers these verses "as reflecting a popular dogma which was not wholly consonant with the writer's own thought, although he desired to allow due place to it . . ." "He" (i.e. the Evangelist) "accepts the popular belief in a resurrection at the last day, but he empties it of the significance which had attached to it in earlier Christian thought." We consider that Scott goes too far in this respect. With Von Hügel, *Eternal Life*, p. 78 (2nd ed. rev., Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1913), we prefer to say, "It is in the less characteristic passages of these writings that we get the very valuable, strictly necessary, compensatory movement, and insistence upon the future, the bodily resurrection and the increase of the soul's stability and joy in the beyond."

two such simple little sentences as the following : " This flower is white," " This flower is beautiful." The first sentence is a statement of fact, whiteness has been predicated of a particular flower, a connection is stated between a certain object, flower, and the quality, whiteness. On the other hand when the assertion is made that a particular flower is beautiful, a standard or norm is thereby introduced. The person making the statement has in his own mind the idea of beauty, a standard, and in his judgment this particular flower conforms to it. Not merely has a statement of fact been made, but a judgment of value has been passed.

Now science calls nothing common or unclean. A Cæsar Borgia is as much a fact of existence as is St. Francis of Assisi, for both of them she has neither praise nor blame. The survival of the fittest, keeping to the scientific plane, means not the survival of the morally fit, but of those who do survive.¹ But Goodness, Truth and Beauty are also a part of experience. The Ideals which loom before us, and are also an integral part of the nature with which we are endowed, do of themselves confess the fact that " He hath made us and not we ourselves " as undeniably as the heavens above and the solid earth below. Right or wrong remain the same, it is true, whether there is a future existence or not, but their importance and significance for us as individuals may be diminished or increased according as they are believed to be eternal or otherwise. Character may be compared to a house which a man builds to live in ; if it is to be of a temporary nature then he may be content with a bungalow consisting merely of disused railway carriages, but if it is to last for an indefinite period, then the materials of which it is composed must be the best he can procure.

Assuming then that the world in which we live is not indifferent to morality, that it is of the very nature of things, justice being an essential element in the making and order of the Universe, the demand for the assurance of immortality is a most reasonable one.

First from the point of view of justice. No human good is complete unless there is a union of virtue and happiness and well

¹ Dean Inge in his *Outspoken Essays*, First Series (London, Longmans, Green & Co., p. 24), says, " Science declared that, the survival of ' the fittest ' was a law of Nature, though Nature has condemned the majestic animals of the Saurian era, and has carefully preserved the bug, the louse, and the *spirochæta pallida*.

" We din'd as a rule on each other
What matter : the toughest survived."

being. The facts of experience at most prove that there is a tendency in this direction. But the happiness that is implicit in goodness is very far from always being made explicit. Men like Caiaphas do succeed in getting their way, and from motives of political expediency bring about the death of innocent persons (St. John xi. 50). Justice, even the most cheerful optimist must be forced to admit, is very far from being realized in this world. Granted that the Soul of the World is just, then an opportunity must be given in some further stage of existence for the claims of justice to be vindicated and fully met.

Secondly, this world is insufficient for the realization of our ideals. The greater a man is, the more is he haunted by a sense of his own incompleteness. The seeker after truth becomes more and more aware of his own ignorance, the little he knows in comparison with what may be known. Perfection is like some distant mountain peak with the snows of the Eternal ever resting upon it. In the morning of life it seems so near, but as the shadows lengthen, it appears more and more inaccessible, and, when the night comes, the pilgrim feels that he is farther away from the fulfilment of the ideals for which he strove than when he first set out to reach them. But a universe which puts before us tasks incapable of fulfilment or, when we seem on the way to their accomplishment, permits death to come along and reduce them to nothingness, whatever else it is, is not a moral universe. Immortality is the triumph of goodness. It is the promise that our ideals shall be realized. We shall not be put to permanent and intellectual confusion. The "ought to be" and the "is," which now stand out in such glaring contrast, shall one day join hands and dwell together in Zion. The immense capacities which lie within us shall have ample room for expression and development.

But when the transition from ethics to religion is made¹ Immortality is transformed from a great hope into a glorious certainty. The Being whom Jesus revealed is the Father of all men. With Christ the certainty of the future life rested on the Being and Nature of God Himself and His absolute consciousness of the union between Himself and His Father and those whom the Father

¹ Cf. Prof. J. B. Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), p. 10. "Religion, if taken seriously and rationally, will be deeply moral; but it is not morality."

had given Him (St. John xvii. 2). "If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in Heaven give good things to them that ask Him" is the splendid argument of religious experience. As Christ declared "God is not a God of the dead but of the living."

The feeling of incompleteness once more makes its appearance. The Saints and Martyrs are the first to confess that, under our present earthly conditions, our communion with God is imperfect. Long ago Mother Julian exclaimed, "I saw Him and sought Him, I had Him and I wanted Him." The spiritual life, from one point of view, is a present possession, but from another it is an earnest or a prophecy of better things to come. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is (1 John iii. 2, 3).

But the spiritual life as a present possession is a guarantee of its own continuance after death. There are moments in the lives of most of us when we realize the presence of God to such an overpowering extent that death seems merely an episode in the great Drama of Life. A life in communion with God is of such an indissoluble character that, though the waves of time may beat against it, they cannot destroy it. The abiding Presence of the Incarnate Son of God within us (St. John vi. 51, 53; xv. 4, 5) a vital, realized union, is an assurance, nay, the assurance of our Immortality.

We are confronted to-day with Spiritism, or what is commonly called Spiritualism. What is the attitude that should be adopted towards it? Frankly, we consider that psychical phenomena should be submitted to most rigorous investigation at the hands of those competent to undertake that difficult task. The Society of Psychical Research should continue its operations. But, dabbling with Spiritism seems to us to be dangerous, just as the same may be said of psycho-analysis and hypnotic treatment. Joubert's dictum is very true, "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." An open mind should be kept on the subject. But it is not the Scientists whom we are prepared to listen to so much as the Psychologists. And we should never be surprised to find that they would be able to explain the so-called communications from the other world as being due to psychological laws, of the existence of which Mankind is for the most part totally unaware.

Immortality on Spiritistic lines need have no ethical significance, nor is it necessarily religious.

At the most Spiritism may be called the back door into the next world, therefore those who would enter that way may expect to find themselves in the scullery. If in reply to this, the assertion is made that the ordinary proofs of the existence of the future life do not convince a large number of people, our reply is that the Fourth Gospel was written to enable us to realize the value and meaning of eternal Life. Did we but pursue the methods to be found in that Gospel, we should become partakers of eternal Life, and knowing its secrets be assured that He who came to give Life and Life in abundance will be true to His word, "In My Father's house are many mansions; I go to prepare a place for you," "Because I live, ye shall live also." He who has imbibed the Johannine spirit will not of necessity condemn Spiritism, but will humbly claim that he has found a more excellent way.

American books are dear, and the Ingersoll Lecture, *The Christian Faith and Eternal Life*, by George E. Horr Offord (Humphrey Milford, 4s. 6d.), may seem excessively so at the price of four and sixpence. Judged by the number of words it is; but tested by its argument and matter it is by no means expensive, for unlike many Transatlantic volumes it contains no padding. Every word tells and its suggestiveness is only equalled by its logic and breadth of vision. It is one of the most satisfactory works on Immortality we have read and shows how the Christian Faith as to eternal life is woven of many strands which make a very strong rope. The current beliefs in Palestine are sketched, and we see how our Lord accepted the Pharisaic tradition and also emphasized the Sadducean doctrine that resurrection is not resuscitation. He laid down three leading truths: God's faithfulness to His own children, God as the Heavenly Father, and the Kingdom of God. The contrast between the Greek view and that of our Lord is well brought out, and we have a strong vindication of the "empty tomb" as the basis of the belief of the primitive Church. "The conviction of the Christian Church upon this evidence" (the sense experience of witnesses corroborated by the vision of St. Paul) "and this conviction" (of the resurrection) "is an historical phenomenon that remains insoluble to the most acid criticism." We have been much impressed by the masterly way in which the whole case is presented, and by the cautious fairness of the argument put forth by this singularly able author.