



The Saviour of the World

Volume 1

THE HOLY INFANCY

Charlotte Mason

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Book 1

The Holy Infancy

by

CHARLOTTE M. MASON





HANS MEMLING

Madonna and Child

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Apologia

A traveller passed the sign of the “Rising Sun”:
Smiling at yellow paint in flaming rays,
He thought of the Sun: seeing, his journey done,
A “Dawn” by Claude, the Picture had his praise.

Introductory

We are at present in a phase of religious thought, Christian or pseudo-Christian, when a synthetic study of the life and teaching of Christ may well be of use. We have analysed until the mind turns in weariness from the broken fragments; we have criticised until there remains no new standpoint for the critic; but if we could only get a whole conception of Christ's life among men, and of the philosophic method of His teaching, His own word should be fulfilled, and the Son of Man, lifted up, would draw all men unto himself.

It seems to the writer that verse offers a comparatively new medium in which to present the great theme. It is more impersonal, more condensed, and is capable of more reverent handling than is prose; and what Wordsworth calls "The authentic comment" may be essayed in verse with more becoming diffidence. Again, the supreme moment of a very large number of lives—that in which a person is brought face to face with Christ—comes before us with great vividness in the gospel narratives; and it is possible to treat what we call dramatic situations with more force, and, at the same time, more reticence, in verse than in prose.

Indeed, the gospel story offers the epic of the ages for the

poet who shall arise in the future, strong in faith, and meek enough to hold his creative gift in reverent subjection.

We have a single fragment of this great epic:—

“Those holy fields,
Over whose acres walk’d those blessed feet
which, fourteen hundred years ago, were nailed,
For our advantage, on the bitter cross”;—

If Shakespeare had given us the whole, how rich should we be! Every line of verse dealing directly with our Lord from the standpoint of His Personality is greatly treasured. We love the lines in which Trench tells us,—

“Of Jesus sitting by Samaritan well,
Or teaching some poor fishers on the shore”;

and Keble’s,—

“Meanwhile He paces through the adoring crowd,
Calm as the march of some majestic cloud”;

or his,—

“In His meek power He climbs the mountain’s brow.”
Every line of such verse is precious, but the lines are few; no doubt because the subject is supremely august; but also, perhaps, because those poets who have written at length of *The Messiah*, have not left us words spoken out of the insight of faith upon which the soul can feed.

But the subject is as inspiring as it is august, and is of such surpassing interest that the poet need bring little more to his task than the equipment of passionate conviction: he will have power, too, to discern the unique psychological truth of every phrase of the narrative, as well as the amazing self-revelation of each speaker and actor. As regards the Divine Person, he will perceive that he cannot see for the brightness, cannot know for the greatness, but must needs adore and delight in the unspeakable loveliness as an insect basks in the sun.

He, the poet of the future who shall give the world its great epic, will perceive with the mediaeval Church that the "Seven Liberal Arts" themselves are under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost; that our knowledge of science comes to us in set portions at set times, according as we are ready and there is a man to be found with the hearing ear and the seeing eye. He will see that it is absurd to bring our fragmentary, inconclusive science into opposition with Him who sustains us with knowledge as with bread, and to say that this or that cannot be, before we are able to discern why and how anything that is exists. He will know that all these chimeras vanish as shapes of darkness before the Light of the World. It is a poet the world is waiting for; another greater Shakespeare, able to tell us the truth about Jesus Christ—That truth set so plainly before us in the Book we are forgetting how to read!

We know how the Tate and Brady version of the Psalms wrought a great religious revival, not only in England, but throughout western Europe; we know, too, how Marot's Psalms fired the hearts of the Netherlanders to their heroic

resistance. If new presentations of the Psalms have effected great things, what may not the Church expect when a poet shall be inspired to write the epic of Christ?

It may be said, we have the whole story in the Gospels, and cannot hope or desire to improve upon that which is written. But this is true, also, of the Psalms; no poet's version can equal the original; a version in a new form is a concession to human infirmity, but we know how arresting a new, though inferior, presentation is; no one can read the Gospels in another tongue, though in a poorer translation, without new convictions, new delight. For these reasons, the writer ventures to hope that a rendering in verse which aims at no more than being faithful and reverent may give pleasure to Christian people, may help to bring out the philosophical sequence of our Lord's teaching, and throw into relief the incidents of His life.

The writer, at any rate, experiences in the study a curious and delightful sense of harmonious development, of the rounding out of each incident, of the progressive unfolding which characterises our Lord's teaching; and perhaps some measure of this entrancing interest may have found its way into this little volume. When the great poet shall give us the Great Christian Epic, it will be read in the closet and in the congregation, by the neophyte and the saint: in the meantime, a feeble attempt (made with anxious diffidence) may be of a little use in furthering that era of passionate Christianity which will probably be the world's next great experience, when "the shout of a King" shall be in our midst. If such attempt send any one back to a more diligent and delighted perusal of the sacred text, its end will be fully accomplished.

The scope of this work, *The Saviour of the World*, is to cover each incident and each saying in a single poem, blank verse or rhymed stanza, according to the subject. The poems follow one another in a time sequence, but each is distinct and separable. Therefore, though the work will, God willing, continue through a series of little Christmas volumes, each volume will be complete in itself and independent of the rest.

The first of these called *The Holy Infancy*, from the first of the three Books it contains, covers about an eighth of the whole subject; so it is probable that the work will be completed in eight such volumes.

The writer begs to acknowledge her great indebtedness to the Rev. C. C. *James's Gospel History*, combining the four Gospels (in the words of the Revised Version), which she has followed for the chronological order of events.

AMBLESIDE, 1907.

BOOK I

The Holy Infancy

I
PROLOGUE TO THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN

INTIMATE, searching, inly witnessing
In every heart of Man, behold, the Word!

We know not whence we came; nor how became:
The Word was in the beginning, and was God.

We may not know; but may know Him who knows;
For with the Word have all men secret speech.

The Word with the Father was ere time began:
He tells us of the Father all we know.

When came the world, and how were all things made?
All things that be to-day are of the Word.
No longer baffled, we, by tortuous quest—
Whether all life proceed from two or many,
Whether our origins be high or low—
Those things concern the manner of our making:

In Him was life; that is enough to know:
How He dispersed the largess of His bounty,
'Twere good indeed to learn; and time will come
When ear to hear the whisper of the Word
Shall wake; a man, learned in the laws of things,
That he heard whispered by the Word, shall tell.
Till then we wait, not knowing whence we came,
but knowing Him from whom all doth proceed.

Nothing of all good things that have been made,
Picture, or world, or book, without Him came.

Nor knowledge good for man can mankind know,
But he vouchsafes it: He is all our light.

And every man who comes into the world
By that true light is lighted, knowing it not.

The light in darkness shone; darkness nor quench'd
Nor caught the light, but dark in the light remained.

He came unto the world that He had made,
And the world knew not Him, its life and light.

He came to His own people, called of Him,
And they that were His own received Him not.

As many as received Him, they became
Children of God, believing on His Name.

Our flesh the Word became, and dwelt with us,
And we beheld His glory, as, of God,
The only-begotten Son: we who believed
Knew glory when we saw it, by the signs—
Not of the pomp and majesty of Kings—
But Grace, the touch of God, showed sweet in Him;
And Truth, discerning all things, made Him simple,
His glory saw we—full of grace and truth.

II

CONFLICT, disaster, ceased: the Earth was still
As one who holds his breath: proud souls and meek
Waited the Expectation of the Nations.

A rustle under foot when none doth move,
Peals overhead when skies are blue and high,
Warm breath on cheek when no man is in sight,—

As though by signs like these, were men perturbed:
All hearts uprose, as seas to meet the moon,
Questioning, uneasy, How t'abide the Coming?

No man could tell what he was looking for;
Each knew within himself a nameless need;
And souls, an-hungered, for appeasement cried.

III

An aged priest, within the temple courts,
In meditation watched the curling fumes—
His lot was to burn incense—and all the prayers
Of men he saw ascending; no, not all—
That prayer he prayed, and prayed again, for years,
He and his wife Elizabeth, had that
Indeed gone up to God?—A sudden gleam,
In that dim place, of light ineffable
Arrested him, and lo, an angel stood
At the right side of the altar:

“Fear not thou,”

The angelic word, for Zacharias trembled:
How had he dared to doubt? But not to chide
The visitor was sent: “Thy prayer is heard,”
(That very prayer of years ago he deemed
Had lost its way); ‘thy wife Elizabeth
Shall carry babe in gladness; nor to her
And thee alone this joy (not any pair
May hold their child for all their own: but this)—
Many shall rejoice at his birth, for he
A great one in the sight of God shall be,
Filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb.

Give him not juice of grape, nor any drink
To cloud his clear intelligence of good:
His people shall he turn to God with the cry,
'Make ready, there, the highway for the King!'—
Whereat shall natural duties prick men's hearts;
Fathers bethink them of a son denied,
Children, of fathers recklessly defied—
Unseemly matters for the King to see—
and, rough made plain, behold the King's highway!
He goes before Messias to prepare,
As spake the prophets, a people for the Lord."

So said the seraph: Woe to the doubting heart!
No sudden generous impulse makes him sure—
Perchance, if he might see the wounds of Christ?
But lesser proof avails not, though it were
An angel fraught with promises should speak!
So, Zacharias: "How shall I know this thing?
I am an old man, and my wife is old;
Not for the aged are the joys of child-birth!"
To whom, austere, the seraph, grave rebuking:—
"I, Gabriel, who in the Presence stand,
Am sent by the Most High to thee with word
Of these glad tidings: be thou dumb, nor speak
Till all shall be fulfilled."

So he went forth
Among the wondering people, making signs,
Whereby they knew an angel spake with him.
And, like an inlay in old cabinet,
His life a space of silence held, wherein
He spake with God, and was abash'd.

After these days Elizabeth conceived,
And for five months did hide herself from men
And praise God alway, Who, of His dear grace,
Shame and reproach had taken from her face.

IV

The great white throne was set; and therefrom spake
Jehovah, God almighty: heaven hush'd to hear:—

“Gabriel, who stand'st before the throne, art sent,
Wonted ambassador, to princely men
Who know to wrestle with their God, nor fall,

“Go thou on errand now to such a soul:
Meek maid thou'lt find, simple, of low estate,
Whose instant thought doth, as a fountain, rise:

“She wearieth heaven with importunity;
'Let a pure virgin of King David's house,'
So runs her prayer, 'be mother to the Babe!'

“Go thou to this one; say, ‘Thus shall it be,—
Thyself shalt bear the Child, Son of the Highest,
Born in due time, the Saviour of the World.’”

V

ISAIAH

Lo, that which I foretold!
 “A Virgin shall conceive”—
 But how might men believe
Thing never known of old?

“Immanuel, His name—
 The very God with men”:—
 A word beyond my ken
Was given me to proclaim:

But, now, I see the whole—
 The Babe, the Son, the Child,
 The Lamb, all undefiled—
Now may I read the scroll

At one time I did write:
 And, Wonderful His Name!
 His majesty shall tame
Rebellious tribes; His might