

The Life of JESUS CHRIST

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Chapter 2

THE NATION AND THE TIME

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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 [25] 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 [1880]. Galilee and Perma 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 Judea 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 [26] 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 [27] 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 [28] 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 synagogues. [29] 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 veneered 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 skeptical, cold-hearted, worldly men. Though they praised morality, it was a morality unwanned 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 [30] 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. A way 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 [31] 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 fulfillment 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 [32] 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 [33] 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.**

* 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.[34] [Page 35 left blank]

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